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Tyndale University College & Seminary

Spiritual Formation Shaped by the Potter's Hands:
Exploring the Impact of Spiritual Friendships in
Small Groups Using *Lectio Divina*

A Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
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by

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Toronto, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Christ followers seek to become more like Jesus. A major goal of the Church is to aid in the process of spiritual growth. In this research portfolio, the author explores spiritual formation as the process of being shaped and reworked, both as an individual and in community, in the Potter's hands. In other words, we will examine how in companionship with one another in the church we make ourselves available to the Triune God so that we might be shaped into an image more reflective of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this research is to answer the question: How does spiritual companionship contribute to the spiritual development of one another? Special attention was given to how spiritual companionship can be deepened in small groups for spiritual growth. The author scrutinized the question through three separate but related projects. First, in the author's spiritual autobiography, the author's personal experience of being shaped and reworked in the Potter's hands is considered. Within this narration, consideration of the presence of essential facets of spiritual formation—God's Word, Spirit, and People—is to be noted. To become a change agent for others, these three essentials are applied, just as a potter applies pressure to shape a vessel for its intended purpose. Second is a model for spiritual formation through small groups, outlining the theology, goals, and means of spiritual formation. In particular, the author considers the relationship between small group activities and the three essential resources of spiritual formation, as well as the impact of intimate relationships within a community setting. The author also provides an introduction to the spiritual

discipline of *Lectio Divina*, or Divine Reading, considering its efficacy in terms of personal, interpersonal, and spiritual growth. The final section consists of a research project, facilitated by a small group at the author's church, focused on spiritual companionship. This serves as a practical demonstration of the ideas presented in the preceding model. This study's phenomenological research approach allows for a more personal understanding the model, as revelations of the participating members are included, allowing the reader to understand the quality of spiritual growth resulting from this method of small group study for spiritual growth.

The findings suggest first that individuals' practice of particular spiritual disciplines successfully cultivate a deeper relationship with, and experience of, God and his work in their lives. In sharing with one another in a small group setting, these life stories serve to deepen spiritual companionship between group members and, in turn, encourage mutual edification towards Christ's likeness.

Furthermore, this research provides a comprehensive explanation of various elements of the spiritual formation process, including theology, goals, and means of formation.

DEDICATIONS

I dedicate this research portfolio in honor of my beloved wife, Bernice and in memory of my parents, Peter T. F. Wu and Florence F. L. Chiu. Thank you for being spiritual companions to me.

Without the love, sacrifice and support of Bernice, it would have been a strenuous journey in the last few years of my study. You are God's greatest gift to me as my ministry partner, soul mate, prayer warrior, playmate, travel buddy and cook. You have helped me to balance hardship of study and research by dosages of fun and adventures in life.

Mom, you were my first spiritual mentor. Your exemplary life as a prayerful godly woman dedicated to serve God, family and others drew me into full time Christian service. You taught me how to pray. You prayed with and for me. You showed me how you took time in fellowship with others. With that exposure, you instilled a deep desire for my own journey to cultivate spiritual companionship through small groups.

Dad, you modeled a life always seeking to learn and grow. Your love of new ideas and adventures impart in me a passion for new explorations and the courage to try new things. You remained faithful in following Jesus despite a life full of triumphs and failures, misfortunes and miracles. You showed me your own spiritual transformation even in the golden years of your life and inspired my curiosity to explore how spiritual formation happens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I so highly value Tyndale University College & Seminary, whose distinguished faculty equipped and encouraged me not only to learn about spiritual formation, but to also experience it. Many of these faculty members offer their valuable life experience to complement and illustrate their teaching. Special thanks to Dr. Paul Bramer, Dr. David Sherbino, Dr. Mark Chapman and Dr. Barbara Haycraft. Your teaching, guidance, and the program that you have put together for me have changed the way I do ministry for the better. To all my fellow students in Spiritual Formation Cohort 1, your insights and perspectives, your passion for God and people, and your life stories have greatly enhanced my learning and spiritual journey. Your words have been ingrained on my heart, and for that I am forever grateful.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In chapter 18 of the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet writes that he is told to go to the potter's house, where he watched a potter fashioning a pot from clay. Because the vessel was not suitable for what the potter intended, he had to remould it into something other than what he had first designed. Jeremiah 18:1-10 presents a compelling illustration of God as potter and Judah as clay. Jeremiah learned that God, as the potter, has a plan for every life (Herbert Lockyer, 1966).

God actively transforms people's lives. This research portfolio portrays the process of spiritual formation—shaping by the Potter's hands. My personal experience has been just that, an ongoing process of being shaped and reworked by God. Even my enrolment in Tyndale Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program, and the events in my personal and ministry life throughout my three-year study, served as a series of moulding opportunities, a special gift in the Potter's hands. I was shaped and reworked in my relationship and experience with God and others. This, among many other experiences, overflowed into and significantly influenced my approach to discipleship and small group ministry. It is my sincere desire that this portfolio will serve to illustrate key lessons that I have learned during this process, and that those who are interested in cultivating spiritual

formation through small groups will be able to find insights and processes helpful to their ministry. As I complete this program, I will have served in pastoral ministry, involving small groups as a key discipleship platform, for almost eighteen years. I am excited to put what I have learned into practice at Stouffville Grace Baptist Church (hereinafter also referred as SGBC) as I begin my third year as senior pastor.

The Spiritual Formation track of Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry program has three objectives: to cultivate personal spiritual growth and practice, to explore the academic study of spirituality, and to integrate both of these with the actual practice of ministry (Doctor of Ministry Handbook Part 1 2016, 47-48). Three research projects form the core of this program. One was written each year, during each consecutive year. Together, they constitute the framework of this portfolio. First, my spiritual autobiography, second my model of ministry, and finally, a phenomenological research project conducted with the members of one of the small groups at SGBC.

My spiritual autobiography, found in Chapter 2, shares my life story, one rich with processes by which I was shaped and reworked, held tightly in the Potter's hands. It stands as a testimony of God's grace, sovereignty, and faithfulness, a story of transformation through the circumstances of life and through many spiritual companions along the way. My story portrays the important role of spiritual friendships, and the roles of others who served as the Potter's tools used deftly in his hands to shape me – my family, friends, schools, and church community.

Through my reflection while writing my spiritual autobiography, I have noticed the recurring moral conflict between spirituality and religion. For the sake of this paper, I wish to clearly define this concept. In my life, the attitude of ‘being religious’ primarily describes an almost autonomous pattern of conformity to social rules or norms – often simply the general expectations of Christians and their church dynamic. In practice, this results in Christians who essentially perform ritualistically, going through the motions of Christian life with little spiritual dynamism. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the Pharisees in the first century. On the other hand, I would describe ‘being spiritual’ as a countenance marked by the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, as well as the willingness to be responsive and obedient to God’s voice. When applied, this attitude results in Christians who are reliant on God’s strength and wisdom, who make decisions in accordance with his will as opposed to their own strength. This intimate reliance promotes spiritual dynamism, and is illustrated by the disciples who followed Jesus in the Gospels.

Thanks be to God, I have grown from being religious, and not necessarily spiritual, into a man seeking God’s will while living out my faith through the religious routine of ministry life. The spiritual experiences in every season of my life, those ups and downs, the setbacks and challenges, my brokenness and my healing, moulded me in preparation for every season that followed in my life of service to God.

A Model of Spiritual Formation through Small Groups, found in chapter three, outlines my personal philosophy of a model of ministry. It provides a

comprehensive, academic understanding of the various elements of the spiritual formation process, including the theology, goals, and means of formation. It also describes the discipleship process, the role of spiritual companions, and the essential resources and spiritual disciplines crucial to spiritual formation, as well as the practical implementation of these at SGBC. This project provided an opportunity for me to consolidate my previous eighteen years of small group ministry experience, re-examine my assumptions about the role and utility of small groups, and identify areas in which the discipleship process needed to be modified. This model focuses on creating an environment that facilitates spiritual growth through discipleship, the three essential resources for spiritual formation—God’s Word, Spirit, and People—and various spiritual exercises, most notably *Lectio Divina* and the communal sharing of life stories. The relationship between the three essential resources and the development is then explored. Finally, the proper practice and application of these methods and essential resources facilitate the laying of groundwork for a malleable spirit, one that will be shaped and moulded by the formative pressure of the Potter’s hands. This reflection empowered me to refine the SGBC discipleship process, incorporating that which I have learned from my current studies on spiritual formation.

The phenomenological research project, found in chapter four, details the practical application of my philosophy. It explores how spiritual companionship in small groups is deepened due to a communal pursuit of God, resulting in participants becoming more Christ-like. In particular, this project seeks to

understand in what ways the regular practice of two exercises, those of solitary *Lectio Divina* and communal sharing of life stories, deepens spiritual companionship.

The title of this research portfolio is *Spiritual Formation Shaped by the Potter's Hands: Exploring the Impact of Spiritual Friendships in Small Groups Using Lectio Divina*. The image of spiritual formation shaped by the Potter's Hands is most vividly described in the Book of Jeremiah,

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." (18:1-6 ESV)

Jeremiah sees the clay being shaped and moulded into a vessel by the potter. Some defects in the clay, however, spoil it in the potter's hand, and the potter crumbles it up, beginning anew the process of shaping it into a vessel that pleases him. This passage distinctly illustrates the potter's capable hands, guided by his intelligence, working to mould, shape, and rework the clay into the vessel he has in mind for his purposes. Jeremiah offers us a visual representation to provide insight into God's interaction with his people: God is the Potter. Jeremiah observed that an individual and a nation is like clay in the Great Potter's hands. He has a sovereign right to shape it according to his will. The Apostle Paul affirms the sovereignty of God as the Potter by saying in Romans 9,

Will what is moulded say to its moulder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump

one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use?
(20b–21, ESV)

The clay represents the people of Israel, both individually and communally as a nation. The same relationship that Jeremiah learned at the Potter's house can be applied to not only individuals, but to the nation as well. The vessel is shaped in the Potter's hands, according to the image in his mind, made for his use and to his liking. His wheel turns constantly, bringing the clay against his hand. The Potter is in constant control, over the speed of the wheel and over his hands which exert the appropriate pressure; this control is necessary to deftly shape the clay into the vessel he envisions. J. Andrew Dearman argues that the illustration in this passage is clear, "Just as the potter may form and reform the same clay until he is either satisfied or decides to dump the clay completely, so God can form and reform the house of Israel" (Dearman 2002, 185). As Jeremiah 18-20 reveals, humanity's responsibility is to respond, repent, and be malleable, eager to be shaped and reshaped by God's work in our lives.

In a nutshell, the Potter's house is made up of three elements: first, the Potter; second, the Clay; and third, the Wheel. Consider in this case that spiritual formation involves God being the potter, and his people, the clay which is "formed and reformed" to become Christ-like. I propose that the process of spiritual formation is comparable to the wheel. It is my hope that these underlying elements provide a sense of coherence throughout the three projects of this study. For the sake of clarity and of relevance to our context, we must further consider

the elements of spiritual formation in order to maintain awareness of the movement of the Potter's wheel.

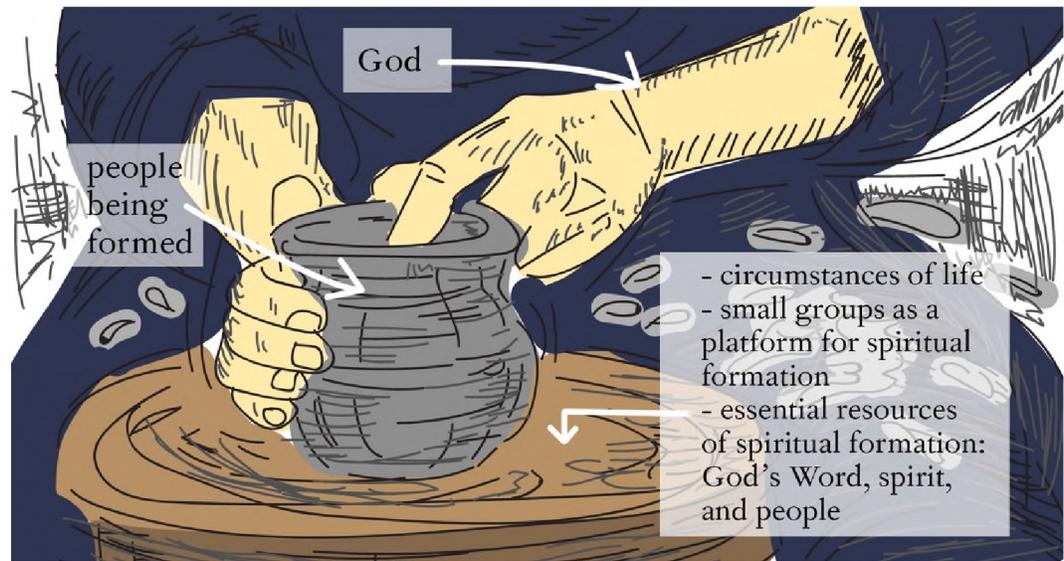


Figure 1. Key Elements of Spiritual Formation (Graphic by: Tiffany Wu)

The Potter's wheel represents various elements that facilitate spiritual transformation. This study's scope will consider the aspects of life's circumstantial providence of formational opportunities, the small group as a platform for deep spiritual formation, and the key resources of spiritual formation as a whole. While there are many of the latter, Jonathan Morrow argues that spiritual formation is divinely enabled by God through three essential resources: God's Word, God's Spirit and God's people (Pettit 2008, 45–47).

This, then, is how our lives are shaped and moulded. Through God's Word, Spirit and people, within the circumstances of our lives, that the Potter's wheel continually brings us against the formative pressure of the Potter's hands. If we do not resist, spoiling his work, but instead welcome the shaping movement of the Potter, this pressure abates, and in turn, his vessel takes shape. God is our

creator and naturally has sovereignty over all that he has made. Dearman argues that the potter knows the potential held by each bit of clay, and he remakes and reforms it into a vessel according to its promise. Our cooperation with the potter, therefore, directly benefits us, allowing us to live according to our life's purpose, and to its full potential (Dearman 2002, 188). As such, if we resist, or if we choose a plan apart from that of the Potter, we will create blemish in our lives, as unsound as if it were defective clay. The Potter then would have no choice but to break the vessel (us) down to a lump once again and begin anew, forming it into a vessel which suits his plan. Furthermore, the speed and pressure applied to the clay heavily dictates the resulting shape and purpose of the finished vessel. By practicing the proper methods of fellowship and the correct application of the essential resources for spiritual formation—God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's People, as outlined in chapter three—the groundwork can be laid to allow a believer to experience the Potter's formative pressure, facilitating spiritual transformation in accordance to his will. All powerful though he is, the Potter asks for the cooperation of his clay. As spiritual maturity deepens, the believer's willingness to be moulded increases. This cooperation with God is crucial, both for the spiritual health of the individual and for the intimacy of their spiritual companionship.

My spiritual autobiography, in chapter two, reveals the Potter's hands at work. The concept that God shapes, reworks, and moulds believers upon his wheel is one that I have experienced regularly throughout my life. Because I grew up in a Christian home, I found it difficult to recognize areas in which I needed

improvement. This was due to the fact that I learned how to be ‘good’: I simply needed to do the right things and behave in the right ways in order to avoid trouble with those in authority over me. This early paradigm built the original ruleset of my religion. However, God set me on an arduous journey, breaking and restoring me through the events of my life. At times, I resisted God’s work, but he patiently waited for my co-operation. In looking back over my life, it is clear that, through my various trials, God, as the Potter, was masterfully applying pressure, to mould and shape me, working my life into the vessel he saw according to my gifts and weaknesses, while patiently waiting for me to comply. Eventually, I learned to trust and obey God’s call.

Cooperation with God facilitates higher-perspective sight in all aspects of life; as I continue to be shaped by the Potter’s hands, I continue to gain a greater appreciation for God’s movement in my life, and my vision consistently aligns closer with his will. I have begun to respond to my struggles and setbacks with gratitude and anticipation, and I now watch for the Potter’s hands, eagerly anticipating his work on the innermost parts of my soul. My relationship with God became more intimate. My story reveals that God has worked in me through spiritual companions, ranging from my family and friends, to my schools and churches in a constantly formative process. Through all this, I have grown in my faith, having replaced my original religious paradigm with a deep and rich spiritual walk with Jesus. As my relationship with God deepens, I continue to be drawn toward understanding the nature of this deepening spiritual formation, not just in my own life, but also in the lives of others. In observing the changes of

others, I am provided with parallels that serve to reinforce my personal spiritual development, as well as cement my understanding of God as the Potter.

Chapter three examines the aspects of the Potter's wheel. The importance of small groups, spiritual companions, and essential resources for spiritual formation are explored beyond my personal experience, in an applicable model. This chapter's primary function is to propose a process of discipleship through small groups for SGBC. The initial process of discipleship at SGBC is shown in Figure 5 in Chapter 3, showcasing the five elements in the disciple-making process. These foundations, grace, growth, group, gifts and good stewardship, have served as effective tools for spiritual growth, but our church's goal in redefining our model is to orient our members' reflection and devotion inward in order to serve outward. The outward mission of our church is to join God in his redemptive purposes, bringing restoration to a fallen world in accordance to his original intent in creation. In strengthening their inner spiritual life—building up their personal and intimate relationship with God—our members become better empowered to serve as they continue to align with the image of Christ. This reorientation results in a communal deepening of our members' spiritual growth as they share their insights and their experiences communally. As with many cases of communal spiritual formation, we are focusing on individual growth for the sake of the edification of others. The general purpose of small groups, their method and effectiveness as a platform for the cultivation of spiritual formation, is shown in Figures 6 and 7. The essential resources of spiritual formation, God's

Word, God's Spirit, and God's People, as well as practical suggestions for their appropriate application within of a small group, are covered in Chapter 3.

The phenomenological research project examined the impact of practicing communal *Lectio Divina*, as well as the application of individual private practice to assist the development of deeper spiritual companionship within a small group. Each group member shared their life stories with one another in small group meetings, their encounters with God, and their observation of God's actions in their own lives through *Lectio Divina*. Throughout the study, the participants were also encouraged to share their thoughts on spiritual companionship and God's influence in their lives. A phenomenological analysis of survey data collected from the participants, as well as the personal accounts shared in their small group reveals the deep spiritual companionship that was formed over the period of the study. These results demonstrate the importance of *Lectio Divina* and the essential resources for spiritual formation, and their effectiveness, both in ministry and in spiritual growth.

James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard suggest that one way the Spirit communicates is by stimulating thoughts and feelings. Practicing believers learn to recognize and relate to the Spirit of God by attending to the thoughts that arise as they read scripture. As Christ-followers read scripture, the Spirit reorders the thoughts and feelings of their hearts to align with God's. Over time, their hearts become strengthened in holiness. This strength is the result of the encounter of the Spirit, the text, and the reader (2012, 46-57). When Christ-followers who practiced *Lectio Divina* on their own come together in a small group to share their

life stories, and the lessons they've learned, they encourage each other to grow spiritually. In chapter four, a spiritual companion is defined as someone who seeks to help other Christians attend and respond to God, living with greater awareness of his presence and voice, and to see his work in their lives. Within this context, a small group from SGBC was chosen to participate, exploring the ways "A Storied Way" of *Lectio Divina* fostered deeper spiritual companionship between the members in a small group. This project involved all three essential resources of spiritual formation: God's Word mediated through *Lectio Divina*, God's Spirit experienced through the life stories shared by participants, and God's people, spiritual companions committed to mutual spiritual growth.

Within the analogy of the Potter, these three essential resources can be thought of as the speed of the wheel or pressure from the potter's hands. As these fine techniques are required to properly realize the form and purpose of the final vessel, so similar finesse is applied to bring us into Christ-likeness. The outcome of this research reveals that individual group members who practice *Lectio Divina* on a regular basis, sharing with one another through life stories together in small groups, do, indeed, build deeper spiritual companionship with one another, which, in turn, fosters greater spiritual growth.

The wheel of God, as the process of spiritual formation, works both individually and communally. As we are moulded to become more Christ-like, it is important that we also follow Jesus' example to grow communally. Therefore, it is key that individual Christ-followers commit to build spiritual companionship through small groups. Not only does this follow the example that Jesus sets for us,

fulfilling a 'religious' emulation, it also allows us to grow more vibrant in God's spirit with each other. Spiritual companions should explore the most effective combination of the three essential resources for spiritual formation, so that they can pursue a deeper relationship with God, and each other. It is the responsibility of individual believers to cooperate with the wheel of God, for the purpose of spiritual growth. I have seen this need throughout my years in ministry in others, and in my own life as I have reflected and written my own spiritual autobiography. As Bill Donahue argues, "a small group provides the optimal environment for life change Jesus Christ intends for every believer" (Donahue 2002). This statement is further reinforced by the findings of my study, as well. In this case, the spiritual growth that occurred in our controlled small group setting served to greatly deepen the members' experience of spiritual companionship, so much so that the level of their apparent companionship's growth took many members by surprise. Small groups, therefore, play a vital role in a church to work towards the goal of spiritual development.

To say that who I am is who I have been moulded into cannot be overstated in the least. My life began to be shaped and changed as early as I can remember. If the Potter's wheel represents the various circumstances that draw me into his hands, then I was thrown onto the wheel the very day I was born. I was placed in an ideal environment for growth. The relationship that I experienced with the Potter, however, has not always been a smooth one. The pressure of God's hands has surely sometimes been harsh, but through his grace I have been shaped to his will. By God's hands, I have grown, so that this meager,

tainted clay can stand as an ever-improving vessel—a testament to the Potter’s transforming power.

CHAPTER II:
CHANGED TO BE A CHANGE AGENT
A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I began writing this spiritual autobiography with a time of reflection on multiple major events throughout my life. At times, the good and the bad, sadness and joy, abundance and deprivation occurred concurrently. I often experienced my greatest gains after a series of losses. The more painful the experience, the closer that I felt to God. Traumatic experiences took me to greater levels of spirituality. My early years, the foundation for the rest of my life, were coloured by adventure, special friendships, mentorship from a loving mother and serving experiences used by God in unexpected ways.

Each season of my life was full of unexpected twists and turns that challenged my core values, belief systems, and assumptions. My life's cycle of trials and opportunities have served to illustrate the cycle of the Potter's wheel. Through these trials, God kept me changing, transforming me into an instrument of servitude for him in the next season. While it was often hard to see the end of these traumatic experiences, when I focus on God's work in my life, I see that my moments of struggle are full of God's exceptional grace, abundance, fruitfulness,

and blessings. The experiences of inexplicable abundance, and undeserved provisions by the Lord are evident.

All in all, my motif in life seems to have evolved: God has been working to change my life to become His change agent. Indeed, what is said in Jeremiah 18:4 is true of my life: “And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.” It is my sincere hope that what follows would be a testimony of God’s transforming power to continuously rework a life as clay in His hands for His purposes. No matter how useless or meager the clay, God may rework it into a vessel through which His transforming power is present.

A Rich Christian Heritage

I was born and raised in a home with a rich Christian heritage. Both of my parents were born in Hong Kong and raised in Christian homes. My father, Peter Chau-Fong Wu, born on July 3, 1921, was a 2nd generation Christian raised by a very dedicated Christian mother. My mother, Florence Fook-Ling Chiu, born on August 16, 1929, was a 4th generation Christian with a dedicated Christian father who was a well-respected educator.

My Father’s Christian Heritage

My paternal grandmother was an American-Chinese born in Honolulu, and my paternal grandfather was Malaysian Chinese. When they got married, they relocated to Hong Kong. My grandmother, who became a nurse, adopted her

oldest child, an orphan. She then gave birth to my father and a younger sister. My father told me that my grandfather was an irresponsible person who often got drunk and misbehaved. He left my grandmother shortly after my father's younger sister was born, and moved back to Labuan, British North Borneo (now called Eastern Malaysia). He then bought out a wine shop in Labuan, where he lived, in order to carry on drinking day and night to his heart's content. All my father knew about my grandfather was that he drank so much that, eventually, the excessive drinking took his life. He died when my father was just seven years old.

Nevertheless, my father recalled that his mother took the three of them by boat upon receiving news that my grandfather fell seriously sick. The voyage took seven days, an eternity compared to today's three-hour journey—back then, air transport was nonexistent. However, they arrived too late. My grandfather was already buried. They were unable to attend his funeral and were only able to meet with some distant and unknown relatives.

After she heard the gospel message proclaimed by Dr. John Sung, my grandmother became a pious Christian and eventually an ordained life-time deaconess of a Methodist church in Shaukiwan, Hong Kong. She brought my father to attend almost every known revival meeting held in town. My father often recalled those years of youth with fond memory and excitement. He would be fired up by anointed preachers such as Rev. Wang Ming Tao and the famous evangelist, Dr. John Sung. In those days, these godly preachers had been greatly used by God in China to reach millions for Christ.

At age 12, my father became a born-again Christian after attending a revival meeting held by Dr. John Sung, perhaps the most powerful evangelist in China's history¹. Both my father and my grandmother were very dedicated and committed in their Christian walk and served fervently in the church.

When my father was in his late teens, my grandmother had a stroke, which left the bottom half of her body paralyzed. And thus, out of necessity, my father had to take care of the livelihood of the entire family. He grew up without a father in his formative years, and then cared for his paralyzed mother for the next twenty-some years. Despite her physical situation, my grandmother insisted on going to church in her wheelchair and served the Lord however she could. Thus, many people were touched by her dedicated service to the Lord until she passed on November 27, 1961, when my father was 40. Throughout her life, my grandma remained strong in her faith and served as my father's spiritual inspiration, prayer supporter, and wise counselor. In his teenage years and as a young adult, my father worked very hard to make a living, took care of the family and was very passionate in seeking the Lord. Then, the Sino-Japanese war broke in 1937. When Hong Kong lost control to the Japanese in 1941, my father left Hong Kong for a counter-Japanese occupation movement called, "Free China." He worked in

¹ For the history and life story of Dr. John Sung, you may refer to:
Lim, Ka-Tong. 2011. *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*. Singapore: Armour Publishing.
Lyll, Leslie T. 2004. *A Biography of John Sung (80th Anniversary Edition)*. Singapore: Armour Publishing.

Guilin in Guangxi, and Kunming in Yunnan, as an interpreter, a liaison officer, a hostel manager (for the U.S. Army), a radio station English announcer and editor, a newspaper writer, an English tutor for the top management in Guangxi Provincial Bank, and a University of Calcutta instructor on Chinese life and language (for U. S. Army radio school for G.I.s). In his many endeavours, he developed great friendships with a multitude of American soldiers. One of them, Rodney Wagner, Sr., became his first business partner after the war in 1945. My father founded “Sino-American Trade Advancement Company,” and Rodney Wagner Sr. started his own company, representing my father’s business in Seattle, Washington. My father represented Rodney Wagner, Sr.’s business first in Shanghai and later in Hong Kong. He moved the business to Hong Kong in 1949 when the communists took over China. Over the years, my father built the business to become an international trading company with branches in various parts of the world and manufacturing facilities in different cities across Asia, including China. As the business and the size of our family grew, my father became more and more focused on his work. As a result, his involvement in the church and his Christian walk slacked—he became a Sunday Christian for most of his adult life.

The friendship between my father and the Wagners, however, lasted two generations. Rodney Wagner Jr., the son of Rodney Wagner Sr., had been a Treasurer at Standard Oil in San Francisco for over thirty years before his retirement when he began a jewelry and seafood business with my father. Though he was my father’s friend, as his father had been before him, Rodney Wagner Jr.

would later betray and cause irreversible damage to my father and his business. However, it was a blessing in disguise; this betrayal that hurt my father deeply led to a transformation in his life—encouraging the renewal of his passion for serving the Lord. My father would often share with me how much he wanted to serve full-heartedly were he not burdened with the financial responsibility of both his family, as well as that those of his siblings, and what seemed a heavy-handed strike by the Potter served to begin his reshaping process. This point in his spiritual journey played a significant role in mine.

My Mother's Christian Heritage

My mother was a fourth generation Christian. Her father was a famed English teacher in a high school in Hong Kong. He was unique among his peers because he had a strong mastery of the English language. He held high moral standards and was a well-respected Christian educator. My grandmother became mentally ill with delusion during the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945. At one point during the war, my grandfather was taken to a concentration camp and my grandmother was left with the responsibility of taking care of eight children. She was overwhelmed by the daily responsibilities and the constant threats of her children possibly being taken away from her by the Japanese soldiers—the hardship and stress of life during that time eventually broke her. Unfortunately, she never fully recovered from that period of her life. After the war, she became calmer and could live a seemingly normal life but would often still have delusional thoughts. At a young age, I was baffled by the fact that God would let

us suffer like this. If the Potter was good, shaping and moulding his people for their betterment, my grandmother's situation stood as a harsh contrast to that sentiment. As I continued to grow in my faith and understanding of God's will, however, I have found peace in the fact that he works for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8: 28); it just takes time to understand what this 'good' is.

My grandfather had a heart attack and passed away in early 1957 when my mother was 28. Since my mother and her siblings understood the suffering that my grandmother went through, they all helped in taking care of her until her death. My mother and her siblings are all devoted Christians.

My mother came from a rich spiritual lineage with three generations of pastors. My great-great grandfather, Rev. Wong Mui, because of his significant work toward the stabilization and growth of the Chinese Protestant church, was likened to many spiritual greats. He was said to have served as a cornerstone of faith as Peter and was posthumously lauded as the "Chinese Martin Luther."² He was a pioneer in planting strong and growing churches in Southern China in a turbulent period of Chinese history. He was bold and courageous, overcoming adversity in order to serve his generation for the sake of the Gospel. He became the first Chinese ordained pastor and the second senior pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Guangzhou (惠愛八約浸信會首任華人牧師). Rev. Wong Mui

² Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (website: <http://www.bdcconline.net/zh-hant/stories/by-person/h/huang-mei.php>)

was ordained by his predecessor and senior pastor, Rev. Rosewell H. Graves, an American, in January 1870. Rev. Wong Mui eventually succeeded Rev. Graves as the senior pastor of this church. His son, Rev. Wong Ngok Ting, subsequently served as the fourth senior pastor of the same church.

It is worth noting that Rev. Jehu Lewis Shuck, the pastor who baptized my great-great grandfather while he was living in California before his return to China, was on a business trip from China to work in Sacramento, California for seven years. It was during that same period between 1854 and 1861 that he also spent seven years in California as a missionary to the Chinese-American community. He built a chapel in Sacramento, organized a church of sixteen members, and edited a Baptist newspaper. It was reported on the Baptist History Homepage that his first convert in California was Wong Mui, who afterwards was a successful preacher in Guangzhou. Rev. J.L. Shuck subsequently became the first American Baptist Missionary to China, living in Macao, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and, later, Shanghai (Taylor 1912).

My great-great grandfather, Rev. Wong Mui, had two sons and one daughter. Wong Ngok Ting is the name of the first son, who later became an ordained pastor. I was unable to identify the name of the other son. Wong Sum Kit, his daughter, gave birth to nine children after being married to Chiu Cheuk Tzi. It is worth noting that Hong Kong Baptist Church was founded in 1901 by 28 members. Among those were Wong Sum Kit, and Chiu Cheuk Tzi, who was subsequently ordained as life-time deacon in 1911. They made great contributions to both the church and the Christian upbringing of their children. Among the nine

children of Wong Sum Kit and Chiu Cheuk Tzi, the eldest is called Chiu Yan Tze, also an ordained pastor.

My grandfather, Chiu Yan Kwong, was their third child, who gave birth to my mother, Florence Fook Ling Chiu. My mother was ordained as a life-time deaconess of the Hong Kong Baptist Church in 1971. Thanks to God's exceptional grace, I became a pastor at the same church in 2000 and served there for ten years. My mother told me that the benevolent work by Chiu Cheuk Tzi cannot be underestimated; his building of the First Baptist Church of Hong Kong helped spark a spiritual revolution of benevolence that has persisted through Hong Kong's growth, from the small fishing village that it was to its prowess today. To this day these effects can be felt. Interestingly, Rev. Wong Mui appears to be the only known Chinese Baptist ordained pastor with five generations of Christian descendants actively serving in churches to this day. My mother always reminded me and my siblings to be grateful of God's exceptional grace for our rich Christian heritage.³

³ A family tree is attached as Appendix 1 at the end of this paper for reference.

Growing Up in a Christian Home

1959-1971

Perception is Not Reality!

Growing up, I was often reminded of the special circumstances in which my mother gave birth to me. My mother is the third of eight children. Both she and her younger sister, Auntie Molie Cheng, gave birth in the same hospital, the Sanatorium Hospital, at about the same time on January 4, 1959. My mother gave birth to me, her fourth child, and Auntie Molie gave birth to her first daughter, my cousin Angela. Sanatorium Hospital is located in Happy Valley, Hong Kong, across the street from the Royal Jockey Club, where gambling and horse races were held. The irony was not lost on my family. While there was competitive horse racing at the Jockey Club, right across the street in their hospital beds sat two sisters—who loved each other deeply and who had known no competition between one another, both dedicated Christians who knew only kindness, love, and admiration for each other—waiting with anticipation and excitement for their children to be born. Like the competitive races across the street, both of these women, unknowingly and unintentionally, were put into a circumstance in which they “competed” with each other in the eyes of their relatives who wondered which child would be born first. Often, in the following years, when Angela and I met with other relatives, they would tease me about how I “won the competition” and became the older cousin by only a matter of hours. Since we celebrated our birthday on the same day every year, this fact was frequently brought up. I believe

when all the aunties and uncles teased us, they meant no harm, yet deep down, I felt like a victim of circumstance. Their misattribution of my intentions made me feel as if I was nothing more than a figurehead of some success that I didn't even care about. I had no intention to compete and did not feel like I won anything for being born a few hours ahead of Angela. In my naiveté, I accepted my 'win' as a social burden, instead of accepting as the mark of my first day on the Potter's wheel. While my first day marks the beginning of a lifetime in which many of my actions have been misperceived as competitive, I can now find peace in the fact that I can do my best for God. He has used these pressures to form me to act for his glory without fear of worry of responses that my actions might garner from others.

One of the most significant life lessons I learned in primary school was that "perception is not reality." Although I could often be wrongly perceived as having intentions that I did not, thus becoming a victim of circumstance, this "wrong perception" could sometimes work in my favor. One such example of this was when I was in Primary Two studying at the Lingnan Middle School at Stubbs Road, Hong Kong. The school was located in a hilly area and built around a mountain. It had a fish pond, a big rock, and a seesaw. During spring, the fishpond became a birthing place for hundreds of frogs. For adults, a fish pond, big rock, and seesaw would mean a scenic and leisurely area to be considered as a great place to spend a recess; for Primary Two students, they spelled disaster! We would use the seesaw as capital punishment for frogs that we caught. After they were smashed when one side of the seesaw came down, we would put them on the

rock to dehydrate the corpses. It was fun to us but a horrific scene to the teachers who felt that my whole class committed a very serious crime. Since I looked cute to teachers at the time, had a good Christian family background, and was believed to be among the best-behaved students, the teachers perceived that I played no part in this crime and spared me from the after-school punishment while everybody else was in detention for this cruel crime.

Another time, I had a big fight with one of my classmates when I was in grade four. When both of us were taken to a school counselor, he made a judgment against my classmate, punishing him for causing the fight. In reality, my share of initiation for the fight would be no less than my victim who was slightly injured from my punch. These are only a few examples of an exception; more often than not, this misperception of me would not be in my favor.

While there have been specific moments, one of the main examples of this has actually been feedback that I've received from fellow students or colleagues. Oftentimes, I would just be myself, doing the best I could with the gifts and abilities God has entrusted to me, enjoying the process with no intention of taking credit nor any attempt to win any praise, but somehow my intentions would be wrongly perceived by doubters. The classic comment from a new friend that I met in my University small group was, "Hubert, you are too good to be true. You speak well, you behave well, and you care about everyone around you. There must be something wrong about you; you must have some hidden agenda I don't yet know about." At the time, I was studying at the University of Washington in Seattle. I came to know this new friend through a Christian fellowship and after a

few weeks of observation, this was his first comment. I remembered only doing what came naturally to me but somehow my actions were perceived in a questionable light.

Despite my often-misunderstood motives, it can't be denied that I have also demonstrated charismatic leadership throughout my life. I attribute my thick skin to the constant pressures that have been exerted on me upon the Potter's wheel.

A Leader has Followers

I have had followers, in one way or another, since Primary One. If the basic definition of leadership is having followers, then, it could be easily said that I was a natural leader. Throughout my primary school years, I invited my followers to participate in various activities during recess, lunch hours, and after school. Academically, I was an honours student; socially, again misunderstood, I was perceived by classmates as a teachers' pet. During the first three years of primary school, I would host various competitions including toy car races and marble games. Since our school was built around a mountain, it was perfect for competitions involving anything that could roll down a slope. We would also think of all kinds of games to play in our group, myself and my followers, and there was always something creative going on. During my Primary Five and Six years, I became quite involved in the church fellowship. My counselors would often pick me as the leader for group activities or to lead the fellowship, granting me opportunities to flex my leadership and creative muscles. As a natural

organizer, I would also organize events and activities under the guidance of my youth counselors. I began to learn how to serve God, with both the right attitudes and skills.

At home, my father intentionally trained myself and all my siblings on teamwork, leadership, management, and administrative skills through organizing the annual Christmas party. We learned to brainstorm, plan, and implement large-scale events with engaging games, a time of worship suitable both for adults and young children, a magic show, great food and snacks, and a gift exchange and lottery. We also had guest speakers for children that shared friendly Christmas messages. Each of us would invite our friends and all of them loved the parties. We had to be creative to provide a fresh experience year after year, as many of our friends attended regularly. At one point, the attendance grew to over seventy kids squeezing into our living room. Over the years, some of our friends became Christians through these annual Christmas events.

My Parents' God Became My God

Although my parents brought me to church every Sunday with my other three siblings, I only became a Christian at the age of eleven when I was in Primary Six. One night, I went with my parents to an evangelistic meeting at my home church, Hong Kong Baptist Church. The speaker was Rev. Hay Chun

Maak⁴ whose message pierced through my heart that night. I recall feeling heavy hearted as I, a sinner, fell short of God's glory, so I accepted Christ into my heart to cleanse my sins. I stepped forward to commit my life to Christ in response to the message and followed along with the speaker in a prayer of confession. There was also an usher who took me to another room full of people who made the decision to follow Christ that night, praying with me and briefly going through the basics of new believers. Growing up in a Christian home, and actively participating in church since I was a baby, it was difficult both for me to identify myself as a sinner and to draw the line in my life between when I was "lost" and when I was "found." I did not necessarily have a dramatic "before and after" experience of coming to the faith. For a long time, the moment I became a Christian was quite vague to me. In my early childhood, I responded to Sunday School teachers who asked me to invite Christ into my heart. My mother also often asked me to do the same, after sharing bible stories with me before bedtime. I prayed the confession prayer many times in different ways. It was at that point in my life at this Evangelistic Gathering where I responded to the altar call and "reconfirmed" my faith in Christ, that I could identify as my day of conversion (and yet I did not write down the exact date). That night marked the start of a

⁴ Rev. Hay Chun Maak is a well-known evangelist but later joined Singapore Bible College in 1975, becoming their fourth principal between 1979–1992. He also served as General Secretary of the Chinese Coordination Center of World Evangelism (CCOWE) between 1996–2001.

change in my understanding of faith. It was the first night that I felt the reality of God's presence in my life. Despite the fact that I now forget the passage that was being preached, I distinctly remember the feeling of resonance with scripture, and the alignment that I felt with the Holy Spirit. It was as if I recognized that I was on the Potter's wheel and given a glimpse of God's plan for me. I was stricken with the disparity between my current state—this haphazard lump of clay—and the vision of the vessel that I could become, so I willingly invited God to shape me. I could not hold my tears as I felt I was a sinner in need of a Savior. That night, my parents' God became my own.

Baby Brother to My Sister

I have four siblings. My sister, Catherine, born on October 9, 1951, is the eldest and is about nine years older than me. My brothers, the second and third children, Gilbert and Albert, born on December 25, 1952, and July 1, 1957, are seven years and one and a half years older than me, respectively. I had a younger brother, Poon-Hoi, who was born in 1962 but died of pneumonia at only seven months old.

Catherine and I shared the same bedroom with bunk beds throughout the first eleven years of my life. My father had entrusted Catherine as the treasurer of his children and she was responsible to distribute pocket money to each of us. So, growing up, my sister took care of me in various aspects of my life. One of the fond memories I had of Catherine was that she was a serious fan of the British spy, James Bond, and his movies. She and her friends would often go out on the

streets to play spy-hunting games. They would bring me along and I was always thrilled to follow them around and share the excitement of being found as a spy or to finally find the spy all of us were hunting for. When Catherine left home in August 1970 for her undergraduate study in Business Administration at the Pepperdine University in California, it broke my heart. I felt short of breath after returning from the airport where she disappeared from my eyes behind the immigration desk. It was the first time in my life that I felt so alone, empty, and sad. To an eleven-year-old, it was an unbearable feeling. Missing Catherine, I cried for weeks before bed time—that was how close we were.

Catherine was a very resourceful person and to me, she was a living encyclopedia. I could ask her about anything and she would have information or advice for me. I did not know then what I know now: She continued to play this wise counselor role throughout my life and she was always there for me when I needed her, even when we were miles apart.

Brother Gilbert, a Radical

In contrast to my relationship with Catherine, my relationship with my brother Gilbert was rather cold and remote. In fact, we barely knew each other growing up. I did not see brother Gilbert often because he was either busy with school work or spending all his after-school time at church or with a church group. For this, I would call him “a radical.” He had his own circle of friends with whom he wanted to spend time. He was hardly home and was quite detached from the family. My most poignant memory of this was that my mother had to take a

measure of brother Gilbert's pants, adding lengths to buy new pants for him, because she saw him even less than I did! Brother Gilbert was the smartest amongst the siblings. He first went to UCLA for his undergraduate studies before getting his PhD in biochemistry at Columbia University.

My brother Gilbert has a unique personality, and I came to understand him to be a perfectionist. He sought fairness and justice in everything he did, even if his values led to splitting hairs. Once, when he was home, he complained to Auntie Yu Kwan, my father's younger sister, that she was unfair to give the smaller half of an apple to him and the bigger half to Catherine. Auntie Yu Kwan answered, "Gilbert, do you want to weigh your half of the apple to see if they weighted the same as the one I gave to Catherine to make sure that it was fair?" This was Gilbert's justice—he would not take advantage of others and would not let others take advantage of him. Through this, he remained polite, calm, and headstrong, but I often felt that this caused him to be emotionally removed in conversations with me and others in the family. He would speak in a lawyer's tone and manner, even when complaining. I recall during my teenage years when brother Gilbert wanted to buy a high-end and expensive organ that usually only a big church would procure. He spent more than a week speaking to my dad nightly. Whenever Gilbert came home, he talked through the evening until after midnight, fervently trying to persuade my father to buy an organ that my father thought was too expensive for a common household. Eventually, my father bought the organ just to have a good night's sleep again; my father yielded to Gilbert's insistent, almost torturous, methods of persuasion. Gilbert continued to

embody focus and determination throughout his life. Like my sister, he left me for undergraduate study at UCLA when I was still a Primary School student. Unlike the emotional experience with my sister, however, I hardly noticed his missing presence.

Brother Albert, My Keeper

Brother Albert and I are only one and a half years apart in age. While he is an introvert, he has a very considerate and caring personality, much like my mother. During recess in school in the first grade, he would find me and take me to the tuck shop to get snacks. Brother Albert and I had different but complimentary personalities and skill sets. He accepted our differences and embraced my strengths to compliment his weaknesses. He did not care for getting credit and has always been an easygoing, non-calculative, and patient individual. He was slow and I was quick. He was people-oriented and I was task-oriented. Although at times we had conflicts with each other due to these fundamental differences in our tendencies, he would take heat from me and patiently wait for me to calm down. He has also always been a very forgiving person; Brother Albert kept me sane and safe. For that, we became very close.

A Thorn in the Family's Side

Auntie Yu Kwan Wu, my father's younger sister, has always been part of our family life as she lived in a room at a special corner of our home with a private bath. She was a midwife nurse and often had to take shifts. None of us

children were allowed to go near her room, and we were always to stay quiet when she was home. I thought of her room as a place of mystery; I didn't have access or permission to enter. My dad and Auntie Yu Kwan had a love-hate relationship and never talked to each other, instead using my mother as a go-between. Auntie Yu Kwan had an inexplicably hot temper and a critical spirit. She would always find a way to criticize anything and everything in her sight. We had two full-time maids at home growing up, but Auntie Yu Kwan would re-clean the kitchen again by herself to meet a specific and unique standard she set for our home. No one besides her could meet her standards of cleanliness. When I was young, I thought this was some type of funny quirk, complaining about how incompetent everyone else was at home that she had to do the work of the "incompetent maids." My father's reason for her excommunication was that he gave up engaging with this side of her. He simply did not want his conversations devolving into insults, testing the limits of his patience. Looking back, I have come to see the Potter's hand in our family's relationship with Auntie Yu Kwan; he used her as a formative pressure, further refining my mother's character, further making her a woman with great patience and perseverance. For all my siblings, we learned to respect our elders even when they behaved in unexpected ways that crossed every boundary. We learned how to live with, love, and respect those who are most unlike us.

A Successful Self-Made Entrepreneur and Family Man

The youngest always tends to be the baby of the family. For a very long period of time, I spent a lot of time inside my parents' bedroom. I would sleep between my parents and they would take me back to my bed when I was sound asleep. At times, I would crawl over to my parents' bedroom and squeeze myself into their bed in the morning when I woke up early. I loved to sit on top of my father's big tummy for bedtime stories. He shared with me his wartime stories, how he served as an interpreter in the American army, and how he survived the war years through the risks and dangers he faced. Since he was serving as an interpreter in the army—a supportive team member in contrast to frontline soldiers—he had opportunities to serve God during those dark times of Chinese history and played piano at churches in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces. He also loved to tell me the story of how he began his multi-national business with a rented desk in a shared office. He had no relatives or friends to help him during the toughest times of his early years in business. He built the company from the ground up and made it into a multi-million-dollar international trading business with offices in many parts of the world. To this day, I am indebted to my father as I was imbued with many of his important qualities that propelled him to success, including entrepreneurship, creativity, a continuously learning and renewing spirit, and the ability to be highly adaptable to change and challenges. What he shared with me in those days fueled my imagination and I admired him for his capacity to overcome adversity in life. I later realized that my ability to face

toiling adversity in life in an emotionally healthy manner is because of his stories and lessons. I now know that my father contributed significantly to my becoming a restless, self-initiated, and driven visionary.

I got my first watch—a Timex—from my father as a reward for my good performance at school when I was in Primary Three. My father was very reserved when it came to personal spending but very generous and kind, spending lavishly for others. He was always able to think of gifts for his friends and family on birthdays, for Christmas, and any other special occasion. He would also buy inexpensive but unique gifts for his staff. He showered us with fancy toys as Santa during Christmas. I thought Santa was real and did not know my father was Santa until I was eleven. Thanks to him, I can count myself a generous person.

My father treasured friendship, and demonstrated his loyalty to his friends by taking us every year to visit some of his best friends from his war days. He also was an insatiable reader; extensively collecting and poring over magazines and books involving business and Christian living. Our home library had more books than the libraries at most churches! I would rarely see my father without a business magazine or a book at his side, during his free time. I emulate my father's loyalty and love for books and new knowledge, values which have thankfully become part of my children's lives as well. My father was playful and enjoyed performing magic tricks for me. One of my all-time favorites was to watch him cut off and reattach one of his fingers. I did not know it was an illusion until I was eight; he performed it so well.

My father did not compartmentalize his life. He tried his best to integrate and balance life between family, business, and church. On many occasions when he had overseas customers visiting Hong Kong over the weekend, he would first go to church with us and then pick up his customers bringing them along to share a day with us. For the weeks where he had nightly business dinners with customers, he would ask my mother to bring us along, even on school days, just so we would not feel his absence for extended periods of time.

Our family regularly attended worship services at Hong Kong Baptist Church as early as I can remember. Since my mom was a third-generation member at the church, my father agreed to join her church while keeping membership at Saint Mary Anglican Church in Causeway Bay, where my grandmother had taken my father. It was at Saint Mary that he spent his spiritually formative years, and my father continued to attend their worship service once a month. For a number of years, I kept my father company when he went and he would give a special donation every time he worshipped there. I came to see how considerate and accommodating my father was toward my mom and came to recognize the value that he put on going to church together as one family; he had every chance to continue attending Saint Mary by himself. I appreciated my father's loyalty to Saint Mary and his effort to keep the memory that he had with my grandmother alive through worshipping there once a month. In addition, after the worship service at Hong Kong Baptist Church, for many years, my father would pick up my grand-auntie Kong Ching-Po on our way to lunch. Great Auntie Kong attended another church in the Central District called New Life

Church, a charismatic church located on the second floor of an office building. Since I was eight, my father sent me up to get her. While I was waiting for her to come out from her worship service, I saw people speaking in tongues. While I grew up in a Baptist church, I came to appreciate the diversity of the liturgy and traditions in different denominations as a young boy. I experienced firsthand that these denominations all were comprised of God-loving people, and that their churches served in different capacities and to fill their respective needs. They were, effectively, bespoke vessels crafted by God's loving hand for their express purposes.

My father was a man who walked the talk. He valued family, committed to continuous learning through regular reading and emphasized the importance of growing up in a Christian environment; he taught us these core values through living by example. I remember appreciating my father for regularly squeezing time out of his busy schedule to come home and drive brother Albert and me to youth fellowship, before we could go by ourselves.

Although my father was extremely busy, he would insist on keeping Sunday mostly free, so that he could spend it with his family. Growing up, we treasured, valued, and prioritized our weekly 'family day' for travelling and spending quality time together. After church in the morning, my father would take us to try different foods in rather nice restaurants. My father was a food lover. It was his only hobby, but he pursued and shared it with passion. I think he wanted to raise us with international exposure, good dining manners, and a love of variety. He would also drive us to beaches, down scenic routes, through out of

town neighborhoods, and take us on nature walks. At times, we would drive for over an hour to villages in remote areas of Hong Kong for the experience of handpicking live seafood and taking them to a nearby restaurant to cook them fresh. We were so excited to follow him around as we always longed to try something new and different.

In 1969, when I was ten years old, my father took the entire family on a trip to Taiwan. It was my first experience on a plane, I was so curious and excited. He took us to visit his office in Taipei and dine with his business partners and staff members. He then took us to visit a big mall with an indoor amusement park where there were advanced mechanical and electronic games and playthings we had never seen before. At the time, Taiwan was more advanced than Hong Kong. We drove four and a half hours outside of Taipei to the Alishan National Scenic Area. My father not only dressed us up with native costumes, he wore them himself. We had a lot of fun taking pictures together, and we still all remember that trip fondly decades later.

The following year, my father took us for a family trip to visit the World Expo held in Osaka, Japan. It was the first world fair held in Japan. Walking around the World Expo was like walking on the moon to me at eleven years old—everything was a new experience. I was also exposed to the world's latest technology: prototypes of new inventions there that became products we later used in everyday life. Concurrently, a Baptist World Congress including Baptist Youths was held in Tokyo. Since Gilbert was part of the youth delegation representing Hong Kong, my father took us to Tokyo after visiting the Osaka

World Expo for a very different religious experience. It was in this Congress that my father met Dr. Richard Shearer, Chancellor of a Christian college, now called Alderson Broaddus University located in Philippi, West Virginia.

1971 was Alderson Broaddus' centennial year. There, my father received his honorary L.L.D. degree as an acknowledgment of his business accomplishments and contributions to society. Those who were honored at the same ceremony included vice-president hopeful Senator Hadfield, and five other distinguished recipients. Dr. Shearer and my father became life-long friends and they visited each other and kept in touch until my father passed away in November 2013.

A Virtuous Woman and A Prudent Wife

My mother was a godly woman, a wise, understanding, and prudent wife, as well as a loving and caring mother. In her I saw all the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Physically, she was afflicted with chronic asthma which made her weak, allergic to dust and pollen. She was very careful with food and was constantly conscious about taking measures and extra precautions to stay healthy. She religiously took multi-vitamins and food supplements daily. One night, when I was probably still in Primary Two, our family doctor came to our home in the middle of the night and closed my parents' bedroom door and tried to rescue her from an asthma attack. In those days, asthma could be a life-threatening illness. I was sleeping on a sofa just outside of my parents' bedroom and frightened to lose my mother. I

was too young at the time to keep myself awake and fell asleep while I was awaiting the doctor to come out. I was truly glad to see my mother still alive the next morning. While thankfully not regular, similar incidents occurred throughout my childhood. I think my dad was frightened, too, for the lives of four children growing up without their own mom would be painful lives full of hardship.

With looming life-threatening asthma and many other dark challenges in life, one bright thing that stood out in my memory of my mom was her prayer life. Indeed, prayer sustained her. I was only nine when she began to tell me she prayed daily for each of us—all her children—to have spouses who are dedicated Christians and who love the Lord; God indeed answered and honoured her prayers.

She led the Women's Ministry as well as the Caring Team of Hong Kong Baptist Church for many years. The caring team would visit newcomers as well as needy members every Wednesday. On many occasions, she fell sick before Wednesday; she would pray for God's timely healing to allow her to serve him through the visitation of the sick and needy. God would generally answer her prayers and give her strength for ministry on the next day. Auntie Yu Kwan used to complain and criticize my mom, griping, "Are you pretending to be ill? You are too lazy to help on household chores. How could you be so energetic to spend the entire day visiting while you leave your chores to me and the maids? If you are so lively on Wednesday, you cannot have been that ill on Monday or Tuesday." Yet even at a very young age, I could see that my mom's strength was, in fact, God's strength for his glory, in spite of her weakness.

Very much the baby in the family, I would seek my mother's attention by asking her to accompany me every day when I took a bath. I usually took a long time. Some parents would have probably tried to keep their children from wrinkling up in the water, but my mother valued that our time was shared. We ended up spending this time together productively; my mother taught me many valuable Biblical lessons in the water. It was an intimate time for daily mother and son talk throughout my primary school years.

Mother also had a strong community with her siblings who visited our home to share and pray together regularly. Mom also hosted small groups at home. Sometimes, I would sit in those groups and listen to their sharing. I was amazed by many of the life stories shared; God's presence was quite evident in them. It cultivated in my heart the desire for God and for a deeper, more personal experience in him, and also laid the foundational values of small groups and spiritual companionship that I hold to this day. The fact that I could surround myself with those stories of growth in Christ motivated me to create such open, vibrant communities wherever I felt called. The seed for spiritual experience in my heart grew instead of spiritual knowledge in my head. In the late sixties, my mom's small groups had all the elements of small groups today with a strong sense of Christian community. In contrast, fellowships and large group gatherings facilitated by the church seemed much more superficial than my mother's home groups. Throughout my childhood, my mother was my spiritual mentor, counselor, and prayer partner.

Growing Up in a ‘Greenhouse’

I grew up in a harmonious home. I never saw my parents argue openly, even when they had disagreements. When my mother had strong opinions on anything, she would write a note to my father and subtly put it on his bedside table. This usually resulted in my father doing whatever it was my mother asked of him. Although my father did not believe the benefits of multi-vitamins and health supplements, he would quietly swallow the more than ten pills given by my mother daily without a word for decades.

I also grew up in a home without wants. My father founded his own company in 1945. By the time I was six, his business career reached its peak. I remember going to my father’s office at Suite 1801 in the Prince’s Building—the most prestigious office building at the time. It was situated across the street from the Mandarin Hotel and the Headquarters of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, as well as the Standard Chartered Bank in downtown, still at the heart of the financial district in Hong Kong to this day.

And so, my early childhood was marked by an affluent lifestyle. Because of my mother’s physical weaknesses, we had two live-in maids who took care of us. We lived in a decently sized flat with connected units occupying the entire 10th floor with an ocean view. Our living room was even large enough to ride a bike inside. Our school mates would come to our home to play ping pong since we had our own folding table. We also had a chauffeur for a number of years. As my father enjoyed imported vehicles, we used to own a Vauxhall—an old British

manufactured vehicle with a rich pedigree. One day after school, my father came home with excitement and got all of us into the elevator. As we were wondering what was going to happen next, my father showed us his new car, a Canadian brand, Acadia, which was a luxury car at the time. Eventually, in our teenage years, we had a Mercedes-Benz.

Growing up in affluence meant I had access to more resources than most of my other classmates. I could get toys and books my other classmates might not have. When there was an event at school, I could tap into my father's resources to make things happen quicker and easier. Fortunately, both my parents would guide me to use these for the glory of God instead of for my own benefit or social gain. My parents taught me that it is not a sin to be affluent, but it is a sin to be selfish. In turn, it became a part of my life to share personal resources in whatever way that God may see fit. We were taught the importance of being good stewards of the resources given by God for the benefit of others and for the glory of the Lord.

Life Is Not About Me!

Being the youngest in the family, my parents spoiled me, and I got what I wanted most of the time. This wasn't always good, though, as I developed a short and sensitive fuse for when things did not go my way. In my early childhood, I was emotional, with a quick temper when facing adversity or interruption. My sensitive anger-switch flew when things derailed from my original plan. I had quite a dominant character and was also hard-headed. This part of my personality became a headache to my parents, but they prayed for me and took steps to help

me eventually grow out of it. While my parents continued to take good care of me, and see to my needs, they began to teach me to consider my wants against my needs, as well as the needs of those around me. They also were quick to guide and counsel me when I behaved in ways that demanded instant gratification. Through their guidance, my parents taught me an important lesson: life is not about me. It was often in adversity that God brought me back to this part of my childhood, to remold, reshape, and help me to realize that life is about God, and how God wants to accomplish His purposes through me. It became a lifelong lesson for me.

May I Change My Name Please?

My Chinese name is Poon Tak Ng, “Poon Tak” meaning rock of virtues and Ng is my last name. My father also gave each of my brothers’ English names. Brother Gilbert starts with a “G”, brother Albert starts with an “A”, and I was originally named by my father as Robert which starts with a “R.” In my father’s mind, the three initials would make a word, “GAR,” which happens to be synonymous to “family” in Chinese; but because many local movies were made with villains named Robert, I was often teased. One day, I proposed to my father that I wanted to change my English name to Hubert. I convinced him that “GAH” would sound like “GAR,” maintaining the sound of “family” in Chinese. Eventually, my father agreed. It was not until I went to study in Ottawa in Grade 11 or 12 in 1975 that I changed my last name from “Ng” to Wu, too. In those days, Caucasians were not familiar with “Ng” and could not pronounce it since there were no vowels in the name. Nowadays, people could automatically say,

“iNg” when they see “Ng” as the last name. I was very embarrassed—even my homeroom teacher had trouble with the name! I changed it to “Wu,” the Mandarin pronunciation of the same character, since it seemed easier to say than “Ng,” the Cantonese. From 1975 onwards, Robert Ng became Hubert Wu; I like the name Hubert much better. Later, I found that it originated from Old German, means being “clear-minded” and has a spiritual connotation to being “obedient.” A Christian friend of mine from the charismatic tradition told me that there is a bible verse attached to this name in James 3:17, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” This passage has given me overflowing inspiration and constant reminders to live up to God’s expectations for my life.

Life Changing Events in Early Teen Years

1971-1975

At Lingnan Middle School, there was a group of relatively small buildings scattered on one side of the fish pond built on a hill for the primary school. Beside the fish pond, there were stairs and an uphill path that led to a single building that was big enough to be the home of all middle and high school classes. On September 1, 1971, I walked into a classroom in the middle/high school building for the first time. I found out very quickly that school life in middle school differed significantly to school life in primary school. Not only did teachers demand more in terms of self-discipline, the tests and examinations demanded

more in mental faculty as well. Most of my classmates felt like they became adults after the summer dividing Primary Six and Form 1. When I was in primary school, I never went home after school without someone picking me up, be it the driver or my mom. Now that I had become a Form 1 student, my parents allowed me to go home by public transportation to learn to become more independent. And so, I led some of my friends—through the woods and the cemetery near our school and through various downhill shortcuts—to walk to the closest town where we could take public transportation on the main roads to go home. It felt good to have the first taste of independence. We were grown-ups!

During my early teen years, I was very engaged in serving the Lord whenever opportunities arose, both at school and at church. At church, I served in various positions including being a small group leader; being in charge of devotions, logistics, and recreation; as well as being a vice-chairman and then chairman of the fellowship. I helped to organize retreats and overnight youth camps as well as outreach activities for the church fellowship. At school, I became the chairman of the School Fellowship, a position I maintained throughout all four of my high school years. In addition, I was baptized by Rev. Poon Tzi Pui, the Interim senior pastor of Hong Kong Baptist Church, on Easter Sunday, April 22, 1973. These may well have been the most critical and spiritually formative four years of my life. There were several major experiences that became my spiritual trajectory for growth, launching me toward the next phase of my spiritual journey. As a potter uses broad motions to rough out the

initial shape of the vessel they intend to make, so I felt God's heavy hand forcing my development in my early years.

My Life is Yours

One day, after school in early 1971, I went to the washroom for my daily routine as usual. Suddenly, I passed out and before I fell on the floor, it was all dark in front of my eyes and I used all my remaining strength to yell for help. Before totally passing out, I heard my mom coming over to help me. I recall vividly that I also prayed with all my strength, "God, don't let me die now. If you save my life, I will give my life totally to you." After a few hours, I had awakened. I forget what my mother told me had happened, but I remembered this promise to God in the years that followed, thankful that God did save me that day.

Two of My Best Friends Came on Board!

Although I would often invite my friends to church, I became even more passionate and enthusiastic in my effort to bring my two best friends to Christ in the beginning of my high school years. Francis Wong had been one of my best friends since Primary Two. I suspected that it was difficult to bring him to Christ because he felt he did not need Christ. He grew up in a wealthy family, his father was a famous architect and his mother was a medical doctor. Francis had three other sisters and was the youngest among his siblings. I suppose he was overwhelmed by the love of his parents and three elder sisters, especially since he

was the youngest and the only boy in the family. All this may have kept him from joining me at church.

Eddie Ma became one of my best friends when he transferred to our school in Primary Six. Francis and Eddie later joined the Scouts, an after-school program at our school. The two of them also became best friends. In 1972, I intensified my evangelistic efforts on both of them much more regularly and fervently after our friendships deepened. Eddie at one point suggested a “trade.” He suggested to me one day when we were in Form 1, “Hubert, you have been asking me to go to church with you so often. I have been thinking, why don't you join the scouts with me and then I will go to church with you?” After a pause, in my usual dominant character, I counter proposed, “Eddie. Alright. Why don't you try out the church first and we will see what happens?” Eventually, both Francis and Eddie accepted my invitation, came to yet another evangelistic gathering, and responded to the altar call. However, Eddie was the only one who came to Christ that night. Francis later told us that he went out to the altar by mistake. The seed that I had planted, however, continued to slowly grow. The sowing was all I could do, and it took all of my patience to wait the next three years for God’s spirit to soften his heart. And so, he held off until he went to a Gospel Camp where he crossed the line of faith to accept Christ as his personal savior. My heart was overjoyed. While it was excruciating at the time, it became an immense blessing that God, in his exceptional grace, allowed me to experience his work in softening the hearts of my two best friends. In my high school years, despite the newness of each of their spiritual journeys, they joined the youth fellowship at our church and

served with me at the School Fellowship. After becoming a Christian, Eddie stopped insisting that I hold up my end of the deal and join the Scouts. I never became a Scout at school.

It took almost ten years of friendship and evangelistic efforts before Francis eventually came to faith. In contrast, I met Eddie much later yet he came to faith after only three years of friendship. Eddie and Francis went on to become pastors much earlier than I. From this experience, I learned that God has His own way and timing for everyone. Each of us responded to God in different ways, at different times. Also, I found that knowing God more deeply through passionate service is not exclusive to Christians, as even seekers can share the same experience when in community among Christian friends, like Francis. God is sovereign. Since those formative years, Francis and Eddie have remained my spiritual companions through thick and thin, in the high and low seasons of life.

Death of a Hero

It was an unforgettable afternoon. On July 20, 1973, the news of the death of Kung Fung movie star Bruce Lee dominated all the news media. His death was so unexpected that I had an unspeakable sadness, akin to losing my own close relatives. He was praised as an athletic and strong man, with a perfect physique. Although, as a Christian, I knew I should not have idolized him, he was someone I admired. I had watched every movie he made. His sudden death at age 33 and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death became the talk of the town and it impacted me on two fronts. First, the circumstances surrounding his death

suggested the double life he had led. It broke my heart to see my hero's name dragged through the mud, as rumors of heavy substance abuse and association with (and perhaps assassination by) Chinese criminal organizations surfaced after his untimely death. This sad episode caused me to respond with a strong yearning for a life of integrity, authenticity, and accountability. Second, this was my first close encounter with the idea of death. This caused me to wrestle with the hard reality that life was so fragile and temporary. In my young age, I regarded people virtually as immortal. This event brought me back to reality—the fact of human mortality, a fact that I knew in my head, now pierced through to my heart. Around that time, I was struck by the text of Psalm 90, particularly verses 9–12,

For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

This marked a transition in my life, as I began to recognize God's Word speaking to me in inspiring ways. Many of my peers, myself included, struggled to find or ascribe meaning to our lives, and these events and passages caused me to become deeply concerned about how precious and fleeting life was. I began to wonder what God's purpose was for my short time here on earth. I didn't realize that the first foreshadowing of my life in ministry was to occur so soon.

God May Work with Only a Few

“Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, ‘Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the Lord will work for

us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few” (1 Sm 14:6 [ESV]). These words embody my experience of serving God at the High School Fellowship. Although Lingnan was a Christian School, I soon found out as the Form 1 school year began, that the High School Fellowship had been loosely organized and poorly attended. It was clear that it had been dying a slow death for a number of years. After a year of observation and general irregular attendance in the fellowship, it was evident to me that very few of my peers cared about it. Worse, this apathy was mutual; there were minimal outreach efforts made by the fellowship to our fellow students as well. After Eddie came to Christ in 1972, I got together with him as well as some other Christian friends, including Alvin, Daniel, Jonathan, and Wai-Man to start a small prayer group and form a new committee for the fellowship. Francis, although, still a seeker, also agreed to join the committee. After I was elected Chairman of the fellowship, we began dreaming of what we could do differently to revive the fellowship. We came to a consensus that we wanted the countenance of our school to exemplify our title: a Christian School. In a way, that was our vision and mission.

We tried everything we learned from our church fellowship and began organizing programs on a weekly basis. We started with fewer than ten people, including ourselves. Although we were not able to generate much response from the wider student body, we remained positive. We were all open to new ideas and external resources. And so, we contacted the Fellowship of Evangelical Students, an inter-church and inter-school organization, which provided the necessary resources and support for our growth. We continued to organize outreach

activities inside and outside our school. During term breaks and summer, we received funding from the government and approval from our school to host District-wide Singing Competitions and other fun activities to serve the community. We found that these events and activities not only created platforms for us to do more outreach and evangelism, but also strongly built community among members in our school fellowship and neighbourhood. About two years later, in late 1973, we were contacted with a new opportunity. “Breakthrough Magazine” was to be launched in Hong Kong in January 1974. Full of interesting readings, graphics, and pictorials, the magazine was positioned at High School students with inclusive seeker-suitable content. We decided to tap on both of these resources and launched an all-out campaign to promote the magazine around the school. We worked hard to persuade our Principal to allow us to use the first ten minutes of our school days to share devotions through our PA system. We tried to make these daily broadcasts as interesting as possible, with thought-provoking Biblical insights, and promotions for fellowship activities, outreach events, and the magazine. All these activities created an atmosphere at school that made it easier for us to invite our non-believing classmates to join our programs.

By then, our group had a vision to reach the entire school for Christ. We knew that we had to have something attractive for non-believing students to voluntarily come to our outreach events. I remembered while we were organizing and promoting one of our major outreach events, a number of teachers discouraged us with comments like, “Who would come? No matter how hard you try, it won’t work!” We prayed and we decided to invite our Principal, Dr. Wong

Lai Man, a Christian, to play the violin at our event. We used his headlining show as a gimmick for promotion; no one had ever heard our Principal perform. Since our outreach events were both voluntary and held either during lunch time or after school, we were very nervous to see who would show up. We had booked days ahead to accommodate our target audience of eight hundred students. What if only a few people came? We worked hard and made invitations. We prayed, held our breath, and waited. When the outreach event was finally held, the halls were packed—God had answered our prayers! We had a great worship time, the Principal played the violin, a motivational speaker shared the Gospel and some students came to Christ! We were overjoyed to the point of tears. Soon after, our fellowship attendance grew even more.

If God is for Us, Who Can be Against Us?

By the Winter of 1974, it sure felt like there was a revival within our fellowship. I forget the exact date, but during the first half of 1975 we held a Gospel Camp at the Baptist Assembly Campground for three days and two nights. We were excited to see that many non-believing friends signed up. We planned and organized the camp, inviting a well-known public speaker to share the Gospel. We were ready for a great time and waited upon the Lord to do it again like the outreach event a year ago that attracted about eight hundred people to come, resulting in many converts. I received a phone call from our speaker the night before our camp. She apologized and said that she wouldn't be able to join us. I was absolutely stunned! What were we to do tomorrow without a speaker? I

prayed and wondered what to do. On the next day, I arrived at the campsite early and had a meeting with the committee. They were bold enough to ask me to be the speaker! I was scared to death; I had never preached. I was their peer, only fifteen at the time. Could I really preach? Would I qualify to make the altar call? Or should we just cancel the evangelism and just have fun? I calmed down and prayed. I felt a sense of the quiet empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and direction from that still small voice to preach. And so, after several hours of consideration and while the programs had already started, I began to prepare my messages for the next couple of nights. When it was time for me to preach, I did. There was an urge in my heart, after I preached the Gospel and shared my testimony, to make the altar call. I asked everyone to close their eyes, to save me from embarrassment if no one responded. There was a pause and silence. Then, a hand rose, and then another, and quite a number of seekers confirmed their faith in Christ! The greatest blessing was that Francis was among them. I was amazed by the work of the Holy Spirit as I knew that it was not I who preached to touch their hearts to come to Christ. It was the first time that I experienced a partnership with the Holy Spirit and God's saving power. My youth counselor often said, "When God assigns a job for us, He will empower us to complete the task." After that night, I was convinced. Looking back, this experience of God's spirit placed the idea upon my heart that Christ followers are not to be only religious, but also spiritual. God was telling me that following him is not like following a playbook, a manual, to do certain things for him. Instead, for me to follow God, I must allow his Spirit to guide and use me in unexpected ways.

The Seeds of a Pastors' Club

The seven core members at the committee of Lingnan Middle School's high school fellowship came from diverse church backgrounds. It was God's grace to put us together, to grow with each other as God's People in companionship, furthering his kingdom where we were placed. While I had grown up attending Sunday school, I was blessed to serve with these friends and count them among my first spiritual companions. Eddie Ma, Francis Wong, and I came from the Southern Baptist tradition. Alvin Poon came from the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination. Daniel Lau and Wai-Man Leung came from the Assembly of God, while Jonathan Lui came from the Pentecostal branch. Although we might sometimes be uncomfortable with each other's methods, we visited each other's churches and learned from each other's practices. These differences also allowed us to discuss differences and similarities in our faiths and their manifestations in our lives; we were able to grow more because of these differences. Thanks to the Potter, not all of our vessels are shaped the same. We came to understand, respect, and appreciate each other's distinctive backgrounds. We made use of our differences, using them to our advantage when serving together. We shared the same love and passion to serve God. It was amazing that God called us, one by one, to full-time ministry. We all became Pastors! I was the leader (Chairman) of the school fellowship and led Eddie and Francis to Christ, yet I was the last to become an ordained pastor. Our high school fellowship truly became the seeds for a Pastors' Club!

New Wine, Fresh Wineskins

My brother Albert and I joined the same youth group at our home church, Hong Kong Baptist Church. For a number of years, the fellowship was stagnant, and without much growth. It was then and there that Albert and I arrived to bring new wine into the new wineskins. We attempted to try new ways to attract newcomers to join our fellowship. We also tried different programs and methods of communication, attempting to share Biblical value and knowledge in fresh ways. We also attempted to change the one-way learning environment, encouraging more interactivity and individual participation. We assigned as many members as possible to teams in charge of different projects and allowed everyone to contribute instead of observing. While Albert and I were very close, we had very different personalities, skills, and approaches toward performing various tasks. We understood and embraced our differences as we grew together and knew each other better. In our teenage years, we experienced God's work firsthand. He used both of us, with our almost opposite personalities, in complementary ways. Albert clearly was God's gift to me, as one of God's People on the Potter's wheel as he served to sharpen my abilities. In some cases, in the face of extreme differences, we agreed to disagree, forgoing our individual desires to get things done. These were valuable lessons that God used to prepare me for my later ministry life. We had ample opportunity to team up to serve together. In his quiet manner, Albert had tons of great and creative ideas, but he was often too timid to share them publicly. I became his mouthpiece, agent, and manager.

Albert and I made historic breakthroughs in our church by turning one of the chapels into a nightclub with creative and lively programs. This alone attracted many of our classmates who were seekers to come for events, and provided opportunities to learn about the Christian faith in very unorthodox ways! We set up tables with candle lights, like a nightclub, for three or four persons each. We decorated the stage and formed a band to play contemporary music. Our first theme was “Finding the Love of Your Life,” which focused on the well-known passage from John 3:16. However, we presented it through new and creative ways, incorporating drama, songs, performances including magic shows, and Gospel messages. It was a radical way of outreach during the early Seventies in a conservative Chinese Baptist church, but it worked! These main ideas came from my brother Albert, and I used my administrative gifts to get things organized, promoted, and smoothly implemented. It was probably my most early experience to explore new and practical ways to experience the three essential resources for spiritual development in one creative package; God’s Word, conveyed through our various media, God’s People, the volunteers in our functions, and God’s Spirit, which empowered us as organizers and performers. This mix provided us an ideal environment which facilitated great spiritual transformation in the Potter’s hands. God showed up and touched many lives, not just impacting my own. I saw new believers come to faith. I saw those of us who served together grow in our faith. At one point in time during our teenage years, our youth fellowship grew to about eighty people in regular attendance. Our elders considered it a revival for our youth fellowship to have so many participants. God

did not only show up then, he continued to work through the lives of many of us in that fellowship, a breeder for more than four pastors and five lifetime deacons in subsequent years.

Religious, but Not Spiritual

By 1974, my father was in his early fifties and his Christian walk was not as vibrant as when he was young. After spending over twenty years in business, he was somewhat desensitized because of his time entrenched in secular culture. The irregularity and busyness of business made it difficult for him to focus on God's Word. Through his dealings within the business world, his expression of God became more of a religious set of actions than those of spiritual desire and growth. His circle of friends became more limited to his business associates, and he focused less on surrounding himself with God's People. He would go through various Christian motions in the default mode: attending Sunday Worship, putting small coins into the offering bag when it came to him, and more. As this became rote, my father slowly became disconnected with God's Spirit. On the surface, someone looking from the outside wouldn't see much to be concerned about, but he increasingly failed to engage in church life. In short, my father, the man responsible for the strong spiritual foundation in my life, became little more than a Sunday Christian. During this time, he was not immune to sin's effects. My father was vulnerable toward temptation; a secular businessman could encounter many. I knew that my mom prayed fervently for my father's repentance, sometimes even crying out of desperation. In her quiet and submissive manner,

my mom was a strong example of a prayer warrior amid this fierce spiritual warfare. I remembered my mom praying regularly for my father to walk with God closely again one day, and that they could once again serve together. This was a prayer that took two more decades to be realized. In the meantime, my father took us to our youth fellowship but refrained from joining in a communal group himself. He was not as engaged in his faith as his sons were.

The same year saw one of the worst stock market downturns in modern history. It was made even worse by concurrent the oil crisis. It inevitably affected the stock market, and business in Hong Kong, and my father came very close to bankruptcy. He moved from his office at the prestigious Prince Building, located in the heart of the financial center in town, to a ‘poor building’ in an old residential district with limited space in the Causeway Bay area. I was too young at the time to realize the impact this move had on my father.

Around that time, I had a conversation with my father over the phone. In my usual manner, I asked my father to bring home a special toy that I wanted on his way home after work. He was just teasing and joking with me that he would not buy it unless I got even better grades in school. I overreacted and, with a slip of the tongue and a curse, insisted, “If you do not buy it for me tonight, I wish that you would be bankrupt by the time you turn sixty-five.” I knew I should never have said such a thing. I was dead wrong to have said something like that, but I was only fourteen at the time, and hadn’t considered its effect. That night, he came home with complete silence. He was not the yelling type. I knew immediately from his speechlessness and angry stare that he was very, very upset

with me. My mother took me to the side to confirm my suspicion. I was scared, and I hated myself for saying the wrong thing, but my father insisted that I had to apologize to him, and then to literally “spit the saliva and say words of blessings to replace the curse,” so as to neutralize the curse. He explained to my mom that he believed “a young boy’s prophecy usually comes true.”⁵ That was an ancient Chinese superstition. I understood the apology part and had no problem with it; I should repent of my sin of saying the wrong thing, but I had doubts about the second part, the “spitting out bad words to replace with good ones in order to receive blessings.” To me, it reflected the reflex of someone superstitious, and it displayed the idea that he was religious and no longer spiritual. I had learned to see the difference between a religious countenance and a spiritual one. I thought a religious person might go to church but may also respond to life in secular or superstitious ways. That is, the religious life might not make any impact on their daily living. A spiritual person, on the other hand, would go to church and respond to life in a spiritual way. That is, the spiritual life might make a significant impact on their daily living. To me, it would have been much more effective to turn a curse into a blessing through spiritual means of repentance, forgiveness, and prayer. Looking back, I now understand that the stress from the stock crash might have been the main cause of my father’s newfound turn to superstition, as well as the steady erosion of his spirituality over that time.

⁵ In Chinese: 童子口好靈驗

I now can appreciate my father's strong will for survival. It pulled him through his company's financial crisis. He sacrificed a lot for the family and did not spend much on himself while continuing to provide for most of the family's needs. I also appreciated his "others-centeredness" philosophy—stingy for himself but generous for others—and never bringing workplace troubles or worries home. By the end of that year, he had sold all of his cars as well.

An Innocent Prayer Leading to a Lifetime of Adventure

In my early teen years, I often joined my mom's home groups when her group members shared deeply on how they experienced God. When I heard many of my mom's friends sharing about their dramatic transformation experiences with God, such as recovery from addiction or a serious disease, I wondered why my spiritual life was so routine and uneventful. I envied the personal experience of God as shared by these Uncles and Aunties. I desired more and more to have the same experience, especially since I had more head knowledge than personal experience of God. I cannot remember the exact time when I began to pray this prayer, "Dear Heavenly Father, I want to experience you in a real way, on a personal basis, like those dramatic testimonies shared by my mother's friends. Please help me to experience you in a real and personal way." For quite some time, I prayed this seemingly innocent prayer; I purely wanted God to grant me some dramatic experience, out of the ordinary, so that I could experience him deeply and to be able to share a testimony with others. My Seminary professors

used to tell me, “Don't pray for something you are not serious about because God truly listens to prayers.” Indeed, God listened to my ‘innocent’ prayer. In the years that followed, my life was full of adverse circumstances, as if on a seemingly endless wheel. These challenges continued to refine my form, as the Potter’s hand applied appropriate pressure to bring out his vision in me.

Experience God Together

At the beginning of the Form 4 school year in September 1974, I began to pray for God’s guidance and provision for me to leave Hong Kong for further study in Canada, the only logical North American schooling option, as the U.S. didn’t accept foreign students at all at the time. There were multiple reasons for my strong desire. Firstly, at that time, all Form 5 students were required to take a special public examination by the Hong Kong school board. The purpose was to eliminate the majority of high school students for further education due to very limited space for university education available locally. Only a small percentage of high school students were accepted into Form 6 or 7 (equivalent to North American education system of Grades 12 or 13), greatly reducing those to be accepted by the two universities in Hong Kong. Secondly, it was fashionable for families who could afford it to send their children to study overseas, either before or after the special public examination. Thirdly, the success rate of passing the public examination by students of certain schools, including ours, was quite low. Most students in these schools would end up studying overseas for their further education anyway. Fourthly, many children from well-to-do families would leave

Hong Kong for further education either before or after finishing Form 3 or 4 (equivalent to grade 9 or 10 in the North American education system).

I felt strongly that there was no point to work hard for the public examination. Although I was doing well at my own school, I still had to compete with the entire student population in Hong Kong. Since I belonged to the category of the well-to-do families and our school had a low successful rate of passing the public examination, I began to pray that God would open a door for me to study overseas. All seemed to make sense except when I talked to my father. He told me then that his business was seriously and adversely affected by the stock market crash and his company was struggling to survive. Since my father had never mentioned his financial situation until then, the news was devastating to me. I felt disappointed and trapped. My mother, however, encouraged me, prayed with me regularly, and sought God's provision with me. I think my mother's intention was to mentor me through this process, to learn how to seek for God's will in circumstances like these and to learn obedience when God's will becomes known to us.

After a few months of praying, a dim light shined through the stone wall of prohibition keeping from going overseas to further my education. My mother's eighth sister and her husband, Auntie Anita and Uncle Ben, had immigrated to Ottawa, Canada, a few years prior. Auntie Anita wrote back to my mom that it was possible for her to sponsor me, as my legal guardian and guarantor, to attend a public High School in Ottawa. However, we would still need to make a deposit of C\$1,875.00 to cover the tuition fees for foreign students, and my father needed

to provide financial evidence to prove that he was able to support my education and living expenses. I can clearly recall the conversation with my father, in early January of 1975, when he said, “Hubert, I knew that many of our friends may send their children overseas for further education as a result of our school system’s limitations. You know that I love you and want to provide you with the same opportunity. But, you are now fifteen years old. You are old enough to understand and share my burden. With my current financial situation, it would be best for you to stay in Hong Kong. If ‘we could afford rice, we eat rice together, and if we could only afford congee, let’s share that together too.’ But, if you leave us for Ottawa, we are not sure if we could support you to complete your education there. It would be worse if we had to take you back in the middle of your school year there.” I felt that my father’s sharing was genuine. I was touched by the way he told me with such candor. My mom and I could have just listened to my father at that time. However, despite our disappointment, we did not give up. I did not know why my mom and I were so determined to seek for God’s help in the face of earthly hindrance. We continued to pray even more fervently for God’s help to overcome all odds, to open a way where there seemed to be none at the time. It was a trying time for our faith.

In early Spring of 1975, during one of the Saturday night fellowship meetings, there was a panel of guest speakers sharing how they sought for God’s will in their life and how God showed up in unlikely places. I was touched by most of the stories, especially by the message from one of the guest panelists who shared how he had to prepare His heart to receive God’s guidance and blessing. I

went home that night replaying the message over and over again in my mind. At that point my prayer life consisted of petitions, where I used increasingly stronger language to plead God for His help and to answer my prayer and needs. It was all about me. That night, God seemed to have spoken to me again, “Life is not about you, son!” Life is about God. I began to reflect on the condition of my heart and how I should prepare my heart, like what the guest panelist said, to receive God’s answer and be obedient to it. From that night on, I changed the direction of my prayer to ask God to soften my heart to know His will and to have the capacity to hear him and to be obedient to His will. Although I continued to plead for God’s help, I felt I opened myself to God for answers that might be contrary to what I was asking for. This change of prayer direction was radical to me; it was contrary to my nature. I was so used to telling my family what I wanted and more often than not, I got what I wanted. It was the way I was brought up. But, God truly broke this aspect of my habit, to learn to see His way is higher than my way.

With such an attitude and prayer direction changed, something began to happen. After a few days, my father asked me into his bedroom and told me,

Hubert, I know that you and mom prayed fervently to God for his guidance and provision. I wanted to share with you something special that happened today at the office. One of my long-time customers from Canada comes to Hong Kong every year about this time. He always asks us in advance for some Hong Kong currency and he would reimburse us in Canadian currency upon returning to Canada. It has been his practice for many years. He usually only asks for a small amount, but he asked for the exact equivalent of C\$1,875 worth of Hong Kong currency today! And, I had to pull together some resources to make available that money to him. In the afternoon, there was a deposit from a new order from another customer that came into our account which would be sufficient to meet the minimum requirement for required financial evidence to be submitted to the Canadian Consulate for your student visa.

These two things happened on the same day and I came to the conclusion that it was God's way of telling me that we should have faith in him and let you go to Ottawa. So, you may begin your application. When it comes time to pay the tuition, I will ask this Canadian customer not to wire back to us in Hong Kong but to give it to Auntie Anita directly as it was the exact amount that she needed.

I could not believe what I heard! God answered our prayers. At least, I could take the first step of faith and see where He would lead me. And so, in the days that followed, I began to submit applications. I then began to wait anxiously every day for the letter from the Canadian Consulate to come. If they granted me an interview, it meant that I had a chance to go. If I was denied of an interview, then I knew that I was not qualified. I was desperate to know God's verdict.

We held another Gospel Camp a few weeks later. The morning before I took off to join the Camp, I checked the mail box and the letter had not arrived yet. So, it was in this spirit of suspense and anticipation as well as with the condition of my heart being opened a bit more to God that I arrived at the campsite. I had to lead and preach at the Gospel Camp. I experienced God in that Camp in new and more personal ways including seeing the works of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to Christ. I felt a sense of close partnership with God and my heart was filled with the Spirit. I learned to make myself available to God for use as his vessel for his purpose. At the Gospel Camp, I was focusing fully on serving God and the campers and did not have time to think about my own needs or issues. After the Camp, I went home physically exhausted but spiritually fulfilled. I remember spending a quiet afternoon all by myself. One of my favorite songs came to mind, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and I kept singing it:

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.
When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone, hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home. (Presley 1957)

The Holy Spirit seemed to guide my prayer of lament and confession, admitting to God that I was asking too often what I wanted. I asked for God's forgiveness. Then, I prayed to God the Jesus prayer, "Thy will be done! Not my will but yours." I had such a sense of relief, as if several tons of weight lifted from my chest at once! I felt an extraordinary peace in my heart after I prayed this. It was no coincidence that I received the letter from the Canadian Consulate offering me an interview the next morning!

One big lesson learned: I was waiting for God to answer my prayer while, in fact, God was, waiting for my heart before providing. It became one of the guiding principles of my prayer life in the years that followed. I started to ask: what was my heart's condition before the Lord?

A few weeks later, I found myself at the Canadian Consulate. My English was not particularly good, and I had difficulties completing the forms that were required before the interview. I was a bit worried so naturally, I prayed. Suddenly, I noticed that there was someone I knew a few people behind me. I let the few people before him pass me and I consulted him for the completion of my application. I also prayed to God that the interview would not be too long as my limited English might not be sufficient if the interviewer asked too many

questions. And so, I completed the application and the interview was surprisingly short and brief. It was as if the interviewer simply checked on the facts written on my form and I was released. I was immediately granted the approval for a student visa. God was gracious and good!

When I went home that night, my parents and I celebrated God's faithfulness and goodness. We all experienced God together!

Onto Ottawa, New York and Seattle

1975- 1979

During the summer months of 1975, after the Form 4 school term ended, my heart began to develop mixed feelings about my situation. On the one hand, I was joyful with great anticipation, planning, and much preparation to soon leave Hong Kong to receive further education in Ottawa. On the other hand, there were multiple circles of intimate friendships, spiritual mentors and close ministry partners, both in school and at church that I felt sad to soon depart from them. In the last four years, we had developed very close friendships and experienced various life-changing events together. Through serving together, I developed a strong emotional attachment to my mentors and friends.

Moreover, I was very close to my parents, particularly my mom. I began to miss them before I even started packing for my journey to Ottawa. I felt excitement in my heart in one moment and yet a sense of sadness in the next. I felt strange. As a result of my nearing departure, I attended many farewell parties, which probably served partially as a grieving process for both my friends and

myself. These parties gave me opportunities to share my testimony as well as for my friends to recount the good and bad times with one another, which brought a bit of closure for all of us. As I prayed and spent quiet time with God, my heart was overwhelmed by his grace and faithfulness to me for answering my mom and my yearlong prayer. I was certain that it was God's guidance and provision to lead me toward this new path. And so, with a blessed assurance from the Lord, I was leaving Hong Kong.

Signposts for the Journey

In the final days before I left Hong Kong, my family gave me a bilingual New Testament in both Chinese and English. It became one of my most loved treasures which I have kept with me over the past four decades. What set this bible apart from all other bibles that I use daily is the front page. It contains handwritten words of encouragement from my family. My mom quoted 1 Timothy 4:12, Catherine quoted Philippians 3:13-14, and Albert quoted Proverbs 1:7. My father wrote almost a letter which took half of the page,

Dear Hubert, you must look upon God for His guidance, He would never make mistakes. Do not stop striving for the best in whatever that you do. The secret to success is diligence, and the secret to prosperity is good stewardship. The way to win friendship is to be polite, humble and always be helpful to others.

However, you must be careful when making new friends who may lead you astray. Do not join them. Whenever you are lonely, facing challenges,

disillusioned, discouraged, burnt-out, receding in your faith, trust and pray to God and overcome them through hard work.⁶

I continued to read what my father wrote in my bible from time to time and they became spiritually formative for me as they shaped my habits and lifestyle. My father passed away on November 5, 2013, and a few days prior, I brought this bible to his bedside in the hospital and read this admonition from forty years ago. I shared with tears and thanked him for what he had taught me. Indeed, through the ups and downs, successes and failures, repentance and testimonies, my father's life blessed mine.

The Longest Journey

Finally, I left Hong Kong for Ottawa by late August 1975. At that time, there was a low fare chartered airline called Four Seas Chartered Flights. People who looked for the most inexpensive airfare would almost certainly choose them. My father bought me a ticket from this airline. It was the first time that I traveled such a long distance alone without my parents. I had two big suitcases and a guitar with me. I began my first-time travel across the Pacific Ocean, which eventually took over 36 hours including layover time from Hong Kong to Ottawa, since it had multiple stopovers for refueling and picking up additional passengers

⁶ The original Chinese version: 磐德愛兒: 要仰望神的帶領，祂永無錯誤。自己份內的事，非做到最好，不要罷休。成功秘訣在於勤，致富的秘訣在於儉。爭取朋友的方法，是要求謙恭有禮，助人即助己。但交友要當心，不要隨流合污。一切的孤單、困難、沮喪、疲乏、倒退、失望，要在禱告中去交托，在工作中去克服。

along the way. There were stopovers in Seoul, Tokyo, Alaska, Vancouver, and Toronto before finally arriving Ottawa. In these flights, they served very minimal drinks and food. I was so hungry by the time I arrived Vancouver in the late afternoon, that I looked at the flyers and took a taxi during the five-hour layover to a train-turned restaurant near the airport. Dining on a train was a new experience for me, and my first meal on the continent—I had the biggest and best steak that I ever had in my life. Maybe I was too hungry at the time. Upon arrival in Ottawa, I sat in the arrival lounge for over an hour with two big suitcases and a guitar, waiting for Auntie Anita to pick me up. She was tied up in her office and could not make it on time. She was very worried that I might be panicking and wondering what happened. There were no cell phones at the time, and it was impossible to keep in contact. When she finally arrived the airport, she was surprised to see me with such calmness and confidence in a new environment.

Surprised by Miracles!

After filing formal registration at the Gloucester High School in Ottawa for Grade 11, Auntie Anita told me that I could get a full refund of my tuition deposit of C\$1,875. She had just been notified that because, she became my legal guardian, I could attend the school as a local, without paying the tuition of a foreign student. A few months later, the government announced that this was to be the last year that public school could accept foreign students into their school. If I came to Canada the following year, it would not be possible for me to get accepted into a public school and it would be too expensive for me to go to

private schools. In addition, the refunded tuition was sufficient to cover most of my living expenses for the year. My school was located within walking distance to Auntie Anita's apartment where she lived with Uncle Ben and his retired parents. She found a room available for rent in one of the townhouse units nearby and rented it for me. I could walk to school and go to her home for dinner every day, and get my laundry done in her apartment. I settled down very quickly. I experienced God's perfect timing for everything during my year in Ottawa. Indeed, when God guides, he provides. I learned, at this young age, that it was most critical to discern his will for me and to walk on it, as he would take care of the rest.

Allow Time to Turn Failures into Success

After a few weeks of school, I met my school counselor who encouraged me to watch more television daily,

Hubert, it has been brought to my attention that you need help to improve your English proficiency quickly. Otherwise, you may lag behind on your learning. I suggest that you watch at least two hours of TV after school daily for a few weeks and I hope that you will be able to catch up soon.

Watching more TV? When I was in Hong Kong, my mom often warned me not to watch too much TV, and to instead focus more on my studies. Now, I was given special "license" and permission officially from my school counselor to watch TV daily! In any case, I started to do so but could not understand most of what people were saying while I was watching since I was so used to reading Chinese subtitles when watching English movies shown in Hong Kong. After a few days, I became discouraged but my counselor encouraged me to keep on

trying. I had my doubts about whether my listening capacity and the mastery of the English language would truly improve by watching TV without Chinese subtitles. I remained an obedient student. After another few weeks, I found that my listening capacity had improved and I began to be able to understand what the actors were saying. This experience helped me never to stop trying something that initially seems difficult. It also helped develop one of my long habits to try any new insights, ways for improvement, and allow initial failures and the necessary time for the new attempts to bear fruit.

You Light Up My Life

Throughout my year in Ottawa, I often missed home and my close friends in Hong Kong. It was very hard for me, especially during weekends when I was alone in my room. I felt alone even amidst newfound friends and under the loving care of Auntie Anita and her family. In those days, long-distance telephone calls were very expensive and the only inexpensive means to communicate with family and friends in Hong Kong would be by mail. I communicated with my family and friends through recording on cassette tapes and mailing them. They often responded the same way. These cassette tapes became my spiritual treasure, since they were archives of spiritual journals among spiritual companions, and spiritually edified my friends and myself while we continued to share our lives from afar. One of my favorite lyrics at the time, sharing my feelings with my Hong Kong friends, would come from a song sung by Debbie Boone called, “You Light Up My Life,”

So many nights, I'd sit by my window,
waiting for someone to sing me his song.
So many dreams I've kept deep inside me.
Alone in the dark, but now you've come along.

And you light up my life. You give me hope. To carry on.
You light up my days and fill my nights with song.

Rolling at sea, adrift on the waters.
Could it be finally, I'm turning for home?
Finally, a chance to say, "Hey, I love you,"
Never AGAIN. To be all alone.

And you light up my life. You give me hope. To carry on.
You light up my days and fill my nights with song.

It can't be wrong, when it feels so right.
Cause you... You light up my... Life. (1977)

The lyrics touched my soul deeply and was reflective of my inner yearning
for God and for my friends. I missed them so very much.

Church and Fellowship Life

As I settled into church and fellowship life in Ottawa, I soon found new mentors and friends whom I would share life with. In those days, there were very few Chinese churches. I joined the same church that Auntie Anita and Uncle Ben were attending at the time, Ottawa Chinese United Church. There was no fellowship at this church and hence, Auntie Anita helped out at the Ottawa Chinese Christian Fellowship (OCCF) which was an inter-church fellowship for young adults and college students. We met every Saturday night at the basement of the Metropolitan Bible Church. I became their youngest member; there was no other OCCF member attending high school at the time. I was actively involved in OCCF, busy making new friends, serving and helping out in whatever way and

whenever they needed help. I also led worship at the fellowship and helped organize retreat camps and led campfire sharing, which I was good at doing. Tim, one of the PhD students became my mentor; and Paul, who was a freshman and the next youngest in the fellowship, became one of my good friends. As a fellowship, we spent a lot of time together outside our regular weekly gatherings on Saturday night. We went on road trips together to Montreal and Quebec City and created many memories together. I was spiritually nurtured by both my friends back in Hong Kong through communications by cassette tapes and by my involvement with OCCF.

I heard, by the late 1980s, that Ottawa Chinese United Church had split due to unresolved conflict over theology within their denomination. Auntie Anita, Uncle Ben, and many of the other Chinese friends we knew joined a new church called Chinese Christian Church of Ottawa in 1989. I was saddened when I first heard of this news; I personally knew some of the members of this church and wondered if it could have been avoidable. Since then, whenever I encounter church conflicts, I tend to strive for church unity, even at the expense of my own interests.

Is My Baby Brother Doing OK?

After graduating from the Pepperdine University in Los Angeles in 1973 with a bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration, my sister, Catherine returned to Hong Kong to help my father's business for two years. Since Catherine grew up with three boys in the family, she was considered quite boyish

in the traditional Chinese culture. Some of her hobbies during university included horseback riding, piloting, and archery. After working for my father's business for two years, she decided to immigrate to Canada. It was before the flood of immigration from Hong Kong to Canada in the 80s and 90s resulting from the changeover of Hong Kong from Great Britain to Mainland China. There were very few Chinese in Canada in the 70s. Though there were even fewer Chinese in Ottawa, Catherine has always been a strong minded, independent and adventurous individual. She became a landed immigrant in Canada in December 1975. She was probably suspicious whether I, her baby brother, could survive in Ottawa alone. She came to Ottawa, rented an apartment and got me to move in with her in early January 1976. Life was never boring when she was around because she would always think of something to do: new things to try or museums to explore. She was very creative and quick minded. As soon as she realized the hard reality that it was very difficult for new immigrants to find a good job, she decided to get a realtor license and wanted to start her own business. While she was still going to classes in preparation for her qualification process, she took telemarketing jobs conducting marketing surveys for major companies. Paid by the number of calls made, Catherine recruited me to help her. This was my first job, a job without pay. My income went to my sister, of course. But still, I loved helping out whenever I had time. It was fun.

Since the minimum driving age in Ottawa at the time was sixteen, I took driving classes at school and promptly got my driver's license. Catherine bought a

Volkswagen Rabbit and I became its second driver. We explored many new places in and around Ottawa together.

Life in Ottawa was more than okay. Auntie Anita and family took care of me when I first arrived, and after a few months, Catherine came. I made new friends at school and at the Christian fellowship. I felt so undeserving of God's amazing and wonderful care. It strengthened my faith to rely on him in the face of storms I would encounter later in life.

Yet Another Supernatural Act: Guidance and Provision

While improving my English proficiency, I received top marks with science, mathematics and all other subjects. After the first quarter, my school counselor offered me an opportunity to take Grade 12 courses, which allowed me to finish Grade 11 and 12 in just one year! Though Canadian students would have needed to finish Grade 13 before going to university, by early 1976, I found out that there was no Grade 13 in the American school system, which meant that Grade 12 graduates were eligible to go to university. Although I was a good student with excellent grades, I very much preferred efficiency to another year of school. I prayed, applied, and got accepted to the New York University (NYU). It was great because I did not have to pay tuition for enrolling in Grade 13 at a private school and could begin my university life one year early—I could save both money and time. My father's business also significantly improved by 1976

when the world economy began to recover. Once again, I felt that it was God's supernatural intervention to bring me to this point of life.

Still Miles Apart

I moved to New York City in early September 1976. I purposely arrived two weeks prior to the beginning of my first Quarter at NYU, so that I could explore all the world-famous landmarks. My sister, Catherine, was the Marco Polo of our family; she loved travel and went to different places around the world. She would send postcards sharing the different scenery of places she was visiting. My hunger for traveling the world came from her. In my early teen years, I began to write down in my own little blue book all the places in the world I wanted to visit one day when I got older.

I lived with my brother, Gilbert, and my sister-in-law, Alison at the couple's dormitory for married students, provided by Columbia University at Morningside Drive. Gilbert was doing research on poison ivy in the PhD program. It was a one-bedroom apartment. They provided me a bed in the living room, which was comfortable. They treated me well but we interacted more like new friends and had a host-guest relationship. Gilbert and Alison were very polite and helpful, but they seemed guarded and private. We visited a nearby church, Riverside Church, every Sunday. Most of the time they were very busy especially since Tracy, their first daughter, was born on February 10, 1977, just months after my arrival. My sister-in-law became even busier as a first-time mom, while my brother spent most of his waking hours at his laboratory doing research. Gilbert

had a theory of his own on childcare. He insisted that they should let Tracy cry, even for hours, if she was not hungry and did not need her diaper changed. If they inspected her and found that Tracy was only crying to fight for something and to seek attention, they would intentionally ignore her. And so, we were all kept awake at night by the cries of Tracy for the first few months after her birth. Occasionally, they would take me to visit different places but we would never have conversations about personal matters. Somehow, because of Gilbert's typically distant countenance or my interaction with both he and Alison as a unit, I felt more like a distant friend, a tenant or tourist during my time staying with them. Since I had grown used to intimate friendships with soul-level sharing, I felt our hearts were still miles apart despite the fact that we lived together.

How Are You Doing, Really?

I began the first term of my freshman year at NYU with a traumatic experience that I will never forget. One of Gilbert's friends at Columbia referred a Columbia freshman, Constance Cha, to Gilbert. As Constance and myself were in similar age, and we were both freshmen, Gilbert arranged a dinner at home to provide an opportunity for Constance and me to get to know each other. Constance grew up in a wealthy family and his father was a famous and popular fiction writer. Even though we only met for the first time, Constance shared quite authentically and deeply about himself. I sensed that he had a lot of inner struggles, loneliness, and an identity crisis. I felt that his family might have given him too many expectations, which became a burden almost too heavy for him to

bear. I had the opportunity but did not share the Gospel with him since I thought I might just wait for our friendship to grow, perhaps to meet for a few more times before sharing my faith with him. After he left our home that night, I felt sad for him and prayed for him. A couple of days later, Gilbert brought home a *Columbian News*—a newspaper for the Columbia University community. On the front page was the report that Constance was found dead hanging himself in his own dormitory room. I was devastated with this deeply troubling news. My heart was broken for Constance. I hated myself for a long time; I should have shared the Gospel with him that night when my heart seemed to have a prompting to do so. I met him only once, but there were no more chances for me to meet him again. He would now be lost in eternity. A few years later, one of my spiritual friends helped me to overcome this self-blame and understand that I was not responsible for Constance's death. It was a huge lesson for me to learn, one of the broad shaping slaps that served as a wakeup call from the Potter's hand. Through this, I was shaped into becoming a more sensitive and cautious friend when discerning the state of people's spirits and the condition of their hearts when they opened up and shared deeply. I also learned to listen more carefully, as best I could, for the Holy Spirit's prompting for my response. It has been a life-long process but I have become more responsive to people's needs in their inner world. It would not be enough for me to just ask, "How are you doing?" Upon listening to people's routine answers, I would much prefer to ask further, "How are you, really?", so that they may share more deeply.

The Community that Deepened My Desire for More

There was a term break after the first quarter ended and before the next quarter began. I took the opportunity to join a program made available to foreign students who wanted to learn more about the American culture. We were to live with a Mennonite farming family in Pennsylvania for a few days. I was assigned to share the same room with a student from Palestine. It was quite an eye-opening experience for me. I learned a lot from my conversation with this Palestinian student and his perspectives on the conflict between Israelites and Palestinians. At the end, he told me that “the conflict was really between the two countries which stemmed from the history of both countries.” For him, he held no animosity against the Israelites as people: “At the peasant level, there is no conflict.” I took his word for it.

My host family had five children. The oldest son was about twelve at the time followed by two girls and twin boys. One of the twin boys had a growth disorder from birth and stopped growing when he was five. I later found out it may have been a result of marriage between close relatives, a common occurrence in their community.

For the few days that I lived with this host family, I got a glimpse of how a truly simple communal life could enrich community. I woke up at 4:30 in the morning and joined my host and his son to milk cows. They allowed me to try with my own bare hands. It was harder than I thought. After that, we had early family time of devotion, singing, reading the bible, a bit of sharing and prayer

before breakfast. They undertook farming chores during the day. My Palestinian roommate and I joined part of their work during the day. They also took us around to visit different families in their close-knit community and to learn about their lifestyles. For example, I learned that they used gas instead of electricity. They used buggies and horses instead of automobiles. They kept their traditional costumes and clothing. They were not afraid of looking weird to other people. We had early dinner at around 5:30 in the afternoon. After dinner, we took a short rest before family devotion time, again, with singing, Scripture reading, sharing and prayer. There was no TV at home, and they spent time resting, reading, or sharing. They paid more attention to God and one another during their free time. I was impressed with their close relationship with their own family members and with their community.

I attended a worship service on Sunday with my host family and was surprised to find that their seating arrangement was still segregated by gender, men on the right and women on the left. Afterward, I enjoyed the family time and a feast at home with extended families after church. It was beyond me how this community lived and maintained their own lifestyle and these traditions for so many years, surrounded by a society that was so different from them. Despite our common religious roots in Anabaptism, it was apparent that our lives looked very different. I asked myself, “why would the way I live seem so similar to the non-believers around me? Why would my values and habits be so much like them instead of like Christ? When my friends told me that I acted weird because I followed Biblical values, why would I care more about how they look at me and

less about how God looks at me?” I recalled thinking about these things at night during those days when I lived with this family. These Mennonites became my heroes. I may not have necessarily agreed with their specific lifestyles based on their interpretation of the bible, but their attitude toward God, their communal life with one another, and their determination to live a godly life inspired me. It was the first time I came to know the Mennonite community. They planted seeds in my heart and encouraged my deep desire for a communal life that reflect what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as “Life Together.” It was God’s visual aid to me to see how Community life in Acts 2:42-47 could be lived out.

Looking for Greener Grass

The longer I lived in New York City, the stronger my desire grew for a university campus with greener grass and open space where I where I could lie down freely and relax. I began to long for my own room in a dormitory or a shared apartment with my own schoolmates. The crime rate of New York City was quite high at the time. One day, I recalled walking out of Gilbert’s apartment to find myself surrounded by police cars. The police actually had closed off the entire block to deal with a crime scene nearby. Every day, I walked through the Washington Square Park on the NYU campus to the Stern School of Business building where my classes were held. But, as I walked through the park, there were drug dealers who wanted to stop me and make a sale. After the initial thrill of being in New York—a big and attractive city—the reality of a crowded city filled with countless high-rises, constant traffic jams, pollution, hostile or drunken

people on the streets, and risk of muggers on the subway set in. Although the Stern School of Business at NYU was one of the oldest and most prestigious business schools in the world and I was proud to be part of its student body, my desire for a better and more ideal campus life trumped all else.

I began to apply for other schools. I was accepted by both the University of Washington in Seattle (UW) and the Washington University in St. Louis. If I had to change to another school, my father preferred that I would go to UW. It was my first choice as well; UW was named the school with the best campus in the U.S. at the time. Although their academic ranking was also good, this choice reflected more on the value I placed on the quality of college life. I was hoping that my University experience matched my childhood dream—a big campus, architecturally aesthetic buildings, friendly people, and, most importantly, open space with lots of green grass.

Stereotype Reversed

I arrived in Seattle in early September 1977. The first two friends I met while waiting in line for registration at UW became my roommates. We shared a rented apartment near the campus. Both of them were non-Christians. David was polite, soft spoken, mild tempered and had a caring type of personality. He came from a well-to-do family background. Eugene spoke with slangs and words of profanity often and had a strong personality. He came from a low-income family background. In those days, a young person wearing sunglasses often was

associated with gangsters. Eugene often wore sunglasses. I immediately built the stereotypes: David was the “good” person and Eugene was the “bad” person.

One weekend, David came home very worried and shared with Eugene and me that he was cheated by a used car dealer. Eugene wore his sunglasses and took both of us to the dealership immediately. The salesman at the used car dealership initially did not want to make a settlement with David. However, after some negotiation and upon Eugene’s insistence, and possibly the language that he used, the salesman eventually accepted Eugene’s proposal which favored David. This broke my original ideas about Eugene. I came to know him as loyal to his friends, and his profanity was simply part of his pattern; he was simply influenced by the environment in which he had grown up.

On the other hand, David was very passionate about his girlfriends. He would put pictures of his girlfriend on all four walls and even the roof of the room that I shared with him. However, I soon found out that he changed girlfriends frequently and he treated every new girlfriend as passionately as those whom he stopped dating. He kept changing the pictures in our shared room every month or two. I came to realize that David was not loyal to his friends.

These early experiences helped my ministry later. I learned not to make premature judgments on people, instead to look beyond the surface. It increased my tolerance toward people as there is always a second side to that coin. The closer and deeper I looked, the more good I could find in every person.

Friends Take Care of Each Other

Mrs. Rodney Wagner Sr. lived in Seattle. She was already in her late seventies when I first met her upon my arrival there. She lived alone in a decent size home left by her late husband, my father's first customer after the Sino-Japanese War. She took good care of me and my friends and we often visited her for the best homemade pizza and carrot cake I have had to this day. The pizzas she made were thick, juicy and tasty. The carrot cake tasted just right with softness that kept all my friends finding any excuse to come back to visit her with me. She had a habit of turning her bed every few months and that gave us something to do for her in return of her generous hospitality extended to us. It was like an extended friendship crossing over two generations.

Darwin became one of my best, life-long friends. We met in a line at the Registrar's office when I first arrived in Seattle, before school even began. After we found each other again at our school's orientation event, we became fast friends. He was a computer major and a workaholic. He spent almost all of his time in the computer laboratory. Although he grew up in a Christian family and was a Christian before he came to UW, he did not set boundaries for himself in his school work and often skipped church. Our friendship grew as I became his accountability partner. I often had to literally dragged him out of the computer laboratory and take him to church on Sundays. He gave permission for me to help him which I found essential; as God's People it is our responsibility to find spiritual companions who could help each other to grow with spiritual habits.

Moulded into a Change Agent

1979-1996

While the beginning of my life laid a firm foundation for my spiritual formation, the next large chapter facilitated my spiritual transformation. The series of events that led to my pursuit of a career in ministry lined up to tell me God's message: "Go." The start of these pivotal events had a great impact on my relationship with God and my spiritual life. I decided to change my path—from student to businessman and director, then from that career in international business to a career of full-time Christian ministry.

I had just finished my third year at the University of Washington when I decided to return to Hong Kong to work at my father's international trading and manufacturing businesses. I made that decision when I was in Hong Kong over the Summer break, after discussions with my father and my mentor, Rev. Timothy Lau. Up to that point, I was aware of God's calling to join full-time ministry. I shared this sentiment with my father, along with the fact that I, in turn, wished to get transferred to a bible College in my fourth year. Since my father had high aspirations for me as his successor when he retired, he took my desire with serious gravity. Despite this, he hid his disappointment by asking me to reconsider, to see if I might find a career in business more challenging and fulfilling. I also discussed with Rev. Lau and he told me that I was only twenty at the time and could afford to try my father's offer. Rev. Lau said, "Hubert, you may look at it this way. If God's calling in your life is genuine, then nothing could derail you. Since you are so young, you can afford to look at your life like a

‘sandwich.’ The first layer of the sandwich is your calling, the second, your business career and preparation for your future ministry, and the third layer would finally be full-time ministry in response to your calling. Who knows? If you went this way, you might even be more prepared to serve God than if you started now. If, however, you found business more interesting to you during this tryout, you might also discover that your initial calling from God was not clear enough.” I took his advice. And so, my University life ended abruptly. Darwin was kind enough to help me pack and ship my belongings from Seattle back to Hong Kong.

The decision to join my father in business began a long period of transition in my life full of dramatic twists and turns along the way. While this advice from my pastor was good advice—I continued to be moulded by the circumstances in business, and God continued to mould me in preparation for ministry—it would take another seventeen years before I began my Seminary study. During this period, I began working for my father as Marketing Manager in his international trading business, started some manufacturing joint ventures in China, and eventually took over as the Director and Chief Executive Officer of the conglomerate of companies in 1985 until I left the business in 1997. I married my wife, Bernice Leung and we subsequently had four children. Tianne was born in Hong Kong in 1985, Jonathan was born in Toronto in 1990, Christine was born in Hong Kong in 1994 and Tiffany was born in Calgary in 1996. As a result of the growing size of our family, coupled with the company’s rapid expansion, or sometimes the downsizing, of our business over the years, we moved our family home nine times and moved our offices eight. I only have God to praise through

these challenges and adversities brought upon my life; the lessons learned throughout these years which have prepared me for my full-time ministry. Because of these experiences, my faith in God grew stronger and I became increasingly ready and prepared to trust him despite the trials of life. In the Potter's hands, I was moulded into an instrument for God's will.

The Calling and a Special Mission

It was interesting how it all started; the two friends whom I led to Christ were instrumental in leading me to seriously seek after God's will for my life. Francis, one of my best friends, was at his final year of undergraduate study when he shared with me that he planned to go to Seminary to pursue a Master of Divinity (MDiv.) in the following year. I had not met with Francis since I left Hong Kong in 1974. I was very curious how he had changed in the past few years. And so, I drove more than a day, during the cold Winter of 1978, from Seattle to Winnipeg, Regina, and had long hours of conversations with him.

Francis grew up in a middle-class family like mine and everything was going well for him. With his parents' networking, he would surely have a very successful career in whatever that he chose to do. I asked myself, "why would my friend want to give away his life for full-time ministry when everything was going so well for him?" It was baffling to me! When we met, Francis told me that he had the same feeling and bewilderment like mine a few years back. Our mutual friend, Eddie, decided some time ago to get into full-time ministry. Francis was looking for an answer then. Francis shared that "God spoke to me through a

recording of the testimony of Eddie's dedication to full-time ministry while I was still in high school. Later, through a series of Sunday morning sermons, God confirmed this call while I was in first year of university. After discussing with my parents, I decided to respect their opinion to finish university first before entering seminary.” As I was driving alone on my return trip, I was reflecting on what Francis shared with me on his own calling and how he was passionate for a life of full-time service to the Lord. I was also listening to Christian songs in the car. And the lyrics of *For Those Tears I Died*, still vividly float in my mind to this day. It goes like this,

You said You'd come and share all my sorrows,
You said You'd be there for all my tomorrows;
I came so close to sending You away,
But just like You promised You came there to stay;
I just had to pray!

Your goodness so great I can't understand,
but, dear Lord, I know now that all this was planned;
I know You're here now, and always will be,
Your love loosed my chains and in You I'm free;
But Jesus, why me?

And Jesus said, "Come to the water, stand by My side,
I know you are thirsty, you won't be denied;
I saw ev'ry teardrop when in darkness you cried,
And I strove to remind you that for those tears I died."

Jesus, I give You my heart and my soul,
I know that without God I'd never be whole;
Savior, You opened all the right doors,
And I thank You and praise You from earth's humble shores;
Take me, I'm Yours. (Stevens 1970)

My heart was so touched by this song that I pulled to the shoulder of the highway and prayed to the Lord, “Jesus, I give you my heart and my soul, I know

that without God I'd never be whole. Take me, I'm yours." In my response, I planned to rededicate my life to the Lord. As I was driving through the city of Vancouver, I had a near missed total collision! As my car spun 180 degrees and came to a stop in opposing traffic, the stereo in the car was playing, "Are you ready? Are you ready?" Although I now forget the name of the song, I still remember the event as if it was yesterday; God was asking me "Are you ready to see me? Are you ready to submit to me for a life of full-time ministry?" As I drove back from Vancouver to Seattle, God continued speaking to me, inviting me to serve him with all my life. After a few weeks of soul searching in Seattle, I prayed to submit my life totally to God for a life of full-time service.

When I shared with my father about the decision to transfer to a Seminary before finishing my undergraduate study in the Summer of 1979, I did so with a special mission. If I got the permission to proceed, I had hoped my action revitalized my father's commitment to God, restoring it to that of his teenage years. I longed to see my father, besides succeeding in business, serving God in a way that he said he wish he could do if he was not so busy making money to support the family. And so, my commitment stood: if my father turned seminary down, I was ready to assist him in his business, so that he could have time to spare to serve God. It was my hope that my father's diminishing relationship with God was due to his overworked, time-starved schedule, and I suspected that, if given the ability to rest in silence, my father's heart would have the chance to reorient itself. In any case, I felt called with this special mission to be my father's change agent for rekindling his passion for God. Thankfully, my hunch was

correct, at least in part. In his free time, my father's devotional life began anew, and in his newfound time for rest, he began to meditate on the message from God's Spirit. In the years that followed, my father retired from business in 1986 and immigrated to Toronto, Canada. My father began to spend more and more time in personal devotion, which served as a rekindling of his passion for God. He once again became a vibrant fixture in his church. He began to teach Sunday School with my mother at the Scarborough Chinese Baptist Church. Even after my mother passed away in 1997, he continued to teach Sunday School. He also served in a Senior fellowship and also in the outreach ministry for a number of years until his health declined. Thanks to God's grace, he was even able to find peace with Rodney Wagner's betrayal.

In the last thirty years of my father's life, I witnessed first-hand how God transformed his life from just participating church life religiously—attending Worship on Sunday only—to a life full of vibrant spirituality and spiritual activity. Indeed, he was religious no more; he became spiritual once again in his walk with God.

First Short-Term Mission

After settling in my father's business for a couple of years, I took the opportunity during a business trip to Bangkok to make a side trip for short term mission with William Lo and Eddie Ma. A missionary team in Bangkok drove us to Northern Thailand to visit a U.N. refugee camp with several hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. From the campsite, we could hear battle across

the border shared by Cambodia. Many Vietnamese refugees crossed the border through Cambodia to Thailand to escape from civil war and the catastrophic political climate in their home country. Everyone we spoke to at the camp had a painful past and a horrific story. They felt hopeless at this camp as they had nowhere to go; no country in the world would take them at the time. When we went back to Hong Kong, the three of us raised funds among our local churches to airfreight 100,000 bibles to this refugee camp. I thankfully had the chance to visit Bangkok later, and met with the missionaries there a few separate times. William, Eddie, and I kept in touch with the missions there for almost a decade and heard amazing stories of how God touched the lives of thousands of people as the Gospel was shared there. It was a profound and lasting spiritual experience for the three of us, especially for me. We had no previous experience raising funds in churches where we were not known. As we went around churches with a slide presentation showing the conditions of the conditions and the desperate needs at this refugee camp, we saw firsthand how God touched people's hearts to give and to support the purchase of bibles and the cost for their transport. Through this, God showed me a tangible experience of the "five loaves and two fishes," and how He could multiply what we had in our hands like the mustard seeds to become great work in his hands. God had, indeed, grown my faith when I had very little.

By keeping in contact with the camp's missionaries, as well as in our own encounters with some of these refugees years later, we came to know that close to 50% of these refugees came to Christ. Over the years, there were fantastic stories

coming out of this camp and this experience that strengthened my faith in God who works in unimaginable ways. As my life in business slowly had been chewing away at my passion for full-time ministry over the years, this experience served to bring me back to God's calling for full-time ministry. More than that, this experience also shaped my faith in God, as it taught me how he works in unexpected ways. When I became a change agent for the church, I would therefore not be afraid to try new and original ways of shepherding people, as I know that he is a God working in outside-the-box ways.

Decades later, after I became a Pastor at HKBC, I learned that one couple who became Christians at that refugee camp eventually went to live in Paris years later. Amazingly, I have had the opportunity to conduct pre-marital counseling with their son, David, who worked in Hong Kong and wanted to marry a girl who happened to be my small group member at the time! When I showed him the pictures taken at the refugee camp where his parents stayed, we shared common stories that he heard from his parents. Once again, God has shown me that I must work faithfully every day for him, as I will never know how or where God will use my work in his plan, even if it's something that seems routine or ordinary.

My "Breakthrough," and Life Long Partner

Between 1980 and 1996, when I worked for my father's business, I served in various committees at my home church, including the Evangelism Committee and the Church Members Relationship & Activities Committee. Outside of the church, I served as the host to one of the Gospel Radio programs broadcasted

daily by “Breakthrough Gospel Communications” (a sub-division of Dr. Philemon Tsoi’s Christian media, Breakthrough Organization) through Commercial Radio in Hong Kong. Since I travelled very frequently during 1981-1984, the flexible serving schedule of this ministry fitted my hectic schedule—I could pre-record the programs! God again had taught me another lesson; I could still serve him effectively and bear fruit if I was willing no matter how little time I had left from my daily schedule after work during those years. From this, I also learned not to judge people’s spirituality based on whether they serve in a rather routine fashion or serve intermittently in the church; how people respond to God’s guidance and their willingness to be obedient to God reflects their spirituality all the more.

One of the volunteers who hosted the radio broadcast was my childhood friend, Bernice. Although I knew Bernice since our teenage years from our youth fellowship at HKBC, our relationship experienced a breakthrough of its own through this ministry. We became close friends. We spent time together with other fellow volunteers after recording the programs, spending many nights sharing evening snacks at nearby street eateries. We quickly found ourselves dating, as we had such a great time together after work as well.

I was very much attracted to Bernice when I first met her at the Youth Fellowship. Her innocence stirred my heart—love at first sight—she had a very pure and heavenly look. Her skin color was healthy, and she was sporty. She always wore a big smile on her face and was friendly to everyone she met. I admired her musical talents and unpretentious demeanor. She was quick minded, witty, and humorous, but she talked straight and to the point; she spoke her mind. I felt she

had one of the best unique characteristics possible; she was a girl who didn't play games or hide what she was thinking, so I didn't have to second guess what she said. She expressed her emotions freely and without disguise. I never wanted to date a girl who hid her true thoughts or intentions. I understand that a lot of people look for honesty in a partner, but I was looking for a deeper transparency of spirit, so that in all things we knew the true state of each other's heart.

However, we had very different traits and preferences. I was the introvert and she was the extrovert. I was not a good story teller, but she had endless stories to share—and even before I could respond to her funny stories, she would already be in stitches herself. I tended to be thoughtful, more reserved in my expression and most often serious minded. She was more lighthearted, a live-for-the-moment type of person. I would share deeply with people close to me and she shared freely with anyone in front of her. I liked action movies and she liked dramas or comedy. She loved sitting in classical music concerts and I liked more adventurous activities. However, we learned to accept each other, and appreciate each other's God given uniqueness. Because of these differences, we had the opportunity to serve together in complimentary ways. For example, her musical talents complimented many of my ministerial skills, including preaching. In outreach events, she was the one to connect with strangers and I would dive deeper into those conversations that she started, where I was more effective, not to mention more comfortable. Because of our differences, Bernice also has become my trusted sounding board with whom I can share my new ministry ideas and get feedback from differing perspectives.

Originally, when we started dating, Bernice and I were both highly driven people with the best of efficiency in mind. Our task-oriented mindsets coloured our actions in everything we did in our work and ministry. With the same focus and fervor, we applied the same principles to our relationship. Within the first six months, we had taken two trips together with friends to Penang, Malaysia and Hokkaido, Japan. After we had been dating for about six months, I arranged a romantic night out with Bernice. Towards the end of the evening, at a small lake near a restaurant, under moonlight, with flowers on my hands and my knees on the ground, I asked her to marry me. She accepted. Within yet another six months, on June 2, 1984, we took part in the biggest event of our lives to date, celebrating our wedding with over 500 guests. Looking back, both of us are amazed how God has drastically transformed us. We were changed from task-oriented persons to relational people, from those with a super-fast pace of life, characterized with little patience, to a life of relative calm, full of grace, and with more loving care towards people. Little did I know originally that God put the two of us together for me to learn how small group ministry might work. In order to build a community with spiritual friendships in small groups, people need to learn how to practice unity in diversity, accepting the differences of one another, respecting each other's unique giftedness, and applying them to their best use for common goals and speaking the truth in love. I learned these from my marriage with Bernice and many of these skills became part of my ministry skills.

Our family takes an annual vacation together, a tradition that I inherited from my parents. We took the four children together for out-of-town trips. As

they became adults, we continued to travel together. In each of our family vacations, we spent about an hour every day in family devotion led by one of the family members. We would take turns leading each evening in song and sharing God encounters that touched each of our lives in the past year. Our sharing in this time of devotion grew deeper and deeper, so that we could share both our triumphs and failures, our praises and struggles in our spiritual journey. Our children took the initiative to set up a WhatsApp group on our mobile device named the “Official Wu Small Group.” This way, our sharing can continue throughout the year. Bernice and I have learned much from the spiritual journeys of our children. In my heart, I felt most grateful to the Lord that my small group ministry begins with my own family. I learned this from my mother who had a prayer small group with her own siblings. I am glad, and extremely grateful, that God has turned these experiences into a tradition of my own family.

Changed by Work to be Change Agents for Ministry

I recall vividly in my business days what my father taught me, on the first day of my work, on the most important secret to his success, “Hubert, there are a few mottos that you should always remember: ‘Waste not, want not.’ ‘Never use a person you doubt, never doubt a person you use.’⁷ ‘Lead, or follow, or else get

⁷ A Chinese idiom: 用人莫疑，疑人莫用

out of the way,’ ‘there are three kinds of people in the world: those who are wisest would do good without being taught; those who are wise do good after being taught; those who are stupid would not do good even after being taught.’⁸ These are the evaluation parameters of whether we should get into a new business project: “First, you have exclusive rights to a product. Second, you have exclusive distribution rights from a manufacturer. Third, you have exclusive buying rights appointed by your customers. If you do not have at least one of these three factors or a mix of them, no matter how good the business opportunity is before you, it would be most unlikely to be your cup of tea.” My father’s advice has continued to guide me, as I’ve witnessed these principles apply to many fields beyond business. Any project in ministry that I tackle begins with the contemplation of these principles, so that I can justify my actions against the question at the bottom line: “Why should I invest time and money into this project?” Beyond that, though, in ministry, this question has evolved to include whether or not I’m best applying my spiritual gifts, and whether God’s calling is clear. If God hadn’t shaped me and provided learning opportunities to apply this thought process in business, I am sure I would not have near the discernment ability that I do today.

I also remember the first day of work at my father’s office in the Fall of 1979 when he took a big batch of lending notes signed by his suppliers. He taught

⁸ A Chinese idiom: 上品之人，不教而善;
中品之人，教而後善;
下品之人，教亦不善.

me to look under the hood, deep into people's lives. When people did something bad to you or were unable to pay you back on money due, first think about why they did what they did and show compassion to them. Later, I found that he would do his due diligence to check the genuineness of these people's needs. His big and graceful heart in a bottom-line focused, money grabbing business world amazed me.

He also had a business philosophy of "I would rather be taken advantage by others than to take advantage of others unfairly."⁹ Over the years, I saw him being taken advantage of and even being betrayed by his business partners or staff, but he forgave, moved on, and worked hard to get the company back on track without complaining or saying anything against those who treated him unfairly. That is not to say that he was soft. Of course, I also saw how he learned to be wiser to defend himself from being mistreated by other people.

What my father taught me in business would later apply to my personal and ministry life. In principle, there are certain factors of success in everything that one does. It is important to identify them and incorporate them into long term ministry plans for fruitfulness. For example, the essence of what my father taught me was the importance of integrity, respect, and graciousness, as well as the importance of matching a job with the right people. These same elements were

⁹ A Chinese idiom: 寧可人負我，不可我負人

easily transferrable when I first applied them in building ministry teams, and their wisdom carries on to this day. My father's lessons also equipped me to be able to assign work to members according to their spiritual gifts as instructed in 1 Corinthians 12.

I also learned lessons in business that expanded my faith in God and deepening my trust in what the Apostle Paul said, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28). Within the first two years of work in my father's business, I successfully landed a contract from China that was equal to three times the company's assets. My overwhelming joy was replaced by deadly worries; the buyer defaulted payment after we had paid for our suppliers through bank loans. This was during the time when China opened up for business with international companies in her infancy. The banking system and legal system were still developing after decades of strict communist control, which had prohibited state companies from doing business with the outside world. At the time, I was inexperienced, and my father was out of town. During the next few weeks of hard work and prayers on my knees, God answered my prayers in miraculous ways. For instance, one day, as I was walking down the street in Guanzhou (a city in southern part of China), I met a close friend with whom I had been out of touch with for a long time. Besides reconnecting and catching up, he referred me to capable buyers who were able to help resolve this crisis. I learned to pray and trust the Lord despite my circumstances, inexperience, and

shortcomings. I experienced first-hand how God had protected and provided with grace beyond reason.

Almost a decade later, I was much more experienced as a businessman. However, due to the worldwide economic recession, the company was once again facing another imminent risk of bankruptcy. I had made a plan, one that could save our company, through a business deal in Moscow. I flew there immediately, my heart soaring with the knowledge that I could save everything. After spending more than a month in Moscow, however, the deal fell through. I was very discouraged on my flight home. But, I clung to God and to his promises, and kept praying for his guidance and provision. In the months that followed, God resolved the company crisis through a completely different manner. Through another unlikely referral, we were recommended a capable banker who successfully restructured our company's finances; we were back on our feet.

God has consistently shown me that the darkest hours of my life could be used as the brightest lessons for spiritual growth. In the times when I needed them most, he provided guidance in the shape of his Word, his People, and his Spirit for my edification. In subsequent years, these types of experiences continued regularly, and I became comfortable with facing the challenges of life. Whenever a crisis presented itself, I could assume an attitude of peace, one where I could wait to see what God was doing, and how he was teaching me. All of these lessons from business have served me in ministry, as well. Indeed, these seventeen years in business prepared me for the difficult life of ministry; God

used them to mould my expertise as a Potter would refine a rough vessel. In this way, he first changed me in order that I also become a change agent.

A Change Agent in Ministry–The Tryout

I became the volunteer chairman of the Training Union Department (TUD) of my home church (HKBC), which oversaw all youth and adult fellowships in 1994. The Baptist Training Union was a training and program-based fellowship mode of discipleship for Southern Baptist youths and young adults. They would attend weekly, participating in gaining knowledge of scripture and training for Christian services and missions work. Its primary idea was that the fellowship functions as the training auxiliary of the church. Its primary purpose served to train church members, showing them how to live out their faith and involving them in service opportunities. It also served as a program to aid students' maturation, as it was a logical extension of the Sunday School ministry. Although I myself also grew up within this training program, this served as groundwork for me to see the need for church transformation. Through my life experience of vibrant spiritual friendships, as well as the apparent waning efficiency of this training method, God impressed upon me the need to change the church life of adults through authentic life changing small groups. I didn't start implementing these changes until later, however, when I became a pastor of my home church beginning Sept. 2000.

During my three years of serving as the TUD, I tested much of what I had learned from business, applying similar tactics in the church ministry. As a

volunteer, I led changes to our strategic planning, designed and implemented many experimental ministry projects, and tried new ways to recruit members to serve and attend events. I used objective management methods in evaluating and planning ministry work with significant success.

Often, we would invite well known motivational speakers to draw a crowd. As with all types of lectures, this was more of a one-way teaching approach. In my observations at these events, I noticed a distinct lack of depth in spiritual sharing with one another among attendees through these events. This needed to change. In response, we hosted a three-day retreat camp specifically designed to foster deeper spiritual friendship among participants. On one hand, we were glad to see the growth of TUD in numbers and social friendships built. On the other, we were disappointed that there was such a lack of spiritual depth within their relationships. Yes, friendships were built at the retreat, but these relationships were often not spiritually motivated or sustainable; the fellowship model we used at the time had only facilitated social interaction, using only lecture-style learning. The leadership team of the TUD wanted to do better but did not know what needed to be done. This need resonated with me personally, as well. I needed to find out how to create environments that would facilitate spiritual growth and encourage vibrant spiritual relationships. This need pushed me toward my calling, into full-time ministry.

Finally Going to Seminary

1996-2010

Due to some unforeseen circumstances, but also probably because of my own weakness, I had to keep postponing my response to the calling for full-time ministry while working as a business partner of my family business. Throughout the process, my mother prayed fervently and patiently for God's guidance in my life. God was faithful and forgiving, and he re-affirmed his call for me through a series of personal and professional crises, as I have said earlier, which helped grow my faith and spiritual maturity.

I kept doubting my call for full-time ministry. For years, I kept asking God to show me the right time to move forward. After a decade of such struggles, some of my closest spiritual friends started to admonish me, asking, "Hubert, do you think that other people have the same struggles as yours for so many years? Wasn't it clear to you that by the nature of this struggle, it re-affirmed God's calling on you? Listen to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit!" My heart resonated with their chiding comments. I recalled a chapter of the book from Rev. Wang Ming in which he talked about his experience of discerning God's will (1982). He shared that God's calling to him was made to him repeatedly over time and became increasingly strong and clear. The whispers of God incessantly reminded me that it was time to move forward. God had been speaking to me through my prayer partners, including my mother and some spiritual companions with whom I had journeyed since my high school years. They held me accountable, keeping me on track to eventually respond to God's call. One night

in 1994, God pierced my heart during a special conversation with Pastor Esther Ho, who asked me simply, “What would be your biggest regret in life if you meet the Lord today?” I prayed with tears in my eyes in response to her question, and both Bernice and I knew that it was the time to act. And so, when I was thirty-five, we started to make serious plans to re-structure our business and prepare ourselves for this daunting midlife transition.

Two years later, I was accepted by Prairie Graduate School for my Master of Divinity program, and our family left Hong Kong for Calgary in late September, 1996. As we took off, I remember looking out the window of the airplane with a question to which I did not have an answer, “How can God change me from being the boss of a business to a humble servant leader in ministry?” After spending many years in business, there were many habits that I needed to change, including spending habits, the love for luxury, and the need for humility. It was simply a different lifestyle.

Within weeks of our arrival in Calgary, we were hit with the coldest winter and the biggest snowfall in decades! One morning, we saw four feet of snow when we opened our garage door. In subsequent years, the winter weather was much kinder to us. Looking back, it was as if God was telling me, “Hey, Hubert, whenever you face challenges in life or in ministry, remember that the day after the storm will have clear skies in store.” Thankfully, this has been my experience in the years ahead. One such example was the sudden death of my mother in the first month after I began my Seminary study. It had very deep impact on me. My mother had been especially close to me. I knew that my

constant inner struggle, being pushed by the Holy Spirit toward full-time ministry, was a result of my mother's unceasing prayer ever since she knew of my commitment to the Lord. Although I was saddened by her sudden death, I was most grateful that God had, through her and the subsequent events, reconfirmed my calling for full-time ministry at a local church, and to become more aware that my root remains planted in Hong Kong. I was also grateful that God allowed my mother to see the fruit of her prayer—my rededication to full-time ministry and the start of my seminary studies—before her death. All of these have had a great impact on my sense of dedication and commitment to serve God in my hometown even though I was sure that life would be much easier if we continued to live and minister in Canada. In addition, the Hong Kong stock and property market had a historic meltdown in October, 1997. This was only a few months after the changeover of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China. I was still in my first year of Seminary when all the assets that I accumulated before my Seminary study evaporated overnight. We prayed daily as a family, grinding through those tough days. And so, as fast as that, God changed my lifestyle from a businessman to a humble servant. Nevertheless, we experienced sufficiency in God who provided and sustained us. Indeed, he miraculously provided for our every need. God used these difficulties to make sure that Bernice and I would experience his care, comfort, assurance, and guidance firsthand. I learned to trust him, once again, despite my circumstances.

The three years of study for a Masters of Divinity degree at the Prairie Graduate School (PGS) in Calgary, Canada served as a transformational

experience for me. I was transformed spiritually through my theological education, various ministry opportunities, church life, and Christian friends. In school, several excellent professors impacted my life and helped transform my attitude in servant leadership and also my theology and philosophy of ministry. In ministry, I had the opportunities to preach as well as teach Sunday school in various Chinese churches in Calgary. In addition, during my last year at PGS completing my seminary studies, I served as an intern at the First Alliance Church (FAC) in Calgary. God was gracious to allow me to serve in a Caucasian church with a culture very different from my own. This precious experience stretched my mind and philosophy of ministry. I also learned much through weekly pastoral meetings during my year there. I was supervised by Rev. Ray Matheson, a very kind and loving experienced pastor in charge of pastoral care from whom I learned a lot. The senior pastor had also entrusted me to start a new ministry in their church and kick started the Alpha curriculum there. Through my time at this church, God reaffirmed my spiritual gifts of administration and leadership, which were also confirmed by senior pastor, Rev. Terry Young. The very first Alpha course was a great blessing to the church and the multifunction room was filled with over 200 guests, most of them seekers. Decades later, I learned that they continued the Alpha course long after I left, and the ministry continued to prosper through the framework and structure that I had built. Although I did my part, I experienced God's willingness to do his part through bringing salvation to people and sustaining the ministry over the years. I was a new and inexperienced Seminary intern at FAC and they gave me the opportunity to learn, use my gifts

and grow. They took a risk to let me start a new ministry. I have since made sure to give the same opportunities to those who are new to serve the Lord when I became a pastor.

To Stay or To Go

The last eight months before my graduation from PGS was a testy time for our family; it was time again for another big decision. Our family was seeking God's will together. We first tried to discern whether God wanted us to stay in Canada, or North America, or to return to Hong Kong for ministry. There were many advantages of remaining in North America for ministry including a more easygoing lifestyle, better education for our children, and many ministry opportunities. At the time, it was also a well-known fact that there were numerous Chinese churches in North America that needed pastors. The focus of our attention in seeking God's will for our family was "Why not North America? Why should we return to Hong Kong?"

As we prayed together as a family, we saw God working through each of our family members' hearts. Our sense of commitment and calling to go to Hong Kong became stronger day by day. Many close friends, and even my father, advised us against going back to Hong Kong out of their genuine concern for us, their main reasons including the difficulty of joining churches in Hong Kong as a beginning minister, and the fact that our children were used to Canada; for their sake, we should stay. However, after 'counting our cost' and repeatedly evaluating both spiritual and physical aspect of all factors, we felt an

unexplainable peace in our hearts and minds: we should go back to Hong Kong. Although fully aware of a great many challenges that we might encounter there, I felt that God's Spirit's call was irrefutable. I wasn't sure how to bring up my confirmation without threatening my family's current lifestyle.

At the same time as my own inner calling, however, Bernice shared with me that she felt a prompting that it was right to return to Hong Kong for ministry. Her prompting served as a significant step toward our decision to go, as she was originally more worried than I about the adaptability of our children and other adversities relating to going back. We, as God's People, felt that following this call would align us closer with God's Spirit.

Then, during one of our family devotion times, our eldest daughter Tianne shared that she felt that we should return to Hong Kong. There was no reason for Tianne to feel prompted to go back; she had lots of friends in Calgary, and she had been heavily involved in church ministries and studies, as well as the Calgary Junior Orchestra, and more. In addition, she was among the top 10% of her class, and she had been thoroughly enjoying her life in Calgary. This example served as a confirmation in God's Word, and our devotion brought not only family harmony, but also peace while preparing for this great transition. After Tianne shared with us, my father called one day and indirectly indicated his support. In his call, he helped walk me through what I should do and avoid, in case I really was going back to Hong Kong. This was greatly significant because of his former opposition to our return. When we added up all of the other circumstantial confirmation, we practically had no choice but to fully commit to go back to

Hong Kong for ministry. God spoke to us through his spirit, his people, and his word, affirming our choice to serve him and, in doing so, continued to be moulded by the life events that the Potter had in store for us.

In my spiritual journal, after my graduation from PGS, I wrote the following words,

I am sure that it is more important to ask God what the next step is given the circumstances than to ask God why I am in a given situation. In reviewing God's work in my life up to this point, I believe that God's potter's hands made each person unique. It is clear in John 21:22 that God may guide someone with wealth and another with wisdom and yet another with problems... However, I must always learn to ask myself, "What is that to you?" (The WITTY Principle)

I thought of Eddie and Francis who seem had seemed to have had a smooth transition into ministry while I have gone through a rather difficult one, I must not ask God why and it should not shake my commitment to him. It is because, no matter what happens, my commitment and dedication to the Lord should not be changed. I must live my life for His glory. With that in mind, I began the move back to Hong Kong.

Be the Change Agent at My Home Church

In September of 2000, I began my service as a full-time pastor at my home church (HKBC), upon completion of my MDiv. I was assigned to lead the adult ministry for those aged 21 to 50. I also served in the function as executive pastor, assisting the senior pastor to oversee the administration work of the church. Rev. Lau had a vision to transform this stagnating 100-year-old church into one that thrived, using the *Purpose Driven Church* model with an intentional small group

shepherding system. He visited our family in Calgary when I was still a Seminary student and subsequently attended a couple of church conferences with me in North America. We had had opportunities to share our dreams and future visions of HKBC, and he asked me to come back to Hong Kong to partner with him during this change process. My friendship with Rev. Lau had developed since I was a teenager and he was my youth counselor. With such a trusting relationship, I remember I shared with him at the beginning of my ministry,

It is hard to make changes. I have learned a few things about change and transition from my business experience. Also, after reading a few books on change management for church, I come to the conclusion that it is very hard to avoid offending some people no matter how hard we try. Some people simply do not want change.

And so, if we are determined to partner together to make such significant changes in this church, we should go all in or not go at all. Since you are asking me to lead this change for you and the church, we must both be prepared that when I could no longer be effective as change agent for this change process, I should move on to other churches. Are we willing to commit to such a sacrifice?

With mutual agreement, we decided to go all-in for the change. Looking back, I did not know why I said what I did but it was quite prophetic.

Within months, we started the first small group for our pastoral team. When Rev. Lau asked me to lead this group, I asked him, “would you model authenticity and be willing to exemplify to the rest of the pastoral team your effort to open up your life?” Although Rev. Lau wanted change for his church, he did not expect to have to first change himself. At that time, he was a traditional Chinese pastor who separated his private life from his ministry life. He seldom shared his feelings or struggles in his own spiritual journey. It turned out that he was able to be the catalyst for change for the entire pastoral team, and this first

group was where all of our pastors learned how to live outwardly within a life changing group with intentional shepherding. We learned, shared, and grew together, becoming a great team; we supported each other as well as drew on each other's strengths. Looking back, God was gracious to allow our pastoral team to first experience the kind of small group life that both Rev. Lau and I had envisioned. Because the success of our first group, all of our pastors became effective change agents. When we launched the church-wide movement of small groups, they were dispatched to coach newly formed groups.

We succeeded in changing from a ministry model using fellowship and formal teaching styles to an authentic model with a very interactive learning style that supported life changing small groups, with a focus on intentional shepherding. Before this change, there were only about 300 people attending these various fellowships. Within a few years, however, the population of small groups amazingly grew from 300 to over 1,400! I was also asked to organize the *40 Days of Purpose Campaign*¹⁰ in our church in 2004 and our congregation grew further from 1,400 to 2200 as a result. As a result, we were awarded "the Healthy Church Award" from the Saddleback Community Church. Many small group leaders led their small groups with full conviction, and they also traveled with me to small group conferences held annually at Willow Creek Community

¹⁰ This campaign consisted of a 40 day spiritual campaign based on the program and curriculum outlined in *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Church. We all became better equipped, and became close ministry partners, because we led, learned, and served together as a leadership community. One of the songs that we learned during that period best represented the sentiment of the relationships within our community of small group leaders and the pastoral team at the time,

One heart one spirit
One voice to praise You
We are the body of Christ
One goal one vision
To see You exalted
We are the body of Christ

And to this we give our lives
To see You glorified (Brown and Hampton 1997)

The fruitfulness in ministry came with a cost. There were a few dozen people in the congregation who were against the drastic growth of the church and also resisted the small group life because they felt undue pressure to open up their lives and their spiritual journeys with others. They became increasingly vocal in their opposition to change.

In 2005, I was invited by the International Christian School (ICS), where my eldest two children were attending, to become the chairman of their Capital Campaign Committee. This school was unique; it was set up by American missionaries with an expressed mission of developing godly leaders in Hong Kong with a Christ-centered curriculum. The school had achieved great academic success. Through fervent prayer and divine guidance, the Hong Kong government granted land to the school for a permanent campus after years of renting a building in a shopping mall in less than desirable environment for students. We

had to raise HK\$204 million, a seemingly impossible task for any school, let alone this Christian school with limited resources started by overseas missionaries. In hindsight, it's clear that God put me in this position to be firsthand witness of how he worked in ways beyond my wildest imagination. Through prayers and hard work by a group of dedicated volunteers, the school raised all of the necessary funds and completed its construction within three years.

In September of 2006, the school also invited me to become one of its trustees. At first, I hesitated due to my tight ministry schedule, wondering why God wanted me to serve in this capacity. Eventually, I felt led by God to do so and later understood the reasons. The school board underwent a major change from traditional school board system to Policy Governance (Carver, 1997). Again, I learned much from this experience; God seems to have been preparing and equipping me to be a change agent for other churches and to help transform the culture of the board with this governance concept. This was a helpful step toward the promotion of change and the transformation of traditional Chinese churches into prevailing churches capable of facing challenges of the modern age. Also, with God's miraculous provision for the financial needs of building the school, and after experiencing his faithfulness in responding to prayers, it was clear that God was using my positive and rewarding experience at ICS to carry me through the personal challenges and conflicts brought upon me from the minority of members at HKBC who became increasingly vocal in their opposition to change. From the various roles and capacities in ministry that God has involved me in, he has shown me that he had always been faithful and powerful. Moreover, when

God guides, he provides. Through these ministry experiences, I can see the Potter's hands at work, moulding me to conform to my Lord's image in a variety of ways. I grew in humility because I could not accomplish what I had attempted to achieve in my various parts of ministry without faithfully walking in the ways that he had planned for me. I became increasingly submissive to God's authority and guidance. My faith and trust in God became stronger. God seemed to be moulding me to become a change agent beyond Hong Kong, and to help to transform churches from a point of weakness into dynamic and strong, prevailing churches through creative ways. God had also molded me to become more patient, to see my changes through as they often took time to become reality. I also became more loving in response to the tension that these changes could have brought about; love alone could bridge the gap. Through all these, I also noticed that I became more kind and gentle as God has been very generous in providing for my family's every need. He has been very forgiving toward my own mistakes when trying new ways during the process of making changes; I've become a person increasingly filled with joy and peace as I grapple with what God wants me to do, and I've become more certain of his calling and direction. I always bear in mind what James 4:8a says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." I trust that I can only experience the joy and peace of bearing fruits in my ministry if I stay close to Him and know what He wishes to do through me. Amidst this period of trial and adversity, God drew me closer through the work of Singing

Waters Ministries in Orangeville, Ontario, Canada.¹¹ During one of my visits to Toronto, a friend referred me to them, suggesting that I join one of their retreats for inner healing that spanned a few weekends. I grew up in a church environment where the work of the Holy Spirit was taught but not openly sought after. Of course, I had knowledge of the Holy Spirit and its work. I had faith that the Holy Spirit resided in me and worked in my life. However, I was not expressly taught to open my heart to the Holy Spirit. My experience at Singing Waters Ministries was transformative to me; not only did it bring healing to my brokenness, it also changed my perspective of how the Holy Spirit spoke. I've since grown in my sensitivity to its still small voice, and its implications in my life. Looking back, I think this openness to relate to the Holy Spirit led to a greater experiential understanding of its workings. By seeking after him, preparing myself to listen to his still small voice, I was able to see the work of the Holy Spirit, which laid the groundwork for God's deepening work in my life, an invaluable help to me in all facets of my life, including my DMin studies on spiritual formation in the years that followed.

Together with Rev. Lau and the pastoral team, I made a lot of changes during the ten years that I served at HKBC. These changes ranged from the

¹¹ Singing Waters Ministries was founded in 1953 with a mission to reach out to the people of God with healing and restoration and to bring the unfailing love of the Father to the brokenhearted. For more details of this ministries, refer to their website: <http://singingwaters.org/>

administrative system, changes of preaching and worship style, changing the children ministry to shepherding system of the adult ministry, just to name a few. All of this positive change was overshadowed by the dissenters. Those who resisted the change coupled with a few who lodged unfounded and unsubstantiated attacks on me became increasingly stronger. After taking a sabbatical leave to discern God's guidance, God confirmed to me that the work that he had brought me to do at HKBC had been accomplished. The ongoing conflict also made me increasingly less effectiveness as a change agent. It was clear to me that it was time to move on, in accordance to what Rev. Lau and I had anticipated if I became ineffective or no longer helpful to the process of change. This was what we had agreed at the beginning. Little did we know how painful it would be to leave the church that I grew up in and loved. It was even more difficult to finally say goodbye to many of my close ministry partners. It was comforting and reassuring, however, to know that God had better plans for me. He wanted to change me further and deepen my spirituality and relationship with him for his service.

Serving in Ontario, Canada

2010-2014

Deepening the Process of Discipleship:
Turning the Religious into the Spiritual

Small group ministries, if they are working properly, are great tools for discipleship. I have observed and experienced their effectiveness in the nine years

of small group ministry at HKBC. I have seen spiritual friendships develop, mutual accountability grow, and biblical principles daily put into practice. There were groups multiplying with members growing spiritually; groups encountering stagnation in their members' spiritual lives; and groups falling apart when members lacked engagement and commitment. Although we had a generally effective method for developing disciples at HKBC, not all group leaders followed the paradigm as outlined. There was a lot of freedom for group leaders to decide how to manage their groups. As the small group ministry grew from only a few groups to over 140, with nine newly added pastoral staff concurrently overseeing coach huddles of group leaders within a few years, it was not possible for me to know every group intimately. As a result, it was a mystery to me as to what caused groups to become stagnant and what encouraged groups to thrive. During the time of transition from my ministry from Hong Kong to Ontario, one story from John Ortberg's *The Life You've Always Wanted*, was often on my mind:

Hank, as we'll call him, was a cranky guy. He did not smile easily, and when he did, the smile often had a cruel edge to it, coming at someone's expense. He had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in oceans of happiness. He would always find a cloud where others saw a silver lining. Hank rarely affirmed anyone. He operated on the assumption that if you compliment someone, it might lead to a swelled head, so he worked to make sure everyone stayed humble. His was a ministry of cranial downsizing. His mother tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way a prisoner carries a ball and chain. Although he went to church his whole life, he was never unshackled... Hank was not changing. He was once a cranky young guy, and he grew up to be a cranky old man. But even more troubling than his lack of change was the fact that nobody was surprised by it...

We expected that Hank would affirm certain religious beliefs. We expected that he would attend services, read the bible, support the church

financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here's what we didn't expect: We didn't expect that he would progressively become the way Jesus would be if he were in Hank's place. We didn't assume that each year would find him a more compassionate, joyful, gracious, winsome personality. We didn't anticipate that he was on the way to becoming a source of delight and courtesy who overflowed with 'rivers of living water.' So we were not shocked when it didn't happen. We would have been surprised if it did! (2002, 27–30)

Several questions fascinated me. Was it even possible for spiritual transformation to be a 'norm' in churches? Why would some small group members behave like Hank—a man who participated in all church activities but never changed? Why did some Christians become 'religious,' like the Pharisees, doing all things required by the religion, but without having a real Christ-filled life? How could we turn people from being religious to spiritual?

The first problem involved identifying what, in fact, a spiritually disciplined person looked like. I was touched by John Ortberg's description:

A disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit. Notice what a disciplined person is not. A disciplined person is not simply someone who exercises many disciplines. A disciplined person is not highly systematic, rigidly scheduled, chart-making, gold-star-loving early riser. The Pharisees were rigid and organized, but they were not disciplined persons in the sense required by true discipleship.

Disciplined people can do what is called for at any given moment. They can do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason... A disciplined follower of Jesus is someone who discerns when laughter, gentleness, silence, healing words, or prophetic indignation is called for, and offers it promptly, effectively, and lovingly. (2002, 50)

Ortberg presents a good comparison of those who are religious and those who are spiritual. The good work God began in me in 2008—a desire for making disciples who are spiritual but not religious through small groups—continued during this

period of my life. In God's divine humor, He put me through yet another adverse experience that deepened my conviction about what is religious and spiritual.

The Journey of Spiritual Discernment

In July 2009, while I was still serving at the HKBC, Bernice and I were invited to have lunch with a senior pastor of a church in Canada. He asked us to consider working as a small group pastor in his church, explaining that I could potentially succeed him once he retired in four to five years. Bernice and I spent more than six months in discernment. We discerned through affirmation by prayers, God's Word, and spiritual friends as well as circumstances.

I started with this new church in Canada in 2010, having been blessed with a trusting relationship with the senior pastor. I served at this church for several years with fruitful ministries, great team work and deepening friendships, and thought that I had found a long-term home for my ministry and leadership. Yet in my final year, the fluctuating retirement and succession plans of the senior pastor began to cause serious conflicts, divisions, and tensions within the leadership, as well as confusion and friction among the congregations. Throughout the entire process, I felt helpless. The leadership of the church assured me that the eroding trust among different groups of the church was not my doing, and they encouraged me to focus on my ministry and persevere with patience. Some of my spiritual discernment partners who had intimate knowledge of this time in my life likened my situation to the events in Joel Gregory's, *Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church*.

In my darkest moments, I struggled with how to best demonstrate Christ-likeness, to sow love and peace while remaining truthful. Throughout the process, I experienced first-hand how people can behave religiously but not spiritually, as the situation caused considerable tension and conflict. Nevertheless, with God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, I was determined to overcome adversity with good by demonstrating a Christ-like character despite the circumstances. My mind fixed on what Jesus would do in my place, and my heart sought to decipher God's intention for me.

A Spiritual Discernment Dilemma

In January of the following year, I faced a dilemma: should I take this adverse event as God's training for my perseverance and faithfulness to build in me a more Christ-like character, or should I consider it God's guidance for me to go to another area of ministry? I began to take steps toward serious spiritual discernment. At the beginning of the process, the Holy Spirit impressed upon me that I wait; I should not make any decisions until after at least a few months of being voted down for my nomination. I felt this still small voice telling me that God would not be pleased if I left the church at the height of this tension, as my abandonment would certainly cause the church to split. Thus, in the following months, I took all that happened as God's signpost of where He was guiding me.

Listen to God's Still Small Voice

I began to work toward bringing my own spirit to the right place, where I could be quiet before the Lord, to develop a higher sensitivity in listening to him alone. I tried to spend the first few months preparing my heart for spiritual discernment by reengaging my personal practice of the presence of God, the act of which I learned years before from reading about Brother Lawrence (1958). I am well aware that spiritual discernment is not simply comprised of a single event or exercise in which I set aside a time period to try to listen to God. Rather, it is the habit of keeping in constant dialogue with God, heightening my listening capacity for his still small voice. I found *Lectio Divina* very helpful to this end, as it allows for the understanding of God's Word through God's Spirit, which in turn is affirmed through sharing with God's People. One day, during a practice of *Lectio Divina*, I experienced a sense of unspeakable healing and encouragement by the Holy Spirit through meditating on Galatians 6. I felt as if the Spirit guided me to pause on verses 9–10, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” I talked to God about those who wounded me through their words and deeds. But, the Spirit urged me to forgive those who had hurt me the most. I was convicted to do good despite of how people treated me or the chaotic circumstances that I was in. The weight I had held in my weary and burdensome heart was greatly lifted.

From that point onwards, I was equipped with newfound strength to face the challenges ahead.

As I maintained the discipline of being in constant dialogue with God, I noticed that my capability to see God's presence in every situation consistently improved. I seemed to have a clearer lens with which to see God in every part of my daily encounters. I am convinced that the constant dialogue with God—asking God what to do and attempting to answer back aloud with my voice, believing that it might be God's reply to me—has been spiritually transformational. When I regularly practice these dialogues, I find peace and joy amidst chaos, and I grow in my capacity to discern God's voice. His guidance in my life and ministry also becomes clearer amidst uncertainty.

Encountering God at a Retreat

After several months of disciplined daily devotion, prayer, and practicing the presence of God throughout our daily lives while attending to regular pastoral ministry, my wife and I both felt our hearts were in the right place to dig deeper into our spiritual discernment; we were in a state of indifference toward all but the will of God. The next step we took together was to join the Spring Conference in early April 2014, offered by the Shoemaker Center for Church Renewal at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston. The Conference title and the

speaker, Mark Buchanan,¹² caught both of our attention: *Inside-Out & Upside Down: The Subversive Power of Christian Discipleship*. We prayed that, through the message from the conference speaker and the times of quiet reflection and meditation, we would hear what God had to say to resolve our dilemma. We learned that being a disciple required our commitment to be still, holy, filled, and dangerous. That last adjective struck us, and we began to understand “dangerous” as the idea that we were prepared to take risks for Christ. Throughout the retreat, two resounding words grabbed hold of our hearts, and we felt they were from God: “Rest” and “Risk.” We felt that God had guided us first to rest in him. We responded to the Spirit’s promptings and committed to rest in the Lord, and to build a stronger relationship with him through reflection upon the challenges we had faced. With that, we also felt a strong sense of the need to be bold and take risks for Christ. As we meditated on God’s Word throughout this retreat, we felt the encouragement of the Spirit to step out of our comfort zone, to look beyond the current event, and to be good stewards of the resources God has given us to serve him in ways that would befit his calling on our lives. As we pondered on these revelations from our Lord against the dilemma we were struggling with, we discovered God’s guidance—to move on from our current ministry to the next.

¹² Mark Buchanan is the author of *Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus Every Season of Your Soul* and *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*, among other books.

Once again, Bernice has proven to be my best spiritual companion and discernment partner.

Digging in on Our Spiritual Discernment Questions

Bernice and I used this revelation received from the retreat to frame our spiritual discernment question: “In light of this call, does God want us to stay on as change agents for our current church, or does he mean to send us to another place of ministry to be better stewards for our calling?” We broke down this discernment question into two parts. First, we were to discern whether it was God’s will for us to stay or go, and second, to discern where our next place of ministry could be. The framing of the discernment question was critical to the discernment process and subsequent outcome as it helped us clarify what to set aside, and what to pick up, on the path to our envisioned future. We went through a period of more than a month in prayer, seeking to discern the Spirit in accordance to the processes proposed by St. Ignatius Loyola.¹³

Differing Advice from Our Discerning Partners

By the middle of May, we felt ready to share with the leadership team, who had been walking closely with us during our discernment, that God had instructed us to move on. They insisted we should wait at least a few more

¹³ For a brief introduction of discernment of Spirits by St. Ignatius Loyola, please refer to website: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/introduction-to-discernment-of-spirits>

months, sharing their own discernment. Bernice and I also shared our discernment with another six of our closest ministry partners in the church. We gathered them together and shared with them for corporate discernment. They listened, asked clarifying questions, pondered, then shared their observations. These ministry partners surprisingly expressed their understanding and support. This confirmed our discernment and led us to our next question: “When should we leave?” Bernice and I felt that even though it was clear to us in our discernment that we should go, we still needed to look at the circumstances and discern when would be the best time to leave for the sake of church unity.

Discerning Partners Changed Their Minds

While pondering upon this decision, our team of close ministry partners suddenly changed their mind, individually and separately from each other, and came to us in the following few days to try and convince us to stay. Originally, we felt it was natural for the leadership to want us to stay and, if we had consensus with this team of close ministry partners, we would have taken immediate action to move on. With the change of heart of our ministry partners, however, we felt like the Apostle Paul in Acts 16:6, where Luke says, "They passed through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." Here, we see the Holy Spirit at work in changing the plans of Paul and Silas. When Luke says that the Spirit had forbidden Paul to speak the Word in Asia, he implies that Paul wanted to do so. No doubt, at some point, Paul had made his desire known to his missionary team.

We felt in similar ways that God, through his People, was trying to communicate that we should reconsider the timing of our resignation. Although I felt I had answers to all of their concerns, I knew that if I resigned right away, I might be guilty of not waiting for the entire process to play itself out.

Go, but Not Yet

Consequently, we advised the leadership team that we would wait up to a year to see the series of events run its course, as long as we were able to contribute to the church in our role as change agents.¹⁴ Throughout the process in the months ahead, Bernice and I felt there was a lack of clarity in these ambiguous circumstances. Consequently, we decided to wait for the right time to act, in the spirit of reconciliation and in an effort to maintain peace and unity within the church. It was my hope that my resignation would not incite further division in this body of Christ. In hindsight, this focus on unity was largely derived from the disappointments I felt towards the split at my former church in Ottawa, where I attended during my high school years.

Henri Nouwen's description of active waiting and waiting with patience describes perfectly my experience in the weeks ahead:

In active waiting, we live the present moment to the fullest in order to find there the signs of the one we are waiting for... Waiting patiently is

¹⁴ This is a reference to my original calling upon graduation from Seminary: God called me to be a change agent to build prevailing churches. This term was popularized by the Willow Creek Church, whose yearly conferences I attended during my seminary studies, and I decided to use my training therein to grow vibrant, prevailing churches following the biblical Acts 2 culture.

suffering through the present moment, tasting it to the fullest in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us... Patient living in the fullest of time (*kairos*), in the knowledge that real life events happen in this fullness. And the great event of God's appearing is recognized in the fullness of time...

It has been helpful to me to realize that, when I pray, I am living my life before God, doing what I know to do, offering my thoughts and actions to the Holy One in expectation that I am being led where I need to go and will be given the courage to do what I need to do because I know who I am in God. Active waiting is being open to the promise yet to be fulfilled. Patient waiting is staying fully in the present moment. (2013, 152–153)

During this time of active waiting, I found myself with a clarity that enabled me to look back on the events up to that point, making me more sensitive to the present.

Within a few months, the senior pastor had decided to stay for at least another year and I knew that it was time to move on. I enjoyed a close relationship with most of those in leadership, worked well with small group leaders in my ministry, and experienced love, care, and support from the majority of the congregation, but I saw clearly that I would no longer be an effective change agent in the church.

The Battle of the Head and the Heart

While my head concluded through discernment that it was time to resign, my heart still struggled. It was a battle of the heart between staying for the love of my flock and moving on, which, seemingly, was the right thing to do. Admittedly, throughout the process, I had to discern the meaning and implications of what happened and how God would want me to respond. I spent a few months trying to analyze and to interpret each and every event, but God had other plans. After a

long wait, I felt I had received a clear answer from God as to whether he wanted me to stay or leave. Looking back, God wanted to use this adverse circumstance in my ministry to push me to another paradigm of decision-making. It also expanded my vision of small group ministry to integrate discipleship with spiritual disciplines helpful for spiritual discernment. I began to learn to make decisions based on spiritual discernment and to seek God's guidance on whether to stay or to go. Throughout the process, God seemed to redefine the ways he wanted me to serve him.

God is gracious and faithful; he protected my heart and guided me throughout this adversity. More than seven years ago, I had plans to enhance my ministry skills and spiritual development through a DMin. program. I kept procrastinating in my application until early that year, when I felt the spirit prompting me to apply to several schools. Originally, I had planned to enter programs from seminaries in the U.S., but none of them would accept me that year due to my late submission. The earliest that I could begin my program would be in 2015. However, I had a change of heart after my wife and I attended the luncheon for potential students of the DMin. program at Tyndale Seminary on February 24, 2014. I was fully convinced that the Spiritual Formation track of the DMin. program and the program's philosophy of education were exactly what I had been looking for. Since my wife had expected me to join a program in the U.S., I thought she might question my change of heart. But, to my amazement, God seemed to have put in her heart, also, that it was the right program for me. With her blessing, I filed the application before the deadline and was accepted

into the program starting on May 1, 2014. What I experienced in the months that followed after starting the program seemed to be an experience that Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird point toward when they write the following:

The books we read, the nature we enjoy, the people we meet, and the events we experience contain within themselves signs of God's presence and guidance day by day. When certain poems or scripture verses speak to us in a special way, when nature sings and creation reveals its glory, when particular people seem to be placed in our path, when a critical or current event seems full of meaning, it's time to pay attention to the divine purpose to which they point. (2013)

Indeed, it has been amazing how God spoke to me through the bible and the books that I read in my time of personal devotion and the D. Min. courses. Every course I have taken has helped provide clarity to my spiritual discernment and make sense of what appeared to be senseless.

My Calling Revisited and Renewed

During the week of the DMin. Residency in mid-August 2014, in the course Listening to God: Discernment for Spiritual Formation, God transformed my thinking in multiple ways and cleared the way for me to act based on what I have discerned. During one of the evenings, we watched the movie *Cf God and Men*¹⁵. It was liberating to know I was not making a life-threatening decision. The

¹⁵ *Cf God and Men* is a French drama film directed by Xavier Beauvois that follows an order of Trappist monks whose members live among the Muslim population in a quiet corner of Algeria. As the country is plunged into civil war in the mid-1990s, the men of God must decide whether to stay among the impoverished residents who have been their neighbors, or flee the encroaching fundamentalist terrorists.

Monks in the Monastery had to decide whether to stay or to leave but it was a life and death decision for them. The monks demonstrated to me that to discern is to know what God calls us to do. We simply leave the results to God. In one of the scenes, the main character, Christian, goes out to the ocean and spends time in solitude to seek God and His will. He concludes that “they are called for the poor and the sick,” which results in their decision to stay instead of to leave in face of life-threatening danger. It reminded me of my own calling, refreshing my desire to be a good steward of God’s call in my life and ministry in spite of my current circumstances.

See Beyond the Clouds

I have been confused by many issues, factors, and behaviors of different people, as well as my own attempt to find out how God is leading me. From the lives of these monks in *Cf God and Men*, I was convicted again that discernment is not about the whys. Discernment is the ability to see the signposts of God’s guidance and to be obedient in stepping forward. If I look at the monk’s discernment to stay, which consequently is discernment to risk their own lives, it seems too big a sacrifice in a temporal sense. It is not easy to understand why God allowed them eventually to die. From an eternal point of view, however, there is no need to know the whys nor even the need to know whether their sacrifice was the will of God. In general, discernment always involves some sort of death: Dying to our own ego, dying to what we hold dear, dying to our own will to do the will of God, or dying to ourselves. We therefore need to have faith to follow

what we try our best to discern. Greater in value than my final decision was the suffering that I experienced to fulfill my calling and my vocation; it has shed new light to what God has been teaching me from the beginning of my life.

A Balancing Act between the Head and the Heart

It is not easy for any pastor to leave his sheep or pasture for another. I was weighing way too many issues and concerns and seemed to lack the courage and confidence to take my next step. The four questions below, which could be applied to any decision-making process, truly helped me narrow down the weighing process into a manageable scope and move forward with faith and confidence:

- Is my decision congenial to my calling?
- Is my decision compatible to my situation?
- Do I have the competence?
- Is my decision compassionate toward others?

I learned of these four key spiritual discernment questions from Dr. Graham Standish's lecture during my August 2014 DMin. residency.

To my own amazement, the time I spent thinking and praying regarding my calling bore fruit. God spoke to me through *Lectio Divina*, in a few books that I read using the Spiritual Reading approach and spent time in deep reflection. I first chose to focus on my calling, to become absolutely sure of it, before discerning the remaining questions. After all, my deepest desire was to be a good steward of God's calling and the gifts he had given me.

Turning Perspectives from Religious to Spiritual

Upon graduating from Seminary in 2000, my original calling was that God invited me to be a “change agent;” I was to build churches with a biblical Acts 2 culture and lead them to thrive. God seems to have revealed to me that, over the first eight years of my ministry life, I have become skilled and experienced in changing and shaping a church’s culture. I felt ready to use small group ministry as a tool to mold and build upon the mental, physical, and relational aspects of members through strategic plans and programs. In the past seven years, through significant adverse events, God slowly but surely moved my heart towards this spiritual dimension. Despite growing up in different traditions and approaches to ministry, I find my heart fully embracing Dr. Standish’s description of a blessed church. I was especially drawn to the vision that a blessed church creates communities that “are grounded in God’s purpose, alive to God’s Presence, and open to God’s Power” (2005, 52). I also long for a blessed church whose focus is on

doing what God is calling us to do, having the confidence to know that God is in our midst, and relying upon God’s power [to reap the fruits]. In short, [...] becoming a place where God is present and God is experienced. Lives are thereby healed. (2005, 20)

I desire for the main focus of the church to become “prayerfully seeking what Christ, the head of the church, wants for the church” (2005, 62). Leaders are chosen because of their spiritual maturity and not solely on their ability:

[T]oo many church leaders are chosen for their functional abilities to organize and get projects done, not for their spiritual maturity. They may be good problem solvers in their work and in other facets of their lives, but

this doesn't necessarily mean they will be people of faith committed to discerning God's will, instead of problem solving. (2005, 63)

When I ponder my own calling to be a change agent and lead churches toward a biblical culture, I find the blessed church described by Dr. Standish reflects the kind of church culture that I deeply desire. My heart starts to pound when I read,

In a blessed church, the focus moves from maintaining right practices or beliefs to leading people to a communion with God. What matters most is allowing the life of Christ to flow through the church. (2005, 75)

At this point, my heart is filled with the joy of finding the missing piece of my puzzle. All that I have learned, all I am, and all the good and bad experiences God has put in my life thus-far make sense to me. God is calling me to move the spiritual dimension back to the integrated spirituality championed by Standish (2005, 36). As I have clarified and fine-tuned my calling from the Lord, the rest of the questions seem obvious; and God has shown me the way to my next place of ministry through the entire process. I realize God had been speaking through Scripture, other mentors, and long-time spiritual friends—saying I should try something new, go in a new direction, and embark on a new venture at a new ministry or church.

I also had an unexplainable encounter during a trip to Hawaii while attending a friend's daughter's wedding in September 2014. To my astonishment, a phrase uttered by a stranger in a casual conversation complaining how “many Christians are religious but not spiritual” spoke to me in the context of why churches are increasingly being perceived negatively by the world, as well as why

there have been so many church conflicts and splits over the past decades. Somehow, this phrase kept creeping into my life as a theme in books I read, lectures I heard, and people I encountered, all within the span of months. It dawned on me that this phrase confirmed God's calling and guidance to me for a new season of ministry to deepen the discipleship process—turning religious people into spiritual people through a decision-making process founded upon spiritual discernment.

Increasingly, I have been convicted by this new insight God had impressed upon me—spiritual discernment is key to discipleship. Since the essence of discipleship is the right response to God's call on our lives, it is a matter of being willing to become all that God wants us to be. Spiritual discernment is the key to following Jesus and becoming all God had intended for us to be. I am convinced it must be central to the life of a disciple, as well as the life of a small group.

Where Do I Go from Here?

2015-ff

I grew up in one of the oldest churches in Hong Kong with over 110 years of history and was a pastor there for ten years with weekly attendance of over 2,200 before I left. I am thrilled with what God has done through the adverse events of my life to shape and change me for spiritual growth and also to guide me to new places I never thought possible. God has shown me that my calling should never be about the size of a church; I should focus on building for the sake

of his Kingdom, not mine. In hindsight, I fully agree with Henry Nouwen's insight from "A Time To Be Led" in which he states,

Waiting in a time of sorrow or suffering can be one of the most difficult but also the most fruitful times of life. We step closer to the way of Jesus when we step into our own pain and the pain of others. Often we are thrust into suffering; we are handed over to it... The reality is that we have very little control over our lives. Most things are done to us or not determined by us... more often we have no choice but to let other people, circumstances, and events determine much of our life direction... It becomes increasingly important to recognize that our vocation is fulfilled not just in our actions but also in our passions (suffering). Passion is a kind of waiting—waiting for what other people are going to do.

To love another is to realize that they have the power and freedom to hand us over to suffering, whether intentionally or not... When time comes, we let go of our wishes and desires and wait open-endedly for others to act, for God to deliver, giving up control over our future and letting God define our lives. (2013, 154–156)

Indeed, God brought me to this place, a place where a new season of ministry life is being ushered in and all that I need to do now is to let go of myself and to have total trust in Him, being led by him as I continue to grow in listening to his still small voice. He speaks, and he is at work, for which I give him thanks.

If being religious means going through the motion of religious life, then, being spiritual may mean being open to God, seeking His guidance, and following his calling in our lives. This idea of living spiritually has been a theme that I've recognized throughout my life, and it's an idea upon which I began to focus in this next season of ministry. I felt called to further develop a discipleship platform through small groups that would shepherd God's people—a process by which they may become increasingly spiritual, instead of being religious, through spiritual discernment. In application, I focused on the ways in which church life could nurture disciples to be spiritually discerning people through small groups.

These ideas of discipleship and spiritual discernment set the stage for me as I began the search for a new church family.

As God led me to leave my old pasture, several ministry opportunities were presented to me for discerning his guidance. These were all great opportunities to apply what I have learned thus-far from God, who provided me with a renewed calling, direction, and passion for ministry. Although I had been considering many options, I decided to shortlist two positions so that I could discern my course of action. The first was a church who had just completed an expansion project, while the second was planning to build a new church building altogether. Somehow, I felt the Holy Spirit's prompting; that God was calling me to the latter. However, I wrestled with the fact that this church had no church building of her own, and also was so small; it had a congregation of about 120. I wasn't sure if God really would guide me from my first church with over 2,200 to a church with only 120. While a leadership position anywhere is still a leadership position, my pride cast doubt on God's will, but his unwavering direction remained. I never had served in a start-up church, nor had actively attended one; my experience had always been of churches that were already well-established, all the way back to my young years, growing up in one of the most established church in Hong Kong. The pressure of God's hands, felt through my experience with his Spirit, remained firm. Stepping out in faith, and in response to God's leading, I began discussions with Stouffville Grace Baptist Church.

My first experience in ministry with SGBC was a training workshop to inspire and equip their leadership team, which included their small group leaders.

While spending the day with them, the Holy Spirit impressed on me the idea that the small size of this church was ideal to nurture intimacy and grow spiritual friendships without that stagnation that could appear in a larger church. My first Sunday Worship with them was held in a rented school gym. Despite their lack of a permanent home, their hearts were fervent, and I felt God's Spirit among these people. After the worship service, the entire congregation went to the nearby land they had purchased a year prior. Upon my arrival, I found the congregation in worship, singing and praying together over the site of their future church home. This passionate congregation touched my heart, one who desired to build a focused church to connect their local community with God and one another.

My DMin studies have proven invaluable as I've learned to draw closer to God and better discern his will. I've spent time in solitary reflection, and in prayerful discernment using Dr. Standish's questions on congeniality, compatibility, competence, and compassion, as discussed in greater length in the previous segment. I was placed under the guidance of a spiritual director for over a year. Through all this, God has shown me that Stouffville Grace Baptist Church is where he is sending me to begin a new journey with him. Despite any lingering doubt, I decided to follow God's insistent calling. In following God's calling to this young church, I experienced death to my prideful self, and in its place, peace and trust in God's will remained. As I met with the leadership team of the church, I was given the opportunity to spiritually discern together with them whether our visions aligned, and we established that they did. I was graciously accepted and allowed to serve part-time in a year of discernment, to see if we were a good fit

together. Thanks to God's grace, I became their first senior pastor in February, 2016.

I believe Jesus has changed every aspect of my life since I have made a commitment of faith in him, moulding and changing me to be an agent of his will, a change agent. From relational change, getting married to a godly and abiding wife, to change in career, I have grown in my trust and dependence on the Lord, learning to foster stronger and more genuine spiritual relationships. I have been transformed from being a shy and introverted person to a person fully enjoying deep, authentic sharing in small groups in accordance to the authentic and genuine fellowship of a Biblical Acts 2 community. My leadership style has also changed from one of individual dominance to one that emphasizes teamwork and interdependent co-operation.

My past experiences have solidified my belief that God's guidance on each person is unique. It is clear in John 21:22 that God may guide someone with wealth and another with wisdom and yet another with problems. However, we must always ask ourselves, "What is that to you?" (The 'witty' principle). For example, if someone has a smooth life and we have a difficult one, we would not question God, and it should not affect our commitment to our Lord. It is because, no matter what happens, our commitment and dedication to our Lord will not be changed.

Conclusion: The Experience of Writing a Spiritual Autobiography

As I wrote, I could see how the dots that God has put in my life are connected together. The Apostle Paul said of life, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, ESV). This experience gave new meaning to a familiar passage and deepened my own conviction to it. Indeed, as I was writing, I became increasingly aware of the Potter’s hands at work. It’s been evident that God has used the circumstances of my life, along with his Word, his Spirit, and his people, to mould and shape the vessel that I am today. In taking the time to relive and reflect upon what I’ve learned, I’ve developed a deep sense of awe and worship toward God who has continued to shape and reshape me. It changed my perspectives on the bad things that happened in my life as God used the good and the bad to form me spiritually for His purposes. I could also see more clearly how my calling relates to who God has been shaping me to become.

I knew my family shaped who I am but the process of writing my own spiritual biography helped me tremendously in understanding how each member contributed to my spiritual growth and the way that I do ministry. For example, my mom had asthma and she was physically weak. But, her faithfulness to serve God with what she had made a big impact on those whom she served. I was so heavily influenced by my father and indebted to him for his entrepreneurship, creativity, adaptability to changes, his drive for excellence in whatever that he did and his determination to overcome any challenges in life, trusting God to provide.

They shaped the way I work and do ministry. I love traveling and exploring the world and that came from my sister, Catherine. This love of travel and exploration created curiosity in me and a deep thirst for new ideas, as well as a tolerance of cultural differences and the ways that people do things. I find these to be helpful traits in my spiritual journey and ministry life as well.

This experience also helped me realize the impact that different events in my life had upon me. For example, I tend to be an emotionally stable individual who seldom sheds tears. But, I had been wondering why I cried uncontrollably when I was faced with particularly traumatic events. I knew I was walking on God's path under his sovereign guidance. I traced it back to the event when I was studying in Form 4 at Lingnan Middle School. I developed very close friendships with those I served together in the high school fellowship. While I enjoyed each other's company and the fruits of our ministry together, I also knew that God was answering my prayer, calling me to leave on a new journey where I would be finishing my high school in Ottawa. It was a year-long prayer answered. I traced it back to the day when I left them that I felt sad and shed tears when I was alone. The emotion came from a deep sense of tension; I did not want to leave those whom I loved and served together with close relationships and at the same time, I knew God was guiding me away from them. Although I kept these friendships throughout my life, it still saddened me. I came to the realization, for the first time, that my vulnerability derived from this particular tension during my writing of this spiritual autobiography. It is only one of the examples and there are plenty.

Another important discovery was that of my role as a change agent throughout the majority of my life. As I reflected upon this realization, I've begun to understand the significance of this role. John P. Kotter, in his book *Leading Change*, examines the forces and motivations that effectively drive change, and also the causes for organizational stagnation or loss of direction. I find that I often naturally have fallen into a role that causes change, as demonstrated in my life. I pondered, for example, on how I acted as a change agent during my high school years, dissatisfied with the low attendance of the school's Christian Fellowship, and the complacency and lack of urgency that allowed it to remain anemic. Unable to reconcile that fact alongside the fact that we attended a Christian school, I took to action. As identified by Kotter,

the biggest mistake people make when trying to change organizations is plunge ahead without a large enough sense of urgency... If complacency were low in most organizations today, this problem would have limited importance. But quite the opposite is true... [Because of their complacency], people won't give that extra effort which is often essential... Instead they cling to the status quo and resist initiatives from above. (2012, 9)

My dissatisfaction of the complacency of my peers caused me to drive into action, and to create a sense of urgency for my co-students. By highlighting the present need of an enlivened Christian Fellowship, I became a catalyst, outlining vision that was embraced by a core team that wanted the countenance of our school to exemplify our title: a Christian School. As the urgency was transferred to those around me things started to change—our vision began to take shape in the forms of worship nights, improved community, and, most importantly, a vibrant and growing spiritual community. This continued throughout my professional and

ministry careers, notably during my time serving at HKBC. This time, the dissatisfaction that I had experienced didn't necessarily seem like a negative, instead I noticed complacency there in comparison to their potential ministry structures and values. Through my life experience of vibrant spiritual friendships, as well as the apparent waning efficiency of this training method, God impressed upon me the need to change the church life of adults through authentic life changing small groups. The actual change manifested itself in a similar way; first my call to action based on the vision for change, the building of energy to grow the church to foster a much more vibrant community of spiritual friendships, and thankfully the realization, acceptance, and approval of those I had counselled. These instances have highlighted my deep-seated desire for constant improvement—the fact that I strive to break away from and build on top of, the status quo.

Overall, I see my understanding of being a change agent underscored with the quality of someone who had become a catalyst for change in spiritual structure and relationships, wherever God placed me. In being available to receive the direction of the Holy Spirit, not only was I a change agent, however; God moulded me through these experiences, as well. Therefore, these experiences shaped me into a 'changed agent,' fundamentally building and refining me as I built others. God renewed my understanding of my changing roles and qualities as a change agent during this DMin study, reinforcing my understanding of the responsibility of inciting change, as the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of spiritual change and transformation, whereas people and life circumstances

function secondarily, reinforcing that which is revealed by the Spirit. Through my years being moulded by the Potter's hands, I have seen a shift in my role as a change agent, being directed as a catalyst for change in organizations and relationships to one of an agent whose goal is to help facilitate godly transformations in the inner workings of both individuals and communities .

This autobiography took much longer than I thought it would. Along the way, I had to pause and reflect on what materials to include and leave out. And, it took time to process many of the incidents that happened, as well as their impact on my spiritual life. At times, I had to stop and process the pain that some incidents brought in my inner self. I am a bit overwhelmed by the clear presence of God and his hand prints all over my life. I knew he was there all along, but the impact of seeing it in my own spiritual autobiography is an entirely different experience which brought me to new depth of knowing myself and God.

Finally, writing my autobiography reinforced my next steps as I transition from growth in the DMin program at Tyndale to maturation and application of that which I have learned in my time spent here. It has reinvigorated me, encouraging me to pursue the studies of spiritual formation in small groups, where, through God's Word, his People connect to his Spirit.

CHAPTER III:
A MINISTRY MODEL OF SPIRITUAL
FORMATION THROUGH SMALL GROUPS
FOR STOUFFVILLE GRACE BAPTIST
CHURCH

Small groups serve different purposes in different churches. Some groups serve as care units primarily tending to each member's needs. Others serve as task groups that help ministry teams with relationship and team building. Yet some others serve as social groups that provide social or recreational activities. And some serve as Bible study groups that help members accumulate a wider and deeper knowledge of God's Word. With these various purposes, how effective are small groups at facilitating spiritual transformation and developing devoted followers of Christ? As evident in my spiritual autobiography, I have found small groups to be formational. My own positive experience causes me to question how we might encourage small groups to be more effective in the discipleship process.

The model suggested in this chapter focuses on providing the resources necessary to create an environment that facilitates spiritual companionship, and significant spiritual growth. While our maturation happens through the formative pressure of the Potter's hands, the creation of this environment is akin to softening

the clay, so that it is receptive to his touch. First off, I consider the model demonstrated by the early church in Acts 2, and draw relevant insight from their example. Next, I consider the models of discipleship laid out by both Bill Hull and the Willow Creek Community Church, to better understand the purpose and method of finding and growing disciples as a large cycle. These lay the framework for spiritual growth, which requires three essential resources for spiritual formation—God’s Word, Spirit, and People—and various spiritual exercises, most notably *Lectio Divina* and the communal sharing of life stories. The relationship between the three essential resources and spiritual development is then considered. Finally, the proper practice and application of these methods and essential resources is explored, with practical information for small group leaders, such as the format for small group meetings, as well as some instructions for intentional shepherding and larger perspective direction of the group to navigate with both their group members and their church’s leadership team.

Jesus’ invitation for his followers is nothing short of demanding radical change in their lives: “And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Mk 8:34). Jesus’ call to follow him is a call for a total commitment. Christ is demanding a life of spiritual transformation for His followers to give up whatever in their life that hinder them from giving their life to God (Garland 1996, 333-336). Without a life focused on transformation—self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness—and surrender to his will, one is not worthy to be called Jesus’ disciple. Therefore, one of the most important missions of the

church is to foster spiritual transformation. At Stouffville Grace Baptist Church (SGBC), small groups serve as a tool to facilitate spiritual formation and discipleship. The church holds a strong belief that “a small group provides the optimal environment for the life change Jesus Christ intends for every believer” (Donahue 2002, 22). Although life changes may best happen in small groups, members in different discipleship groups with the same emphasis on Bible study may experience significantly different results. Why would some groups experience spiritual growth while others experience spiritual stagnation? Why would some groups develop close social friendships while not being able to foster deeper spiritual friendships? Since SGBC spends tremendous amounts of time and effort in engaging with small group ministry as a church, it is important to identify issues and elements that are important to provide the optimal environment for spiritual formation.

Premise

Small groups are a primary discipleship tool for the church. This section is designed to provide a ministry philosophy and model of this ministry, as well as the underlying biblical principles and values of small groups for the leadership team of SGBC. The team include pastors, deacons, ministry coordinators, life group leaders and their apprentices. It is also intended to be a reference guide for group leaders to lead in such a way that spiritual formation is the norm, not the exception.

The meta-church model is instrumental to the development of the small group strategy and structure.¹⁶ Donahue explains key components of the meta-church strategy for groups which we have adapted into our small group discipleship model: “A meta-church is organized around cell groups, where people can find friendship, be mentored in the faith, understand and discuss the truth of the Word, identify and use their spiritual gifts, and provide care for one another” (2002, 13). The three guiding principles that follow—relational ministry, the power of intimate relationships, and leadership as a growth stimulant—further enhance the model for SGBC small group strategy which derived from Carl George’s meta church model (1994, 40-92).

Relational Ministry

Many churches structure their ministry around teaching models that elevate information over relationships. These models provide the same curriculum and program experience for their participants’ spiritual growth. It is assumed that if the congregation is encouraged to stay in these types of programs long enough and is exposed to enough curriculum, spiritual progress will be made. Program-oriented ministries often run the risk of isolating members, often being unable to provide an individual or tailored solution in their growth. Spiritual formation,

¹⁶ For more information about how small groups in such churches are organized, refer to Carl George’s books *The Coming Church Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994); and *The Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership* (Richmond: Kingdom Publishing, 1997).

however, cannot be ‘one size fits all.’ Hence, special considerations must be taken regarding individual members’ spiritual journey, personality, learning style, and struggles. There needs to be a balance and interaction between programs and content for everyone as well as the spiritual journey and characteristics of individual members. Our church’s small group model continually attempts to elevate relationships over curriculum, methods, or programs. Relationship-based ministry is more concerned about changing lives than with strict method- or curriculum-based approaches.

Appendix 2 uses key words to illustrate the differences between people-oriented and program-oriented ministry models. An in-depth study of these differences is helpful to group leaders as they shepherd and disciple members.

Carl George points out the following:

The relationship-centered approach to teaching makes sure that a portion of the meeting time is spent in relationship building. People must have the opportunity to interact with each other, and in the process draw out a fuller appreciation for how they are accepted and loved and learned from, as well as how valuable they are to each other. The second setting involves the dozens of hours between meetings. That which happens from minute sixty to the next meeting’s minute one is more important than anything that happens from minutes one to fifty-nine. (1994, 69)

When group members trust each other enough to share their vulnerabilities or struggles, then true ministry can begin.

The Power of Intimate Relationships

People in close relationships have significant influence over one another. Those who are in our small groups are encouraged to build close and intimate relationships with God as well as one another. Special emphasis is made on

members' private practice of spiritual disciplines for deeper personal experience of their faith. It is through the strength and depth of individual relationships with God that impact can be observed in small group members' spiritual lives. Hence, group members may learn and be edified by each other's deepening spiritual lives.

The Apostle Paul expressed the importance of being a spiritual influence in community with those amidst your spiritual journey. He told Timothy: "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tm 4:12). He also asked Timothy to "flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tm 2:22). In addition, the Apostle Paul spoke plainly on conduct, urging believers to "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). It ought to challenge believers to think about whether they matter to those who know them: How do I represent Christ in the minute aspects of life? What are the ways to become a spiritual influencer to one's friends? Lawrenz reminds us of the following:

And influence comes out of the core reality of who the influencer is. People whose foundation is their faith in God have an extraordinary opportunity to do something more than influence people and organizations from their personal opinions, preferences, and goals. They can connect faith to their influence, whether their work is in the realm of business or the church or education or any other endeavour. They want to connect faith and influence because they know that it is the way to effect enduring change, and they believe God is the ultimate influencer. (2012, 26–27)

Because of the established intimacy within small group settings, this opportunity can be acted upon while continuing to build relationships. As these intimate

relationships with other members continue to grow, their framework—God’s influence—continues to be realized, and the environment that facilitates spiritual formation is strengthened.

Leadership as a Growth Stimulant

When faced with the presence of a problem, most people are motivated to learn. Especially in ministry, growing adults see learning as a process through which competence can be raised to reach life’s full potential. Carl George expounds on how to motivate adults to learn:

In short, I needed a problem I couldn’t solve before I would be stimulated to receive teaching from others. My motivation, as that of most adults, rises dramatically in the presence of a problem. If you want adults to learn, present them with problems they feel are significant. (1994, 92)

If brothers and sisters are simply assigned to be group leaders, these new leaders soon begin looking for help or to get the training needed to succeed in their newly designated position. This assigned stimulation builds motivation to learn makes fresh leaders much easier to train and coach. This sequence of “Assign–Do–Teach” for leadership development is critical to leadership development based on the aforesaid principle. Small groups are also organized in ways that help members identify the needs of their personal growth and how the curriculum is meeting those demands.

Context

Stouffville Grace Baptist Church was planted by Richmond Hill Chinese Baptist Church in 2007 and celebrated the beginning of its independence in 2013.

Not only is SGBC affiliated with the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), it is also the only bilingual Chinese church in Whitchurch-Stouffville, serving mainly Cantonese- and English-speaking congregations. With an average weekly attendance of 120, as well as eleven small groups in early 2017, the church's demographic consists mostly of young families and early retirees who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong, China, or Taiwan about ten to thirty years prior. Chinese and English worship services are held weekly. About 15% of our congregation is English speaking second generation Chinese, 80% being descendants of our Cantonese speaking congregants. Small groups consist of members on different spiritual journey including mature Christians, new believers and seekers.

The Mission

Sharing Life Together...Bringing Christ's Love to Others

The Vision

Develop devoted disciples of Christ:

Submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to live out a God-centered life

Form a community that experiences, witnesses, serves and glorifies God

The church is dedicated to building a community of love where everyone is on a journey to a deeper relationship with God and one another. The goal is to build a faith-based community that reaches out to the larger community. Small groups play a significant role in the implementation of the overall mission and vision of the church. Therefore, it is critical for leaders to understand the meaning of spiritual friendship and what deep spiritual companionship looks like. This will encourage group members and guide them to develop such spiritual friendships for the sake of the Gospel.

Method: The Foundation of Discipleship

The Great Commission and the Goals of Discipleship

Jesus issued the Great Commission to all of His followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28: 19-20). Some may take “to make disciples” or “discipleship” to mean teaching new believers the truths of scripture, the doctrine and theology of God, and establishing the moral codes of the faith. If satisfaction is found when a person knows the concepts about God and the faith, all this is good. However, Jesus’ use of the word actually means what nowadays is more commonly known as an “apprentice.” Apprenticeship isn’t satisfied until the apprentice has learned to live the life of God. God not only wants believers to form doctrine, theology, and moral codes in those who follow Jesus, He wants all believers to experience the transformation that results from the very life of Jesus within them. Bill Hull in his book, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, summarize the characteristics of such a life:

1. A disciple submits to a teacher who teaches him/her how to follow Jesus.
 2. A disciple learns Jesus’ words.
 3. A disciple learns Jesus’ way of ministry.
 4. A disciple imitates Jesus life and character.
 5. A disciple finds and teaches other disciples who also follow Jesus.
- (2006, 68)

Also, the Apostle Paul summed up the power of kingdom apprenticeship this way, which should be the goal of discipleship: “That Christ be formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). That is, the whole life of Jesus includes the mind of Jesus and how he viewed people and his calling to be faithful to the Father; the heart of Jesus that broke over the things that broke the Father’s heart; the character of Jesus that protected him and gave him favour with people; the mission of Jesus which gave him purpose for his life. Hence, Paul expects believers to do more than give passive cognitive consent to their faith. Rather, they should experience a transformed life and serve as witnesses to the Gospel:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may turn out to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world. (Phil 2:12-15)

A commitment to be and to make disciples must be the central act of every disciple and every church. At SGBC, it is critical to know what it means to be a disciple since the church’s vision is to develop devoted disciples of Christ.

The Character of a Disciple

The ultimate character goal of a disciple is Christ-likeness—living as Jesus lived. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

Those who follow Christ are destined to bear his image... Their goal is to become ‘as Christ’. Christ’s followers always have his image before their eyes, and in its light all other images are screened from their sight. It penetrates into the depths of their being, fills them, and makes them more and more like their Master. The image of Jesus Christ impresses itself in daily communications on the image of the disciple. No follower of Jesus can contemplate his image in a spirit of cold detachment. That image has

the power to transform our lives, and if we surrender ourselves utterly to him, we cannot help bearing his image ourselves. We become the sons of God; we stand side by side with Christ, our unseen Brother, bearing like him the image of God. (2015, 228)

To truly become Christ-like, then, is to understand this expectation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlined core aspects of a character in tune with God's character (Mt 5:7). These traits famously described in the Beatitudes, if made real in a Christian's life, result in character that mirrors the character of God (Mt 5:3-11). The Beatitudes illustrate the exemplary life of a disciple in their relationship with God and with others.

Every believer is a disciple, an apprentice of Jesus. All believers, as apprentices, try to help each other become Christ-like. For this reason, the expectation for disciples is set on the fact that they are to be disciple makers, helping others to come to know Christ and to grow in him. Bill Hull advocates this perspective in *The Disciple-Making Church*:

Technically, from the moment of spiritual birth, every Christian is a disciple. Disciples are born by the Spirit to be made into mature reproducers, as described in John 15:7-17. They are to be made in every nation; therefore, every person in the church is a disciple and has the responsibility and divine ability to be what Christ desires. Every disciple should make disciples. (1990, 20)

Jesus himself described the life of a person transformed by the Gospel in John 15. In short, a disciple abides in Christ through the Word and prayer, bears much fruit, responds to God's love with obedience, possesses joy, and loves as Christ loved (Jn 15:3-13). The Apostle Paul points out in Galatians 5:22-23 that with the Holy Spirit working in the life of a disciple, positive qualities and characteristics that allow a good Christian example to be shown externally

develop. The Fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In addition, the character of a

Disciple as a result of denying oneself may also include:

Commitment / Accountability
Compassion / Mercy
Humility / Meekness
Obedience / Submission
Faith / Hope
Perseverance / Longsuffering
Selflessness / Self Denial
Unity / Integrity
Justice / Righteousness
Forgiveness

The above characteristics of a disciple provides a helpful guide for believers endeavouring to develop devoted disciples of Christ.

The New Testament Picture of Discipleship

In the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples establish a rabbi/disciple relationship which was common at that time. In Jesus' day, students often approached rabbis requesting to be taken in as their disciple. Upon being accepted, students went through a long period of closely shadowing the rabbi—listening, observing, and imitating. They spent large amounts of time with their rabbi, serving him and trying to become like their rabbi in both thought and character. Similarly for Jesus, his disciples followed wherever he went and were learning to be like him as they lived with him, assisting in his various activities (Krallmann 2002, 33-36).

When Jesus began his earthly ministry, one of his first acts was to form a group of twelve disciples (Mt 4:18–22; Lk 6:13). Jesus chose to love the twelve,

teach the twelve, and pour himself into relationships with the twelve, creating the original model for the contemporary small group. As the Son of God, companionship or assistance was certainly not needed from these disciples (“the apostles”). Yet he chose to build and shepherd them within a framework of interpersonal relationships from the very beginning. He is pictured in the four Gospels as the greatest small group leader in history. It was the small group that provided the platform for Jesus' ministry to be preached to large groups of people. The apostles accompanied Jesus during the work of proclaiming the Good News to the multitudes. Despite the large scale of his following, however, he consistently withdrew to the familiarity and support of his select small group (Mk 3:7).

Jesus spent the majority of his time with this small group of twelve. He moved about the Jewish villages and towns, primarily around the Sea of Galilee, with occasional forays beyond, and particularly to Jerusalem with this group. While travelling about, Jesus did three things in the synagogues, homes and public areas: he proclaimed the availability of life in the kingdom of God, taught about the nature of the kingdom of God, and demonstrated the power of the kingdom through amazing deeds (Mt 4:23, 9:35; Lk 4:18-44).

This first small group experienced considerable hardship among its members and even within their families. Peter on one occasion plaintively remarks: “We have left everything to follow you” (Mt 19:27). It was no doubt a thought that often occurred to these disciples. After a period of training and communing through the various hardships as a group, Jesus sent his disciples to

go and do the things that they had heard and seen Jesus do. This training and action continued throughout his trial and death. During his post-resurrection presence with the disciples, Jesus trained them with the assurance that he would remain with them after his ascension, despite no longer being visibly present. Jesus also instructed his disciples to make disciples of all nations—all types of people—and promised he would be with them always until the end of the age (Mt 28:19–20; Krallman 2002, 57–74).

The Method of “Being With” Passed On through Disciples

Following the Great Commission, the disciples continued Jesus' model of teaching and formed a community of believers who loved God and loved one another. They gathered groups together, sharing the story of Jesus including his resurrection and return as way to exemplify living with Jesus beyond death. In this way, the disciples shepherded many people to a life of sharing Jesus, and the pursuit of his likeness.

What, then, is the key to this discipleship method? Gunter Krallman in his book, *Mentoring For Mission*, points out that Jesus regarded consociation as the most fertile soil for his disciples' growth in character, understanding and skill. Accordingly, he made the experience of his with-ness the anchor of their training (2001, 53). Jesus invited his disciples to move with him in consociation in a way that may acquire both knowledge and character development simultaneously. In describing this type of discipleship, the New Testament goes beyond discussing

behaviors required of Christ followers. The text comes alive with detailed accounts of the remarkable, changed lives of the disciples after they commit themselves to Jesus and to studying the Word, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' discipleship approach is highly relational and people-oriented. He engages the Twelve to learn by hearing, doing, seeing, through his transparent life, which seem to leave the strongest imprint and impact of all in the twelve lives. Hence, consociation is the heart and secret of Jesus' training method for the Twelve. Despite incredible persecution and against all odds, the disciples carried on Jesus' first group through the generations of communities (i.e. churches) that proclaimed the gospel and changed the world forever. This serves as a constant reminder of the importance of small groups for transformative life change and the continuing transference of Christian mission from one group, or one generation, to the next.

Relevant Insights from the Early Church

While Jesus called the apostles one-on-one as recorded in Mark, the disciples became the first small group for one another as seen in Acts 1:12–14. Jesus' method of "being-with," or the intentional act of spending close association or fellowship with others, was passed on through the disciples in the first century churches. The early Church followed Jesus' pattern of discipleship and life in a Christian community, a reminder and reflection deeply rooted in the community of the Trinity.

Christian Community as a Reflection of the Triune God

God said, “Let us make man in our image” (Gn 1:26). God himself is in a community of three persons in one—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who exist in perfect unity and have always experienced this relationship. Hence it is not strange that, from the beginning, God created humanity to be in community with one another as a reflection of his image. Genesis 2:18 states: “It is not good for man to be alone.” This passage is often used in the context of marriage, but it also speaks to the fundamental need to connect with one another in the human community. The compelling nature of this statement is based upon the fact that God makes it before the Fall. Sin had not yet been realized and disobedience was non-existent; humans were in perfect intimacy with God. Yet, God declares that man is alone and that it is not good. God created Adam with the need for relationship, and this need extends through humanity into the churches of today.

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian points out:

Community is deeply grounded in the nature of God. It flows from who God is. Because he is community, he creates community. It is his gift of himself to humans. Therefore, the making of community may not be regarded as an optional decision for Christians. It is a compelling and irrevocable necessity, a binding divine mandate for all believers at all times. (1997, 27)

Because community is grounded in God’s nature, it is essential that we study, and find ways to effectively practice, community through small groups.

The Cross as a Symbol of Reconciliation

The Apostle Paul proclaims that “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18-19). The Cross serves not just as a reminder for what God has done through Christ, but also as a symbol of reconciliation in a relational context. As a symbol, the lines drawn by the cross’ beams can represent a vertical reconciliation, with God, and horizontal reconciliation, with one another. Small groups, as Christian communities, stand as agents for reconciliation and unity with God, one another, and with the unbelieving world.

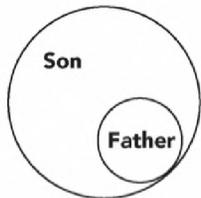
Formation of a Transformational Christian Community

Jesus, in his High Priestly prayer, prays for the unity of all believers in John 17. He describes a kind of unity that is not simply a collection of believers in the same place, doing the same thing, at the same time. A fascinating part of Jesus’ prayer is the various ways in which the theme of “indwelling” serves the cause of unity. Jesus teaches that:

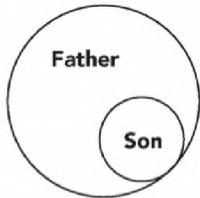
1. The Father is in the Son (Jn 17:21, 23)
2. The Son is in the Father (Jn 17:21)
3. Believers are in the Father and the Son (Ibid.)
4. The Father and Son are in believers (Jn 17:23, 26)

As illustrated in Figure 1, Jesus prays for the kind of unity that reflects God’s image as a community of the Trinity in three persons. In doing this, Jesus

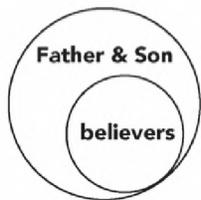
1. The Father is in the Son



2. The Son is in the Father



3. believers are in the Father and Son



4. The Son is in believers

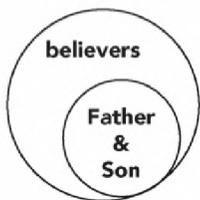


Figure 2. Illustration of Various Indwellings (Graphic by: Tiffany Wu)

sets a very high expectation and vision for such a kind of a communal life together among believers: Christians, living in ideal communities that reflect the united nature of the Trinity, experience supernatural transformation. This style of community is only possible with God’s power, and the commitment of believers to one

another.

This commitment, and its manifestations can be seen throughout the book of Acts as an observable pattern of the early Christians meeting in two main areas—public places and private homes (Acts 2:46, 5:42, 20:20). In particular, Acts 2:42–47 illustrates a picture of the early church and the components of biblical community, encompassing both the “temple courts,” for public corporate worship, and “house to house,” where gatherings of believers numbered few enough to fit into normal homes. There are numerous examples of believers gathering together at individuals’ houses in the early church, including people who gather to pray together at the house of Mary, John Mark’s mother (Acts 1:13,

12:12, 28:30–31; Rom 16:3–15; Col 4:15; Phlm 1:1–2). The disciples also originally model this paradigm by teaching large groups and visiting small groups from house to house.

This ‘two-winged’ approach of gatherings contributed to the formation of united, transformational Christian communities. Meetings in small groups provided a safe environment that fostered deeper communal life. The early church lived out Jesus’ High Priestly prayer in many ways. These believers engaged in life together through their teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, miracles, radical generosity, and corporate worship. They spent time together eating, learning, celebrating, proclaiming the Good News, and supporting each other.

Bill Donahue identifies five important qualities from the early church which created authentic relationships among believers in a life changing Christian community:

1. Self-disclosure: to know and be known[, ...]
2. Caregiving: to love and be loved[, ...]
3. Humility: to serve and be served[, ...]
4. Truth-telling: to admonish and be admonished[, ... and]
5. Affirmation: to celebrate and be celebrated (2001, 58-71).¹⁷

By committing to practice these qualities, believers can take action to better form groups that facilitate spiritual togetherness and unity. This reflection of

¹⁷ For a full discussion on how small groups contribute to the formation of a life changing community, refer to chapter four of *Building a Church of Small Groups* by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

community allows for a clearer manifestation of God's Spirit, which reinforces the unity of believers.

In his book *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor*, John Stott characterizes the community of the early church based on Acts 2:42–47 by its characteristics of learning, caring, worshipping, and evangelizing, all key elements that characterized the early church. Bill Hull agrees to both of these sets of characteristics, providing observations of his own. He shares that there are five priorities practiced by the early church that helped to develop it into a mature, reproductive congregation:

1. A commitment to scripture (Acts 2:42) [...]
2. A commitment to one another (Acts 2:42, 44, 46) [...]
3. A commitment to prayer (Acts 2:42) [...]
4. A commitment to praise and worship (Acts 2:43, 47) [...]
5. A commitment to outreach (Acts 2:45–57)
(1990, 61–75)

These characteristics provide an illustration of a mature congregation and can be used as a standard to judge the unity of small groups. When groups of believers are of one mind, as modelled by the Trinity, they are able to best experience the mature, positively influential community for which humans are designed.

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul implores of this community of believers that they be of one heart and one mind, to live out the oneness and sameness of consecration, spirit, love, prayer and activity (2:1-4). They should demonstrate their capacity to agree with one another, love each other, be deep spirited friends, neither exert their will over others nor sweet talk their way to the top, put themselves aside and help others get ahead, and not be

obsessed in maintaining their own advantages (Phil 2:1-4 [MSG]). In addition, the 50-plus “one another” verses in the New Testament, which can be found in a complete list in Appendix 3, describe other aspects of this community. The New Testament community was one in which where people loved, forgave, served, bore each other’s burdens, encouraged, exhorted, prayed, equipped, spoke truth in love, confessed sins, and treated each other as precious members of one body.

Considering the weight of our responsibility to emulate Christ in the maturation of our faith, we must approach these ideas as ideals with which we can inform our ministry. Through the unity perfectly modelled by the Trinity, and the community demonstrated by the New Testament church, we see that we, as believers are designed to exist communally. Jesus’ discipleship formation within these tight communities also shows the value of intimacy in spiritual growth. These examples all reinforce the need to consider the environment of our small groups and how they encourage us to become like Christ.

Small Groups as the Best Model for Meaningful Change

This kind of a dynamic and self-sacrificing community requires a particular environment to foster its growth. Jesus used his small group of the Twelve to facilitate spiritual formation. This same principal of close interaction to influence change is still important today. Paul Pettit points out the following:

[C]hange for the Christian does not normally involve change that occurs in isolation from others...Christians are to be in process and undergoing renovation so that the individual believer is able to influence and interact with others in a more Christ-like manner...the change or transformation

that occurs in the believer's life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others. (2008, 19)

Life change—the result of the moulding and forming of believers in the Potter's hands—is Jesus Christ's intent for every follower. Change of this nature is best facilitated in small groups. Indeed, small groups provide a fertile environment where relationship and deep spiritual friendship can be developed.

Facilitation of Transformation at SGBC

If discipleship is the status or position within which spiritual transformation occurs, how could it be facilitated at SGBC? How could the life transforming discipleship that Jesus Christ exemplified be nurtured?

The Process of Transformation

Like the formation of a vessel from a lump of clay, the process of spiritual transformation is gradual. Jesus' invitation to follow him in Matthew 4:19

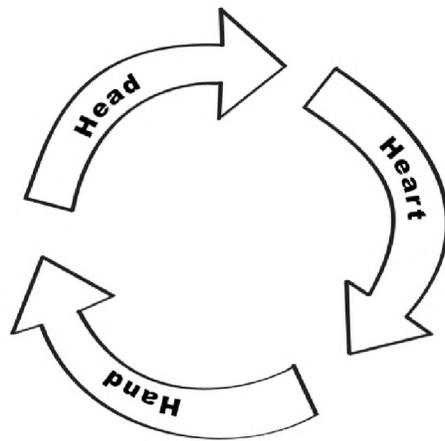


Figure 3. The Transformation Process (Graphic by: Tiffany Wu)

provides a framework for the process of transformation as illustrated in Figure 3. This process must be considered when making and evaluating ministry plans for the church community. The following three sections describe the key characteristics of God's People, as described in chapter two of *DiscipleShift*:

Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples, by Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington and Robert E. Coleman.

As displayed in Figure 3, the transformation process involves three key attributes of a fully devoted Christ follower, symbolized by their head, their heart, and their hands.

Following Christ (Head)

“Come, follow me,” is an invitation for people to accept Jesus, both his authority and truth, at an intellectual level. It is primarily a mental acceptance of Jesus, recognizing that he is now the Lord and Savior of life. This step begins the process of transformation by encouraging disciples to learn and believe truths about Jesus and the Christian faith. This leads to change at the headship (authority) and head (knowledge) level. A disciple knows who Jesus is and what he is like and follows him.

Change in Christ (Heart)

“And I will make you,” these five words convey a process of transformation in which work takes place in disciples’ hearts and affections to mold them to become Christ-like. It also indicates that Jesus is the one who initiates, guides, and works in people’s lives. Jesus appeals to people at the heart level as they incorporate the truth from God’s Word and allow the Holy Spirit to transform their inner being (Eph 3:14-18). Scripture shows that Jesus’ followers are changed by him, through the power of his Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). In moving the lives of his disciples and affecting change in their hearts, Jesus is able to guide

his followers in the development of their character. He transforms the way in which his disciples see the world, and what they value and consider important as they make spiritual responses to the Holy Spirit. At its essence, discipleship is transformation led by the Holy Spirit, driven by the God's Word and in community with his People.

Commitment to Jesus' Mission (Hands)

“Fishers of men,” is a commissioning and a call for action that affects what people live for and do. A disciple is committed to the mission of Christ. Jesus gave all his followers a new purpose for living—help in God's work to bring people to salvation in Jesus Christ. If believers' acceptance of Jesus begins in the head and extends to the heart, it leads to a change in their actions. Ephesians 2:10 points out that there is important work to do, which God had planned before time began. The engagement is at the hands level, where gifts and abilities are used to serve Jesus and his mission for the world.

The transformation process of discipleship turns people who are far away from God into devoted followers of Christ. Those who accept Jesus as Lord need to let him make them “fishers of men.” Apart from head knowledge, individuals must surrender themselves to let God do his work through them. At SGBC, the truths about Jesus and the Christian faith found in the Bible are taught primarily through Worship Services and Sunday School. Small groups are structured for spiritual transformation rather than knowledge accumulation. The goal is to turn head knowledge, through a development of heart, into action, applying truths in

daily life. Small groups endeavor to encourage and support one another, keep each other accountable, share together as peer spiritual mentors in an organized manner, and raise up leaders. The ultimate purpose of all activities in SGBC is to build fully devoted Christ followers to become “fishers of men and women.”

The Cycle of Discipleship

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 sets in motion an endless cycle of discipleship. First instituted by Jesus more than two millennia ago, his call extends to all believers to this day. It has become the unchanging mission of the church throughout the generations. Bill Hull expounds on the spirit of the Great Commission this way: “Through the power of Christ we are delivered from sin; by the discipling process we are developed into mature believers; finally, God deploys us into the harvest field to reach others” (1990, 21). SGBC captures this mission—the never-ending cycle of discipleship—in three words: Win, build, and send. The cycle begins the win, as people come to Christ, then instruction to build them up in spiritual maturity, and finally with missions, to send them out to be disciple makers of their own—the salt and light of the world.

Jesus has demonstrated to us how he moved his disciples through this never-ending cycle of discipleship effectively through four phases of development: (1) Come and See (2) Come and follow me (3) Come and be with me (4) Remain in me (Hull 2006, 164–170). Figure 4 illustrates this process. Ministry plans and strategies at SGBC are focused on a two-year interval of win, build and send. For example, during the two years discipleship cycle of “win,”

there is a focus on ministry involving outreach, evangelism and intercultural missions. The strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for these ministries



Figure 4. The Never-ending Discipleship Process (Designed by: Jackie Tsang)

come under review, including the overall health of SGBC in reaching out to the unchurched. There is also an evaluation for improvements, enhancement and empowerment for fellow congregants. Strategic ministry plans are made to

move the church forward towards how to “win” more people for Christ. Although the various aspects of ministries continue to be carried out, resources are especially prioritized towards these goals. Likewise, the same approach will be done during the cycle of “build” and “send.”

Win

There is no greater gift of love than to share the good news that brings people into a relationship with God through Jesus. While our actions bear witness to the love of God, it’s ultimately up to God’s Spirit to encourage curiosity and to foster growth in those searching for him. SGBC’s activities and small groups are structured for winning people for Christ by inviting others to “come and see.” We

hold a strong commitment to evangelism and to bringing new believers into the body of Christ through local membership.

Build

The Great Commission is about making disciples, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded them. Hebrews 6:1a challenges Christ followers in all generations: “[L]et us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” Small groups and Sunday School are two primary platforms to build members at SGBC from spiritual infancy to maturity. During this cycle of discipleship, two phases of spiritual development are emphasized: “Come and follow Christ,” and “Come and be with Christ.” The regular practice of spiritual disciplines and sharing life as spiritual companions is encouraged. Leaders are discovered, developed, and deployed in accordance to the strategy in 2 Timothy 2:2. The church is committed to building up those who are motivated by bringing them closer to Christ, as it is only when we are with Christ that we are able to witness to what we have seen and heard.

Send

If disciples are to be sent to the world for God’s purposes, they must first learn to “remain in [Jesus].” Christ followers remain in him through the Holy Spirit and through the body of Christ. Spiritually matured disciples who remain in Christ and have a love for God and are naturally prepared to serve God; they’ve grown to be ready to “go and tell” the world about the Gospel. During this cycle

of discipleship, they are encouraged to identify their spiritual gifts to serve the Lord, both in and outside of the church. They will also recognize the fruitfulness of remaining in Christ (Jn 15:5-7) and, as a result, learn how to surrender themselves further to God. Their goal is to be moulded into a vessel for his purposes and to serve him based on his agenda and pace. They are also encouraged to learn how to live by and be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and to discern his guidance in their daily lives. All believers are called by God to do work as his People on earth, and it is their job to discover the details of and be obedient to that calling.

Lifestyle of Sustainable Discipleship

At SGBC, the type of Christian lifestyle that sustains this cycle of discipleship is readily evident. Active members are those who are maturing in grace, growth, group, gifts and good stewardship (Donahue 2006, 25–26). Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between the cycle of discipleship and the sustainable lifestyle of a disciple.

Growth

Christ followers are constantly transformed through God's hands and should strive to live a life increasingly conforming

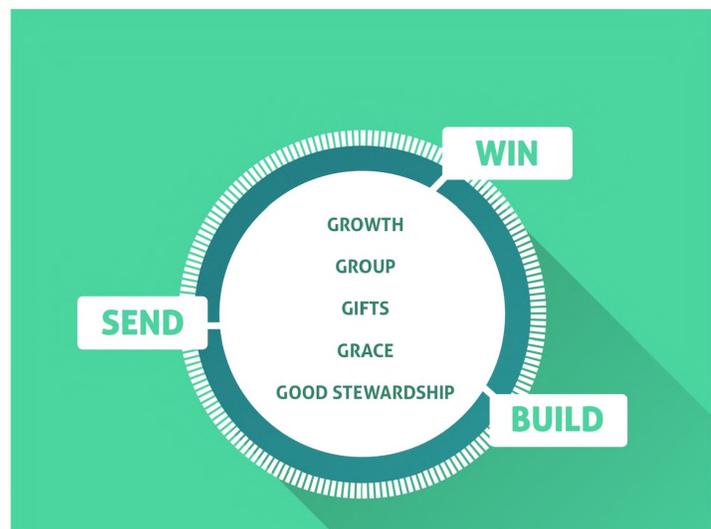


Figure 5. Relationship Between the Discipleship Cycle and Lifestyle (Designed by: Jackie Tsang)

to Christ's image. Their lives are marked with growing faith and obedience surrendering themselves in following Christ. They are committed to the study of God's Word, prayer, worship, fellowship, and service. They are regularly engaged in spiritual disciplines that nurture their deepening personal relationship and experience with God.

Group

Christ followers recognize the importance of authentic Biblical community in their spiritual journey. They give priority to participate in small groups where spiritual companionship is nurtured. They seek a life of transformation through mutual accountability and through sharing life experiences with each other. They commit to a life marked by love, care, openness, humility, and vulnerability. They learn from one another, sharing in each other's ongoing spiritual growth.

Gifts

Christ followers recognize their unique gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of edification, allowing complementary gifts from others to advance the church's ministry. They take these gifts seriously and endeavor to discover, develop and deploy these gifts as guided by the Holy Spirit.

SGBC seriously considers the mission of Jesus in all plans and work. All levels of our ministries work toward fostering a healthy spiritual lifestyle, in an

effort to fuel the momentum of missions that Christ has entrusted to the community. Figure 6 shows this model's structure in detail.

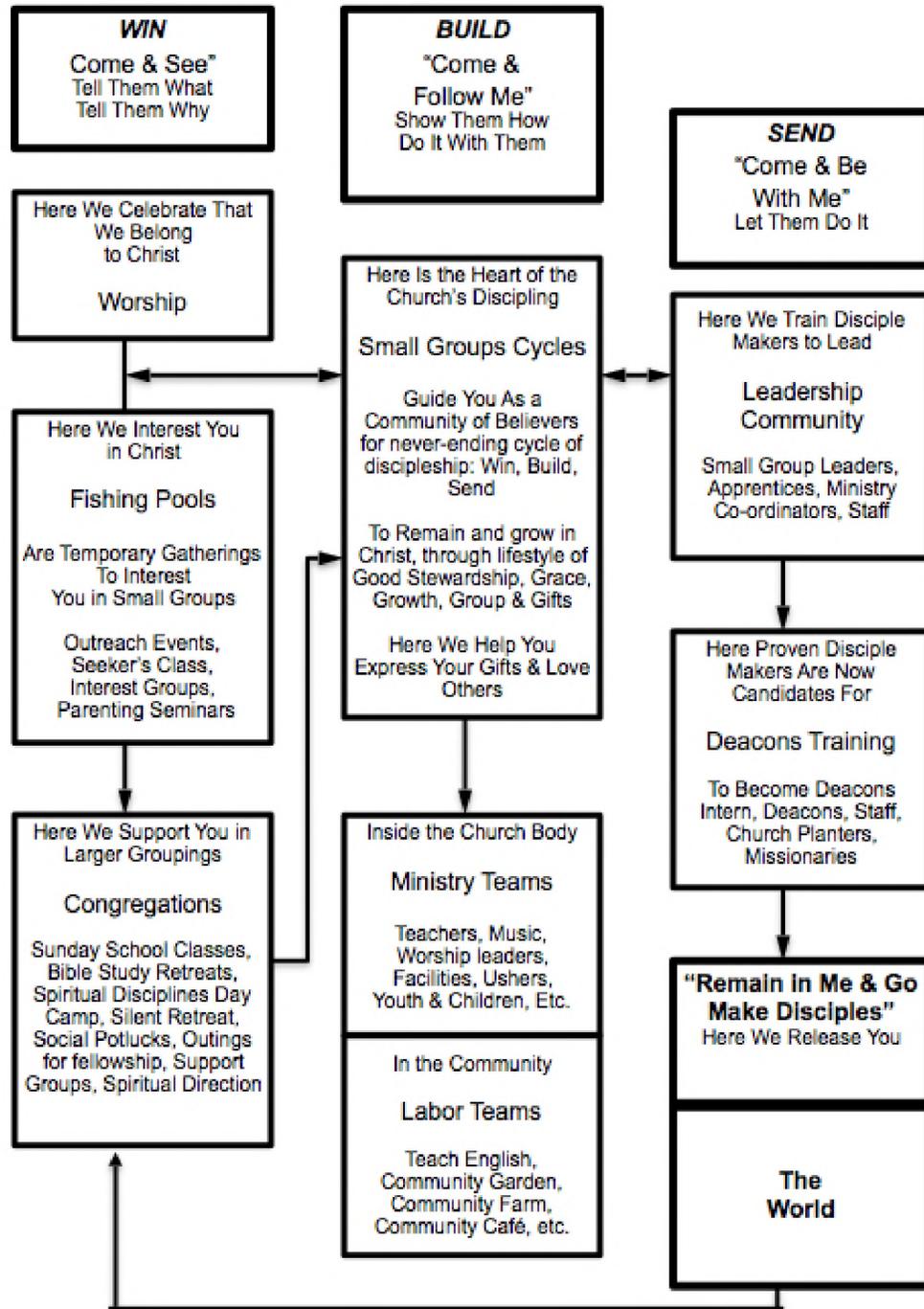


Figure 6. SGBC Disciple-Making Plan (Hull 1990, 23, Reprinted with Permission).

Grace

Christ followers are those who have received Christ's saving grace and who continue to walk in that grace. They are willing to actively share their testimonies and life stories from their encounters with God and engage in evangelism and outreach for the sake of others.

Good Stewardship

Christ followers honor Christ's lordship in their lives. They seek to be good stewards of all of their resources, including time, energy, and finances. This stewardship serves as an act of worship, a reflection of their commitment to live in recognition of Christ's lordship as per Romans 12:1-2. Since they recognize his abundant provisions in their lives, they practice tithing, at least ten percent of one's earnings, and endeavour to model God's abundance through becoming increasingly generous and compassionate in a needy world. The act of giving back to God, as well as that of sharing for the sake of sustaining community is important as it solidifies believers' sense of responsibility as a member of God's creation. These five qualities, which are developed in all disciples, are taught from the beginning of the discipleship process for the betterment both of the individual, and their community.

Spiritual Formation as the Process of Discipleship

Relationship Between Spiritual Formation and Discipleship

The terms ‘discipleship’ and ‘spiritual formation’ are often used as interchangeable terms. Both signify the idea of an ongoing process of becoming Christ-like. However, discipleship has been more often used, in recent years, to refer to on-one-one discipleship or discipleship programs in which discipleship knowledge is passed from one person to another (Hull 2006, v). This connotation lends to some confusion between discipleship and mentorship. On the other hand, spiritual formation is more often referred to a process of sanctification of disciples within a group or community context.

Mulholland proposes a four-fold definition of spiritual formation as “(1) a process (2) of being conformed (3) to the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others” (Mulholland 1993, 15, 17). Spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness in the context of community. This human wholeness is actualized in nurturing one another toward wholeness, whether within the covenant community of God’s people or in the role of God’s people in healing brokenness and injustice in the world. He points out that “[w]e can no more be conformed to the image of Christ outside corporate spirituality than a coal can continue to burn outside of the fire” (1993, 145). Paul Pettit, in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like*

Christ, put forward convincing arguments on the importance of community in spiritual formation, defining spiritual formation as

the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ—accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community. (2008, 24)

As such, we will continue with an emphasis on the act of spiritual formation, as this model's goal is to provide the means to facilitate ongoing organic growth within a small group setting. In order to understand spiritual formation, we must understand how its process occurs.

The Elements of Spiritual Formation

These elements of Trinitarian life, Jesus' model, the early church revealing the benefits of community, serve to remind us that the processes of spiritual formation do not occur in a vacuum. Evan B. Howard explains the different forces and dynamics in play during this process in chapter eight of *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*.

Howard argues that life itself provides the general context for spiritual formation (2008, 270–273). As relational beings, people interact with each other, nature, spiritual forces, and God. These interactions shape their formation. It is, therefore, crucial to understand who they are, including their relational networks, state of mind, and emotional needs, in order to find out how to best foster Christlikeness. There are also specific contexts wherein their spiritual lives are nourished. Susanne Johnson suggests that church is “an ecology of spiritual guidance and formation” (1989, 86). All activities therein are used as the means to

achieve the goals of spiritual formation. It is important to be intentional in every aspect of planning, therefore, and we should approach this task with this gravity in mind. It is noteworthy that a balance between the intention of formation and the wisdom of formation is needed. Certain means of spiritual formation have the potential to cause harm in the wrong context, such as fasting with health issues. Thus, we need to become intentional with the way that community becomes formed in our context in order to promote spiritual transformation. As well, we need to become aware of the specific influences and agents at work in our congregation.

The agents of spiritual formation are influences who contribute substantially to the formation of an individual or community. While the primary agent is the Holy Spirit, other agents can be individuals, such as a spiritual mentor, a pastor or a group leader, or groups who take leadership in spiritual growth of group members. Humans often are self-directed, working with the Spirit to incite transformation through their own efforts. Individuals also give permission to the body of Christ to speak into their formation and to take initiative for the sake of growth, both consciously and unconsciously. Small group leaders and members have significant roles as agents of spiritual formation for each other.

The task of spiritual formation as presented in the New Testament can be simply described as putting off the old and putting on the new, i.e. reorientation and re-habitation, increasingly nurturing attitudes and behaviors to become Christ-like (Col 3:9-14). It is not merely a matter of following a list of do's and don'ts, but rather it's necessary to cultivate a transformed life, a Godward mental

attention—a trust and devotion toward God. It is the task of putting the Gospel and the Christian faith into practice. It involves a series of acts and attitudes in progressive steps that are integrated with the context, agents, goals, and means of formation. Different churches and small groups need to discern their respective circumstances, recognizing that the small group itself can be instrumental in the task.

The means of spiritual formation involves various activities, situations, and relationships to cultivate growth in Christ. Once a disciple experiences the openness of the Holy Spirit, the various trials of daily life will facilitate spiritual formation. Such trials shift one’s attention from everyday distractions in life to issues of eternal significance. Another means of spiritual formation is through the community of Christ, both through group guidance, and one-one-one mentorship. Additionally, intentionality can assist the small group in reflecting upon these various activities in order to identify where God’s Spirit is at work in the lives of the individuals involved.

The “Both/And” Approach to Spiritual Formation

Paul Pettit suggests spiritual formation requires a “both/and” approach in at least two key areas (2008, 47–48). Spiritual formation is both the activity of the Holy Spirit and the believers. Just as one must respond in faith in order to be justified, one must also respond in faith during the process of sanctification—putting on and putting off. Disciples must cooperate with the Holy Spirit who is constantly working in their lives (Phil 2:12–13; 1 Thes 2:13; 2 Pt 1:3–8). It is

important, therefore, to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit and practice spiritual disciplines discerning the Spirit for a disciple to respond and co-operate with the Spirit. That is, it takes *both* the Holy Spirit *and* the disciples working together for spiritual formation. Small groups allow for both, as the Spirit can use both God's People and his Word to promote growth.

Spiritual formation has *both* individual *and* communal dimensions as well. Each person is created to function within a community. Transformation happens by degrees (2 Cor 3:18) and believers need each other to grow (1 Cor 12). In the body of Christ, believers are given to one another for mutual edification and spurring one another on to love and do good deeds (Heb 10:24). Spiritual gifts are given, not primarily for one's own benefit or self-elevation, but so agents of grace will be cultivated, building up the Body of which each member is only one part. While spiritual practices certainly include private disciplines, they must also include disciplines in community to be effective. Private disciplines may include solitude and silence, prayer and meditation, scripture, self-examination and confession, retreat, spiritual mentoring, etc. Disciplines in community may include corporate prayer and worship, teaching, communion, Sabbath, hospitality, caring for those in need, spiritual friendship and direction, evangelism, caring for the poor, compassion, justice, etc. How the Holy Spirit works in an individual's life and practice of spiritual disciplines inevitably impacts the lives of others when journeying together in community. Examining and talking about this work can encourage growth in the lives of the participants.

Essential Resources of Spiritual Formation

There are numerous resources that can function as agents and means of spiritual formation. These resources equip believers to better discern the shaping power of the Potter's hand, but they are not solely responsible for development. Jonathan Morrow, argues that spiritual formation is divinely enabled by God through three essential resources: God's Word, God's Spirit and God's People (Pettit 2008, 45–47).

God's word is used dynamically to form believers into the image of Christ. It is the primary and objective source of truth about Christ and what it means to follow him. Exposure to the text provides countless benefits to each journey of spiritual formation—benefits like stability (Eph 4:12–15), insight and guidance (Ps 119:9–10; Prv 3:5–6), and spiritual maturity (1 Pt 2:2–3; 1 Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:14). No true spiritual transformation can take place apart from the true meaning of the biblical text.

At the time of salvation, the seed of Christ's life is planted within those who believe; then throughout the process of transformation, the seed grows and flourishes in the right and good conditions. As 2 Peter 2:13a says, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness." However, the bloom and growth is supernatural in that it is something only God can accomplish through the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). Jesus promises another helper, the Holy Spirit, when speaking to his disciples in the Upper Room Discourse. This Spirit would not only be with them, but after Jesus' death, resurrection, and

ascension, would also be in them (Jn 14:17). As the third person of the Trinity, its role is to be an advocate, teacher, and counselor to lead Christ followers into truth as they are able to bear it (Jn 15, 16) and to communicate the depths of God (1 Cor 2:8–16). The Holy Spirit is an assistant in prayer, as well as a guide, enabling Christians to proclaim the Good News, and empowering them to serve God well.

Lastly, Christians need one another to be conformed to the image of Christ. Prior sections of this paper have mentioned that the image of God, by its very nature, expresses community, and the Christian life is not to be pursued in isolation. Gordon D. Fee argues that “God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character” (1996, 66). Without the body of Christ, the Church, there is an incomplete knowledge of God. Each relationship with God is unique and personal, and as such, a believer’s knowledge of God will be more complete through the act of learning from other believers’ experiences. Additionally, the gifts received by the body of Christ are distributed by the Holy Spirit for the edification and benefit of the community (1 Cor 12; Rom 12; Eph 4; 1 Pt 4).

Small groups, as a discipleship platform at SGBC, must constantly be reviewed, making adjustments to best utilize or facilitate these three essential resources for spiritual formation. The next three segments explore the framework for best practices of these three resources: God’s Word, God’s Spirit and God’s people.

God's Word

God's Word is one of the three essential resources for spiritual formation. In this segment, we will explore how to read the Bible to best facilitate spiritual formation in personal devotion and small groups.

Two key scripture passages, 2 Timothy 3:16 and Romans 12:1–2 highlight God's desires for the outcome of his Word. In 2 Timothy, the Apostle Paul emphasizes the value of the text itself: "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16). In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul suggests that as we discern God's will, we can be transformed. One key way to discern God's will is through knowing how God has worked in the past by examining Scripture: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). God is pleased by active resistance of conformation to this world and instead, seeking to be transformed by the renewal of minds. While definition of the Greek word *nous* (translated as *mind* in Rom 12:2) includes intellectual or cognitive knowing, it has deeper connotations as well, and would have been understood differently in the original text. *Nous* denotes the seat of consciousness, encompassing a person's faculties of perception and understanding. This consciousness shapes our actions and responses in the world based upon our knowledge of it.

Since the Scripture is God's living Word and is given for spiritual transformation, it must be noted that,

there is more than one way to read which may open our eyes to new possibilities. With so much current emphasis put on reading for information, society may have lost sight of what formation reading can provide. (Studzinski 2009, 5)

Any approach to transformation must go beyond relying entirely on acquiring information at the cognitive level. In addition, there is a present need for fuller knowledge, one that impacts the deepest inner orientations and trust structures, false-self patterns, and any obstacles that prevent a full surrender of oneself to God.

Robert Mulholland points out the fact that *how and why* the Bible is read directly reflects the person's approach to reading the scriptures: the Bible is often read for information for the reader to learn more, or it is read for formation to be changed. In general, for informational reading, we can run in, sit down, pick up the book, and go at it. Any prior preparation is not necessary. Formational reading, however, requires time to "centre down," to use the Old Quaker phrase, or to become still, letting go of one's life in the presence of God. It is this constant discipline of preparing the soul and entering into formational reading that enables greater openness, reception, and response to God in all aspects of daily life (Mulholland 2000, 49–51, 60–61). When we add the step of reading Scripture in community, the depth of understanding potentially increases, provided that we are looking for ways that God's Spirit might use Scripture to form and transform us.

Informational vs. Formational Reading¹⁸

Informational reading of scripture emphasizes contextual, exegetical, and analytical study of the Bible. Rick Warren's *Personal Bible Study Methods: 12 Ways to Study the Bible on Your Own* details twelve informational reading methods that could be used independently or with others for a richer understanding of scripture.

Most informational reading approaches, although not originally intended, tend to engage solely on the mind. People who read the Bible this way could see scripture as an object, something to be analyzed, that they may discover “the truth” that is contained there. If they are not careful, however, this style of thinking could relegate biblical study to merely an intellectual exercise, problem solving and treasure hunting. Raymond Studzinski suggests that “what should also concern us is not only the ability to decipher the words that letters stand for, but also the ability to extract life-giving meaning from those words” (2009, 7).

In his book *Transforming Bible Study: Understanding God's Word Like You've Never Read It Before*, Bob Grahmann points out that inductive Bible study needs a transformation. He argues it is not simply an intellectual exercise:

The Bible is God's living Word, and studying the Bible involves the whole person—heart, emotions, and soul, as well as the mind. The goal of inductive Bible study is not just to learn things about the Bible, or even the main points of a text (although this is essential to inductive Bible study), but to hear from the living God and obey him... The Bible is truth and it

¹⁸. Please refer to Appendix 4 for more information of inductive Bible study: an informational reading approach.

does have meaning—and that meaning can be discovered through careful, deep, inductive study of the text. We need to develop new ways to approach Bible study that affirm the Bible's relational and experiential aspects just as much as its intellectual dimension, for the purpose of studying God's living Word is not only to discover truth but to hear from God, obey him and get to know him better. Experience, community and narrative need to become important dimensions of our approach to Bible study along with rigorous intellectual study. (2003, 12–13)

The informational reading approach helps readers to master the text of scripture. In contrast, the formational reading approach allows the text of scripture to master the readers. It engages the reader, equipping them with the necessary tools to build a more experiential and intimate relationship with God. In this approach, the readers allow the scripture to speak in their lives, potentially providing multiple levels of meaning depending on the reader's own experience and openness to the Spirit's guidance.

Raymond Studzinski, interpreting Proverbs 22:20–21, suggests that the scriptures can have three levels of meaning, each corresponding to dimensions of the spiritual journey of the readers or hearers:

First comes the literal or ordinary narrative meaning, the body of the Scriptural text, which speaks to purifying that needs to go on especially in the beginning of the journey. Second, a more developed meaning, the soul of the scriptural text, increases knowledge of the divine and so meets the needs of those farther along in the journey. Finally, the spirit of the scriptural text, a secret and hidden wisdom of God, leads to union with God. In and through the scriptures themselves the Word is educating Christians and bringing them to a fuller life. While the literal or historical sense will often be found most helpful to those in the beginning of their Christian journey, the spiritual sense satisfies the hungers of those who have gone farther up the road. (2009, 32–33)

The formational approach of reading scripture is especially helpful when it comes to uncovering deeper meanings of scripture, encouraging readers to engage

the text as active revelation instead of static information. With this approach, there is a lesser value in literal text, as the purpose is to discern personally relevant and significant truth from the text as a unique follower of Christ. People meditate or reflect on God's Word to guide their daily living. As scripture is meditated upon, Raymond Studzinski suggests that "the Word would gradually imprint the Word on the heart, so that it could be remembered and lived" (2009, 25). Bob Grahmann (2003, 114) affirms that "we will experience Jesus and hear from him" during meditation. Through meditation, then, a believer's trust in God is deeply strengthened, resulting in a compelled and obedient heart. If this approach to reading scripture is practiced diligently and progressively, it shapes or forms how individuals grow as disciples as they "extract life-giving meaning" from God's Word.

In his book, *Shaped by the Word*, M. Robert Mulholland Jr. argues that informational and formational approaches of reading scriptures are complementary to one another. The informational approach allows the reader to gain deeper or new understanding of facts, historical context, and ways of living. The formational approach seeks to transform the reader through reading the Bible and interaction with the Spirit of God. Informational reading is essential to grasp the content of scripture, but a reader is encouraged to always allow for interplay between the informational and the formational ways of reading. As M. Robert Mulholland Jr. writes,

In information reading we seek to grasp the control, to master the text... [I]n formational reading... [you] allow the text to master you... [I]nstead of the analytical, critical, judgmental approach of informational reading,

formational reading requires a humbly detached, willing, loving approach... A characteristic of informational reading is the problem-solving mentality. In contrast, a characteristic of formational reading is open to the mystery. (2001, 54–57)

These approaches work in complementary ways for spiritual transformation; they help Christ followers build more intimate relationships with God, allowing them to live out newly discovered truths in daily life. When the formational approach is used by the small group seeking to follow the leading of God's Spirit, this community approach potentially encourages the participants to embrace mystery—to see God at work in new ways.

Approach of Studying God's Word in Small Groups

The Bible is not read so much for historical information, but instead as a treasure of spiritual insight to be plundered by those to whom it has been given. To have spiritual insights, one has to know the Bible well. So, time spent on Bible study in the small group or personal devotion is time spent both on information and transformation. It is important to practice a two-fold method of biblical interpretation for spiritual formation in small groups. First, it is important to master the literal meaning of the text. That is, the plain meaning or sense of the words and phrases within the context in which the text was written. Next, it is imperative that the spiritual meaning of the passage is understood, and its significance for the life of faith made clear.

As our church is undergoing a transformation, we have looked to InterVarsity's model—a transition from a cognitive study approach to the

both/and approach, leveraging both informational and formational understanding of Scripture. In *Transforming Bible Study: Understanding God's Word Like You Have Never Read It Before*, Bob Grahmann states that “Inductive Bible study is to InterVarsity what the Big Mac is to McDonald’s. It is one of InterVarsity’s “signatures,” what the organisation is known for” (2003, 11). Grahmann clearly unpacks engaging, relevant, and applicable ways to study the Bible for the whole person—including, but not limited to, the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects (2003, 110–117). Because of InterVarsity’s structure as a fellowship among college campuses, their use of small groups as a primary tool for outreach and spiritual growth has been designed for intimate personal growth as well as tight communal maturation. Grahmann, in his book, considers the effect of their ministry’s transition toward formational understanding and communal spiritual growth.

It is interesting to see the evolution of InterVarsity over the past few years, particularly in their “both/and” approach. Laura Abrams wrote, in *The Blog of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship*, on April 30, 2012:

In InterVarsity, we have a central belief that the scriptures in the Bible are God’s Word—and these words speak to us. The scriptures spoke to generations before us, and will speak to generations after us until Christ returns. Typically, in InterVarsity, we love to study the scriptures inductively—taking into account the context of the text, making observations, drawing reasonable inferences, and applying these truths to our lives as the Holy Spirit guides us. But, *inductive study is not the only way to let our lives be shaped by God’s Word and the Holy Spirit. Lectio Divina*, Latin for “Divine Reading,” is a devotional reading of scripture that has existed for over 1,700 years.

This practice emerged when literacy rates were low, and accessibility to written texts was few and far between. Communities of believers used this method to enable followers of Jesus—with or without a

copy of the Bible (or an ability to read it)—to receive God’s word and consider how to respond. Practicing this spiritual discipline, in addition to inductive study, *opens us up to more ways to hear from, experience, and respond to God*—individually and communally. A benefit of *Lectio Divina* is that there is less temptation to read solely in order to consume information (a temptation of studying inductively). In whatever way you interact with the Bible, scripture is meant to be read with ears open to hear God’s voice through his Word and respond!

Laura Abram's reflection on InterVarsity's approach to Bible study highlights the

fruitful potential of *Lectio Divina* in the contemporary Christian communities.

Indeed, small group members will benefit significantly from practicing ‘Divine

Reading’ at home, sharing what God has spoken to them when they come together

in groups. As Abram's writing suggests, *Lectio Divina* is a valuable addition to the

list of inductive study methods. It not only emphasizes reflection on Biblical text

and its application, but also on individual and communal responses within lived

experiences. This will encourage group members to maintain a high level of

openness to the word and guidance of the Holy Spirit during study in small

groups.

God’s Spirit

God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is the second of the three essential resources

for spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit entered believers’ lives when they became

Christians. However, they need to seek the Holy Spirit continually for guidance.

The Holy Spirit plays many roles, as exemplified in many passages of scripture

(Mt 10:18–20; Jn 14:15–27, 16:5–15; Rom 8:1–17; 1 Cor 2:9–16; Gal 5:16–26.).

Jesus says “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the

works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the

Father” (Jn 14:12). The Holy Spirit was sent to the world to guide all believers to truth and to empower them to do “greater” things than Jesus did as willed by God in disciples’ lives (Packer and Nystrom 2008, .¹⁹

For the people of God who are seeking to grow spiritually and do the will of God in their daily living, it is important to live a spiritually discerning life. In other words, with help from the Holy Spirit, Christ followers must discern God’s still small voice. This way of life pays close attention that what the Spirit is saying and raises consciousness to what it could be like to have an identity in Christ and live in God's presence daily. Henri J. M. Nouwen suggests:

[D]iscernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice. Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission...[L]iving a spiritually mature life requires listening to God’s voice within and among us. (2013, 3–4)

Although it is impossible for individuals to will themselves into spiritual transformation, they may enter into certain environments or conditions that are better suited toward spiritual formation, encouraging the process. There are spiritual practices, also referred to as spiritual disciplines, that are especially helpful in enhancing the capacity to pay attention to the Holy Spirit when he is speaking. For example, solitude and silence are instrumental in creating the

¹⁹. For a full discussion of how the Holy Spirit works in believers’ lives, please refer to chapter ten of *Guard Us, Guide Us: Divine Leading in Life’s Decisions* by J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom (Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2008).

necessary inner space, openness and watchfulness in disciples' hearts to hear the Holy Spirit. Christ followers' response to the Holy Spirit, as well as their subsequent actions will ultimately lead to true transformation. The Apostle Paul says, "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal 6:8).

Richard J. Foster points out that,

This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done... God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us. (1988, 7)

God chooses to speak to individuals and communities through the Holy Spirit at any time. However, spiritual practices are concrete activities intended for making believers available for listening to the Holy Spirit when he speaks, so that they may surrender themselves to God, respond to his Spirit's prompting and allow God's unique work in their lives. Ruth Haley Barton suggests that "cultivating the habit of discernment means we are always seeking the movement of God's Spirit so we can abandon ourselves to it" (2012, 57). Barton further argues that the Holy Spirit speaks both to the individual and the community,

Spiritual transformation takes place over time with others in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God. While we still inhabit earth, our transformation will happen by degree (2 Cor 3:18), and we need each other in order to grow (1 Cor 12). Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation in Romans 12 and in his epistles is always given in the context of community – the body of Christ with its many members. We are given one another in the body of Christ for mutual edification and to spur one another on to love and good deeds. Our gifts are not given for our own benefit or self-aggrandizement but so we can be agents of grace for one

another, building up the body, of which we are only one part... while our spiritual practices certainly include private disciplines (solitude and silence, prayer and meditation, Scripture reading, self-examination and confession, retreat, spiritual direction), to be effective they must also include disciplines in community (corporate prayer and worship, teaching, Communion, Sabbath, hospitality, caring for those in need, spiritual friendship and (group) direction)... (2012, 244)

This segment provides a brief description of a few of these spiritual practices that can cultivate a spiritually discerning life, both for individuals and for community. For additional resources, please refer to recommended books within Appendix 12. Barton suggests that although many spiritual disciplines are learned to be practiced as a private discipline, they may also be engaged together as a group. In some cases, as in that of the following study in Chapter IV, the combination of solitary disciplines with communal disciplines reinforces the value of each. This, in turn, aids both the speed and potency of spiritual companionship and development. In our case, the combination of *Lectio Divina* and group sharing was extremely effective, reinforcing the value of each individual discipline because of the emergent results of their combined practice.

Lectio Divina

Besides making its own voice apparent, the Spirit of God uses God's Word to speak to and transform us. *Lectio Divina*, Latin for "Divine Reading," has been used throughout the history of the church and allows Scripture to act as a vehicle whereby we encounter the living God (Bianchi 2015). Bianchi argues that "*Lectio Divina* finds its roots in the Jewish tradition of the Bible reading and the patristic hermeneutic legacy, is the art of making the transition from a biblical text

to our life.” (2002, 44). This prayerful reading of scripture, in which the Word comes to saturate the readers’ minds and lives (Wilhoit, Howard 2012, 17) is a classic spiritual discipline—one of scripture reading, meditation, and prayer—which has continually developed since the time of Saint Benedict (480-550 AD).

To guide his monastic community, Benedict of Nursia developed a set of guidelines for their life together, known today as the Rule of Saint Benedict. In the Rule, he built into their rhythm of life the time for prayerful focus on Scripture (Healey 1999). Wilhoit and Howard explain that *Lectio Divina* is a prayerful reading of scripture, in which the Word comes to saturate the readers’ minds and lives (2012, 17). They also point out that, over time, Christians began to emphasize particular components of this practice: reading (lectio), meditating (mediation), praying (oratio) and contemplating (contemplatio). Enzo Bianchi clarifies how *Lectio Divina* draws us closer to God through these four components,

In our own practice of *Lectio Divina* we will find that we move naturally through these four levels. We start with the historical and literary level of the text (lectio) and then go deeper into its revelatory dimension, where the face of Christ can be glimpsed (meditatio). Here we enter into a dialogue that engages and transforms our life (oratio). We come to share God’s *markrothymia*, his gaze that takes in all human realities, and we hope for the eschatological fulfillment of the kingdom, when we will meet face to face the Lord for whom we have searched in Scripture (contemplatio). (2015, 58-59)

Hence, it helps to internalize God's Word in our hearts and in our minds by combining our prayer life with Bible reading so we too can, as Colossians 3:16 tells us, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” As scripture is meditated upon, Raymond Studzinski suggests that “the Word would gradually imprint the

Word on the heart, so that it could be remembered and lived” (2009, 25). Bob Grahmann affirms that “we will experience Jesus and hear from him” (2003,114) during meditation which is part of the practice of *Lectio Divina*.

Indeed, at the heart of *Lectio Divina* is the belief that relationship with God the Father is primarily through Jesus himself—the Word—not simply lifeless or static words written in a book. Jesus told His disciples: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (Jn 16:12–13). Jesus said that the disciples were not able to understand, all at once, everything they needed to know. The Holy Spirit comes to continue Jesus’ teaching, facilitating a deeper relationship with God the Father. When individuals read scripture in a personal, contemplative, open way, they can expect to encounter God. This method of devotion naturally exemplifies God’s Trinitarian nature, and continues to provide guidance for small groups. As group members—God’s People—share life stories together from what they have encountered God through *Lectio Divina*, the interaction with God’s Word through God’s Spirit, group members engage with the three essential resources of spiritual formation and encounter the three facets of the Trinity through the experience. Through meditation, then, a believer’s trust in God is deeply strengthened, resulting in a compelled and obedient heart. I find it helpful to develop a more intimate relationship with God by listening through His Word. In this study, this intimate relationship with God refers to the capacity of participants noticing God’s story spoken through scriptural word intersect with

their own story. That is, participant's capability to attend and respond to God's activities and work in their lives.

James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard in their book, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing scripture into Ordinary Life*, suggest that one way the Spirit communicates is by stimulating thoughts and feelings. Readers learn to recognize and to relate to the Spirit of God in *Lectio Divina* through attending to the thoughts and feelings that arise as they read scripture. As Christ followers read scripture, the Spirit reorders the thoughts and feelings of their hearts to align with God's. Over time, their hearts are strengthened in holiness. This is the Spirit, the text, and the reader encountering each other together (2012, 46–57).

Lectio Divina is such a personal and interactive way of reading scripture that it is sometimes called prayer. Those who practice *Lectio Divina* may try to pray before, during, and after reading the passage and pray briefly on the message received from God throughout the day. These different times of prayer are usually described in six elements: *silencio*, *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, and *incarnatio*. Originally consisting of the four elements set out by St. Benedict, the first and last steps were later added to set the stage for listening to the Spirit in silence, as well as to recognize and apply the revelations experienced during the process (Tang 2001, 20–118). These stages were natural in Benedict's monastic environment but aren't too common today; they serve as a framework so that anyone can participate in *Lectio Divina*, despite their current lifestyle. Although these elements do form a logical order, they can occur in any order, even simultaneously. Tony Jones, in his book *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for*

Everyday Life, quotes Guigo on the interconnectedness between four of these elements:

From what has been said we may gather that reading without meditation is dry. Meditation without reading is subject to error. Prayer without meditation is lukewarm. Meditation without prayer is fruitless. Prayer with devotion leads to contemplation whereas contemplation without prayer happens rarely or by a miracle. (Jones 2005, 53)

The Spirit and the Word come together to grant us insight into God's character and enable our own response. *Lectio Divina*, therefore, provides valuable insight on an individual level, and can be especially effective when practiced in small groups. The steps are provided in depth in Appendix 6, but a summary follows here for the purpose of basic understanding.

Silencio

Silencio is a period of silence before reading a passage. *Lectio Divina* is said to be where reading and prayer are bound together. As such, the period of silence functions as a silent prayer preparing readers with the right posture of attention toward the Holy Spirit through the inspired Word of God. Also, it is a time of letting go of personal agendas, surrendering to whatever God wants for the reader to experience as they read.

Lectio

Lectio is the reading and receiving of the Word of God. Read the passage aloud at least once and then the second time slowly, silently and carefully so that the passage is both spoken and heard.

Meditatio

Meditatio is the time of thinking about what the passage speaks to the reader personally. They may dwell on any aspects of the passage under study that pulls at their attention. Through meditation, disciples allow the text to soak into them; they permit the influence or power of scripture to act within. It may involve savoring, repeating, thinking about, or digesting the words so that they become personally meaningful and nourishing spiritually.

Oratio

Oratio is responding to the passage by telling God about the feelings the readers had as they read and think about the passage. The difference between *meditatio* and *oratio* is that in *meditatio*, individuals process the contents of the text, and in *oratio* they notice their feelings. Therefore, both the heart and mind become avenues for God's Spirit to lead the readers. Readers may ask the Spirit of Jesus to draw them to places in the passage where God especially wants them to listen. They may pray to God for spiritual understanding, pray back to God for the promises found, cry out to God for the inspired insight, or listen to His voice in what they may need. The job of prayer is to give a voice to what readers hear, what they need to speak, what is going on in the space-in-between of their relationship with God. Prayer is intimately connected with every moment of readers' spiritual reading of scripture.

Contemplatio

Contemplatio is the time readers spend in silence and contemplate in the presence of God after a time of prayerful study of the passage. This time of being

with God and scripture may not even be something they can put into words, simply basking in God's presence. This may mean simply resting in God's grace and truth. When readers listen for God's Spirit, they wait expectantly for a whisper from God's Spirit to theirs. Readers need to be prepared to listen to anything that He might have to say to them. Wilhoit and Howard point out that, "In contemplation, we just sit. God's Spirit is present. The text is still present. We are present. We wait in silence. We are aware of the love between us, between Creator and created. And in this being present, we are made new" (2012, 124). For the sake of clarity, many practitioners of *Lectio Divina* also journal, a practice I would highly recommend, both for continued reflection and for the sake of tracking one's spiritual growth.

Incarnatio

Incarnatio is where disciples acknowledge any ways that God might be transforming them in their inner being or in their outer activities. They must now put what they learn into practice.

While *Lectio Divina* is the primary tool for spiritual development in this model, there are many others that will aid spiritual formation. In the following chapter, a few of our study participants reported that they were unable to focus or achieve a peaceful devotional environment. While the step *silencio* is important within *Lectio Divina*, its usefulness is not limited to that discipline alone. The sole purpose of this next section is to highlight the benefit and importance of Solitude

and Silence in devotional reading, or any other formative spiritual discipline, as both facilitate an environment to listen for God's Spirit.

Solitude and Silence

The whole purpose of solitude and silence is to create a space for an openness to God, to show up in that space and to pay full attention in listening to what God has to say. Believers are to wait without distraction for God to speak.

Ruth Haley Barton suggests the following:

[T]o be in solitude is to choose to do nothing. For extensive periods of time. All accomplishment is given up. Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us. When we go into solitude and silence, we stop making demands on God... Solitude and silence are concrete human effort and beyond the human constructs that cannot fully contain the Divine. (2004, 10, 31)

Richard J. Foster in chapter seven of his book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (1988, 96-109), explains that solitude is not a place. Rather, it is a state of mind that is inwardly attentive to God. Furthermore, Foster differentiates between inward and outward solitude. Inward solitude is a deep inner silence of the heart that can be maintained at all times, even in the midst of noise and crowds. He calls it a "portable sanctuary of the heart" (Foster 1988, 97). Inward solitude can also manifest itself outwardly, to be alone as a way to hear the Holy Spirit more clearly. Jesus' life demonstrated the importance both inward and outward solitude to his ministry. There are many instances where Jesus experiences outward solitude. He began his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Mt 4:1-11). As well, before he chose the twelve disciples, he spent an entire night alone again in the desert (Lk 6:12; Mt 14:23, 17:1-9, 26:36-46;

Mk 1:35, 6:31; Lk 5:16). In both inner and outer silence, the focus is on receptivity to the Spirit of God. Rather than the absence of speech or sounds, inner silence manifests itself in the absence of thinking about or paying attention to the self. Instead, silence shifts listening and attention to God. If individuals maintain inner silence in their hearts, the whisper of God's still small voice may be audible even in conversation with others.

Together, inner solitude and inner silence enable Christ followers to see and hear God clearly. A person who regularly exercises the spiritual practice of solitude and silence can say what needs to be said when it needs to be said. John Ortberg affirms that "a disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit" (2002, 50). If disciples shift their focus from themselves, instead listening to God, and control themselves as disciplined persons, they directed by the spirit of God. This sensitivity allows them to be able to say what God wants them to say or to rest in silence when God wills.

Spiritual Direction

The spiritual practice of spiritual direction helps disciples learn how to discern God's activities, guidance, and will in their lives. It also helps them get the affirmation they need as they grow spiritually. Spiritual direction involves all three essential resources for spiritual transformation simultaneously: God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's people. Every Christian needs a spiritual director or spiritual friend to help process their spiritual life. Thomas Green suggests that

spiritual directors or friends are “help given by one Christian to another, which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship” (2000, 33). Morris Dirks describes spiritual direction this way:

...direction simply refer[s] to the end goal of time spent together—that the directee would have a sense of direction, insight, or discernment from God in her or his life. The director guides the process, but would never assume control. He or she functions as a spiritual companion. In the end, it is the Holy Spirit who directs, as together we listen for God’s promptings... Spiritual direction takes place when two people agree to give their full attention to what God is doing in one (or both) of their lives and seek to respond in faith. (2013, 29-30)

The goal of spiritual direction is to develop a more personal and intimate relationship with God (Dirks, 2000, 30). Three key features distinguish the nature and practice of spiritual direction. First, the attempt to listen to another person in order to help them identify and discern God’s movement in their life; and second, a specific focus on the directee’s experience rather than on ideas or theology. Finally, as stated by Dirks, the direction comes from the Holy Spirit. When both of these elements are present, the director’s responsibility is to direct the attention of the members toward the Spirit, which manifests God’s initiative. From its movement, God’s instruction can be discerned. This spiritual practice can also be exercised in the context of a small group,²⁰ as the patterns and instructions of the

²⁰ For a list of resources that consider individual and group spiritual direction, as well as methods used to equip group members and to lead small group meetings toward more spiritually

Spirit can be found in many experiences, providing that the members are all willing to share authentically and vulnerably. In these cases, deep intimacy within the group is required for a similar amount of spiritual growth to occur. In new groups, this can be difficult to achieve, but the following Application section considers how to build this intimacy in order to grow such a spiritually intimate group.

While the process of *Lectio Divina* focuses on the Spirit in the Word, spiritual direction focuses on listening to God's Spirit in his People, in order to help discern God's movement in one's life. When combined—the presence of God's Spirit in his Word in *Lectio Divina*, and this movement in God's People as made apparent with spiritual direction—these disciplines allow for an accessible understanding of the movement of God's Spirit; regardless of our experience or expertise, we can be brought to understand its movement.

God's People

God's people constitute the third essential ingredient for spiritual formation. This segment will explore the kind of friendship between group members and what kind of relationship best facilitates spiritual formation in small groups.

intimate discussions, please refer to Appendix 12.

Survey of Spiritual Friendships in Biblical Texts

There are numerous examples of spiritual friendships in the Bible. The best-known example is, as recorded in 1 & 2 Samuel, the friendship of David and Jonathan. The story begins in 1 Samuel 18:1, “After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.” Fourteen chapters later it ends with Jonathan’s death and David’s expression of deep grief, “O Jonathan, in your death I am stricken, I am desolate for you, Jonathan my brother. Very dear to me you were, your love to me more wonderful than the love of a woman.” (2 Sm 1:26). As it was clear in the Bible that David knew the deep love of women, the special bond between these two men is demonstrated greatly through expressed acts of loyalty, enormous risk taking, tender devotion, and ultimately a covenant of eternal friendship sworn in the name of the Lord and binding on their descendants for all time (1 Sm 20:42).

Another extraordinary friendship in the Old Testament book of Ruth tells of two interlocking friendships. Ruth’s phenomenal friendship with her mother-in-law, Naomi, forms the foundation for the story and stands as a tribute to the devotion of true friends. After Ruth loses her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law to death, Naomi urges her to return to her homeland and find another husband. This leads Ruth to assert her love for Naomi in the following familiar words, “But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there

will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth puts aside her own interests in order to follow Naomi and is willing to immigrate to a foreign land in order to further Naomi’s wellbeing.

Both the friendships of David and Jonathan as well as Ruth and Naomi underscore the centrality of one’s relationship to God as a foundation for being a true friend. Indeed, this is where spiritual friendship begins. Mary D. Poust suggests that “the key element in any spiritual friendship, however, is the longing for a deeper relationship with our Creator, something that is evident from earliest recorded history” (2010, 9). 1 Samuel 20:42 illustrates the point, “the Lord shall be between me and you.” Douglas D. Webster agrees and suggests that “we should let the attitude of Jonathan be our conscious thought. For it should be our desire to evidence in all of our relationships that we have been befriended by Christ. It is His love that empowers our love and friendship” (1999, 78). Spiritual friends point us toward God and allow us to experience him more deeply along the way. Such friendships nurture the development of each other’s soul for a heightened sense of attentiveness and responsiveness to God and his will for us.

The most notable story of spiritual friendship in the Bible is that of Jesus and his disciples, which reveals a glimpse of the ideals of friendship. Jesus demonstrates such friendship by spending time with his disciples—eating, drinking, walking and discussing things that were important to both him and them (Lk 24:13–45). He also sets a precedent for intimacy; sharing the most painful depths of his experience with his disciples (Mt 26:38) and sharing insights that

were not disclosed to those outside the circle of friendship (Mt 13:36–52). Jesus’ sensitivity to his disciples’ emotional well-being is consistently apparent in the humbling of himself in offering acts of tender care (Jn 13:1–17), the offering of emotional support, and by demonstrating genuine concern for their feelings (Jn 14); Finally, Jesus endeavours to facilitate spiritual growth and alignment towards God by openly inviting and answering the disciples’ questions (Lk 9:18–27), and by relating to them in ways that are loving and yet challenging to encourage growth (Jn 13:1–17). By demonstrating the ideals of friendship through how he related to his disciples, Jesus invites all his followers into the intimacy of the circle of friendship that exists between him and the Father. David Benner points out that, “the friendship that Jesus offers has shared from eternity within the Godhead. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity places friendship at the very heart of the nature of God. And almost unbelievably, the eternal interflow of companionship that binds Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other extends to those Jesus calls to be his followers and friends” (2002, 65).

In John 15:13-16, Jesus describes the relationship he has with his followers. It gives us a clear expectation of how we are to relate to God and to one another. By calling His disciples to be His friends, it reflects the mutuality present in Jesus’ friendship with His disciples as truly remarkable. In addition, Jesus’ love for the disciples is demonstrated by his honesty in speaking the truth in love to them. In predicting Peter’s denial, Jesus confronts Peter’s pride. In rebuking the disciples for their lack of trust in his ability to take care of them during a storm at sea, Jesus encourages faith. And when he heard them arguing about which of

them was greatest, his confrontation was motivated by a desire for their spiritual well-being. Love cannot ignore self-destructive patterns in those loved. Jesus demonstrates intimacy with his spiritual friends, the disciples, in his time of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36–46). The honesty and intimacy of the conversation is remarkable. He told them that his soul was bursting within him, overwhelmed with sorrow. And he told them he was close to not being able to take it any longer; he was at the point of death. Then he asked them to keep watch with him—to share his experience. Richard Lamb concludes that “even cursory glances through the Gospels confirm that the work Jesus did in the lives of his disciples occurred because the disciples were in relationship not simply with Him, but with one another” (2003, 17).

Beyond the Gospels, the Apostle Paul befriended and mentored Timothy and sent Timothy to do the same to the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:16–17). Time and again throughout the Bible, we see the value of spiritual friendship highlighted. God speaks to his people in community.

Importance of Spiritual Friendships

It is noteworthy that one of the most basic desires of the human heart since the beginning of humanity is the hunger for connection and for intimacy. Paul J. Waddle suggests that,

An undying need of every human being is the need to communicate our self, to share our soul and spirit with others in the hope that we might live in communion with them. This reciprocal communication of selves is the most humanizing and life-giving activity, and it is the lifeblood of

friendship—where it be friendship with God, the special friendship of marriage, or friendship with others. (2002, 46)

People want others to share their lives with. Waddle further emphasizes that “to survive physically we need food, shelter, and clothing, but to survive spiritually and emotionally we need intimacy” (2002, 41). There is a deep desire in our hearts to know deeply and to be deeply known. People long for deep friendships, in which they can share the depth and totality of their lives, especially their inner life.

People are not made to navigate the challenges of life and love and faith alone. No one is wise enough to live well without the presence and help of others. David G. Benner describes how spiritual friendships, which he calls “soul friends,” help one another,

it is a relationship to which I bring my whole self, especially my inner self. And the care that I offer for the other person in a soul friendship is a care for his or her whole self, especially the inner self. Soul friends seek to safeguard each other’s uniqueness and nurture the growth of each other’s inner self. They seek to meet each other as whole people and help each other become whole people. They offer each other the sacred gift of accompaniment on the human journey. (2002, 15)

One of the most wonderful gifts that one can give to another is to help that person live a life of greater awareness of the presence of God, to hear his voice, and see his footprints as we walk through life. Spiritual friends seek to help each other attend and respond to God. In a nutshell, Douglas J. Rumford describes spiritual friendship as,

an intentional relationship between two people, founded in Jesus Christ, in which they focus alternately on the nurture of each other’s spiritual life. The expectation is not that you be experts but that you come together as spiritual peers who commit themselves to growing in Christ. (1996, 381)

Spiritual friends accompany one another on a journey made spiritual not by their presence but by the presence of God. Hence, they help each other to remember that God is sovereign, and he is the creator and ruler of our world. They endeavor to help one another to maintain a spiritual focus, living with a keen awareness of the Divine and his purposes.

Benefits of Spiritual Friendship

Spiritual friendship is considered one of the spiritual disciplines for our journey of spiritual formation. It provides another set of eyes in order to see something in life which they otherwise would not see. Timothy Jones affirms that spiritual friends “assist each other in understanding the deeper significance of what happens, to find God in the everyday, to grasp how God is speaking and leading through the ordinary turns and straight stretches” (1998, 30). In addition, their insights and character can “rub off” on each other. Such influence often has come by seeing how each other react to a situation, by noticing the choices that they make, by observing the ups and downs of daily life. The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3:17, “Observe those who live according to the example you have in us” and in 1 Corinthians 4:16, “Be imitators of me.” Furthermore, spiritual friends help each other in the lifelong task of growing in spiritual vitality by keeping each other accountable through probing questions and encouraging each other to keep their hearts focused on things of eternal significance and to make hard choices. They also help each other tap into the power of shared prayer (Mt 19:19). Paul J.

Waddle provides additional insights on the benefits of spiritual friendship in at the following areas (2002, 67–73):

1. Teach us how to care for another [...]
2. Teach us about ourselves, including aspects of ourselves we might prefer not to know. [...]
3. Help us stay committed to the most important goals, projects, and aspirations of our lives. [...]
4. Help us learn goodness and virtue [...]
5. Free us to live more hopefully and truthfully. [...]

Spiritual friendships help with the nurture and transformation of each other's innermost being through developing a deeper relationship with the creator. Individuals need to invest in deep spiritual friendships which are transformational in nature and to help each other to attend and respond to God in their spiritual pilgrimage.

Defining Elements of Spiritual Friendship

Drawing from various Biblical examples of friendship, David G. Benner suggests that the ideals of spiritual friendship should at least include five elements—love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality and accompaniment (2002, 65).

Friendship involves a bond of love. Jonathan was described as loving David as himself and being one in spirit with him. True friends experience each other as being part of themselves in some profound way making sacrifices and risk taking immaterial. They share mutual passion; they walk side by side in the pursuit of their shared interests. In addition, they long for each other's well-being and do whatever needed to support it. They do not want each other to stay where they are but to seek spiritual growth, striving to become the fully illuminated

being they are called from eternity to be in Christ. Another aspect of love is loyalty—faithfulness to commitments, spoken and unspoken. Jonathan’s loyalty to David is at the core of the story’s timeless appeal. David G. Benner points out what spiritual friends may learn from the relationship between Jonathan and David about loyalty:

True friends preserve confidentiality, commit themselves to being honest with each other, avoid public criticism of each other and offer each other courtesy and respect. They carry their friends’ best interests with them, always seeking to protect and advance them. They are also prepared to protect those interests, even at personal cost. (2002, 69)

Spiritual friends are willing to be true to each other, speaking in love and risking temporary discomfort by calling each other to the truth. In doing so, invaluable opportunities for growth is offered. They help each other see things they cannot see on their own. Friends who practice honesty reinforce their loyalty to each other. They demonstrate true love with a deep yearning for one another, calling each other to settle for nothing less than becoming the whole and holy person they are called to be. Richard Lamb points out that “without such honesty with our closest friends, we are like people without mirrors—we’ll lose the ability to know what we look like, and soon it will be hard to go out in public without drawing stares” (2003, 89).

Spiritual friends would ideally also relate to each other with honesty and intimacy. Intimacy, as shared experience, is found in familiarity and closeness. It can manifest itself in a variety of forms including spiritual, emotional, sexual, intellectual, vocational, recreational, creative, and aesthetic intimacy. Obviously, not all friendships require all levels of engagement, but the deepest

friendships are based on an ever-expanding range of these forms of intimacy.

However, David G. Benner points out that without soul intimacy, there is really no spiritual friendship,

If they never share at this level, the relationship is not worthy of being called a spiritual—or soul—friendship. Sharing at the level of their souls means that their intimacy is not restricted to experience with the external world. Recall that soul refers to the whole person, with particular attention to one's inner life. Soul intimacy therefore is built upon sharing the inner self. The conversations of such friends are never merely about what happened in their lives or the world but move from this to how they experience, react to and understand what happened. Dialogue continually moves from the surface to the depths, from the external to the internal. This is the crucial distinctive of dialogue in spiritual friendships. Most important, however, spiritual intimacy involves sharing our experience with God. (2002, 73–74)

There is also an element of mutuality among spiritual friends who offer each other what they receive from each other. This reciprocal nature of friendship differentiates it from all other relationships in which one is to receive care from another. Mutuality does not necessarily entail equality. For example, what Jesus offered the disciples was different from what the disciples offered Jesus. He was the spiritual teacher, they were the students. Jesus demonstrated this mutuality between those who are not equals in such friendship. Timothy Jones elaborates on how this mutuality could be lived out in spiritual friendship,

We can usually learn and grow from hearing the struggles of another. One man who had been in a relationship of mutual helping learned a lot about his own faith by watching his partner struggle within financial priorities, for example. Also, a relationship of mutual helping can keep us from becoming too inwardly focused, too caught up in every fleeting moment of doubt, too absorbed by the workings of our own spiritual life. Helping another reminds us that the goal of Christian growth is greater than our own warm feeling. (1998, 113)

Lastly, spiritual friends accompany each other on the journey of life. They take active interest in each other's journey. This accompaniment is not about doing certain things. In fact, it is about not doing certain things including not interrupting, not judging, not attempting to solve problems, not prematurely or inappropriately advising, not assuming that what has worked for one will work for others. David G. Benner illustrates this aspect of the ideal of friendship by accompaniment in music,

One of my musician friends is an accompanist for recitalists. He tells me that the challenge the musical accompanist faces is not to lead or get in the road but to stay in close supportive contact with the person he is accompanying. The challenges in spiritual accompaniment are similar. (2002, 77)

Timothy Jones suggests that the presence and insight of spiritual friends are to encourage each other to be the best that they can be (1998, 50-51).²¹

Spiritual transformation takes place in the interplay between God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's People. These three essential elements for spiritual formation, therefore, are crucial for vibrant spiritual growth among their membership. While difficult to intentionally manage the application of all three elements at once, a simple way to ensure their presence in the lives of church members is to create an environment in which they occur naturally. One way that

²¹. Please refer to Appendix 7 for suggestions of how to put spiritual friendship into practice.

God's Word, Spirit, and People come together to promote transformation in our current contexts is through the small group ministries of our congregations.

Application: Spiritual Formation at SGBC

At SGBC, small groups serve as platforms for discipleship and spiritual formation. They are the foundations for spiritual friendships and deeper relationships with God and others. The structure of small groups apply SGBC's vision and missions for practical experience. In other words, small groups serve as the context, agent, and means of spiritual formation. Not only do they shape members spiritually, but they also provide vital and vibrant community life. The definition of Biblical community by Bill Donahue is deeply embraced in SGBC: "the body of Christ expressing the life and message of Christ to build up one another and redeem the world for God's glory" (2002, 27). Small groups are also the agent of spiritual formation because group leaders and members give permission to each other, and exercise their intention, to build in each other's spiritual maturation. Small groups provide the means of spiritual formation; members practice spiritual disciplines together and share their spiritual journeys with one another.

A small group format also allows for a tight-knit community that can hold its members accountable and acknowledge each other's mistakes. As a small-scale society, it provides the opportunity for members to steer each other away from harm or bad ideas, correct missteps, and exercise forgiveness and grace in

the event of failure. These all facilitate growth, providing opportunities to encourage one another towards Christlikeness. James C. Wilhoit states that:

Finally, and most important for Christian spiritual formation, the church has the responsibility of discipling its members and people of all nations who call upon the Lord for salvation. Loving God and neighbor comes full circle when the neighbor joins us in loving God and neighbor as a fellow disciple. The church is to develop individuals who will “lead a life worthy of God” (1 Thes 2:12), who will bear witness through their lifestyle of gentle obedience to Christ and imitation of his character. Jesus’ disciples exhibited just such an obedience to and imitation of him. (2008, 181)

To be effective, small groups must have a reasonable size and an intentional shepherding plan. Once properly formed, each group needs to have a clear vision of where they are going in their spiritual journey as a group and for individual group members. To do this, the leadership team of each group assesses their current state; identifies areas to be formed; selects strategies and means; cultivates determination to implement the plan; and nurtures mutual support and accountability.

Optimal Size of Small Groups

Studies have shown that the optimal size of a small group is twelve (George 1994, 53–61; Icenogle 1994, 115–125). With this group size, deep relationships are easy to create, and easy to sustain, while preventing burnout in the leader. Jesus also spent much of his time with his twelve disciples. One of the lessons learned from Jesus’ example is the act of calling the disciples one by one (Mk 3:13–14). The sincerity and directness of the call drew the disciples in initially. In time, the twelve became an important support for one another.

Four Essential Dynamics of Small Groups

The four essential dynamics of small group worship, based on Willow Creek Community Church's model, serve to loosely guide small groups as they meet. These dynamics—Worship, Welcome, Word, and Work—set a framework that encourage the interaction of the three main elements of spiritual formation—God's Spirit, People, and Word.

Worship

Recommended time: 15 minutes

Worship is a time in which the entire group acknowledges the presence of the living God and submits their time together to him. It is a time to express love and desire for Christ, and provides the opportunity to set the tone of holiness, as without the presence of the Spirit, this meeting would be no different to any other social gathering with friends, family, or co-workers. It is an important time to bring the thoughts and focus of all participants to God and one another.²²

Welcome

Recommended time: 30 minutes

This is a time to loosen up, relax, and have some fun while opening up to each other's hearts. It is a time for group members to know and be known for a deepening spiritual journey and build trusting relationship with one another. This

²² For more resources for worship ideas, please refer to Recommended Resources for Small Groups in Appendix 12 of this portfolio.

component is divided into two roughly even parts. Part I is set aside for icebreakers that can engage the group.²³ Part II is for individuals to take turns and share their life stories in each meeting. These life stories function as a sort of spiritual autobiography, in which hope, joy, success, and triumph, or fear, sadness, struggle, and failure in one's spiritual journey are shared authentically for mutual edifications. There are spiritual lessons to be learned from stories on both sides of the emotional spectrum.

Gail Seidel observes that “[each] story gives definition to the experiences of the past. A story can reframe frustration, suffering, or extra effort as meaningful. Story is a way to recognize God’s process in my life and how he is developing me” (Pettit 2008, 220). Life stories go a long way in building both a deeper sense of community and mutual trust among group members. Seidel points out that ultimately, “[your] life story is to discover who God intended you to be and then camp there, embrace it, engage in it, and live out of his authentic creation, serving him and others” (Pettit 2008, 223). Sharing life stories provide an especially effective way to facilitate spiritual formation, especially since “telling your story can be a catalyst for building community, which contributes to corporate formation—my story intersecting your story for his story” (Seidel 2008,

²³. For some examples of icebreakers, please refer to the resources listed in Appendix 12.

233). This storytelling dynamic highlights the sharing potential of an authentic community, and also defines a life-changing and spiritually-transforming group.²⁴

Word

Recommended time: 50 minutes

The Bible study should use an integrated approach of informational and formational reading with an emphasis on application of Biblical truth in daily living. There is no formation without information. Both the inductive Bible study approach and the *Lectio Divina* approach are taught and used. The goal is for group members to integrate these two approaches to allow God's Word to develop both head and heart.

For this component of small group, study either a particular book of the Bible or a series of topics in the Bible for a given season. Furthermore, use an observation-interpretation-application for one season; and for the next season, adopt an observation-meditation-application attitude, spending 15 minutes in understanding the passage under study and spend the rest of the time on meditation and sharing with one another on how to apply the passage to daily life. Carl F. George states that "If we ever have to choose between how much Bible is understood or how much Bible is obeyed, my prejudice is in favour of obeyed truth" (1994, 44). It is not our goal only to know the truth. Design the time spent

²⁴ For further reading on the value of life story in small groups and how to prepare and share a life story, please refer to recommended resources for small groups under Appendix 12 of this publication.

on studying God's Word in ways that would transform lives as members strive to follow it.²⁵

Work

Recommended time: 25 minutes

This is a time to serve one another through prayer. Not only is this time for sharing with one another about personal prayer needs, struggles, and commitments to live out the truth in the weeks ahead, it is also a time that each person can roll up their sleeves and plan how the group may serve one another in our church and our community. This element of small group meetings also encourages group members to explore and discern in what ways they may contribute to God's mission in the world and fulfilment of the Great Commission, sharing by shifting their inward community-focused intensions outward. Group members then can deliberate as to how to focus on making the Word of God to become the Work of God during their day-to-day lives.

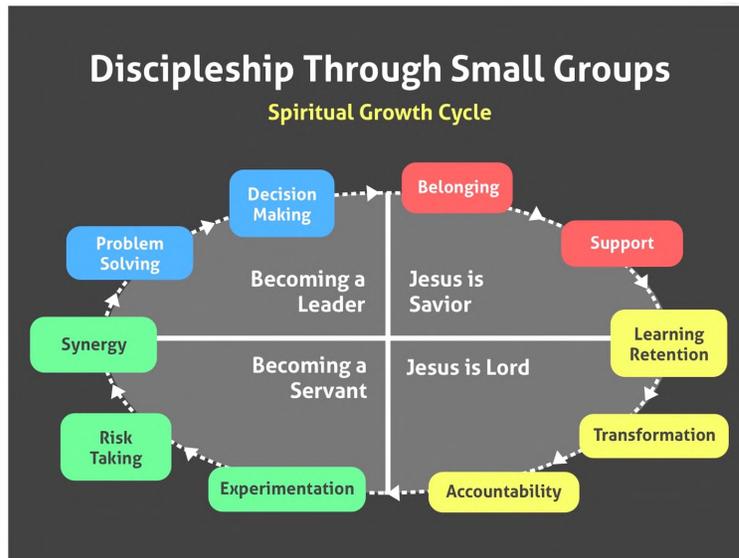
As these four dynamics are applied, their respective qualities will serve to set the stage for a deepening spiritual companionship and facilitate spiritual growth. Despite their prescription from the beginning of a group's spiritual journey these dynamics will continue to provide support through all stages of discipleship.

²⁵. For resources of designing such a Bible study, please refer to recommended resources for small groups under Appendix 12 of this publication.

How do small groups navigate through the different stages of discipleship?

Small groups may do well in utilizing the various dynamics to move group members along to spiritual maturity. Figure 7 shows the different needs of group members through the different stages of discipleship, beginning at the top. Each quadrant of the circle contains a phrase that describes the spiritual development of the believer, while the text on the circumference show the believer's needs in various stages of growth in their faith.

Those in a stage of spiritual infancy want to have a sense of belonging, to feel supported by the group. At this stage, their primary needs are to be loved by



Christ and to cling to Jesus as Saviour, despite their existing spiritual imperfection and immaturity. As infants grow to become spiritual children, they are strengthened by God's Word both in learning

Figure 7. Discipleship Through Small Groups (Adaptation by: Jackie Tsang) Based on David Stark, *Growing People Through Small Groups*, 87. Content used by permission of author.

retention and accountability. It is a continuous process of transformation at this stage as they learn to progressively deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus as Lord. When children grow further to become spiritual young adults, exploration and experimentation with their spiritual giftedness begins. This

results in their deployment to serve Christ according to their gifts which, through their use, provide a greater willingness to take risks in their area of service. The spiritual young adult also aligns increasingly with the vision and mission of the church community. They are learning to be Christ’s servants. Eventually, they grow to become spiritual parents, prepared to become leaders and engage in church ministries, solving problems and making decisions alongside other leaders for the sake of Christ. Individual growth needs during the various stages of spiritual maturation. Group leaders need to be aware of these needs, using different small group dynamics to edify group members along their respective stages of discipleship.

Figure 8 shows the ways in which small group dynamics may contribute to meet the diverse needs of all group members even though they may be at different stages of their discipleship process. Individual members may be at different stages

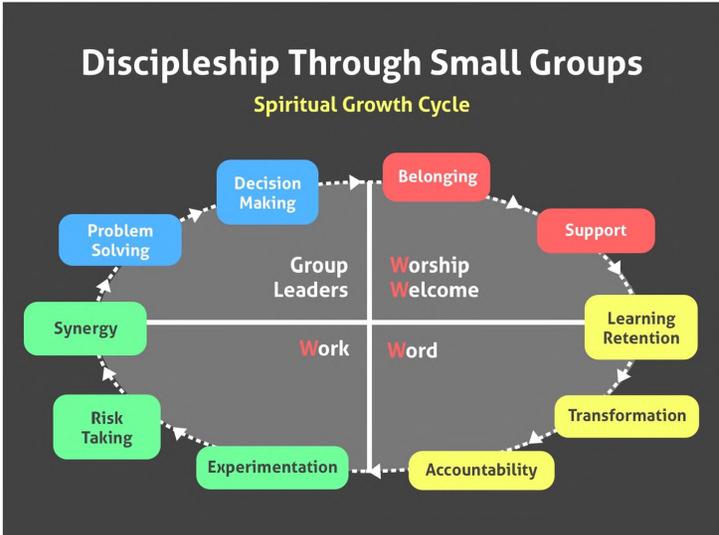


Figure 8. Discipleship Through Small Group Dynamics (Designed by: Jackie Tsang)

of the discipleship process with each other. Worship and Welcome set the small group’s focus, but also to meet the needs individual needs of belonging and support. As group members worship

together and are reminded of the purpose of meeting together, they build a sense

of greater community. Icebreakers build intimacy and greater support structures within the group. Word is the step that fuels transformation and continuous spiritual growth. It takes intentionality to arrange small group meetings in ways that foster learning retention and accountability. As group members experience the Bible as the living Word of God spoken to them, their inward transformation will manifest itself as outward expression in service. Work, as a small group dynamic, naturally springs from spiritual maturity. Group members begin to experience God in new ways through service. They may experience God as he answers prayers for others. They will find God in taking risks—in experimenting uncharted territories of their own abilities, stretching their faith, and sacrificing their own needs for the larger good.

As group members work through service to others, they may progressively grow out of a self-centered life toward a Christ-centered life. As they demonstrate spiritual maturity through their work and service, they will then be ready to become apprentice leaders and eventually group leaders.

Although these four essential small group dynamics of welcome, word, worship and work will usually be employed in each of the small group meetings, their duration and usage can be adjusted at the discretion of group leaders. It is important for group leaders to assess the spiritual maturity of their members—whether they are all in the same or different maturity level, the group leader may then determine in what way the four small group dynamics should be varied in order to equip group members and move them along the various stages of discipleship. For example, in a young group filled with new believers, group

leaders may spend the majority of their time in Welcome with icebreakers and life stories. This will help build the groups community dynamic, allowing better interconnection and relational depth for the next step. Meeting twice a week, they're sure to build relationships quickly. As the group progresses through their first three months, leaders should spend the majority of their time on Worship and Welcome, with a growing portion of time on the Word. Eventually, as group members are increasingly more at home with one another and as growth slows, a larger portion of time on the Word will be appropriate in order not to only build their relationship but to challenge and grow their spiritual maturity. For a spiritually matured group, the leader may decide to spend a few group meetings entirely on Work, as their needs will likely be more based upon the application and realization God's Word instead of attaining additional head knowledge.

Contributing Members of Small Group

Every small group member contributes to each other's spiritual formation. It is critical that all participants are committed and give priority to join every group meeting. James C. Wilhoit suggests that "[i]t requires a commitment to fellowship and a deep recognition that we need the church far more than the church need us" (2008, 177). The development of spiritual friendship demands commitment to each other for sake of one another's spiritual growth. Every group member must sacrifice the gift of time in order to experience this growth.

The quality of communication that facilitates mutual learning and edification is another significant contributing factor. First, be authentic.

Authenticity implies that that which individual members share genuinely represents who and where they are in their spiritual journey (Eph 4:25). Secondly, be truthful. Group members must speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Thirdly, keep confidentiality. What is shared in the group must stay in the group. If trust is broken, so will the understandings of self-disclosure and authentic sharing (Prv 11:13, 17:9, 25:9). A small group needs to be the safest possible space in order for group members to share freely. In order for group members to feel safe, a hospitable culture is critical. It is not only the hospitality extended to one another, it is the hospitable spirit that requires that each one listen to the other, and accept and embrace another despite what they share or do. The hospitable spirit that individual members extend to one another provides a safe space where their soul may be laid bare in front of each other. Commitment, authenticity, truthfulness, confidentiality, and hospitality are the backbone of building long lasting trust and spiritual friendship. Without authentic and truthful communication and a hospitable spirit, there will be no accountability, crucial for the structure of small groups.

Intentional Shepherding

In order to best create an environment to facilitate spiritual growth, small group leaders must be able to lead as they continue to mature, to aid the growth of their fellow Christ-followers. Bill Donahue suggests that

Disciples are people who act like Christ, who are willing to train to be like Him, who practice the disciplines of prayer, solitude, worship, Bible reading and study, community, and ministry. They are lifelong learners and

lovers of Christ. Small groups that get intentional about shepherding people toward maturity will see fruit multiplied in people's lives. (2002, 15)

With the goal of multiplying fruit in the members of our small group in mind, we need to assess where our group members are in their spiritual journeys and how to further them.

Knowing Where Group Members Are

There are two primary resources to make assessment on the current spiritual journey of group members. The first assessment, "How Do I Shepherd My People?" guides group leaders to assess the spiritual condition of their sheep and how the leaders need to prepare themselves to provide the necessary shepherding to their group members (refer to Appendix 8). The second assessment, "Assessment and Shepherding Plan for 5Gs Lifestyle of Disciples" allows group leaders to assess how group members are living out the 5Gs lifestyle which lays our foundational goals for healthy growth in discipleship. It also provides opportunity for group leaders to write down shepherding plans to grow their group members from where they are to where they are going (refer to Appendix 9).

Knowing Where Group Members Are Going

There are two resources that guide group leaders to develop intentional shepherding plan based on their findings from the above two assessments. The first resource is the "G.P.S. Plan" for group leaders to work with the core

leadership team of the group (G for Goals, P for Process, S for Story; refer to Appendix 10). The group leadership team first prayerfully makes assessments and then sets shepherding goals for individual members and for the group for a twelve-month period. They then work with their coach or a pastor to develop the process necessary to move group members along to reach those goals. Throughout the year, and especially at the end of the year, group leaders evaluate the outcome through discovering God's stories in individual members' life.

The second resource is the Group Covenant (refer to Appendix 11). This standard template of group covenant is meant to be used as a starting point for the consensus-making process so that everyone in the group is committed to the group plan for spiritual development. The terms of the group covenant are derived from the two assessments and the G.P.S. Plan. All group members are to discuss and come to a consensus before the group covenant is finalized.

Model Summary

This model is designed to provide the resources necessary to build an environment that facilitates spiritual companionship and significant spiritual growth. While this growth occurs through the formative pressure of the Potter's hands, the creation of this environment is akin to softening the clay, so that it is receptive to his touch. This model is best applied in a church whose orientation is focused on cell-based spiritual growth, such as the growth experienced in small groups. This way, all of the leadership of the church is empowered with intimate familiarity of the process, and can train and counsel shepherds when necessary.

In order to create a small group environment that brings together Word, Spirit, and People, this model, led by a Shepherd leader, uses *Lectio Divina* to discuss how individual narratives join Christ's narrative. The small group follows the pattern of Worship, Welcome, Word, and Work. In this way, the group is encouraged to grow together in friendship, companionship, discernment, and application, respectively. Under the "Word" section, the Shepherd leads the group through a storied exercise that utilizes *Lectio Divina*. The leader helps realize emergent themes that become apparent in discussion, connecting the various threads and similar truths according to the Spirit's prompting. After consideration of these various themes, during the "Work" phase, the Shepherd prepares to send the flock on their way, and so prepares their hearts with the lessons learned, as well as leads a time of prayer which draws from discussed topics during the first three periods, for the sake of increasing spiritual companionship. Through the mutual deepening of spiritual companionship that is built through these phases, and overseen by the Shepherd, deep spiritual growth ensues, for the sake of continuing God's Work in the world. Because of the relatively organic nature of the spiritual disciplines practiced, as well as the natural growth of friendship as spiritual companionship deepens, this model's effectiveness in light of its simplicity cannot be overstated. As such, I believe that it is the optimal method for meeting to further spiritual growth and encourage discipleship.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Jesus has clearly summarized what it means to be a Christian in Mark 8:34, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” This is an invitation to go with Christ on a journey of spiritual transformation. The destination of this journey is the new creature into which the Potter shapes those who follow him—the whole and holy person that finds their uniqueness, identity, and calling in him. In the Old Testament, God asks Abraham to leave his country and his relatives to go on a journey without knowing the destination until later. Abraham responds to that call, following God on a journey that would leave him and the world forever changed. In the New Testament, we see Jesus calling Simon and Andrew in Mark 1:17, “And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” Jesus also extends an invitation to Levi by saying in Mark 2:14, “Follow Me.” From the Old to New Testament, we see ample examples of people being called to a journey of transformation, not simply to another place in which to live. This spiritual transformation journey in the lives of Christ followers is a testimony to the power of the Gospel and it results in an increasing capacity to discern and do the will of God (Rom 12:2).

Since God’s People comprise one of the three essential resources of spiritual transformation alongside God’s Word and Spirit, small groups—manageable units of God’s People—play a vital role in SGBC’s mission to develop devoted followers of Christ. David G. Benner points out the following:

The Christian spiritual journey is a journey we take with others. Each of us must take our own journey, and for each of us that journey will be unique. But none of us is intended to make that journey alone. The myth of the solitary Christian making his or her way alone to paradise flies in the face of everything the Bible teaches about the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31). We are parts of one body as we follow Christ on the journey of personal transformation. We cannot make the journey apart from spiritual companion and community. (2002, 40)

Small groups provide the best environment in our church to foster spiritual friendships as, after all, spiritual communities are simply networks of spiritual friends. Indeed, spiritual companions shape character. They influence individuals' attitudes, values, and perceptions. They challenge believers not to take themselves too seriously, and they give each other hope. Paul J. Wadell also affirms that "living a life of friendship with God in the community of the baptized is inescapably transformative" (2002, 10).

Best friends help each other to be their best selves, which is why people are always better for having spent time with their closest friends. It is in the company with these good friends that many find meaning, aspirations, happiness and freedom in life.

If the church is faithful to its identity as the friends of God, it should be a community that not only welcomes all who come to it but also offers them a place where the practice of intimacy and friendship can be learned. Moreover, if authentic friendship is an endangered species in society today, then an urgent ministry of the church today may be to help create a supportive environment where true friendship and rich intimacy can be witnessed, embodied, and experienced (Waddel 2002, 53). Communities in small groups need to be

developed in which people respect, support, challenge, encourage, and love one another, sharing together in grace and hope. Only in such communities that real friendship can be learned and blessed can true intimacy be experienced.

Ultimately, churches need to be built with friends that care enough about each other's lives in God that they can count on each other to help them live more faithfully. This model was designed to bring together the three essential resources for the purpose of building community in small and large settings. Spiritual formation requires relationships that are supportive and spiritually challenging, ones that bring together God's Word, Spirit, and People. These three essential resources, which act as the formative pressure of the Potter's hands, are primary catalysts of spiritual growth, and best thrive within small group settings. It is worthwhile for churches to invest in creating environments in which spiritually-nourishing, life-giving relationships are valued and can flourish.

CHAPTER IV:
A STORIED WAY OF *LECTIO DIVINA*
TO BUILD DEEPER SPIRITUAL
COMPANIONSHIP IN SMALL GROUPS AT
STOUFFVILLE GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH

“A Storied Way” of *Lectio Divina* is a particular model of developing spiritual companions through the sharing of life stories in small group meetings for mutual edification and for the facilitation of spiritual formation. This research project seeks to describe and understand the experience of participants who practiced a storied way of *Lectio Divina* to build deeper spiritual companionship in their small groups at Stouffville Grace Baptist Church. The methodological approach for this study is phenomenological research. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, interviews, a focus group and participant observations. The responses of each participant were documented and analyzed to answer the overarching question: How do participants’ relationships, both with God and each other, experience change, when practicing individual *Lectio Divina* and corporate sharing of their life stories in an intimate setting?

Out of this research project sprung five major themes: a sense of closer and personal relationship with God; a deeper and enriched sharing with one

another; personal growth from observing the spiritual journey of others; positive influence on devotional habits; and the value of knowing one another deeply.

These phenomenological themes offered insights into how participants experienced and understood deeper spiritual companionship as well as what influence the experience had on them. In studying participants' perceptions, the leadership at Stouffville Grace Baptist Church has gained insight into the ways that a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* can help small group members build a deeper spiritual companionship with each other and, in turn, a deeper relationship with God.

Introduction

While many small groups promise to develop spiritual companionship and growth while providing relational intimacy, both with God and each another, the journey toward these goals is often fraught with disappointment and frustration. In my experience, many of these groups focus too heavily on a single area of growth, leading to stunted growth in other areas. Some groups may help members increase Scriptural knowledge but can also fail to develop relational intimacy with God. Some facilitate close friendships but neglect the spiritual journey of one another. Many groups meet religiously, and yet few experience substantial spiritual growth. To combat these disparities, David G. Benner argues for the relevance of vibrant spiritual companionship in small groups, explaining that it be manifested in such a way that,

...they care for each other as whole people, not simply as spiritual beings
... They offer each other the sacred gift of accompaniment on the human
journey. (Benner 2002, 15)

The mission statement of Stouffville Grace Baptist Church (hereafter referred to as SGBC) is “Sharing Life Together. Bringing Love to Others.” Hence, the pastoral team of the church often preaches on spiritual companionship and how to foster it. Healthy boundaries, mutual trust and respect, confidentiality, transparency and accountability among group members are valued. Group members are encouraged, as an ideal, to collaboratively engage on their spiritual journeys together and cultivate deeper friendships, in which they may increasingly share the depth and totality of their lives as their relationships continue to grow in intimacy. The essence of spiritual companionship is to help each other grow in sensitivity to, and keep each other accountable for, God’s work, Word, and the application thereof, in their lives.

Benner defines spiritual companionship succinctly: “Soul friends become spiritual friends when they seek to help each other attend and respond to God (2002, 16). Consequently, a deeper spiritual companionship is used in reference to a group of friends who grow closer within this framework. Donahue and Robinson point out that

To know and be known, we must first understand intimacy, then overcome barriers to intimacy, by exercising appropriate self-disclosure... No group, friendship, or marriage will achieve intimacy unless people seek both to know and be known... (2001, 60)

Although spiritual friends share the depth of their inner beings, it is important to be aware of what constitutes appropriate self-disclosure, as well as the

significance of boundaries within spiritual relationships. Cloud explains the value of these boundaries, saying “Boundaries define us... A boundary shows me where I end and where someone else begins, giving me a sense of ownership... [and] freedom” (1992, 29). The understanding of these boundaries can facilitate deep appreciation for relationships within a group context. This idea could be illustrated by what I like to refer to as ‘refrigerator rights.’

Consider the example of a stranger who comes into my house, flinging open my refrigerator only to yell, “Why do you not have cream soda for me?” Naturally, this intrusion would warrant a negative response, not just because of the stranger in my house, but also because of their unwarranted entitlement to the contents of my fridge. If, however, my own dear children were to come home, opening the very same refrigerator door and proclaiming their need for cream soda, I would calm my children, then either buy some from the supermarket, or reach a compromise that suited both parties.

The second example illustrates that my children have refrigerator rights, both in the right to open the door of the refrigerator, and also talk about or take anything that they would inside. This right is one that the stranger doesn’t have. The boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure can be thought of in a similar way. As relationships grow within small groups, members would develop relationship with one another. Some group members may feel more comfortable in smaller groups, at first sharing deeply with groups of two or three, but eventually this small circle is likely to expand to the full bounds of the group. This expansion, although sometimes slow, functions as a consistently deepening spiral,

broadening relationships within the group. As group members' trust grows, Donahue and Robinson suggest that this deeper mutual expression will naturally follow, as a gift: "To allow others to see deeply into our lives is the greatest gift we can ever give them. It is a gift wrapped in trust, hope and love" (2001, 62).

Like all gifts that are given in trust, relationships that practice self-disclosure on any level require healthy judgement in order to continue to grow in intimacy. As we open ourselves up for one another, it is important to remember that we are distinct individuals and need to have mutual respect for each other's established boundaries, so that those sharing don't feel forced or manipulated.

When a trusting relationship is built based on common hope in Christ for life transformation and love to protect and honor one another, increased self-disclosure will slowly and gradually spread throughout the entire group, fostering ever-deepening relationship. In such a group, sharing with one another with the innermost being of ourselves could become the norm.

Before this research, many of our small groups fell short of these goals, not necessarily effective at fostering a community of spiritual companions. Although group members often developed close social friendship and grew in biblical knowledge, few members knew each other's spiritual journey—where they were at in their walk with the Lord and their inner world of failures and triumphs. One of the key elements in our church's small group meetings is to share "life stories" among members, the primary purpose of which is to inspire each other on their spiritual journey and growth. This practice is meant to cultivate the desire in group members' hearts to know each other more deeply.

This research revealed a change in the content of the life stories shared and also illustrated how participants experienced deeper spiritual companionship for spiritual growth. It was observed that group members' individual practice of spiritual discipline was foundational, increasing their sensitivity toward the work of God in their lives. This research revealed that group members who did not see God's activities in their life could learn from those who did. By sharing life stories and learning from the spiritual journey of one another, a deepened spiritual friendship ensued, and the individuals became more receptive to God's handiwork in their lives.

Innovation

The purpose of this project is, therefore, to examine whether the regular practice of private *Lectio Divina* by individual members and, in turn, the sharing of these life stories in small groups deepens spiritual companionship.

The research evaluated the lived experience of research participants with the following questions shaping the research agenda and further driving the investigation:

- Does the sharing of these life stories deepen spiritual companionships? If so, how?
- How does the sharing of these life stories deepen spiritual companionships?
- How does spiritual companionship shape the participants' relationships?

The outcome of this research demonstrated that the sharing of a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* in small group fosters deeper spiritual companionship and,

in turn, a sense of increased awareness of God's activities in each other's lives. The findings of this research immediately benefit SGBC's leadership in their attempt to make future shepherding plans, but the principles herein can be applied to similar small group setting to encourage the growth of deep, effective spiritual friendships. In short, this research provided valuable information to equip the church regarding how to use the small group ministry as an effective tool to foster spiritual companionship and, in turn, aid spiritual growth. It also, therefore, provided the SGBC leadership team practical ways for the church to live out its mission.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

I was accountable to the Deacons Board of SGBC, who granted permission to conduct this research within our church. The Tyndale Research Ethics Board provided permission for the study on September 23, 2016. As the senior pastor of SGBC and the lead pastor in charge of small group shepherding, I had ready access to the participants for this project. All prospective members were given total freedom to accept or decline to participate in this project. In the beginning, I received consent from 9 out of 10 members of this group after explaining to them the details and expectations of this study. The one remaining hesitant member was allowed to participate in all parts of the process. As the study progressed, I received permission from her to include her experience for data analysis and reporting.

Context

This research project was conducted at SGBC, Whitchurch-Stouffville. The demographic of the Chinese population in this town consists mostly of young families and early retirees who find housing prices more affordable than in the larger neighbouring cities. Among the Chinese population, they come from at least three different distinct cultural settings: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China. Immigrants from Hong Kong and China compose the majority of our Chinese population. There has been a surge of new immigrants from China in recent years. SGBC is the only Chinese church in Whitchurch-Stouffville, and its demographic mirrors that of its surrounding community. More information about SGBC can be found in greater detail in the Context section of Chapter Three.

SGBC has a regular weekly average attendance of 120 people with eleven small groups. One of the existing groups was selected to participate in this study by the church leadership team. Because of its members' diversity, it is both a mirror of our town and a good representation of the makeup of SGBC's anticipated future small groups. The group was composed of those in different stages in their faith, new believers and matured Christians, and from different countries and cultures, both Hong Kong and China. I was given permission by the group leader to co-lead with her for the duration of this project. In my capacity, then, I took the role both of participant as well as facilitator of this group. Prior to this project, most group members had already become familiar with each other,

participating together in the same group with an explicit focus on discipleship for at least three years. They met twice a month, for approximately two and a half hours, with a meeting agenda based on 4 W's—Worship, Welcome, Word and Work (refer to the previous section for details). Curriculum for the Word segment of the agenda included a topical study, either a book of the Bible or response to the current sermon series. Icebreakers and life stories were adopted as part of the Welcome segment of the agenda to help build deeper relationships between group members. In the first questionnaire (see Appendix 14), context provided by respondents revealed that they already had a reasonably good friendship with mutual trust within the group. However, most of the participants had little to no experience in the practice of *Lectio Divina*, and many struggled to intentionally integrate lessons from their daily devotions into their daily lives. Few of them habitually paid attention to God's daily activity in their life. Some of them tried but struggled to apply what they learned from the Bible in their daily life. This basis of solid relationships within the small group provided a critical context for this research project.

Models & Other Resources

I have made attempts in the past couple of years to integrate my formational model focusing on spiritual growth through small groups with my own spiritual journey. I have experienced a deeper spiritual journey and sense of intimacy in my relationship with God through these various spiritual disciplines. Throughout my life in ministry, I've often noticed a disconnect between the

personal spiritual life and public church life, and this dissonance hinders spiritual growth. In all of the churches that I have had the opportunity to serve in the past seventeen years, I encountered a predominant focus on Biblical knowledge and service in ministry. There seems to be, however, a lack either of training or accountability in fostering spiritual growth out of sharing experience. The assumption that the more one knows the Bible, engages in ministry, or relationally connects with other members of the church community, the more spiritually mature a person would become does not always prove to be the case. In my experience as Small Group Pastor, I have found that most small groups tend to emphasize social friendship rather than spiritual companionship. In contrast, my relationship with God grew closer, more personal, and more intimate through the support of spiritual friendship. My personal spiritual focus was developed through the practice of various spiritual disciplines, primarily the exercise of *Lectio Divina*. I also experienced relational closeness and spiritual growth as I shared my journey with my spiritual director, and others in discernment groups I joined. These groups allowed me to share God's work in me through different Scriptures. Further, I was encouraged to grow through hearing the stories of others. Hence, this project developed out of my ongoing spiritual journey when I realized it would be beneficial to examine the impact of personal spiritual journey on spiritual companionship.

Background from Scripture, Theology, and Literature

The theological framework of this research is built upon the premise of spiritual companionship as spiritual discipline. There are many biblical examples to choose from when considering the nature of spiritual companions. As discussed in the last chapter, the friendships both of David and Jonathan (1 & 2 Samuel) and Ruth and Naomi (Book of Ruth) underscore the requirement of one's relationship with God as a foundation for being a true friend. In both cases of properly aligned friendship, each participant's objective is a deeper growth in God, which in turn brings incredible interpersonal strength and growth. The most notable Biblical friendship story, however, is that of Jesus and his disciples. By demonstrating the ideal manifestation of companionship through how he related to his disciples, Jesus invites all His followers into the intimate circle of friendship that exists between Him and the Father.

No one is wise enough to live without the presence and help of others. In the Book of Genesis, we read that the Creator is concerned with our need for human intimacy and companionship and that humanity stands in absolute need of another (Genesis 2:18). There is also an element of mutuality among spiritual companions who offer what they receive from the other. The insights and character of spiritual companions can rub off on each other. Often such wisdom is gleaned from observing another's life. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:17, "Observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Acts 2:42-47 provides insights from the life of the first century church which demonstrates

what it means to be spiritual companions in a community. They studied God's Word together and responded to the guidance of God's Word and the Holy Spirit. These responses manifested themselves as love toward one another, deep knowledge of the other, and in the tending to each other's needs. They had a discerning spirit to see God's work among them and celebrated together. These biblical passages provide vivid examples of spiritual companionship. We can use their actions as a basis for companionship, seeking to grow spiritually together. David G. Benner defines spiritual companionship in detail,

...they care for each other as whole people, not simply as spiritual beings, it is a relationship to which I bring my whole self, especially my inner self. And the care that I offer for the other person in a soul friendship is a care for his or her whole self, especially the inner self. Soul friends seek to safeguard each other's uniqueness and nurture the growth of each other's inner self. They seek to meet each other as whole people and help each other become whole people. They offer each other the sacred gift of accompaniment on the human journey. (Benner 2002, 15)

Douglas J. Rumford echoes this concept and portrays the mutuality of spiritual friendship as,

...an intentional relationship between two people, founded in Jesus Christ, in which they focus alternately on the nurture of each other's spiritual life. The expectation is not that you be experts but that you come together as spiritual peers who commit themselves to growing in Christ. (1996, 381)

Spiritual companions seek to help each other attend and respond to God, to live with greater awareness of the presence and voice of God, and to see his footprints in their walks through life. They help to make the journey spiritual and help each other live with a keener awareness of the Divine.

This project was also informed by two historical models. One is the practice of *Lectio Divina*, whose method and history were discussed in great

detail in the previous chapter. The second historical model applies adaptations from distinct elements of Methodist spirituality which characterize the Methodist Movement led by John and Charles Wesley. There are three distinct identified characteristics—religious affections, biblical spirituality and social spirituality—upon which this research will focus. To summarize Cracknell and White (2005, 148–153, 159–160), religious affections describe the beginning and end of Methodist spirituality, which is love. Love is at the core of Methodist piety, other characteristics of mind, heart, and action radiate out from that centre. During the movement, believers participated in spiritual disciplines and Bible reading, exposing themselves to the empowering presence of the Spirit. As a result, their affections were shaped and strengthened into Christ-likeness. As this took place they were gradually freed to love both God and neighbor. This manifestation is the embodiment of love flowing from the inside out. That is, believers’ relationships with others and their service to one another was derived first from their love and devotion to God.

Secondly, biblical spirituality proposes the time spent on Bible study or personal devotion would be used for both information and transformation. Wesley advocated a two-fold method of biblical interpretation. First, he calls for mastery of the literal meaning of the text. That is to say, the plain meaning or sense of the words and phrases within the context in which they were written. Following their literal meaning, Wesley encourages an understanding of the spiritual meaning of the passage, and its applications in the life of faith.

Thirdly, social spirituality speaks of the integration of social groups, be they classes, bands, society meetings, or family prayer, all contributing to a network of relationships of mutual care and interdependency for the purpose of growing closer in Christ (Cracknell and White 2005, 159–160). While small religious gatherings were not invented by Methodists, they were a central and persistent feature of Methodist culture for several generations, and helped to shape a deeply rooted understanding of the communal context of Christian spirituality. Wesley advocated that there is no holiness without social holiness. Within a framework of trust, one member might speak lovingly to another, of deep rooted sins. The practice of mutual openness and vulnerability are the hallmark of these trusting relationships.

In addition, a social fabric of mutual care, both spiritual and physical, with a strong sense of accountability were developed. This dynamic became known as the “Holy Club.” Cracknell and White argue that “the ideal of Methodist people meeting in small groups to support and encourage members on the spiritual journey has often allowed the Methodist Church to survive when other larger ecclesial institutions have failed.” (2005, 162). Healey also explains the effectiveness of these societies and classes for the expansion of the movement,

Those who responded positively to his (John Wesley) preaching were organized into local societies. So that they would deepen their own spirituality and pass it on to others. Within the local societies there later developed the smaller “classes” of twelve people with a lay leader, established for the purpose of deeper support and fellowship. The societies became part of the larger circuits, and the circuits came together for the annual conference directed by Wesley himself. It was through the various stages of this structure that Wesley’s spirituality was conveyed in a more lasting way to those who were moved by his preaching. (1998, 331)

The above background from theology, scripture and historical models informed the way that I conducted this research project. In my ministry model on spiritual formation through small group, I have outlined various spiritual disciplines that are critical for spiritual growth. One of the spiritual disciplines is *Lectio Divina*. I wanted to see how *Lectio Divina* works, as a toolset to nurture a deepening spiritual companionship, in the spiritual nurturing process of small groups.

Research Resources

There are two groups of core texts used to support this research: those that provided crucial background to the spirituality, theology, and practice of the research topic, and those which provided the framework for the research design and implementation of the project. Regarding the former, the title of this project was inspired by the second chapter of *Deep Mentoring* with the chapter heading, “A Storied Way” (Reese and Loane 2012, 49–71). It provided practical advice to our small groups on the why and how of paying attention to life stories of one another. Reese and Loane articulated “A Storied Way” as,

...Paying attention to others’ stories and how they have made meaningful sense of their lives challenges the learner to consider related points from his or her own story... By using this life story framework, we can step back and take a more objective look at the what, when and who of earlier chapters (of our life), thus both confirming what has taken place as we’ve matured, and confronting what is needed for further maturity. (Reese and Loane 2012, 53–55)

It gives perspective on where one has come from, where one currently stands, and where one might be heading. While reading the chapter, I became

convinced that an effective method of seeking and experiencing spiritual growth is to actively meditate on God's work in one's life as a story. Armed with this line of thinking, all participants of this project exercised *Lectio Divina* in an attempt to discern God's work in their life during their times of personal devotion. They came together in small groups to share in a storied way what they had noticed and experienced in their spiritual journey. Members of the group learned from one another and kept each other accountable for spiritual growth as their spiritual companionship deepened. In this study, "A Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*," therefore, refer to the experience in encountering God through *Lectio Divina* and then sharing it in the form of life story in a small group.

An excellent resource on Spiritual companionship is David G. Benner's *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Benner 2002). This book provides a technical, in-depth examination of spiritual companionship. Benner highlights examples throughout the Bible, as well as provides instructions for the practical application of spiritual friendship and direction. Among numerous elements that spiritual companionship entail, its most endearing quality is to help each other be more aware of God's activities and work in each other's life. Once realized, the experience of God's presence becomes easy to articulate. In sharing with a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*, this model for spiritual companionship provides one key structural foundation for this study.

There were two key resources used for *Lectio Divina* and how to listen to God. M. Robert Mulholland Jr.'s *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Mulholland 2001) provided theological and historical

background on spiritual formation through spiritual reading including *Lectio Divina*. Key elements were drawn from this book at the orientation retreat at the beginning of this project. Mulholland provides a helpful distinction between informational and formational reading of the Bible, which was especially useful to those participants who were well-versed in informational reading of the Bible. His distinctions explain why a formational way of reading the Bible is necessary. This allowed our participants to then take a more balanced approach between informational and formational ways of reading. James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard's *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (Wilhoit and Howard 2012) provides step by step guides and illustrations on how to read the Bible formationally through *Lectio Divina*.

An excellent resource for the consideration of aspects of the Methodist Movement's culture and its spiritual characteristics is Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White's *An Introduction to World Methodism* (2005). This book informed my ministry model with adaptations from key elements based on the historical model of spiritual companionship, the "Holy Club," and Methodist spirituality in the Wesleyan movement. The three key spiritual elements practiced within the Methodist community of faith, namely, religious affections, biblical and social spirituality, inspired this project on why and how studying the Bible with mutual accountability in small groups transforms lives.

There are eight resources on research methodology and methods which are relevant to this project. Two books were used as core texts, guiding and shaping the project proposal and the final report: Tim Sensing's *Qualitative Research: A*

Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses (Sensing 2011), and Ernest Stringer's *Action Research. 4th ed.* (Stringer 2014). Sensing provides the purpose, process and components for conducting a Doctor of Ministry project. The participant observations protocol provided by Sensing guided this research. Stringer provides extensive information both to understand and to engage in action research which I understand is the most commonly used methodology in Doctor of Ministry projects. Although I did not use action research methodology in my research, Stringer still informs researchers by providing guidance in regards to checking for rigor, as well as conducting interviews and focus groups.

This project used phenomenology as its research methodology. John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth's *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches, 2nd ed.* (Creswell and Poth 2007) provides easy to understand comparisons of the various qualitative research approaches along with their research examples. This book provides a helpful comparison of the various approaches and methodologies for qualitative research. The fourth chapter was instrumental in the choice of adopting Phenomenological Research as the methodology used in this project. Johnny Saldana's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldana 2016) supplies a step by step guide on each of the coding for qualitative research methods with detailed examples. I have adopted their first and second cycles, in vivo coding and focused coding methods, respectively, in this study. Saldana provides an easy to understand guide on

theming the data, further equipping me to implement data analysis and interpretation.

Four books which provided invaluable guidance and shape the ways I used the phenomenological lens to guide how I look at the data, code, analyze and interpret them were Clark Moustakas' *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Moustakas 1994), Mark Vagle's *Crafting Phenomenological Research* (Vagle 2014), Max van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for An Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Manen 1990), and John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (Swinton and Mowat 2006). Moustakas' and Vagle's texts outline various phenomenological approaches and their historic development, as well as detailed step by step guides to phenomenological methodology and methods. Both books guided me in formulating questions for this research approach. In addition, Moustakas' book guided me with individual textual description for the participant narratives, composite structural description and thematic portrayal for my presentation of essential themes. Manen, Swinton, and Mowat outlined hermeneutic phenomenology that guided my data analysis and interpretative process. I found Swinton and Mowat especially helpful in providing a clear step by step guide on data analysis.

Project, Methodology, and Methods

This section describes and explains the approach adopted to carry out this project. It begins with a more specific portrayal of the research setting and the

participants involved in the research, followed by an explanation of the limits and boundaries of the project. The hermeneutic phenomenology methodological approach is summarized, followed by a discussion of the research tools (questionnaires, interviews, focus group, and participant observation) used to collect the data. A timetable outlining the specific dates and actions of the different phases of the project is provided. This section concludes with a consideration of ethics in ministry-based research.

Field

This project was conducted with a small group at Stouffville Grace Baptist Church, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Ontario, from September 2016 to the end of February, 2017. The intervention phase lasted sixteen weeks from September 17, 2016 to January 14, 2017. The pre-intervention orientation retreat and the first meeting took place in the dining room at the home of the existing leader. As a quieter environment was required to minimize interruption for the group members who were parents, the remaining four meetings took place in a sound proof dining room at the researcher's home. The children of this group did not participate in this project and when the group met, children were taken care of in the basement. The orientation retreat and all five meetings were held between four and seven in the evening on Saturday, two or three weeks apart. The focus group took place in the family room at the home of a group member on Jan. 14, 2017. From the researcher's experience, groups that meet in living or family room are more conducive to more intimate sharing. However, this particular group mostly met in

a dining room setting in the past. Thankfully, all group members were comfortable and familiar with a dining room environment.

This group totaled ten members of Cantonese and Mandarin speaking Chinese families, aged from 35-65, ranging from new believers to mature Christians. The participants included four married couples, one married individual whose spouse did not participate and one divorcee. One couple has grown up children. Eight other participants brought their children aged between one to fifteen. The language used at the group was predominantly Cantonese. Three participants came from the People's Republic of China, one of whom can understand Cantonese but could only speak mostly in Mandarin. I was acting as researcher and facilitator. Table 1 names the participants (using pseudonyms) with basic demographic data and their spiritual journey.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Country of Origin	Spiritual Journey
Belicia	46-50	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 21-25 Years in this group: 3-4
Uriah	41-45	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 26 + Years in this group: 3-4
Matthew	61-65	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 26 + Years in this group: 3-4
Ladasha	56-60	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 26 + Years in this group: 3-4
Shawn	41-45	People's Republic of China	Years as Christian: 11-15 Years in this group: 3-4
Ciana	41-45	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 21-25 Years in this group: 3-4
Ian	41-45	People's Republic of China	Years as Christian: 6-10 Years in this group: 3-4
Danice	36-40	People's Republic of China	Years as Christian: 1-5 Years in this group: 3-4
Zacharie	41-45	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 1-5 Years in this group: 3-4
Nasya	46-50	Hong Kong	Years as Christian: 26 + Years in this group: 1-2

Note: Even with the use of pseudonyms it is possible, based on the demographic data in this table, for members of SGBC to identify the participants in this study. All of the participants were made aware of this and granted permission to publish this information.

My role was a shepherd, and I maintained an ongoing relationship with all group members. All members were encouraged to practice *Lectio Divina* on their own and to pay attention to God's work in their life on a regular basis between group meetings, and also to share these experiences during group time (See Appendix 19).

Scope

This research project explored whether “A Storied Way” of *Lectio Divina* facilitated deeper connections between small group members, fostering, in turn, close spiritual companionship for collective spiritual growth.

A key constraint in this research was the length of the intervention. Since the study only had enough time for a seventeen-week intervention, it was not reasonable to expect dramatic spiritual growth and development of spiritual companionship according to the definition described in the prior section on Model and other resources. Spiritual growth refers to the ongoing sanctification process in which a person is becoming Christ-like. Friendship takes time to develop, and spiritual growth is a lifelong undertaking. As a result, this research collected qualitative data on perceived spiritual growth, conceivably a product of numerous additional elements of spiritual companionship as portrayed in the Model segment of this report. Both the constraints of time and purpose limited the analysis and interpretation of data to measure the perceived impact of deeper spiritual companionship on spiritual growth in a small group. This is the primary delimiting boundary of this research project.

Another limitation of this research is that there is very limited prior research on this topic, particularly within a Chinese cultural context. Based on the methodologies and methods described in the following segment, I developed the interview and other research instruments in English and translated them into Chinese. I also took into account certain aspects of Chinese culture relevant to this

study (e.g., tendency to be more comfortable sharing factual or objective information rather than deeper emotions) and further refined the research instruments in Chinese to draw out deeper and more relevant expressions of the participants' inner world and emotions. Further research in cultural competency in the context of the practice of *Lectio Divina* may help fill such gaps in the literature.

Methodology

Sensing (2011, 60) explains that “DMin projects are ministry interventions designed to address particular problems for specific contexts.” Since a lack of deep spiritual companionship was identified, an intervention was executed to create a common experience among group members. This research focused on identifying the phenomena of the lived experience of participants on the research question and based on the findings to develop effective ways to deepen spiritual companionship in small groups. Mark D. Vagle suggests that “phenomenologists set out to study how things are being and becoming” (Vagle 2014, 22). I found the phenomenological method most suitable to collect, analyze, and interpret the data collected from the experience of our participants in this project.

Creswell and Poth define phenomenology as a study which describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon and further expand:

Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon... The inquirer then collects from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a

composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it.... The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon. (2007, 75–81)

Although phenomenology does not attempt to generalize or create a theory, it allows the essence of the experience to emerge from the data. Van Manen suggests:

...phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world. (1990, 9)

Phenomenology helps highlight what makes an experience unique within a mindset that focuses on the structure of an individual or collective experience. Based on the insights obtained from the participants in this project, the leadership of SGBC was able to make informed decisions and project possible next steps for cultivating deeper spiritual companionship for spiritual growth in small groups.

The members of the small group participated and explored the impact of *Lectio Divina* together, applying individual private practice to assist the development of deeper spiritual companionship in small group. Each group member shared life stories with one another in small group meetings, both of their encounters with God and their observation of God’s actions in their own lives, through daily practice of *Lectio Divina*. Many narratives were collected during this research intervention, particularly from the open-ended questionnaires, the interviews, and focus group, which served to enhance data thickness.

Data collected were then analyzed through the lens of phenomenological approach. Max van Manen asserts:

phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or the meaning of our everyday experiences ... Anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt. Consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world ... Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. (van Manen 1990, 9, 179)

Swinton and Mowat agree and affirm that hermeneutic phenomenology provides a rich description of the experience and a necessary interpretative perspective on lived experience (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 109). This methodology searches for the meaning of an experience through textual interpretation. The process of interpretation reveals meanings not immediately apparent. We give significance to a lived experience as we interpret its meaning (van Manen 1990).

Methods

Four data-collection tools were used: questionnaires, participant observations, interviews, and focus groups. Sensing (2011, 74) suggests that methodological triangulation “enhances validity and reliability of the student’s research and is accessible to DMin students.” Creswell and Poth define triangulation as,

involving corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective. They suggest that “When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings. (2018, 260)

Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were employed, using open-ended, neutral, singular, non-leading questions focusing on the perception of the participants' spiritual lives pertaining to the research topic. Questions were designed based on guidance from Patton (1987, 115–126), Sensing (2011, 86–90), van Manen (1990, 42–46), and Stringer (2014, 105–110), who provide guidelines and suggestions for how to ask questions befitting qualitative research and allowing participants to articulate their experience of the research topic. The same principles and instructions applied to questions for interview and focus group as well. Max van Manen argues that “a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also “lived” by the researcher” (1990, 44). Although questionnaires are not commonly used in phenomenological research, I have chosen to use them because of their invaluable ability to provide language, perspectives and themes of participants' past and present experiences pertaining to the research topic. As stated in the Scope of this research, participants were not necessarily familiar with the expression of abstract or subjective ideas, emotions or feelings. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires provided reference points and valuable information for later in the research when I interviewed participants. The phenomena discovered in these questionnaires also grew into their own themes which, in turn, reinforced the emergent interview themes. The discoveries from these questionnaires guided me to prepare suitable follow up questions for the in-person interviews with participants. This allowed me to use their valuable guidance to dig deeper into their reflections to share their lived experience on the

research topic. In formulating questions this way, I was better able to facilitate discussions about difficult or unfamiliar ideas.

The pre-intervention questionnaire (see Appendix 14) was distributed to all participants of the research group at the beginning of the intervention on Sept. 17, 2016. The post-intervention questionnaire (see Appendix 15) was distributed at the end of intervention on Dec. 3, 2016. Both questionnaires were collected within two weeks from date of distribution. Both questionnaires were written in English and Chinese. Instructions were given to all participants to respond in the language that they felt best allowed them to express themselves. For the pre-intervention questionnaires, four responded in Chinese and six responded in English. For the post-intervention questionnaire, five responded in Chinese and four responded in English. One post-intervention questionnaire was not returned. All responses written in Chinese were translated into English before coding for consistency.

The second data-gathering tool used for this project was participant observations, employed during each of the 5 small group meetings. A fellow pastor who has been a member of this group, was trained to conduct the observations based on the protocol found in Appendix 18. The protocol was developed from suggestions and guidelines on what elements to be observed from Sensing (2011, 93–102), Stinger (2014, 113–115), and Vagle (2014, 85–92). Stringer suggests that, “researchers should record these notes during or soon after events have occurred, incorporating information that will later provide the means to describe a context or event” (2014, 113). This fellow pastor took field notes

based on his observations and sent them to me by email within a few days after each meeting and I, as the facilitator of the group, reviewed and expanded as necessary. This provided key insights as to how members interacted with one another as spiritual companions as they practiced *Lectio Divina* regularly. Sensing points out that,

Observation is a powerful way to check the consistency of what people subjectively report about themselves during interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups... By observing the interactions of the participants in the study, the researcher can understand more about their relationships, ideas, norm, habits, and practices. (2011, 93)

The third data-gathering tool used for this project was the interview, with individual members after the end of intervention, between December 18th, 2016 and January 14th, 2017. They were conducted through face-to-face meetings for an average of 45–60 minutes each. The final interview was held with Ladasha on January 14, 2017, just before the focus group meeting, so that her answers would not be affected by the stories of others in the group. One participant did not attend the interview. The way interviews were conducted had been guided by information provided by Moustakas (1994, 114–119) and Vagle (2014, 78–92). I began each interview with a brief social conversation aiming at creating a relaxed, unguarded and trusting atmosphere. Then, I began with a few broad questions as found in Appendix 16. The questions were meant to be thought provoking and focused on their experiences—moments of particular awareness and impact. During the interviews, I listened slowly, thoughtfully, and carefully, allowing the interviewees to share their experience of the phenomenon as lived, as naturally and as fully as they could. All interviews were recorded and the interviews were

conducted in Cantonese. Transcripts were made after the interviews and translated into English for consistency for coding later. Qualitative research seeks to gain deep and rich insights into the meanings that people place on particular forms of experience. Swinton and Mowat suggest that “in order to access these experiences, it is necessary to engage in forms of deep conversation that will elicit this knowledge” (2006, 63). Vagle suggests that the interview is the most important tool for phenomenological studies to draw out such knowledge from participants and suggests that,

... the unstructured interview is the most popular for it tends to be most dialogue, open, and conversational... all interviews are treated as excited opportunities to potentially learn something important about the phenomenon... The goal is to find out as much as you can about the phenomenon from each particular participant. (2014, 78–79)

Sensing also states that,

Interviews allow people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observation. A researcher might arrive at certain conclusions through observation that will be confirmed, modified, or even corrected through interviews. (2011, 103)

Interview was naturally used, therefore, as the primary data-gathering tool for this research project.

The fourth method of data-gathering used for this project was a focus group. After all necessary interviews, a focus group was held on January 14, 2017 for one hour in the family room of one of the participants. All participants in this project attended. Stringer suggests that focus groups “provide another means of acquiring information and might be characterized as a group interview” (2014,

111). Sensing also affirms group interviews, adding additional value to these so-called focus groups:

One person's response may prompt or modify another person's memory of an event and its details. Because not everyone will have the same views and experience, participants influence one another. (2011, 120)

This focus group was used in parallel with the interviews, to solicit responses after the intervention, with two questions as found in Appendix 17. At the beginning of the focus group, all participants were warned that everyone must respect each other's privacy and anonymity. They should not reveal the identities of other participants or indicate who made specific comments during the discussion outside of the focus group. Participants were given opportunities to share their experience and perspectives encountered from the intervention. The same rules and format as those used for interviews were used: employing neutral language, and maximizing opportunities for participant expression, as guided by Stringer (2014, 111–113) and Sensing (2011, 120–124). The entire meeting was recorded. Sharing was made in Cantonese and later translated into English for consistency in coding. The data collected was used as supplementary data for cross reference and thickening of data obtained from individual interviews.

The above tools were chosen also because they are essential tools for phenomenological research (Creswell 79). I followed Creswell's summary closely when defining the procedures for analysis,

The researcher analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes. Following that, the researcher develops a textural description of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions,

situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey in overall essence of the experience. (Creswell, 60)

All of these methods of acquiring data were used to greater understand the experience of those involved in the study. Our focus was to use these methods to extract information from as many interviews and sources as possible, so that, in our abundance of data, clear patterns would emerge despite the often empirical answers provided by participants.

Implementation

At the Orientation Retreat held on September 17, 2016, in the dining room of the original group leader's home, a PowerPoint presentation of this research project as detailed in the consent form (see Appendix 13) was held for all members. We also went through the basics of *Lectio Divina* and how to practice it. Then, I led all members to experience a one-hour example of what was to come in the next five group meetings. We followed a typical four W's of group programs, namely, Worship, Welcome, Word and Work, which are commonly used at SGBC but made some adjustments to suit this research project (Refer to relevant section of my Ministry Model for full discussions of the four W's). We began with a time of singspiration (Worship), followed by an icebreaking game (Welcome). Then, I led them through the Bible study part of the group time (Word) by practicing *Lectio Divina*. For a list of the steps and passages used, see the full curriculum provided to participants, included in Appendix 19. To quiet down, we spent a few minutes following a meditation video (refer to Appendix 19 for video weblink) and a few minutes in silence. I then read a passage three times

with pauses in between while all members closed their eyes to listen intently to God's Word as I read to them. After ten minutes of meditation, members were given opportunities to share with one another. We closed with a time of prayer for one another (Work). The pre-intervention questionnaire was given to all group members and all members were invited to join this research group. They were given two weeks to give consent through verbal means or through emails. At the end of these two weeks, nine out of the ten members in this group gave verbal or email confirmation of their consent.

One key passage was chosen for the whole group to practice *Lectio Divina* together in each of the five meetings. That passage became the theme of that meeting. We began our first group meeting on October 3, 2016. A typical meeting started with about 15 minutes on singspiration led by a member on voluntary basis. Songs were co-ordinated with the theme of the meeting. The group then spent 20 to 30 minutes on icebreaking. A variety of icebreaking exercises were used in different meetings, including a short video, a game, or a discussion starter relating to the theme of the particular meeting. The intent of the icebreakers was to open up group members to each other's lives and at the same time to experience sharing towards the theme of each meeting. The group spent 30 minutes practising *Lectio Divina* on a selected passage. Then, another 30 to 45 minutes was spent on sharing what God revealed to individual members through the time of *Lectio Divina*, as well as what special message that God might have spoken to them in their personal practice of *Lectio Divina* outside of the group meetings. The group spent about 15 minutes in prayer for one another at the end

of each meeting. Starting with icebreakers, *Lectio Divina* and prayers often saw groups splitting into two or three. Afterward, they would come together as a group to share key learnings and experience between subgroups. In light of the participant's observations made at the first meeting, it was found that members seemed hesitant to share their inner feelings and more personal experience on *Lectio Divina*. A change was made in the second meeting to extend the icebreaking time to 45 minutes with a variety of conversation starters in order to accelerate the relational growth between one another. On the third meeting onwards, the time for icebreakers stabilized to a normal time of 20–30 minutes. I varied the centering exercises of meditation through meditative songs, videos on breathing exercises for Christian meditation (see weblink in Appendix 19) or just a time of silence for 5–10 minutes. In each of the five group meetings during the intervention period, group members met for 2.5–3 hours. In between group meetings, a *Lectio Divina* based devotional guide specifying passages to be used was given to all members to practice on their own (see Appendix 19 for the weblink for the devotional guide written in Chinese). Typically, six days of devotional guides were given to participants to practice *Lectio Divina* during a two weeks period. Participants were told to practice at least six days of devotional materials for a two weeks period before the next group meeting and be ready to share their experience and what God might or might not have spoken to them through those passages. After the first meeting, some participants expressed concern that they might not be able to complete the practice with all six days of materials due to their other responsibilities. In response, participants were then

encouraged to practice in a variety of ways during their own private devotional time during the two weeks period before each group meeting. These ways all split up the process of devotion, either allowing the reading or the meditation of the passage to be performed on a separate day as the practice of *Lectio Divina*, effectively halving the workload while still encouraging a deep devotional experience. All participants were encouraged to practice at least two days of the devotional materials before each meeting. At least half of the participants practiced all six days of devotional materials while some practiced with the minimum requirements.

Data Analysis

There were five sets of data to code: the two questionnaires, one focus group, nine interviews and participant observations of the five meetings. Audio data including those recorded from interviews and focus group were translated into English from Cantonese. Audio data were listened to while I was reading the translated transcripts. Before coding began, I did what Saldana (2016, 20) suggested for pre-coding. Each set of data was read multiple times thoroughly to familiarize myself with the data and to acquire a sense of each individual and their background and experiences. I read the data one last time before coding began, searching for themes and proceeded to circle, highlight, bold, underline and colour rich or significant participant quotes or passages that I found striking—those ‘codable moments’ worthy of attention. Notes were also made in the margins to begin thematic analysis. Some quotes served as illustrative examples

in the report. I was mindful of the importance to separate my experiences and curiosity from the content of this study before coding began. All presuppositions were detailed in a field journal to remind myself to stay away from my knowledge as much as humanly possible during the coding process as van Manen suggests, “to turn this knowledge against itself... exposing its shallow or concealing character” (1990, 47).

I used in vivo coding, sometimes referred to as “inductive coding,” for first cycle coding to minimize the possibility of my own potential bias. Loosely translated, in vivo is “in that which is alive,” and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, “the terms used by participants themselves” (Strauss 1987, 33). Saldana suggests that in vivo coding is especially appropriate for studies that “prioritize and honor participant’s voice” (2016, 106). Stringer also points out that in vivo coding is “more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people’s experience” (2014, 140). A total of 1039 sentences or paragraphs were coded into 277 codes after multiple reviews and re-coding in the first cycle coding effort. Categories were discovered through focused coding method in second cycle coding. Saldana points out that focused coding “searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus” (2014, 240). After several rounds of reviews, I made the decisions as to which initial codes made the most analytic sense (Charmaz 2014, 139). 277 codes were then filtered into 35 categories.

Informed by data analysis and interpretative guidelines provided by Swinton and Mowat (2006, 109–119), Creswell and Poth (2018, 77–82, 115–116), and van Manen (1990, 77–109), I next began the phenomenological reduction process.

I immersed myself in these codes and categories which I listed alongside the text of transcribed interviews repeatedly. I continued to analyze through organized clusters of meaning, and from these clusters evolved both textual and structural descriptions of the experiences. These, in turn, led to composite descriptive texts which presented the “essence” of the respective phenomenon (Creswell 2007, 60–62).

I identified salient points from within the data to further support the evolution of core topics. I used codified and categorized interpretive memoing on the margins of the Excel file, in which I suggested identifiers, words that best represented emerging topics that could serve to form categories of meaning.

This helped me determine direction for further analysis. During this recoding process, I expanded on my memos with better focus, justifying my evolving analysis directly through the data for the purpose of confirming and revising emerging topics and refining those ideas into meaning units. I then thought and reflected deeply about the evolving categories and searched for alternative understanding before converting the emergent categories into thematic units and using the themes to compose my descriptive report. This reduction process of the real experiences of the participants required me to ensure my interpretation considered the grammatical and psychological elements reported; I

had to see beyond the simple written words. Tone of voice, body language, and silence were equally relevant and essential to the hermeneutic interpretation. Van Manen states, “Composing linguistic transformation is not a mechanical procedure. Rather, it is a creative hermeneutic process” (van Manen, 1990, 96). It was, therefore, important for me to include participant’s observations in order to cross reference, evaluate, and validate the emerging themes.

“Phenomenology is the study of essences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. vii). Essences are the essential elements of a phenomenon, those things which makes it recognizable as such (van Manen 1990, 10). A phenomenological text is considered good if it demonstrates the effect of making us suddenly see “something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experience” (van Manen 1990, 11). I took considerations of these insights and vetted the developing data composition through focused coding again, identifying both the significance and frequency of the codes. This provided the framework for me to renegotiate these clusters into a more succinct representation of the data that captured the integrity of the participants’ experiences and understanding of the research topics. From this, I constructed a thematic analysis of each of the research transcripts. This involved structuring the themes in line with the various emphases within the text and developing an initial interpretation of the lived experience of each of the participants. Relevant text was extracted and used to illustrate the various themes. Table 1 depicts the themes and thematic statements of each of the participants with frequency, with each member represented by a random number.

Table 2: Frequency of Themes and Thematic Statements by Participants

Essential Themes (ET) / Thematic Statements (TS)		Participants										Total count
		1021	2022	3023	4024	5025	6026	6027	7028	8029	9030	
ET	A sense of closer and personal relationship with God	10	5	16	5	6	11	8	2	14	1	78
	God speaks individually	3	2	2	1	1	3	3	1	4	1	21
TS	Personal relevance	5	1	5	2	4	3	3	1	5	0	29
	Response readiness	2	2	9	2	1	5	2	0	5	0	28
ET	Deeper and enriched sharing with one another	4	6	7	7	4	2	7	2	5	1	45
	enriched understanding of passages	1	2	2	3	1	0	3	0	1	0	13
TS	life stories enriched	1	2	3	3	2	1	1	2	1	0	16
	spiritual sharing enriched	2	2	2	1	1	1	3	0	3	1	16
ET	Spiritual growth from observing the spiritual journey of others	1	4	1	3	2	4	5	2	4	1	27
	touched hearts	3	1	2	1	3	2	2	1	5	1	21
TS	desire more	3	2	3	1	1	1	3	0	6	1	21
	contagious learning	1	4	1	3	2	4	5	2	4	1	27
ET	Positive Influence on devotional habits	4	0	4	0	5	2	6	1	2	0	24
	Prepared to listen	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	5	0	17
TS	dialogue with God	1	0	1	0	3	1	3	0	1	0	10
	dig deeper into one's heart	3	0	3	0	2	1	3	1	1	0	14
ET	Value of knowing one another deeply	2	1	6	2	1	2	4	0	3	1	22
	authentic sharing	4	2	5	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	21
TS	caring more	4	3	6	1	5	3	8	0	4	1	35
	affirmation and encouragement	2	1	6	2	1	2	4	0	3	1	22

According to van Manen, writing and re-writing is essential for understanding the phenomenon. In this paradigm, the act of writing is not separate from the research, it is an integral part of the process (van Manen 1990). A researcher conducting a phenomenological study cannot only calculate the results of an experiment with the traditional scientific method. The researcher must address their experience of the phenomenon, their insights gleaned from the interviews, revisit the interviews, reread the transcripts, and recontact participants to ensure their interviews accurately articulated what they intended. Then all of that information must be integrated into a cohesive and coherent text. I followed

these procedures before the final accounts were produced. I sought to seek validation, avoid repetitive themes, and note any discrepancies during this process. The reconstructed, thematized narratives were then given back to the participants for validation through emails. All participants responded promptly and most confirmed their affirmation of the accuracy of the descriptions, few requiring minor changes and adjustments which I performed before finalizing the documents. Through the reduction process, 310 significant statements relevant directly to the research topic were identified. These were further refined, grouped into 15 thematic statements under five essential themes. Five themes reflected the essence of this research project. Refer to Table 2 for a summary of the essential themes, thematic statements and their respective frequency.

Phases and Timetable

Table 3: Phases and Timetable

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Developing the Innovation	REB application Submitted	Sept. 1 (approval received on Sept. 23)	Hubert	Written report
	Final phenomenological research proposal submitted	Sept. 1	Hubert	Written report
	Verbal consent obtained	Sept. 30	Hubert and participants	Hubert distributed letters to all participants

				on Sept. 17 and consent received from all participants except one by email or by verbal means
Orientation Retreat	Provided orientation on <i>Lectio Divina</i> & how to share in a storied way in small groups.	Sept. 17	Hubert	Hubert conducted training and provided practice opportunities with Q & A for the Project
Gathering Pre-Intervention Data	Hand out questionnaire 1	Sept. 17	Hubert	Hubert distributed questionnaire to all participants
	Questionnaire 1 filled out and returned	By Sept. 30	Participants	Participants filled out and returned directly to Hubert by emails or in person
Intervention (Small Group Meetings)	Meeting 1	Oct. 1: Saturday	All participants	Matthew was briefed and trained to conduct participant observations in each meeting to take field notes. All notes completed within 2-5 days after the meeting.
	Meeting 2	Oct. 15: Saturday	All participants	
	Meeting 3	Nov. 5: Saturday	All participants	
	Meeting 4	Nov. 19: Saturday	All participants	
	Meeting 5	Dec. 3: Saturday	All participants	
	Hand out questionnaire 2	Dec. 3: Saturday	Hubert	

Gathering Post-Intervention Data	Questionnaire 2 filled out and returned	By Dec. 25	Participants	Hubert distributed at end of meeting 5 to all participants. Participants returned by emails or in person.
	Interviews: Interview individual participants	Between Dec. 18, 2016 and Jan. 14, 2017	Hubert	Dates of interviews were arranged after participants returned questionnaire 2. Hubert interviewed individual participants
	Conducted focus group	Jan. 14, 2017 Saturday	All participants	Hubert facilitated, audio recorded all sharing
	Code data for questionnaire 1	By Nov. 15, 2016	Hubert	4 of 10 respondents wrote in Chinese which required translation before coding.
Analysis	Code data for participant observation	Within two weeks after each meeting	Hubert	
	Code data for questionnaire 2	By Feb. 15, 2017	Hubert	5 of the 9 respondents wrote in Chinese

				which required translation into English before coding.
	Code data for focus group	By April 15, 2017	Hubert	Audio data in Cantonese was first translated and then transcribed into English before coding
	Review coded data	By July 30, 2017	All participants reviewed and gave feedback through emails	
	Revise coded data	Aug. 8, 2017	Hubert	
Interpretation	Interpreted coded data	By Sept. 15, 2017	All participants gave feedback through emails.	Discern meaning of data
Reporting	Draft written report for participants to review	Oct. 20, 2017	Hubert wrote the report; participants reviewed and gave feedback by emails	
	Final written report	By Oct. 31, 2017	Hubert	

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

This research project followed the “*Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.*” (TCPS 2010). In order to address the power differential between myself, being the pastor of participants as well as the researcher of the project, it was important for me to beware of this perceived power differential and to make efforts to keep its effect to a minimum. I stressed to all participants that I would be a participant and facilitator in this group and that their current group leader would remain the ultimate leader for the group. If they had any concern during the process of this research project, they were most welcome to refer their concerns to the group leader as well as to the deacons’ board. I was held accountable by the deacons’ board of SGBC throughout this project. Sensing explains that “DMin students are pastorally connected to the participants in their projects. Your first priority is always to your ministry and to the service of the people in your parish” (Sensing 2011, 42). I kept this in mind throughout this project, giving priority to my shepherding role with all participants.

All participants were thoroughly briefed on the exact nature of the research project, along with its risks and benefits. They understood the potential that, despite anonymization attempts, they may be recognized based on the profile their answers could create, especially in a smaller church. Subjects also were aware of the project, that it contributed to the ongoing development of their church, and that the outcomes information gathered in this study would inform the

leadership of our church in our decision-making process. Finally, they were made aware of the benefits of spiritual companionship, and the potential to grow closer to God both through spiritual exercises, and through spiritual companionship. Since an existing small group was invited to participate in this project, all participants already had a trusting relationship with one another and with the researcher. The idea of written consent, therefore, harbored an uncomfortable and negative connotation in the current context. In addition, Chinese culture generally prefers verbal consent over written ones. Therefore, I chose to read the content of the written consent slowly, clearly and fully to all participants at the orientation retreat before they committed to participate and highlighted the content of the informed consent again at the beginning of actual intervention. Furthermore, participants were given full understanding that their participation was entirely on a voluntary basis and that everyone had the right at any time and for any reason to withdraw from the research project without any consequence and would be welcome to continue to join the small group in their usual manner. A copy of this informed consent was emailed to each participant promptly after the retreat. Informed consent as well as the right to withdraw anytime provided an important ethical safeguard to the project.

Every participant was required to give their verbal or email permission to use their input as part of the research. They were assured that any information given would be dealt with the utmost confidentiality. This project presented only minimal risk to those who partook because data was collected and communicated through the anonymity of a pseudonym. If they did not feel comfortable about

disclosing any part or all of the information (even in an anonymous form), then none of the materials shared by them would be used as collected data. One of the participants, Danice, did not initially want to commit to participate in this research group. However, she participated in all activities and interventions. Eventually, she gave permission to the researcher to use her data provided from the first questionnaire and the focus group. She did not return the second questionnaire and also did not participate in the interview.

All data were stored in secured storage at the researcher's home office and third parties will not be permitted to review them without prior permission of all participants. All audio and transcribed data will be disposed on or before Nov. 1, 2020.

Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

In this section, the results of my research, the explanation, both of the understanding of the significance of these findings, and their implications for SGBC's ongoing ministry, will be presented. Although discussions on methodology and methods used have already been made in prior sections, it may be helpful to recap what analyzing data through a phenomenological lens entails. The phenomenological lens attempts to look at what participants experience in relation to the research topic. To study how participants experienced and understood deeper friendship and spiritual growth, I established my research framework based on two primary questions:

- How does the sharing of these life stories deepen spiritual companionships?
- How does spiritual companionship shape the participants' relationships?

A careful examination of all relevant data and the transcripts through the phenomenological reduction process revealed five main themes that appeared consistently across all participants: a sense of closer and personal relationships with God, deeper and enriched sharing with one another, personal growth from observing the spiritual journey of others, positive influence on devotional habits, and value of knowing one another deeply.

These themes outline participants' personal experience of practicing *Lectio Divina* privately, the sharing of that experience through life stories with one another, and the ways in which these experiences cultivated a deeper spiritual companionship in the small group. Each theme illustrates a particular way in which the participants have experienced deeper spiritual companionship over time.

Findings

These findings were from data collected from two questionnaires, a post intervention interview with individual participants, a focus group, and participant observations with a total sample of ten participants from one of the small groups at SGBC. These data provided a venue for a rich depiction of how participants experience and understand deeper spiritual companionship in a small group setting. Although the qualitative approach provided a semi-scripted plan, our findings evolved through patterns of discovery in which I strove to understand

meaning as it was represented through the voice and experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). I attempted to tell their story through their voice, their perspective, their lived experiences, and their understanding in this section. Indeed, the findings are a culmination of the participants' voices; they provide deep perspectives into their lives and experiences. Participants participating in this study were provided an opportunity to check documented transcripts for accuracy which assisted with validity and reliability (Creswell and Poth 2018, 259–262).

Summary of Participants

Most members have known each other in the same small group for a few years, providing the chance to develop closer relationship. This small group was chosen for their diversity in age, cultural background, and spiritual maturity for potential diverse experience and perspectives. Three members of the group immigrated from the People's Republic of China while the rest of the members came from Hong Kong. Participant demographics are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4: Participant Demographics

Variables		Number of participants
Age		
	36–40	1
	41–45	5
	46–50	2
	50–56	0
	56–60	1
	60–65	1
Sex		
	Female	6
	Male	4
Number of Years as a Christian		
	1–5	2
	6–10	1
	11–15	1
	21–25	2
	26 or above	4
Number of Years in this Small Group		
	1–2	1
	3–4	9
Participants' Country of Origin		
	The People's Republic of China	3
	Hong Kong	7

Participant Narratives

Qualitative inquiry allowed me the opportunity to engage with the participants as I investigated the phenomena surrounding their experience and understanding of a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*. The following descriptions are designated to help the reader feel the essence of their lived experiences. The themes that emerged from the data can best be comprehended through each participant's story. Again, pseudonyms were created to protect confidentiality.

Belicia

Belicia, age 46–50, became a Christian about 21–25 years ago. She immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1992. She has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed she has a robust devotional practice. She already enjoyed regular devotion, and kept a journal with special insights from time to time. She described her relationship with God as close and intimate, and demonstrated a good grasp of God’s character and nature. She described a rather interactive relationship with God with “the Holy Spirit reminded me,” “Scriptures spoke to me,” and she responded with “reverence and obedience.” But she also expressed her dilemma in this relationship, “While I am desirous of a more intimate relationship with God, I am afraid of this closeness at the same time since I am fearful of His pruning.” When she felt dry spiritually, she would “spend more time in silence, prayer and meditation of the Scripture.” She stated that “I felt God’s presence most when I am in silence and prayer.” She experienced “God’s presence, discipline, healing” in her spiritual journey.

Data collected after the intervention show how Belicia experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. At the beginning of the interview, she said that there were no big changes in her relationship with God. As the interview progressed, she asserted that she began to pay more attention to God’s personal message in her devotional practice. She also described a change of devotional habits. In the past, she would read one passage a day and a different passage the

next without much awareness of the interconnection between the messages from various days from the devotion. She discovered that when she spent time on meditation on the same passage over several days, sought deeper understanding and focused her attention in listening to God, “the message[s] eventually came through which were very relevant to my ongoing life issues.” She felt a sense of dialogue with God and a deeper personal understanding of God’s Word and its relevance to her daily life. She stated that she began to realize that God, at times, spoke to her over time in a consistent way. She claimed that “God’s Word works its ways in my life throughout the day and I have become more conscious of God’s presence.” As a result, she “was in awe of God and to respond in obedience in the ways that I should go in my service to the Lord.” And after sharing a special encounter in her intimate relationship with God, she proclaimed that “It was a wonderful and special few days for me.” She discovered that group members tend to share deeper and more on their own personal life. She believed she could “sense where other group members’ spiritual journey are when we shared the Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*.” She noticed that different group members, at times, shared different messages which they had received from God based on the same passage. She saw God working in different group members’ life and speaking to them in unexpected ways. By listening to other’s life stories, at one point, Belicia recalled that she was reminded to pursue her “relationship with God as otherwise, the relationship will regress.” She experienced authentic sharing among members based on a trusting relationship. She values “openness to

God and one another” as it played an important role in a deeper spiritual companionship.

Uriah

Uriah, age 41–45, became a Christian more than 25 years ago. He immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1993. He has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that he has a regular devotional practice. He described his eagerness to “know more about God and how God wants me to live out my faith in Him,” through the time of devotion. He sought guidance from Scriptures to deal with issues challenges in life. He claimed that he did not feel that other group members contributed significantly to his spiritual growth.

Data collected after the intervention show how Uriah experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. He claimed that his relationship with God was in the process of changing from one that was like a teacher and student to one that was more like a father and son. He stated that he was “so used to using my mind to think” rather than using his heart to listen during time of devotion. As a student, he felt his devotional practice was routinely trying to “just get it done in a short period of time” and to learn informationally “what the teacher [God] wanted me to do in accordance to His ways.” He felt that his relationship became closer and more intimate with God through the practice of *Lectio Divina*. As a son, he spent more time enjoying just being with his father. He asserted that “the son may just want to share his challenges and struggles without the need to get an answer

from his father. The son just wanted his father to listen to him.” His main struggle was to quiet down his heart and mind to keep himself in a listening mode. Yet, he maintained that he was making progress of developing his devotional habits that made him feeling more intimate with God. He experienced God in more personal ways, “felt that God revealed ‘who I am’ and what issues that I have through my meditation. When I could identify clearly the issues in my life or can pinpoint the issues in the challenges that I was facing, the problems could work their way out and get resolved.” Another time, he shared that “God spoke to me in a special and personal way through the familiar story of the Prodigal son.” Although the time when everyone shared life stories in the small group was similar to what they did in the past, the content went deeper and more personal intermingled with God’s Word. Uriah stressed that it was helpful for him to understand other group members’ spiritual journey more for mutual accountability. He noticed that “when we shared a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*, I saw different perspectives on different passages that enrich my own understanding of the passages.” He also discovered that, often, “some of us shared on the same passage but with different perspectives and that God spoke to each of them in different ways.” He found himself being impacted by others as he “measured his own spiritual journey with that of other group members.” Uriah felt “a more intimate sharing when we all shared our experiences on how God spoke to us in different or same ways from our devotion.” The sharing touched each other’s hearts, and facilitated “contagious, mutual learning and encouragement.” For that to happen, he stressed

the value of group members' authenticity and openness, which enabled the sharing of personal struggles, failures, and weaknesses.

Matthew

Matthew, age 60–65, became a Christian more than 25 years ago. He immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1982. He has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that he has a semi-regular devotional practice, 2–3 times a week. He sought to understand and analyze passages for new insights and applications. He described himself as an intellectual person and once a cognitive decision is made, he would stick to it. He stated that “things can hardly come into my heart without going through my mind first, but they do occasionally.” He characterized his relationship with God as a loving couple in a steady relationship. It was like a candle, “which does not have much heat but it always gives out light as a reflection of its presence.” As perhaps a hyper-rational person, he admitted that his weakness was empathy for others. Since he is one of the more spiritually mature members of the group, other members came to him for answers. He described his relationship with other members as his “tutors who give me homework with questions that I’m not allowed to provide just the model answers.”

Data collected after the intervention show how Matthew experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. He had a different experience in his devotional practice; the practice of *Lectio Divina* helped him to sense that God spoke to him in more direct and personal ways. He stated that “it is different from

the cognitive understanding of the text which I used to do. In the past, my devotional practice did not feel as personal and intimate with God.” He realized that he seldom practiced deeper reflection in his devotion in the past. With *Lectio Divina*, he experienced revelations while digging deeper into the text through meditation, which took him “from one focal point of thought to... a chain of thoughts to receive what God is speaking to me through the passage.” He found himself more prepared to reflect and discern “what God’s Word meant to [him] personally repeatedly.” He noticed that the Holy Spirit spoke to him, “sometimes more than just what the text says, God may use this one passage on a given day and spoke to me on another subject matter that God brought to my attention.” He expressed his desire to deepen relationship with God since he experienced an attitude change. In the past, he would weigh pros and cons before a decision and acted upon “my feelings towards what God might have spoken to me.” Now, he described a more obedient attitude with actions as and when he discovered through meditation with a strong sense of what God was speaking to him to do or to change. He found other group members were quite ready to have spiritual dialogue sharing the part of their spiritual life that they did not share before. He noted that, increasingly, other group members had “taken down their masks and shared authentically.” He observed that members cared for one another more deeply, keeping each other accountable when they “trust each other enough to shed tears as they shared their own sorrow and struggles.” With deeper knowledge of one another, Matthew valued the opportunity, as a more matured member of the group, “to shepherd particular members and be an encourager and

give them necessary and appropriate affirmation to facilitate their spiritual growth.

Ladasha

Ladasha, age 56–60, became a Christian more than 25 years ago. She immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1983. She has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Ladasha’s pre-intervention questionnaire results indicated that she had a regular devotional practice, but not necessarily daily. She used the Bible and also devotional guides for her time of devotion and practiced prayer, meditation and reflection whenever possible, including while walking her dog. She found that her devotional practice invigorated her day-to-day life, helping her to be reminded of who she is and to whom she belongs. She was assured of God’s presence in her life and His purpose for her. She stated that she tried to always be ready to respond and serve according to God’s guidance. She described her relationship with God as that of shepherd and sheep as well as master and servant. She expressed that other group members had played a role in the development of her spiritual life, primarily through the sharing of God’s work in their lives.

Data collected after the intervention show how Ladasha experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. She was very busy during the course of this special small group, and struggled with *Lectio Divina* as she had difficulty finding time without distraction or disturbance, a requirement for cultivating a still heart and listening ears to discern the Spirit. Though she was only able to

practice *Lectio Divina* irregularly, the times that she did practice, she found it instrumental in bringing her attention to God, aiding her awareness of the Holy Spirit's instruction for her. She noticed that a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* pushed group members to "focus their sharing of life story and their own spiritual journey based on God's Word." She thought that her different perspectives and experiences on the Word of God have enriched group members in their spiritual journeys, as well. She valued group members' authentic sharing of their struggles and their private lives as this helped build a closer relationship with one another. In general, she felt that life story sharing through meditation on God's Word "pulls the distance between God and individual members closer."

Shawn

Shawn, age 41–45, became a Christian about 11–15 years ago. He immigrated to Toronto from Jinan, Shandong Province of China in 2001. He has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that he has a regular devotional practice but practiced in rather routine and superficial ways. He stated that "did not have a habit of getting into deep thinking of the meaning behind the words, or what really God want me to get from it." Yet, he believed devotion was instrumental to "better understanding of God's words," and for him to learn how to follow God's word in his life. He felt distant in his relationship with God although he knew God was working actively in his life and that he was a child of God. He was troubled that "I have not been able to hear His voice to me" and "do not know how to discern

His voice.” He was troubled by this because he heard other people hearing the voice of God over many years of his Christian walk. He asserted that he learned and grew spiritually through the life stories shared by other members. In addition, he was learning especially from the exemplary life of a couple in the group who mentored him and became his role model.

Data collected after the intervention show how Shawn experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. He had a more engaged and interactive experience in his relationship with God. He found himself “having a more dialogue relationship with God.” In his time of devotion, he discovered that it was better not to have a long or wordy passage for study. In fact, he experienced a deeper understanding of God’s Word with a shorter passage when he “chewed on” the Word more intentionally. With his past devotional habits, his main struggle was to quiet himself to listen to God. The practice of *Lectio Divina* helped him “to dig deeper into [his] own spiritual life.” The practice helped him to “pay attention to what God wants to speak to me about in a shorter passage in order to be able to hear God’s voice.” He asserted that he learned to listen for God’s voice from other group members who had shared their experiences. In subsequent meetings, they also shared how they overcame these difficulties and how they pursued the ability to listen to what the Holy Spirit spoke to them inside their heart. These stories equipped Shawn to improve his practice as well. He stated that he also learned from different group members of their “different perspectives and what messages they received from God.” He discovered that “through discussion, sharing, and prayers in our life group, other member’s life

stories impacted my spiritual life.” Shawn believed that the sharing of his life stories would have some impact on other group members. He not only experienced a process of self-discovery, but also a discovery of others, as he delved deeper into their inner spiritual lives and feelings in this small group. He valued this increasing “relational closeness” as group members continued to share, learn, and encourage one another. He thought of his members outside of group time more often and his desire to see and care for them, as well as share experiences with them, had greatly increased.

Ciana

Ciana, age 46–50, became a Christian 21–25 years ago. She first immigrated to Vancouver in 1999 from Hong Kong and moved to Toronto a year later. She has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that she has a regular devotional practice which she sought to live by. She stated that she wants her life to be a “Christian life based on God’s standards, not the standard of this secular world.” During the day, when a word or a verse came to mind from the time of devotion done earlier, she would meditate on them. She claimed that she has a good relationship with God and that “God spoke to me through sermons, Bible studies, devotions and different people.” She asserted that her group members “played an important role in the development of my spiritual life.” When she was sad, they encouraged her using Bible verses and prayed with her.

Data collected after the intervention show how Ciana experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. Ciana described her past devotion as more of a systematic approach to reading a passage a day. Usually, the devotion time was relatively short and she was to read and think within a restricted time frame. She had a different experience in her devotional practice. At the beginning, she was quite afraid of quieting down herself as she equated that as “emptying herself” for fear that evil spirits might enter into her. That was what she was taught growing up. In addition, she was afraid “what if God really talked to me which I did not want to respond the way He wanted me to?” However, influenced by sharing by other group members, she asserted that “my initial fear of God [who might be truly talking to me personally] had disappeared.” Her devotional practice became more interactive. She picked up words or phrases that she would mediate and reflect on throughout the day. She felt that God was “speaking to me and re-affirmed what He wanted to convey to me through various ways.” She claimed that it was still a challenge for her to quiet down her heart to listen to God. But, when she did, she felt “a closer and more intimate relationship with God as His message touched my soul in deeper ways.” And, she claimed that God’s message to her was also quite relevant to her daily life. She realized that there was much to learn from the group members through their life stories sharing. She believed that “when she shared authentically on her struggles and challenges as well as how God spoke to her.” She understood that this could also help other group members grow spiritually. She valued how this group cared for one another as they “asked frequently how each other are spiritually and about their spiritual progress.” She

believed that her group members helped to solidify her faith and contributed to her spiritual development through mutual support and encouragement.

Ian

Ian, age 41–45, became a Christian about 6–10 years ago. He immigrated to Toronto from Guangzhou, Guangdong Province of China, in 2005. He has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that he has a regular devotional practice with the use of audio Bible or devotional guides. He sought to apply God’s word in his daily living. He described his devotional practice as routine, superficial and boring. Ian’s relationship with God was such that he wanted to do His will but at times when he “distance away from God by not doing His will in the midst of mundane struggles of life, I feel regrets.” He affirmed that his group members played important role in his spiritual growth “by being companions on the spiritual journey.” He described such companionship as “helping me to know how I am doing as a Christian, what I need to improve, areas where I did wrong, what I need to persist. They are like a mirror that reflect on my life of strength and weaknesses.”

Data collected after the intervention show how Ian experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. He realized that his past devotional habits were more about “attractions to insights from authors of devotional guides and how people in the Bible responded to God’s commands.” He suggested that these habits were fuelled, and limited, exclusively by the idea of cognitive learning, which did not allow his devotions deeper into his heart. He claimed a very

different experience from practicing *Lectio Divina*. At the beginning of the practice, he fell asleep, feeling comfy, restful, and peaceful when he meditated. He said that he “did not hear much from God” then. Although he did not practice regularly, he made persistent attempts to practice. As he progressed, he discovered that the first step of quiet down his heart and mind was critical to his capacity and clarity in listening to God’s voice in his heart. He said his mind was always busy with “doings” and yet, he said he wanted to overcome any difficulties that prohibited him from quieting down his heart. He felt that God was speaking to him with personal relevance. He described the experience as “in the past, I felt like I was speaking to a wall when I shared what troubled me in my heart to God since He would not talk back to me. Now, I experienced that He responded and told me what to do. It was not self-talk and that God was speaking to me and communicating with me.” His devotional practice became more interactive and had more dialogue with God, like a “two-way street.” Ian felt that this experience broke the “ice between him and God and got him to a closer and more intimate relationship with God.” He was impressed with how different group members experienced God in deeper and more personal ways when sharing their life stories. He specifically recalled one time that “we shared which passage most impressed upon us and caught our attention in the past two weeks and three of us chose the same passage with three diverse insights and experience.” Ian noticed that group members resonated with each other as they were able to identify with the experience of one another. He realized that he could learn from other group members as God spoke to each of them in personal ways. He was

impressed with a deeper knowledge of other group members on their spiritual life and found that their interactions were no longer superficial and went beyond a social level. He saw members are “learning from one another and contributing to each other’s spiritual life.” He affirmed that it made group sharing much more interesting. Ian valued “closer” relationships with other group members as they shared authentically, affirming and encouraging each other. He claimed that this closer relationship motivated him to care more for his fellow members.

Danice

Danice, age 36–40, is a relatively young Christian—about 1–5 years old in her faith. She immigrated to Toronto from Guangzhou, Guangdong Province of China, in 2005. She has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that she did not have a regular devotional practice nor did she have specific ways of doing devotion. She claimed whenever she did devotion, “it provided guidance on how to behave in my daily life, providing discipline and caution for my interaction with others and in my work.” She asserted that she felt inspired and refreshed whenever she did devotion. She self-identified as a “Sunday church goer,” and her relationship with God was cold and bland. Although she feared going astray from God, she described herself as “unable to have any real remedial action as I am lazy on spiritual things.” She stated that she would only seek God or do devotion when she or her family were in troubles. She attributed her staying in the faith as a

result of group members “tolerating my slow spiritual growth” and persistently gave her “encouragement and support.”

Data collected after the intervention show how Danice experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. She saw progress in her own devotional practice. She described her previous devotional habits as superficial, instead of personal. She claimed that she was not able to think deeper into what passage meant, or how they applied to her. Hence, she did not feel that scripture could be personal. She pointed out that her initial feeling on practicing *Lectio Divina* was that it was beyond her reach as a new believer. She “heard nothing from God” when most other group members shared that they “heard God speaking to them.” As the group progressed, however, she learned from other group members. The processes that she discovered “opened my eyes and mind” on how to have a “more personal relationship with God.” She realized that she picked up insights from others in their practice of *Lectio Divina* progressively and began to have similar experiences, gaining the fundamental understanding that others had on “how they listened to God and what it meant for God to speak to someone.” She asserted that “now I could sometimes hear God told me things specifically and that I also had feelings about the passages.”

Zacharie

Zacharie, age 41–45, is a relatively young Christian for about 1–5 years. She immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1984. She has been a member of this small group for 3–4 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed that

she has a regular devotional practice which reminded her daily of “how grateful and blessed I am to have Him by my side.” She asserted that she would spend about 30 minutes meditating on God’s Word on most Saturdays. She claimed that her devotional practice guided her “to do and walk what is right and not to drift away from Him.” She stated that although she would not describe her relationship with God as close, but she felt His presence and knew that He is real. She also described God as her friend who listened to her in times of needs. She affirmed that her group members played a role in her spiritual life. Their teachings and sharing nurtured her spiritually.

Data collected after the intervention show how Zacharie experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. She emphasized that her devotional habits became more interactive with God. She struggled to quiet down in the beginning. She claimed that to “sit still, not to think of anything and to quiet down my heart was quite hard and difficult for me.” Yet, as she practiced more, she found that her thoughts went deeper during the time of meditation if she began with centering exercises to first quiet her mind and heart. She asserted that she would meditate a word or phrase that God gave her during time of devotion and often pondered on them further throughout the day. She experienced more dialogue with God and had a more interactive relationship with Him. Zacharie noted that her relationship with God moved from “head knowledge to real experience.” She had more faith and trust in Him as she was “more easily touched by the passages as she read or listened to them.” She discovered that it was critical for her to have “a wide-open mind and heart for God in order to listen and receive

the message from God.” This allowed her to “focus more on the passage and opened to what God wanted to speak to me,” without being overly worried about the literal meaning of the Word. As God’s commands became more apparent, Zacharie claimed that she was more obedient to them, trying “new serving opportunities as the Holy Spirit guided her in her heart.” She also noted the “movement of the Holy Spirit among group members as the Holy Spirit reminded, admonished, loved and cared for us.” She claimed she was able to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit when life stories were shared among members. She discovered that even when group members looked at the same picture or passage together, they had “different takes on what we heard from God on our response were different. It seems that the Holy Spirit was reminding everyone in a personal way based on our individual life circumstances.” She observed that when she shared her experience on the practice of *Lectio Divina* and how God spoke to her, it was contagious to others as well. She valued the affirmation she received from other group members. She stated that “through the sharing of others, I was affirmed that what I believed the Holy Spirit speaking to me was real. It was also re-affirming that God was also working in other members’ life in a real way to accomplish His purposes.”

Nasya

Nasya, age 46–50, became a Christian more than 25 years ago. She immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong in 1987. She is a relatively new member of this small group for 1–2 years. Data collected before the intervention revealed

Nasya's claim that she did not have a regular devotional practice. She asserted that she fell asleep easily when she quieted down. Instead of listening in the quiet, she tried to "think about God's Words when I am in action, taking daughter to and from school, walking, doing household chores or meeting with other people." She claimed that her relationship with God was a relationship in which Holy Spirit "speaks to me when I am doing my household chores, taking my daughter to school or on the road" and she saw God as a companion in her daily life. She asserted that other small group members played a role in her spiritual growth.

Data collected after the intervention show how Nasya experienced spiritual companionship in the small group. She admitted that she felt she did not have the same experience of other group members when listened to their sharing. However, she confessed that what God "spoke to other members had impact on me. It made me feel that the Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* was interesting, appealing and helpful to my understanding of Scripture." She insisted that she fell asleep every time she tried to practice *Lectio Divina* and especially during meditation. She was able to learn from what each person shared from their practice of *Lectio Divina* and borrowed some elements of the practice and incorporated into her own practice. She identified herself as a visual person. And so, she took an alternative way to read and pondered through passages from a pictorial Bible. She claimed she had "strong impression of God's message to me. The pictorial Bible helped me to understand Biblical background of each passage and I found it to be less boring." She felt that her time of devotion was "more engaging with more flow of thoughts." She asserted that, subsequently, she read

the Bible more frequently and spent more time on it than in the past. She felt “a closer relationship with God.” She valued authentic sharing among members and found it to be affirming and encouraging. She believed that other members might constructively influenced by her own struggles when she shared genuinely.

Presentation of Essential Themes

Each theme presented is an extended phrase that identifies what a unit of data means that reflect the common experience of participants as well as individual variations (Saldana 2016). Van Manen explains that themes, at their latent level, serve phenomenology,

the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience its pre-reflective rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it... Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experience” (1990, 9) and points out that a theme is “the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand. (1990, 87)

I extracted significant statements from the data verbatim, formulated meanings through my interpretations as per the data analysis process described previously, and clustered these meanings into a series of organized themes that follows (Saldana 2016). I followed van Manen’s recommendation to reduce the themes to those essential to the phenomenon which make “what it is... without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (1990, 107).

Each participant provided their story and their reflections on their time spent in this study in order to provide a baseline by which we could judge the effects of the study. This baseline accounts for differences across personality, spiritual maturity, and lifestyle. From the post-intervention interviews, five

common themes emerged. These themes captured the essence of how participants experienced and understood “a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* to deepen spiritual companionship in small group:”

- A Sense of Closer and Personal Relationships with God
- Deeper and Enriched Sharing with One Another
- Personal Growth from Observing the Spiritual Journey of Others
- Positive Influence on Devotional Habits, and
- Value of Knowing One Another Deeply

A Sense of Closer and Personal Relationship with God

All participants described some level of impact experienced with their relationship and interaction with God. Commentary and shared experiences about the relationship and interaction that participants had with God and what they observed and learned from one another gave light to emerging categories for defining the themes. Participants practiced *Lectio Divina* in their daily life and shared their experience with one another in the small group. Ian added value to this theme, observing that “God spoke through Scriptures individually to each group member in accordance to what was going on in each of their lives.”

Respondents to questionnaires and interviews defined their experience of a sense of a closer personal relationship with God by offering three personal examples: God speaks individually, personal relevance, and response readiness. These three thematic statements constitute this first theme.

The idea that God speaks individually to participants were manifested in many ways. Many respondents shared that God spoke to them through various means including devotions, small group meetings, and sermons; while a few felt God spoke to them through conversations with acquaintances, listening to Christian radio or when they went about doing their daily chores or dropping off their children at school. The practice of *Lectio Divina* helped all participants to pay more attention to God in their daily life. Belicia asserted that “God’s Word works its way in my life throughout the day and I have become more conscious of God’s presence.” Ciana articulated that she became “more watchful on how God was speaking through small group gathering, worship services and my personal devotion time.” All participants defined God speaking individually as a sense of receiving a specific message from God’s Word; it felt like God had given it to them personally. They experienced the phenomenon through private time of devotion and at times, throughout the day. Ian recalled he felt his spiritual life was quite dry and God spoke to him through a very familiar passage,

During one of my devotion through *Lectio Divina*, the passage spoke to me in a direct and very personally way that cut through my heart and revealed the circumstances that I was facing. I felt and found that there was a distance between me and God [I stood a bit away from God and felt distance from Him] and felt distressed. That phrase “you in me and I in you” made me feel that God was speaking to me through that passage that I needed to correct my course and stay close to Him in order to enjoy His grace and blessings.

Participants were amazed and affirmed by the manifestation that God speaks individually to them in the group. As they listened to one another in the small group, respondents observed that God spoke to different people with

different messages with the same Scripture passage. Ian recalled that, “even if we were most inspired by the same passage, the specific message that God spoke to us were different. I was surprised and amazed how God really spoke to us individually!”

Personal relevance was described by participants as God speaking individually to each person in accordance to what was going on in their life. Ian offered,

By practicing *Lectio Divina*, it helped me to relate the Biblical stories and insights into my own life, my own circumstances, and reflect upon what God was trying to speak to me through the passage more personally. How that relate to the reality of my life circumstances and challenges.

Ladasha added value to this sentiment,

I felt that God revealed “who I am” and what issues that I need to deal with through my meditation. When I could identify clearly the issues in my life or can pinpoint the issues in the challenges that I was facing, the problems could work their way out and got resolved.

Response readiness was the condition of their hearts as described by participants after they heard God speaking to them personally about matters on which they felt deeply in their lives. The majority of participants shared an increased desire to learn more about God’s plan for them in their life and work. Several participants articulated willingness and more openness to take risk and venture into new and unfamiliar territories as God guides. Matthew self-identified as a rational person without much emotional engagement in life. Although he was very comfortable with how he related to God in the past without radical passion, he described a “change of heart.” Matthew illustrates,

For a long time after I became a Christian, I was not able to do what seemingly to be an urge in my heart. Now, it seems that I have increased capacity to act on those urges. God moves me to put off my rational and logical analysis of things and just do what God asks me to do... It seems that God is molding me to become a bit more radical and passionate for Him.

Belicia described a special experience when she heard God speaking to her with a consistent message over a period of time. She realized that God could speak to her with the same phrase or a specific message through same or different passages. She recalled, "I was in awe of God and responded in obedience in the ways that I should go in my service to the Lord. It was a wonderful and special few days for me."

Deeper and Enriched Sharing with One Another

Descriptive themes came to light as participants shared their lived experiences with each other. They perceived the change of content with deeper and enriched sharing with one another in the small group after they practiced *Lectio Divina* privately outside of group time. It was here that they shared life stories and experiences from *Lectio Divina*. A steady thread in most of the participant transcripts focused on deeper and enriched sharing with one another.

Zacharie captured this theme when she stated,

We did not only share the trivial things in life, like where we bought groceries, or how our children were doing, etc.... or how blessed we were to have a job or a happy life, etc.... We were able to share each other's spiritual journey and our spiritual condition.

Three ideas emerged as participants described their perception of key area of deeper and enriched sharing with one another: enriched understanding of passages, enriched life stories, and enriched spiritual sharing.

The majority of participants described the enriched understanding of passages as the capacity to look at a Biblical passage with wider angle and perspectives. As she felt exhaustion and desperation going through some tough time at one point, Belicia recounted, “As it turned out, several passages over a few consecutive days, God led me see different angles and perspectives on my circumstances. To me, it was an amazing experience because I never thought God would comfort or answer me in this way.”

Participants believed the fact that different individuals could receive different messages from God in the same passage. This provided opportunities for them to share insights with each other that otherwise would not have been discovered. Most respondents described this experience while sharing how God spoke to them in different ways and through different perspectives. Zacharie shared her amazement,

Even when we looked at the same picture or passage together, we had different take on what we heard from God or our response were different. It seems that the Holy Spirit is reminding everyone in a personal way based on their needs.

Ian provided further support to this view when he recounted,

I recalled vividly the one time that we shared which passage most impressed upon us and caught our attention in the past two weeks, three of us chose the same passage to share and with three diverse messages from God.

Most of the participants perceived enriched life stories among group members through interesting and refreshing personal stories which focused more on their experience on God's Word and Christ. They had been attending in the same small group for 3–4 years, and they already knew each other quite well. That didn't mean that there was nothing left to learn. Belicia offered her observation,

When we shared life stories, those who generally did not speak much in the past actually shared a lot. In contrast, those who spoke a lot in the past might share very little now. It seems to reflect on their relationship with God and whether they have practiced *Lectio Divina* between group meetings.

Zacharie described the content of their sharing by suggesting that the “life story shared was more about what God said to us individually.” Shawn placed value in knowing each other more deeply—the know and be known elements of community life—when sharing life stories by articulating that, “It was a process of self-discovery as well as the discovery of other group members for one's inner spiritual life and feelings during the life story sharing in small group time.” Uriah added value to this sentiment, “I feel that a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* would be helpful for me and our group members to go deeper in sharing our spiritual life with one another.” This deepened knowledge of each other was perceived by some respondents as the catalyst to spiritual growth. Shawn asserted that,

Through discussion, sharing, and prayers at our life group, other member's life story do have some impact on my spiritual life, and I do believe that my life sharing would have some impact to our group members too.

Most of the respondents found it significant that they experienced enriched spiritual sharing with one another. This comes about by sharing that goes beyond

social or superficial conversation, instead going far deeper into personal topics each other's spiritual condition and journey. Belicia articulated that "it helped me to understand the spiritual journey of other group members. I can sense where group members' spiritual journeys are by listening to them." Ian supported this sentiment by revealing,

Although we had sharing in the past in our regular small group, but this special group helped propelled us into deeper sharing of our own personal spiritual journey and with a deeper understanding of God's Word.

The presence and the work of the Holy Spirit is evident in the group.

Zacharie articulated,

I sensed the Holy Spirit's presence in the group. The Holy Spirit reminds us, admonish us, loves and care for us through one another's sharing. I believe the Holy Spirit's presence and I knew He was in our group when we shared.

Personal Growth from Observing the Spiritual Journey of Others

All participants described some level of personal growth from observing the spiritual journey of others. Examples involving the impact of sustainable learning and spiritual growth are plentiful, with respondents highlighting value in touched hearts, increased desire, and contagious learning.

Participants shared with one another with trust and authenticity about how they were experiencing their relationship with God, whether or not they were able to hear from God, their struggles in their life as well as in their spiritual journey. Ciana asserted, "I believe that when I shared authentically and genuinely, and once I have the courage to share, I can contribute to others as they learn from me,

just like I have learned from them.” Both Ciana and Zacharie had a common fear when this group first began. Ciana was afraid of practicing centering exercises to quiet down herself as she felt anxious during this time of silence and worried that she might not be able to differentiate between evil spirits and the Holy Spirit when God was speaking to her. Zacharie was afraid that God might tell her to do something outside of her comfort zone when she actually heard God in her time of devotion. As time progressed, Zacharie and Ciana both found it significant that they learned from each other through observation. They both confirmed that they had overcome such fear at the end of this special group. Zacharie recounted,

I felt that my fear seems to have infected Ciana... As I shared my experience with the practice of *Lectio Divina* over a period of time, it seems to me that the progress that I had made was contagious to her as well. There is a contagious characteristic of influence to one another.

All of the participants described touched hearts when they listened to others sharing their spiritual experience and journey which, in turn, influenced their own spiritual journey. As a new believer, Danice described her touched hearts experience by recounting that,

I recalled that Belicia shared about the Vine and the branches analogy. What she shared about the 3 insights received from God on that passage inspired me as well. And when I went home and listened to the passage again, my feeling was like I had an electrical shock and I got the message from God.

Ian perceived group members’ hearts touched by each other for spiritual growth and explained that,

I mainly share my own experience on spiritual growth with other members. So that others may see how God works in my life. I trust it may help other group members [for their journey].

Some participants placed value in trusting each other enough to share their personal struggles with one another that touched their hearts for life transformation. Belicia supported this sentiment and suggested that,

When I listened to some who shared their challenges and difficulties, I found they would prepare me to face the same challenges in the future and what I needed to pay attention. We learned from each other's failures as well.

Shawn described a sense of resonance when other people sharing encounters that were similar to his and recounted,

In our group, we have similar family background, and at similar age group at similar family stage. For example, when some members had similar problem as I have when we are trying to fit our daily reading to our normal work life, we share how we did to overcome the problem, and learn from each other to grow together.

Some participants put value in personal experience as the best way of overcoming doubt. Belicia added her support by observing that, "when brothers and sisters taste the sweetness of God's Word, and experience how God realistically guides their life, it will become easier for them to settle into silence and meditation."

Many respondents suggested experiencing increased desire of God as defined by the desire to spend more time with God, to look for recurring experiences of hearing from God, knowing His will and to keep a close and intimate relationship with Him. Uriah described the intimate relationship that he desired with God by suggesting that, "When father and son spend time together, the son may just want to have a chat, a hug and an embrace with the father and share his heart [and thoughts] with the father." Zacharie stated that she used to

only seek after God when she was in trouble. But now, she described a different context where she would experience God, “learning to experience God during uneventful life circumstances or a time of peace.” She further supported this theme by describing that sharing with others motivated her to desire more. She suggested, “when I shared my deep impression of what God spoke to me in a given meeting, I would also look forward to whether I might have the same feeling [deep impression] from God in the future as well.”

However, Matthew revealed tension in his heart and asserted, “On the one hand, I am afraid to go deeper into the unknown. On the other hand, I wanted to get a deeper relationship with God. It is where I am now.” Adding value to the importance of determination, Ian claimed that, in light of his desire for God, the power of obstacles preventing him from focusing was diminished:

So, it was a challenge to slow down and get to a place of silence [with a quiet heart and centre]. I recognized that if I could get to a quiet centre, I would listen to God more clearly. And so, although my living environment [with children and other family members] may not be ideal for such a practice, I still want to try hard to practice and experience [silence and quiet heart].

Most of the participants put value on contagious learning; they valued that they could learn from their peers through natural dialogue within the small group. Danice was a relatively new believer who described she heard nothing from God in the first couple of weeks and did not understand why and how others in the group could share what they heard from God. However, as time went by, she recounted that,

After listening to all your sharing [of your experience of the Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*], I gradually began to be able to taste God’s Word

[differently]. I learned from what you guys shared about what insight God has impressed upon you and how to listened to God... when I followed other group members who were more mature than me [in their Christian walk], and learned from their experience, I was able to make progress... Now, I could sometimes hear God told me things specifically and that I also have feelings about the passages...

Matthew described group members in varying spiritual maturity motivated each other and recounted that,

...although they could still be in different pace [in their spiritual journey], those who are more mature are able to share and encourage those who are less mature. Those who are less mature won't give up and willing to keep trying to catch up [spiritually].

Shawn was a self-identified rational thinker who described his difficulties in hearing God's voice in his hearts even though he has been a Christian for over 10 years. He added value to this sentiment and suggested,

But, in this special group, I was given this opportunity [to learn and practice] to listen to God. I find *Lectio Divina* and the sharing of our group time have helped me to learn "how to listen to God's voice.

Participants found it significant that experiences shared—good or bad—were powerful motivators, providing support needed for sustainable spiritual growth. Ciana recounted,

My understanding of what God spoke to me get deeper and widened when others share their journey which depart from my own experience. I learned from the experience and insight of others that helped me to pay attention and live a more cautious life... I learned from other's good and bad experiences.

Uriah and Zacharie added value to this sentiment by stating that,

It [the experiences shared by others] was also helpful to me to measure my own spiritual journey [or spirituality] against other group members which was an encouragement to my own journey as well... It encouraged me to review my own journey and how much progress that I have made...

Positive Influence on Devotional Habits

Eight out of ten respondents described the positive influence on devotional habits that they experienced. Their examples focused on the interactive nature of their relationship with God and a change of focus to both cognitive and emotive learning from the Scripture. Matthew contrasts his past devotional habits, those of purely fact-based study and the practice of *Lectio Divina*, the emotional internalization of these facts, and their balance in his devotions:

When I learned from Scripture in cognitive ways or exegetical means, once I got the meaning and application, then my work in studying the Bible was done. ... I would have stayed within certain parameters of the usual ways of exegesis to interpret the Scripture. I would not allow myself to depart from those “rules” of interpreting the Scripture nor the meaning derived from such exegesis. ... My focus was to get the correct meaning of the passage and its possible applications.

On the other hand, I began to sense what God spoke to me through the Holy Spirit when I practiced *Lectio Divina*... I found what God spoke to me through the passage are different from what I used to get when I got what God said from the textual meaning of the passage... I spent more time thinking about why God revealed to me certain truth and how to put that into my daily living. I tried to “chew on” what God spoke to me through the passage... I realized that I was previously too focused on the context of the passage to the detriment to what God might be speaking to me through the passage on a given day.

Numerous participants described this change of focus as a change from “simply what a given passage says or means” to what they felt “they have learned personally from a passage and what it means to them personally.”

There are three thematic statements that constitute theme four. They are prepared to listen, dialogue with God, and dig deeper into one’s heart. Prepared to listen requires realignment of the heart, allowing it to stand ready, eager to hear what God has to say. The majority of participants admitted that the most difficult

part of preparing themselves to hear God's still small voice in their inner hearts was the act of quieting their hearts and practicing silence. However, once the noise in their minds had settled, most participants who were open and willing to hear God experienced a dialogue relationship with God. Zacharie found it significant to practice "centering exercises or to quiet my heart first as I found my thoughts in meditation went deeper if I was able to begin with silence to first prepare my heart." Most participants described themselves as eager to know what God wanted them to do, filled with the desire to live out the Christian faith.

Ladasha described how she prepared to listen,

I wish to practice more and more on resting myself longer in a quiet, relaxing environment to prepare for His Word to come into me and intentionally seeking what the Word is speaking to "me" in particular.

A dialogue with God describes a two-way communication with God.

Respondents explained their experience during devotion time as "a more dialogue relationship with God" and they naturally "spent more time in dialogue with God." Ian added value to this sentiment,

I experienced God was speaking to me, communicating with me. I found my relationship with God was more interactive and not a one-way street... In the past, I felt I shared what troubled me in my heart to God but felt like talking to a wall or in the air. I could not expect God to talk back to me. Now, I experienced that He responded and told me what to do, it was not self-talk and that God was speaking to me and communicating with me.

Matthew described a multi-faceted communication with God and suggested,

It could be more than just understanding the textual meaning of a passage. God may use this one passage on a given day and spoke to me on another subject matter that God wanted to bring to my attention.

Belicia also offered her experience,

I felt I was in a dialogue with God. When I felt I did not understand something, I would ask God. I would not mind asking God the same question multiple times over days until I understood the issues and got answers from God.

To dig deeper into one's heart is to explore and solidify the message of God's word in their heart through meditation. Numerous participants sensed an urge to dig deeper in their lives with God's Word, interacting more with the message for personal reflection and response. Ian described his experience, "I would then explore why God is speaking this message to me and continue to dig deeper into my thoughts." Matthew recounts how sometimes his mind moved, during meditation, "from one focal point of thought to a chain of thoughts and received what God was speaking to me through the passage." Some participants would read the same passage over several days, meditate on it for a longer time and seek to dig even deeper for God's message to them. Belicia articulated that,

In the past, my daily devotion is one passage a day and a different passage the next without any interconnection between days... Now, my devotion may focus on a specific passage for a number of days, mediate longer and seek deeper for God's message to me. I now have a different experience since God spoke to me in a personal way when I sometimes read and meditated the same passage over several days... I would then be thinking about it whenever opportunities arise. As I pondered and tried to listen to God more, the message came through which were also relevant to my ongoing life issues.

Matthew adds the value of group sharing to dig deeper into his own heart,

In the past few weeks, I felt curious that God seems to be talking to me with a specific message through various texts. In small group sharing, I found that other group members do not seem to hear the same message from God through the same text. They have received different messages from God from the same text too. Consequently, I felt that I should go

further and deeper into my personal reflection on why God spoke to me with that message.

Value of Knowing One Another Deeply

All participants described value of knowing one another deeply. Examples focused on their deepened relationship with God and one another, how they experienced spiritual companionship through shepherding one another, and spiritual impact experienced through different group dynamics. Zacharie supported this theme by providing her observation that “when we shared with one another, on what we heard from God and our experience on *Lectio Divina*, it helped our spiritual friendship to go deeper.”

There are three thematic statements that constitute theme five. They are authentic sharing, greater caring, and affirmation and encouragement. All respondents found it significant that authentic sharing among group members was a spiral for entering into a deeper relationship with one another. Participants’ transcripts revealed that sharing without reservation included their hopes and fears, failures and triumphs, struggles and challenges. Nasya added value to this sentiment, “We all shared authentically and encouraged one another to practice a life of devotion.” Matthew described the readiness of participants willing to open up to each other into their own personal life and observed that,

At the beginning, we needed warmup first and then gradually opened up to share. By the end, we opened up quickly to share, and gradually needed to cut short the meeting that’s already beyond the agreed time... Some were readier than the others but most were willing to have deep spiritual sharing and dialogue. They began to take down their masks and shared authentically—their sorrow and struggles. It’s a blessing that a group can

start to share their personal spiritual journey and insights as well as emotions with little warmup time...

Ciana put value in authentic sharing that convicted for life transformation and stated that,

As I listened to [the Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* shared by] others, and some shared and shed tears when they talked about helping their friends, I wanted to become such kind of a compassionate person.

Nine out of ten participants described the experience of greater caring both for God and each other. Ian offers,

I find my communication with God went deeper... I would not stay on the surface or superficial level in my relationship with God. I truly have developed a more relational connectedness with God... In contrary to just sit and listen a sermon in worship service or an intellectual study of the Bible, I found this practice [of the Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*] was a spiritual discipline which was deeply personal that also improved my relationship with God and others.

Zacharie added value to this sentiment of closer relationship with each other by suggesting that, "when we shared with one another on what we heard from God and our experience on *Lectio Divina*, it helped our friendship to go deeper." Belicia asserted that "This group process helped us to know more about each other, even the part of us which others may not have known in the past." Uriah stated that "I felt more intimate with other members when I heard their stories." Participants revealed that they now also care more about one another, asking each other more frequently how they were spiritually, showing greater empathy to one another, wanting to provide material care for others, and thinking about each other more outside of group time. Shawn supported this sentiment stating, "I remember them more frequently and have the desire to see them and

started missing them more in between group times.” Ian described the contrast between how he cared about his group members in the past and how he now caring more about them and recounted,

The difference in my relationship with my group members: for example, in the past, I knew they were sad and in need. Then, I would stop there. After this experience, I knew them deeper and that I wanted to do something for them when they experience sadness or in need. My feelings and passion for my group members have increased and deepened.

Ladasha described that no individuals were left behind by others, offering,

Instead of members struggling individually [or privately], this mutual sharing pulls the distance between God and individual members closer through sharing of what they experienced through meditation on God’s Word.

Although Nasya used an adapted version of *Lectio Divina* by using a pictorial Bible for her devotion, she described relational closeness with God and higher frequency in reading the Scriptures. She asserted that, “I was able to apply what I learned about *Lectio Divina* and adapted it on my time of meditation and reflection with the pictorial Bible. In the past two months, I felt a closer relationship with God.”

Most of the participants described a sense of affirmation and encouragement as a key value of knowing each other deeply. Respondents described the group dynamics in such a way that fostered their experience of a deeper and more personal knowledge of one another and their spiritual journey with God. Ian described how this deeper knowledge had an impact on his spiritual life and recounted that,

They helped me to know how I was doing as a Christian, what I needed to improve, areas where I did wrong, what I needed to persist. They were like a mirror that reflected on my life of strength and weaknesses.

They shared with one another in such a way that respondents described their feeling of being shepherded by other's experiences and examples and also felt that they were shepherding others for their spiritual growth by their personal stories. Zacharie described being shepherded by others and suggested,

When another shared that he/she did not get anything from their devotion on a given day, I was reassured that it was ok for me not to hear anything sometimes as well. ... Through sharing by members, I was affirmed what I believed the Holy Spirit speaking to my life was real. It also reaffirmed to me that God was also working in other members' life in a real way to accomplish His purposes.

Ian further supported this sentiment while he encountered some difficulties in practicing *Lectio Divina* and revealed that,

I did not mean to compare my condition with others. But, it was comforting to see some of us are the same level as myself. When I got something out of my irregular practice and affirmed by others who had the same experience, I was more assured of the fact that I was on the right track.

Matthew described how he attempted to shepherd others as he knew them better, articulating,

The sharing helped me to know each individual deeper that I would otherwise not know in the past since there was not context to have such kind of sharing [a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*...] So that I know how to shepherd particular member and be an encourager and give the necessary affirmation [where needed], so that they would have confident to move on or move forward. Some need reminder, some need encouragement, some need admonition, some need wisdom.

Many participants described the progress of others as their encouragement and even the failures of others as their affirmation to keep going. Matthew recognized this mutual encouragement to cheer each other on and suggested that,

Although some are still at the beginning point and some have journeyed deeper, but the interactions have allowed them to be encouragers of one another—to stay on track with their deepening relationship with God.

Interpretations

A phenomenological researcher acknowledges the “whole might be quite different than the sum of its parts” (Omery, 1983). I analysed the lived experiences reported above to identify essential themes. The themes taken together allow meaning of the experience to emerge as a whole (van Manen, 1990). That is, the whole might be quite different than the sum of its parts. In this section, I provide my interpretation of the findings and themes in the context of the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

Connection to the Research Questions and Literature

The purpose of this project was to examine whether practicing *Lectio Divina* privately by individual group members on a regular basis and then sharing with one another through life stories when they come together in small groups would deepen spiritual companionship. The answer to the first question, “Does the sharing of these life stories deepen spiritual companionships? If so, how?” would be self-evident when the second and third research questions are addressed.

The following relates my findings to the second and third research questions in an effort to describe the essence of the phenomenon by weaving in the emergent themes from my study and the literature.

How does the Sharing of these Life Stories Deepen Spiritual Companionships?

My second research question cut to the core of participants' experience between sharing their personal life stories and spiritual companionship.

A Sense of a Closer and Personal Relationship with God

Participants describe a sense of a closer and personal relationship with God. Mary D. Poust suggests that “the key element in any spiritual friendship ... is the longing for a deeper relationship with our Creator, something that is evident from earliest recorded history” (2010, 9). This observation aligns with the themes observed by our participants. Participants actively building their spiritual companionship through a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* recognised a closer personal relationship with God. This relationship was strengthened both through the experience of God speaking individually to them, and as they shared in other participants' experiences. What God spoke to them about had personal relevance to their current life issues. Most participants were amazed and at times, stunned, by the ways God spoke to them so personally and with such relevance. This sentiment was exemplified by Belicia, “To me, it was an amazing experience because I never thought God would comfort or answer me in this way” and Danice echoed by sharing, “And when I went home and read [and listened] to the passage again, my feeling was like I had an electrical shock [I got the message from God].” As the data demonstrated, most of them either responded with conviction and obedience or at least showed a higher level of response readiness

and obedience to God. Many participants resonated with Matthew's feeling, "when I discovered something [God spoke to me] is what God wants from me [to do or to change], I would be obedient. In the past, I would weigh pros and cons, but I would now act upon my feelings towards what God has spoken to me." One participant shared, however, that he struggled to obey although he heard what God spoke to him since it was something he was struggling for a long time. It is my own personal experience that the more one practices *Lectio Divina*, the various element of this practice will get one to have a sense of a closer and more personal loving relationship with God which is confirmed by Bianchi (2002, 43–46). For example, one element of the practice of *Lectio Divina* is contemplation. Wilhoit and Howard suggest that

In contemplation, we just sit. God's Spirit is present. The text is still present. We are present. We wait in silence. We are aware of the love between us, between Creator and created. And in this being present, we are made new. (2012, 124)

This sentiment was reflected in the idea that God speaks individually, as well as in the concepts of personal relevance and response readiness. These thematic observations were extracted from such phrases as, "I feel relational closeness with God," or "When I quiet down and sat on my father's lap, I could lay down everything else and just be with the father," or "relational connectedness with God." Most of the participants described their prior relationship with God as "formal," "routine," or with simply an informational understanding of Scripture and of God. With the practice of *Lectio Divina*, all participants described a varied sense of vibrant relational intimacy with God.

The first theme, a sense of a closer and personal relationship with God, describes how spiritual companions experience God through a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*. It illustrates that participants have a more intimate relationship with God. Participants also become more aware of God's presence as he speaks to them individually with personal relevance, resulting in an increase of their sense of response readiness to God's words. The second theme, deeper and enriched sharing with one another, will now help us understand how participants experience the shift of content in their conversations with each other when they share in small groups.

Deeper and Enriched Sharing with One Another

Participants described an environment of deeper and enriched sharing with one another. In my experience, and to my dismay, small group members tend to share superficially rather than deeply, avoiding difficulty and harsh experiences. Although all these participants have known each other for 3–4 years and they have developed good friendships, many participants observed that “it is not easy to see group members to have spiritual dialogue. It was much easier to have social conversation than to have spiritual conversation.” Another said that “sometimes I felt like we shared only the superficial or trivial things about ourselves.” However, spiritual companions share the depth of their life together. On what spiritual friends would share with one another, Paul J. Waddle suggests,

An underlying need of every human being is the need to communicate our self, to share our soul and spirit with others in the hope that we might live in communion with them. This reciprocal communication of selves is the

most humanizing and life-giving activity, and it is the lifeblood of friendship—where it be friendship with God, the special friendship of marriage, or friendship with others. (2002, 46)

David G. Benner also points out that without soul intimacy, there is no spiritual friendship,

If they never share at this level, the relationship is not worthy of being called a spiritual—or soul—friendship. Sharing at the level of their souls means that their intimacy is not restricted to experience with the external world. Recall that soul refers to the whole person, with particular attention to one's inner life. Soul intimacy therefore is built upon sharing the inner self. The conversations of such friends are never merely about what happened in their lives or the world but move from this to how they experience, react to and understand what happened. Dialogue continually moves from the surface to the depths, from the external to the internal. This is the crucial distinctive of dialogue in spiritual friendships. Most important, however, spiritual intimacy involves sharing our experience with God. (2002, 73–74)

These themes are consistent to those that emerged in the current study.

Participants described a deeper and enriched sharing with one another through three facets of their conversation when they share with one another: enriched understanding of passages, enriched life stories and enriched spiritual sharing. Ian affirms how a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* changed the content of conversation in the small group,

Although we had sharing in the past in our regular small group, but this special group helped propelled us into deeper sharing of our own personal spiritual journey and with a deeper understanding of God's Word.

Most participants echoed this sentiment with statements like, "I can learn from what others have received from God that I would have never considered before myself." Although the cause and effect relationship are not known between the three facets of deeper and enriched sharing, statements from participants

demonstrate that these three facets influence one another like a spiral for deeper sharing among participants who experienced a deeper spiritual companionship. For example, a participant sharing life stories enriched with experience from *Lectio Divina* may provide new understanding of passages to another participant. Each may pursue spiritual sharing enriched with dialogue on each other's spiritual journey. Shawn and a few participants remarked that "It was a process of self-discovery as well as the discovery of other group members for one's inner spiritual life and feelings during the sharing in small group time," and that, "Through discussion, sharing, and prayers at our life group, other member's life stories do have some impact on my spiritual life, and I do believe that my life sharing would have some impact to our group members too."

While the first theme, a sense of a closer and personal relationship with God, describes how spiritual companions experience God through a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*, the second theme of deeper and enriched sharing with one another illustrates how participants experience the shift in the content of their conversations with each other when they share in small groups. The three facets of the second theme also illustrates the spiral of a deepening spiritual conversation with each other. Sharing in this way enables participants to know more about each other's spiritual journey. The third theme, personal growth from observing the spiritual journey of others, will now help us understand the influence on participants resulting from their knowledge of each other's spiritual journey.

Personal Growth from Observing the Spiritual Journey of Others

Participants describe personal growth from observing the spiritual journey of others. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Although he warns the Corinthians to imitate himself only to the extent that he successfully models Christ-like behavior, this verse also demonstrates that Paul feels he successfully lived out such a life. Jesus provides a model as he says in John 13:15, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” However, from my observations and experience, it is easier said than done to live an exemplary life, one worthy of others’ imitation. Timothy Jones elaborates on how mutuality could be lived out through sharing our “less than perfect” life in spiritual friendship,

We can usually learn and grow from hearing the struggles of another. One man who had been in a relationship of mutual helping learned a lot about his own faith by watching his partner struggle within financial priorities, for example. Also, a relationship of mutual helping can keep us from becoming too inwardly focused, too caught up in every fleeting moment of doubt, too absorbed by the workings of our own spiritual life. Helping another reminds us that the goal of Christian growth is greater than our own warm feeling. (1998, 113)

Rumford agrees, highlighting the critical role of influence among spiritual peers,

A spiritual friendship is an intentional relationship between two people, founded in Jesus Christ, in which they focus alternately on the nurture of each other’s spiritual life. The expectation is not that you be experts but that you come together as spiritual peers who commit themselves to growing in Christ. (1996, 381)

These are consistent to the themes that emerged in the current study.

Participants described their perception of spiritual growth from observing the spiritual journey of others as they have experienced the touching of their hearts by

listening to others share their life stories from a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*. Touched hearts can be experienced through ups and downs of life. Participants' statements affirm these touching experiences, identifying them as most often through the observation of the struggles of others, struggles which resonated the most with one another. Zacharie resonated this sentiment, "It encouraged me to review my own journey and how much progress that I have made." Ciana and a few others echoed and described,

When I listened to some who shared their challenges and difficulties, it would prepare me to face the same challenges in the future and what I needed to pay attention. We learned from each other's failures as well.

Through the experiences of touched hearts, participants stated that they also experienced an increased desire for God. Many participants shared this sentiment, describing, "And when I shared my deep impression of what God spoke to me in a given meeting, I would also look forward to whether I might have the same feeling [deep impression] from God in the future as well," Others reflected, "I am willing to spend more time with God as a result." As the data demonstrates, participant statements support contagious learning that fosters spiritual growth. Ian supports this sentiment and explaining, "My understanding of what God spoke to me get deeper and widened when others share their journey which depart from my own experience. I learned from the experience and insight of others that helped me to pay attention and live a more watchful life."

The three thematic statements that define this third theme may work together to foster spiritual growth. Lamb suggests that,

Even cursory glances through the Gospels confirm that the work Jesus did in the lives of his disciples occurred because the disciples were in relationship, not simply with Him, but with one another. (Lamb 2003, 17)

We are in this relationship described by Lamb. Although there is no evidence of any sequence among the three thematic statements, my personal experience echoes my observations from the experience of this group. That is, when one's heart is touched by other's spiritual sharing, our desire for more of God increased. And, when our desire for more of God increased and shared with others, our hearts get touched. When this happens, it becomes a contagious learning for spiritual growth among group members.

The first two themes, a sense of closer and personal relationship with God, and deeper and enriched sharing with one another, describe how participants understand and experience a deeper spiritual companionship through a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*. The third theme that emerged from the data, spiritual growth from observing the spiritual journey of others, depicts each participant's experience from this small group. Based on this data, the observation of others' spiritual growth had a positive impact on the individual. In turn, participants perceived and experienced deeper spiritual companionship through practicing a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina*.

How does Spiritual Companionship Shape the Participants' Relationships?

My third research question delved into the change in relationship with God and one another as perceived by participants on their experience with such a deeper spiritual companionship.

Positive Influence on Devotional Habits

In my ministry model, I discussed at length the importance of keeping a balance in reading God's Word for both information and transformation. Data in this research demonstrated that most of the participants have devotional habits which focused on information intake or cognitive understanding of the truth as revealed in God's Word. Many participants described their past devotional habits before practicing *Lectio Divina* stating, "In the past, I was only attracted by the insight or what the person in Bible story responded to God and how he was changed by God" or "In the past, I felt that my devotional practice was more of reading what others talked about the Scripture passages and learned from there." On top of that, many also accompanied their sentiments with statements like, "dry," "boring," or "routine." Studzinski suggests that practicing *Lectio Divina* will change one's devotional habits "to read in such a way to be spiritually challenged and not just given information," (2009, 3) and "the Word would gradually imprint the Word on the heart, so that it could be remembered and lived" (2009, 25). Bob Grahmann (2003, 114) affirms that "we will experience Jesus and hear from him" during meditation. Through meditation, then, a

believer's trust in God is deeply strengthened, resulting in a compelled and obedient heart. Since *Lectio Divina* is also considered a form of prayer with time of silence and time of interaction with God, this is consistent to the themes that emerged from the current study. Participants described the influence of devotional habits as they experience a sense of openness that allowed them to prepare to listen to and obey God's word. Most of the participant statements demonstrated increased dialogue with God. Belicia echoes this sentiment,

I felt I was in a dialogue with God. When I felt I did not understand something, I would ask God. I would not mind asking God the same question multiple times over days until I understood the issues and got answers from God.

This dialogue with God brings them to dig deeper into their own hearts, helping them deal with their current issues of life. It does seem that when they are prepared to listen to God, they have a continuous cycle of dialogue and dig deeper on their issues of life with God. Zacharie affirmed the starting point of this change of devotional habit by her statement, "*Lectio Divina* would need our own openness to God in order to listen to God and receive the message directly from God." Ian exemplified this sentiment and described,

In the past I felt I shared what troubled me in my heart to God but it felt like talking to a wall [or air] and I would not expect God to talk back to me. Now, I experienced that he responded and told me what to do. It was not self-talk; God was speaking to me and communicating with me.

As these data demonstrate, the influence of devotional habits by a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* changed not only the way that participants communicated with God, but also the entire dynamic of their relationships with God.

The fourth theme, positive influence on devotional habits, describes how participants perceived their relationship with God as it was shaped by a change of devotional habits in the context of a deeper spiritual companionship. Participant statements reveal a closer and more interactive relationship with God. The fifth theme, value of knowing one another deeply, sheds light on the way that participants experienced their relationship with those shaped by a deeper spiritual companionship.

Value of Knowing One Another Deeply

Participants described the value of knowing one another deeply. David G. Benner describes spiritual friendships, which he calls “soul friends,” this way,

... they care for each other as whole people, not simply as spiritual beings, it is a relationship to which I bring my whole self, especially my inner self. And the care that I offer for the other person in a soul friendship is a care for his or her whole self, especially the inner self. Soul friends seek to safeguard each other’s uniqueness and nurture the growth of each other’s inner self. They seek to meet each other as whole people and help each other become whole people. They offer each other the sacred gift of accompaniment on the human journey. (Benner 2002, 15)

These themes connected and overlapped with themes from this study. Participants described value of knowing each other deeply as they felt increasingly comfortable bringing their “whole self, especially my inner self,” and practicing authentic sharing with one another. Although there can be varied degrees of openness in authentic sharing, a few participants described the openness in phrases such as, “They became vulnerable to each other,” or “Group members in our group have already got a close relationship and do not mind sharing authentically.” Matthew offered his observations, “Some are there already [deep

spiritual sharing and dialogue]. They began to take down their masks and share authentically—their sorrow and struggles.”

When participants have authentic sharing, and are vulnerable to each other, they have deeper empathy toward one another, even for their weaknesses and struggles, as demonstrated by the data. The majority of participants experienced greater caring about each other and also approached each other’s vulnerabilities with affirmation and encouragement. The sentiment of caring more is exemplified by Ciana as she described “We expressed care to one another by frequently asking how they are spiritually and their progress.” Ian echoed this sentiment by sharing, “I knew them deeper and that I wanted to do something for them when they experience sadness or in need. My feelings and passion for my group members have increased and deepened.”

Timothy Jones argues that the presence and insight of spiritual friends are to encourage each other to be the best that they can be (1998, 50–51). This sentiment was exemplified by Ian, “When I got something out of my irregular practice and affirmed by others who had the same experience, I was more assured of the fact that I was on the right track.” Zacharie echoed by sharing, “Through sharing by members, I was affirmed what I believed the Holy Spirit speaking to my life was real. It also reaffirmed that God was also working in other members’ life in a real way to accomplish His purposes.”

The fifth theme, value of knowing one another deeply, describes how participants experienced their relationships shaped by a deeper spiritual companionship. They practiced authentic sharing which motivated them to care

more for each other with affirmation and encouragement. Participant statements revealed a move to even closer relationships among participants. This sentiment was exemplified by Matthew, who states,

So that I know how to shepherd particular member and be an encourager and give the necessary affirmation [where needed], so that they would have confidence to move on or move forward. Some need reminders, some need encouragement, some need admonition, some need wisdom.

Without such a deeper knowledge of one another, it would be difficult to nurture a deeper spiritual companionship.

Through the fourth and fifth themes, in response to my third research question, it is apparent that participants formed a closer and more interactive relationship with God and one another as they perceived a deeper spiritual companionship with each other.

Outcomes

The primary finding of this research project is that a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* did, in fact, help the members of this research small group at SGBC to build a deeper spiritual companionship. That is, individual group members who practice *Lectio Divina* on a regular basis and share with one another through life stories when they come together in small groups do, indeed, build a deeper spiritual companionship. This is what I anticipated at the beginning of the project, although I was not sure what aspects of a deeper spiritual companionship might be revealed. Data revealed that participants understand and experience a deeper spiritual companionship through a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* by perceiving a sense of a closer personal relationship with God as well as deeper and richer

sharing with one another. The participants of this study recognized their spiritual growth fostered by a deeper spiritual companionship through observing the spiritual journey of others. Furthermore, a deep spiritual companionship is perceived to nurture spiritual growth as manifested by a closer and more interactive relationship, both with God and with one another.

There are two unexpected outcomes in this study. One has to do with one of the participants who is a young Christian. I thought it might have been difficult for this participant to experience deeper spiritual companionship since this participant is not familiar with the Bible and also was not able to hear God speaking to her in the first couple of group meetings, unlike most of the other more mature group members. However, at the focus group, she shared that she too was able to sense God was speaking to her through learning from observing other more mature group members. It highlights the speed that spiritual companionship develops when surrounded by those with greater spiritual maturity. The spiritually younger Christian may learn from more spiritually matured Christian how to listen to God's still small voice in their hearts. This outcome reinforces this study's findings, as it highlights the drastic change when a young believer is nurtured under these circumstances. It also shows that young believers can very quickly and effectively be trained and nurtured to become more sensitive to God's voice and work in their lives, as demonstrated here.

The other unexpected outcome has to do with one of the participants who has been a Christian for over 25 years. For some reasons, this participant fell asleep whenever *Lectio Divina* was practiced. This participant also found it

difficult to cultivate an attitude of silence. However, the participant shared at the focus group that she used a pictorial Bible to follow steps of *Lectio Divina*. Despite the difference in format, this participant reported also feeling a sense of closer relationship with God through this practice. This result, while unexpected, was a welcome and positive outcome. It highlights the deep desire of this participant to get engaged with the Bible, and the results speak for themselves. Although she might have a different learning style or preference on devotional habits, the act of using a creative adaptation for practicing *Lectio Divina* was helpful. This result, again, reinforces the findings of this study; in the end, it resulted in reaching a closer relationship with God and a closer spiritual companionship with others. This outcome also serves to illustrate how spiritual companions honor the uniqueness of each other and help each other to attend and respond to God.

Conclusion and Implications

The mission statement of SGBC is “Sharing Life Together. Bringing Love to Others.” It is crucial for the church to have practical ways to foster spiritual companionship through small groups in order to live out the mission of “sharing life together.” This project examined in what ways practicing *Lectio Divina* privately by individual group members on a regular basis and then sharing with one another through life stories in small groups would deepen spiritual companionship. The outcome of this research project is that a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* did help the members of this research group at SGBC to build a

deeper spiritual companionship with one another, and, in turn, brought them closer to God. This project will contribute to the process of developing and implementing future shepherding plans of SGBC to build our small group ministry as an effective tool to foster spiritual companionship and, in turn, encourage spiritual growth. It will inform the leadership team of SGBC for practical ways for the church to live out the church's mission.

This study was grounded in the theological framework of spiritual companions as spiritual discipline and numerous examples of spiritual companions in the Biblical stories. Acts 2:42–47 also provides important insights from the life of the first century church which demonstrates what it means to be spiritual companions in a community. They studied God's Word together and responded to God's Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, manifested in loving and serving one another, knowing each other deeply and intimately and responding to each other's needs. They had a discerning spirit to see God's work among them and celebrated together. These biblical passages give a vivid example of spiritual companionship. In a nutshell, Spiritual Companions seek to grow spiritually together. They seek to help each other to live with greater awareness of the presence and voice of God, and to see his footprints in their walks through life. This study was also inspired by two historical models, the first of *Lectio Divina*, and the second, distinct characteristics of the Methodist spirituality from the Methodist Movement led by John and Charles Wesley.

Phenomenology is the methodology used in this research. The members of this research small group participated and explored the impact of *Lectio Divina*,

practiced privately by individual members, and the development of deeper spiritual companionship in a small group setting. Each group member shared their life stories in small group meetings, recounting their God encounters, and observing God's activities in their own life through daily practice of *Lectio Divina*. Many narratives were collected during this research intervention, with open-ended questionnaires, the interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, to ensure accuracy and integrity of data. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to reflect, analyze and interpret the data collected of the lived experience of our participants in this project. This research summarized the essence of the lived experience for all members involved.

This study presented a portrait of certain aspects of spiritual companionship perceived by ten participants in one small group at SGBC. The group members' voice expressed through their lived experiences was always present as I explored and defined the phenomenon. This essence now serves as the basis for my recommendation. Firstly, a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* is recommended to small groups with comparable demographics and spiritual journeys to this research small group. Secondly, while this method was used in a group in which members have good relationships with mutual trust and authenticity, the practice of a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* has been shown as an effective tool for further building this group dynamic, given the proper establishment and respect of mutual boundaries during the exercise. Thirdly, spiritual disciplines, like *Lectio Divina*, should be considered for equipping small group members to read the Bible in formational ways. Finally, a small group

structure that is conducive to mutual sharing and peer-to-peer shepherding is required. These are ideal situations where deeper friendship in small group may be cultivated.

While this study of spiritual formation has much potential to be useful for other ministry professionals and scholars, the study has several limitations. First, and perhaps most prominent, is that the study was set in the Chinese Canadian cultural context. Though it was necessary to be culturally sensitive in the research study and development of the workbook, the study's results and resources would require additional tailoring and adjustment when applied to other contexts, cultural or otherwise. Second, only two out of ten participants who were new Christians, and the majority of the participants were more mature, having known Christ for over ten years. Therefore, the application of the study may better serve a more thoroughly mixed group comprised of mature Christians and new believers. In fact, there may be difficulties in solely utilizing the research application with a group consisting entirely of new Christians, as the variations of life stories shared may not encompass a large enough difference of spiritual maturity. Lastly, the study assumes a strong belief in the value of small groups and may not have sufficiently addressed the issues for church communities that have not likewise embraced small group culture, or one whose focus is not as heavily relationship-oriented.

This study's findings offer a foundation from which to build on as future investigations continue to explore the dynamic between a Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* and the fostering of strong spiritual companionships. By re-visiting the

data, I have identified a few areas of opportunities where I would suggest for further research considerations:

First, the majority of participants in this study initially struggled in varying degrees with the practice of silence or the prescribed centering exercises to focus their mind, listening for God to speak to them through Scripture. Once they became more familiar with the attitude of silence and the centering exercises, most of them experienced a notably more intimate relationship with God, and they were able to pick up impressions that the Holy Spirit left in their mind while practicing *Lectio Divina*. It may be beneficial to conduct further research on the relationship between the degree of comfort or familiarity in practicing silence and centering exercises, and the degree of the exercises' impact on participants' relationships with God and the level of intimacy of the stories that they share.

The second area of opportunity involves the degree of mutual trust and openness in participants' sharing, as they had known each other for at least a few years. During the focus group, a few members wondered if groups with members who did not have the same level of initial trust and openness with each other would encounter difficulties in deepening spiritual companionship. It may, therefore, be beneficial to explore the impact of trust and mutual openness have on spiritual companionship, perhaps by studying a few groups with different levels of familiarity with each other. This perception of trust is closely related to the concept that boundaries enable deeper spiritual companionship by way of providing clear ownership and responsibility for individuals. One avenue to explore would be the methods by which group members would be able to

accelerate their acclimatization period in order to reach a high level of openness quickly and effectively.

Finally, several participants also expressed the same regret: they wished they had practiced *Lectio Divina* more regularly than they did in this study. They wondered if their sense of a closer and personal relationship with God might even be stronger if regularity was increased. It might also be beneficial to explore the relationship between frequency of practicing *Lectio Divina* have on their relationship with God and its impact on spiritual companionship.

As a pastor passionate about the facilitation of spiritual formation through small group ministry, and with over 17 years of experience in the field, I have been looking for new, effective ways to cultivate the inner life of small group members, both individually and corporately. I am greatly encouraged by the outcome of this study as it offers practical ways to achieve this goal. In my experience, churches tend to offer wholesale shepherding experiences, often leaving individual and personal shepherding in the hands of a single individual or a leaderless or unfocused group. Few churches that I know of offer both the training of personal devotion jointly with corporate service. Based on the outcome of this research, *A Storied Way of Lectio Divina* provides an effective way to bridge that gap. This research outcome also motivates me to explore equipping my church members with other personal spiritual disciplines, empowering them to serve one another for the purpose of spiritual growth. Further exploration would be worthwhile on the subject of incorporating personal spiritual disciplines into a life together in small group. This will help make the mission of SGBC a reality. I

was most inspired by Rev. Bill Hybels' statement that "Local church is the hope of the world. There is nothing like the local church when the local church is working right." Let's get to work!

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION

God's purpose for humanity is to reflect his image. At the Fall, the relationship between God and humanity was broken, and God's image and purpose in humanity were marred. Ever since the Fall, God has been at work to restore humanity to their original nature and purpose. God has made a provision for humanity, a chance to regain what was lost, by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to die for our sins and bring us back into relationship with him and for his work of restoration in us. By becoming Christ-like, humanity is restored to its original nature and purposes. The ultimate goal of Christ-likeness is to live and work as Christ did, that is to say, for the glory of God and for completion of God's Work in this world. Christ says, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38 ESV)

God, the Potter, is actively at work. He is the initiator of spiritual formation. We, his clay, are held accountable to respond and yield to God's work in us. We are shaped, in the Potter's hands according to his will, for his purposes, and to do the good works that he has planned for us. God uses the circumstances of life, the revelations of personal study of the Scriptures, and the companionship of the small group as platforms for spiritual formation; the three essential

resources of spiritual formation are used to shape us on his wheel. The three essential resources are God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's People. God's people, the Christian community, play a vital role in spiritual formation. God himself is a community of three persons in one—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He created humanity to be in community with one another as a reflection of his image. Christians, living in communities that reflect the indwelt nature of the Trinity, experience supernatural transformation. Those who yearn to become Christ-like participate in spiritual formation, subjecting themselves to the Potter's hands. Once believers decide to cooperate, they begin the cycle of being broken down and reformed, each time making another step toward Christ's likeness.

This research portfolio has emphasized the importance of Christian community in the spiritual formation process. Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others (Mulholland 1993). Therefore, it is the experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness in the context of community. This human wholeness is actualized by nurturing one another toward wholeness, both within the community of God's people and in the role of healing brokenness or injustice in the world. In this context of community, God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's People work together to bring about spiritual formation. These central themes were illustrated in each project in this portfolio, and are reiterated below, in the consideration of each project's focus: first, personal spiritual growth; second, the academic exploration of spirituality; and third, the application of this formational philosophy within ministry.

The writing of my spiritual autobiography was instrumental to my spiritual growth, as it provided the rediscovery that I came from a family rich with Christian heritage. This realization reinforced God's amazing grace poured upon my family and those who were called to be pastors before me in my family lineage. It fortified my sense of calling and duty in my ministry and has provided additional mental and spiritual fortitude. I was struggling in my ministry and had been anxiously waiting for God's guidance and direction at the time of writing my spiritual autobiography.

The story of my life, and God's past faithfulness and guidance through trials and triumphs, has helped me see clearly God's plan for the next chapter of life. It has also strengthened my resolve to make decisions that may cause me discomfort, as my faith in God will remain steadfast as I follow his voice. I saw, in my own story, how my own relationship with God and my spiritual journey has deepened within the context of community, from my family and friends, to my school and church life. I realize that I can trust the Potter's hands.

As I reflected upon the themes of my spiritual journey through community and spiritual companionship, I realized the impact of God's Word, especially through the practice of *Lectio Divina* and the revelations that followed; my prayers were more focused on listening to and discerning the Holy Spirit's promptings—and affirmation of my decisions by God's People—in times of trouble. At the same time, I saw my own transformation from a dominant personality, one characterized by a deep desire to take control of my destiny, to an increasingly submissive person, whose life was characterized by surrender to God

for guidance and control. I saw positive impact on my life with all the twists and turns and crises and observed the resulting fruits of faith, peace, and joy from the Holy Spirit. Moreover, at the academic level, this writing process helped me to see the importance of life stories on spiritual formation. As I reflected upon my personal story and identified repetitive themes, I began to see the pattern of spiritual formation throughout my life. This, in turn, plays a formative role in enabling me to see how God transforms the lives of others.

Through this process of reliving and rediscovering events from our past, we can be enlightened by a new understanding about our key life decision, significant turning points, the quality of our relationships, the nature of God, as well as an appreciation for life's trials and triumphs. Then we can make use of these insights, to realize new paths for the following chapters of our spiritual life. This also applies to the ministry of spiritual formation. In my role as a pastor, spiritual director, and overseer of small group ministries, I find writing my own story has helped me to expose, listen to, and discern the meaning of God's movement in the life stories of others. It is my passion and calling to help Christ followers to discern the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in their lives for the purpose of spiritual growth. As such, it is very important to cultivate a spiritually discerning life for those under my care. Small groups may cultivate a culture of such a discerning life, when they foster an environment of deep spiritual friendship through the sharing of life stories. This grows the small group of friends into a powerful and discerning community, who can help each other grow to spiritual maturity. I can apply what I have learned from the writing of

spiritual autobiography both in my ministry toward individual spiritual direction and small group communities.

Second, my model of spiritual formation through small group cultivated in me a deeper desire for a more intimate relationship with God and others. As I wrote on the importance of fostering spiritual formation through small groups by the practice of various spiritual disciplines—*Lectio Divina*, solitude and silence, and spiritual direction, I recognized their significance in my own life. Practicing these disciplines on a regular basis has significantly aided the process of both my spiritual growth and the development of a spiritually discerning spirit. I have developed a better sense for discerning God’s will, and have become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s promptings through them. I have also experienced overflowing joy when my spiritual director or other spiritual companions have affirmed what God has spoken to me through the Holy Spirit. I count it as a tremendous blessing to learn on both sides of spiritual direction. In my personal spiritual journey, I have been guided by a spiritual director, while I’ve also practiced spiritual direction with directees from my spiritual direction practicum course. In addition, I have had the opportunity to take a three-day silent retreat as well as experience the results of daily *Lectio Divina* and journaling for a consecutive 45 days in one of my second-year courses. All of these experiences contributed to my own personal growth, and these practices have taken root in my spiritual life.

These experiences and convictions, in turn, have overflowed into and significantly influenced the ways in which I approach discipleship and small

group ministry. They have strengthened my resolve to incorporate these new practices into small group curriculum at SGBC in the future, part of its spiritual formation process through the small group ministry. More importantly, the model is an academic document; I found that the research and write- up process consolidated my experience from small group ministries in the past through the development of the theology, goals, means, and methods of spiritual formation. This writing reinforced the importance of Christian community and spiritual companions, as well as their impact on the spiritual life of Christ followers. It also clarified my thinking in regards to the critical role spiritual disciplines play in the discipleship process in small groups.

Furthermore, this writing helped me focus on the ways that SGBC and its small groups can best use the three essential resources of spiritual formation— God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s People—to provide the necessary environment and equipment to foster spiritual growth among small group members. In regards to the actual practice of ministry, the model developed has provided me with a model for equipping the leadership team of SGBC, from the initial joining of members through their discipleship, and onward in their growth and leadership through their spiritual companions. Our pastors, deacons, ministry co-ordinators, and small group leaders are now able to use this as a guide for the spiritual formation process through small groups at SGBC. I have been inspired to preach a sermon series on the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s role in spiritual formation for developing a spiritually discerning culture in our congregation. I

have also been moved to launch a monthly deacons' 'learn and share' group, focusing on how to be spiritual mentors.

Third, conducting the research project enhanced my personal practice of listening to God and other participants. My relationship with God has grown more intimate as I practiced *Lectio Divina* regularly, and I also grew in my capability to listen to the Holy Spirit's still small voice during my time of devotion. In addition, my capability in discerning God's will through the lives of participants grew as they shared their life stories in small group meetings. This research project reinforced my commitment to practice *Lectio Divina* on a regular basis and also enriched my prayer life. I have experienced a stronger sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life through this process. At the academic level, I believe that the outcome of this produced a research document which supports the importance of sharing life stories to vivify the spiritual life in small groups, as it deepened spiritual companionships among group members seeking spiritual growth. Through this project, we experienced how God's Word, through *Lectio Divina*, as the still small voice of the God's Spirit, was heard. We, God's People, also experienced edification through the sharing of life stories with one another. We experienced how, through the proper application of these three essential resources of spiritual formation in a healthy environment, contributed to the significant development of spiritual companionship by sharing life stories.

Finally, at the ministry level, the skills that I learned from qualitative research and the phenomenology methodology enhanced my ability to identify strengths and potential weaknesses within our ministry. My time spent studying

intimacy in a small group setting has helped me to become a better listener. It has equipped me with a fresh set of eyes that I may look below the surface of others' stories, be they in small groups or other ministry settings, and to be more analytical while minimizing personal bias. The findings of this research project also provided personal affirmation, deepening my conviction to carry out my ministry plan based on my ministry model.

In closing, I would like to highlight the future implications of my studies in spiritual formation, as well as some areas that I wish to further develop. At the personal level, I have two main goals. One is to grow in relational intimacy with God, and the other is to grow in spiritual discernment. Before my spiritual formation studies, God had already been cultivating these desires through my personal readings and learnings from workshops such as those held at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I felt the need to learn more about the ways to achieve these goals. As I immersed myself in my spiritual formation studies in the past few years, I have not only experienced a more intimate relationship with God, but also becoming a more spiritually discerning Christ follower. I also am now able to help others who share the same desires. During a three-day silent retreat in the Spiritual Direction Practicum, I experienced the impacts of solitude and silence on the intimacy of a relationship with God. Every time I read the journals that I had wrote there, my desire and commitment to develop a spiritual rhythm of solitude and silence amidst the chaos of day-to-day ministry life are renewed. For me, it takes regular practice of *Lectio Divina*, solitude and silence, and intentional spiritual direction to sustain these personal goals in the future.

Because of my passion for building small group ministry, as well as my discovery of the practices of Celtic Spirituality, which could potentially enhance my ministry model, my future plan is to pursue further studies within the field and practice. I believe that many of its elements are adaptable to my current ministry model. For example, the Celtic Community's motto is "helping people to belong so that they can believe" (Hunter, George G., III 2010, 45). I find this idea inspiring—the idea of evangelism through small groups. I plan to begin my research by reading relevant texts pertaining to Celtic Community life and how they reach out to their pagan communities. Good starting points include book from authors such as David Osborne, who considers the spiritual discipline of pilgrimage, and Ray Simpson, who discusses Celtic Spirituality's facets including rhythm, roots, and relationships.

A second area I wish to further study is prayer, particularly the ideas of listening prayer and formational prayer. Although *Lectio Divina* was helpful in improving my prayer life, prayer encompasses many more aspects in life than biblical study. There are many facets to prayer, and I am especially interested in prayers that lead to discernment and healing. A third area of further study for me is group spiritual direction. Besides reading books related to this subject, I plan to attend formal training with the Transforming Community led by Ruth Haley Barton. I believe that by experiencing group spiritual direction myself, I would be able to better serve SGBC to become a spiritually discerning community.

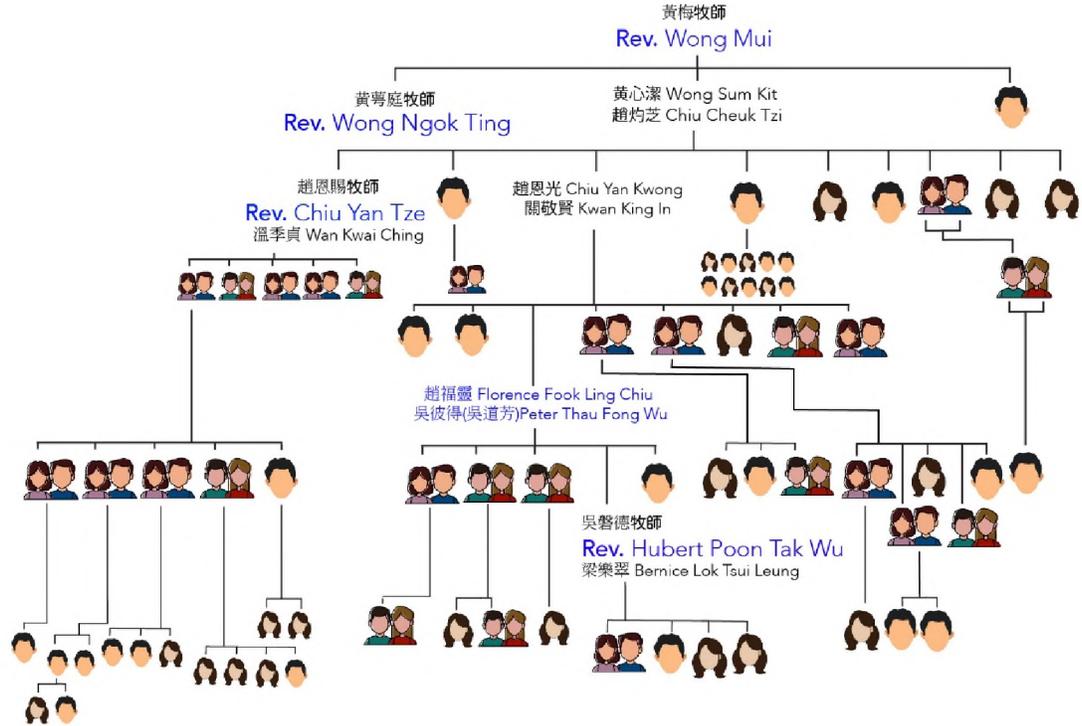
In regards to my future ministry plan, I wish to pursue four goals. First, I hope to equip the leadership team of the church with the discipleship process

based on my ministry model. Second, I plan to incorporate “A Storied Way” of *Lectio Divina* in all small groups at SGBC to deepen spiritual companionship for spiritual growth. Third, I plan to provide multiple workshops over a period of two years to help individual group members experience the spiritual disciplines outlined in the model. This will enhance their capacity to listen to the Holy Spirit’s promptings as they develop a more spiritually discerning lifestyle. Fourth, I hope to see the development of a spiritually discerning church as I succeed in the first three goals, that individual group members and their small groups would become spiritually discerning people and spiritual companions.

It is my desire to see my own life and that of the life of the congregation that God has entrusted in my care to continue to be shaped into Christ-likeness in the Potter’s hands. God, in his sovereignty, led me to study spiritual formation at Tyndale. By submitting to God and yielding to his guidance, I have been further shaped according to his will, both in my personal character development and in my ministerial approach. God has allowed me to experience first-hand his transformation power through his Word, the Holy Spirit, and his people in my own life. It is always a joy to follow God and serve him with spiritual companions along the way. This has been my experience throughout my time of study and my ministry. I look forward to applying all that I have learned into my ministry at SGBC, as directed by God, in the years ahead, so that my clay, no matter how flawed or insignificant, could be shaped as a testament to his transformative power.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Hubert Poon-Tak Wu's Family Tree



**Appendix 2: Key Words Describing Program
and Relationship Oriented Church**

Program Oriented	Relationship Oriented
Content or Information focused Curriculum Delegation Dependency (on teachers or pastors) Feeding Inflexible (disrespect who people are and what their needs are) Meetings Methods Organized by zip codes Tasks Teach–Assign–Do	Account to result Coach Development Dynamics Empowerment Flexible (respect who people are and what their needs are) Gifts use Interdependency Intimacy Leading, Modelling, Releasing Make Change Mentor Meta (transforming) Organism Organized by relationship (not by zip codes) Peer-based ministry Relationship building Sharing Touch a life/self-renewal life (self-renewal first) Transition Trust Assign–Do–Teach

Adapted from chapters 1–6 of *The Coming Church Revolution* by Carl F. George (1994, 25–106).

Appendix 3: List of “One Others” of the New Testament

Below is a list of the 59 “one others” of the New Testament.

Read each one and visualize how they can be lived out in our small group:

1. “...Be at peace with each other.” (Mark 9:50)
2. “...Wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14)
3. “...Love one another...” (John 13:34)
4. “...Love one another...” (John 13:34)
5. “...Love one another...” (John 13:35)
6. “...Love one another...” (John 15:12)
7. “...Love one another” (John 15:17)
8. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love...” (Romans 12:10)
9. “...Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:10)
10. “Live in harmony with one another...” (Romans 12:16)
11. “...Love one another...” (Romans 13:8)
12. “...Stop passing judgment on one another.” (Romans 14:13)
13. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you...” (Romans 15:7)
14. “...Instruct one another.” (Romans 15:14)
15. “Greet one another with a holy kiss...” (Romans 16:16)
16. “...When you come together to eat, wait for each other.” (I Cor. 11:33)
17. “...Have equal concern for each other.” (I Corinthians 12:25)
18. “...Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (I Corinthians 16:20)

19. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (II Corinthians 13:12)
20. "...Serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13)
21. "If you keep on biting and devouring each other... you will be destroyed by each other." (Galatians 5:15)
22. "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." (Galatians 5:26)
23. "Carry each other's burdens..." (Galatians 6:2)
24. "...Be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)
25. "Be kind and compassionate to one another..." (Ephesians 4:32)
26. "...Forgiving each other..." (Ephesians 4:32)
27. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." (Ephesians 5:19)
28. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)
29. "...In humility consider others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3)
30. "Do not lie to each other..." (Colossians 3:9)
31. "Bear with each other..." (Colossians 3:13)
32. "...Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another." (Colossians 3:13)
33. "Teach...[one another]" (Colossians 3:16)
34. "...Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
35. "...Make your love increase and overflow for each other." (I Thessalonians 3:12)
36. "...Love each other." (I Thessalonians 4:9)
37. "...Encourage each other..."(I Thessalonians 4:18)
38. "...Encourage each other..." (I Thessalonians 5:11)

39. "...Build each other up..." (I Thessalonians 5:11)
40. "Encourage one another daily..." (Hebrews 3:13)
41. "...Spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)
42. "...Encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:25)
43. "...Do not slander one another." (James 4:11)
44. "Don't grumble against each other..." (James 5:9)
45. "Confess your sins to each other..." (James 5:16)
46. "...Pray for each other." (James 5:16)
47. "...Love one another deeply, from the heart." (I Peter 3:8)
48. "...Live in harmony with one another..." (I Peter 3:8)
49. "...Love each other deeply..." (I Peter 4:8)
50. "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." (I Peter 4:9)
51. "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others..."
(I Peter 4:10)
52. "...Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another..." (I Peter 5:5)
53. "Greet one another with a kiss of love." (I Peter 5:14)
54. "...Love one another." (I John 3:11)
55. "...Love one another." (I John 3:23)
56. "...Love one another." (I John 4:7)
57. "...Love one another." (I John 4:11)
58. "...Love one another." (I John 4:12)
59. "...Love one another." (II John 5)
(George 1991, 129-131)

Appendix 4: A Brief Guide to Inductive Bible Study

Inductive Bible study is one method of studying biblical text. It involves examining ideas and words presented in the passage, which leads to the understanding of meanings and then the interpretations or applications of that text. More information can be found in Kay Arthur's *How to Study Your Bible: The Lasting Rewards of The Inductive Approach*. Informational and formational approaches can sometimes be used alongside the inductive Bible study approach, commonly used at SGBC. Bob Grahmann provides a precise description:

Inductive Bible study refers to studying the Bible “from the text out.” It requires that one start with a close study of what the text of a passage actually says, then derive meaning, application and relevance from the text rather than read one's ideas or preconceptions into the text. Inductive study is vigorous, deep, serious Bible study, engaging the full faculties of the mind. (2003, 12)

In a journal, fill in the following information for the Bible passage you're reading. Use print and online resources like Bible dictionaries, concordances, maps, etc., to help you discover more about the culture, geography, and history of the passage you're studying.

Understand the Context:

- Author: Who wrote the passage?
- Background: When did the author live? In what culture?
- Context: How does the passage fit in with the text before and after ?

OBSERVATION: What does the text say?

Pray:

- Ask God to guide your study, to reveal new insight within the passage.

1. Read the passage:

- Read over a few times, focusing on what stands out.
- Read in other versions of the Bible if available

2. Ask investigative questions:

- Who is speaking? Who are the main people? Who is being spoken to?
- What is happening? What is the scene? What is the cultural context of the passage?
- Where is the passage taking place?
- When did or will the events take place?
- How did people respond? How did Jesus react?

3. Look for grammatical connections:

- Repeated words, comparisons, contrast, cause and effect.
- Identify key words, repeated words or phrases and commands.
- Note verb tenses.
- Look for conjunctions such as since and therefore. Why are those words in the sentence?

INTERPRETATION: What does the passage mean?

1. Develop some questions based on the text. Ask what the significance of your main observations are and why they happened.

- What is the author's intent in this passage?

2. Imagine the perspective of the people in the scene. If Jesus spoke, why did he say what he said?

- What was he saying to the people of his day? What would they have understood?

3. Answer the questions based on the text and the context

- Look at other scriptures that relate to the passage. These are usually found in the margins of Bibles or in footnotes. What do other verses say about this thought or idea?
- Use Bible study helps to get a clearer meaning of the passage as needed: commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, *Vine's Expository Dictionary* or a Bible study guide for the text, subject, or person your studying. Use a dictionary to define any unfamiliar terms or ideas.

4. Try to summarize the passage in one sentence. What is the main point the author is communicating to the audience?

- What is one principle or lesson the writer/God was trying to communicate

- Why do you think God put this in the Bible?

APPLICATION: What does the passage mean for me?

1. How do you respond to what this passage is saying? Does it challenge how you see the world?
 - What is the Holy Spirit saying to you personally in this passage? Ask him.
2. Is there a central truth that you need to put into practice?
 - What is one way you can apply the heart of this passage to your life?
 - What will you do differently because of what you have learned?
3. What are the implications of the passage for the community of which you are a part?
4. Pray that God will help you believe and obey.

(Adopted from A Brief Guide to Inductive Bible Study from InterVarsity)

Appendix 5: The Practice of *Lectio Divina*

The following are suggested steps to take and questions to ponder during each element of *Lectio Divina*.

Begin with the right attitude:

1. *Lectio Divina* is to read with a devotional and practical view, an eye to your relationship and response to the God who is revealed through the text. Be ready for some “instructions” to present themselves to your thoughts as you read. When they do appear, spend time with them, respond to them. As you do this, these impressions will work their way deeper and deeper into your life and will change the way you pray.
2. It is where reading and prayer are bound together.
3. Seek to understand the passage like a love letter to you from God.

Silencio

Find a place free of distractions, audible and otherwise. Quiet down your heart and mind and relinquish all thoughts; rest before God and be present for the moment. Make yourselves available to God for speaking to you. At the end of silencio, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to speak through the passage to you and pray with open heart and anticipation.

Lectio

Read the passage aloud at least once and then the second time slowly, silently and carefully so that the passage is both said and heard.

1. Ask yourselves a few questions while reading which may be helpful:
 - What have I been thinking about as I have read this passage?
 - Are there any particular thoughts, questions or ideas that have come up?
 - Have I noticed any graces or sins in my life as I have been reading? What kinds of response do I notice?
 - What have I seen of the Lord in my reading, of God’s character or works?
 - How am I led to respond to what I see of God?
 - Do I notice any inclinations to action as I read this passage? What might be underneath these inclinations?
 - What feelings have accompanied my reading? Why?
2. If your mind wanders away or is distracted, then write down the distractions and refocus on the passage

3. If there are words or ideas that need clarifications from Bible Study tools, either look them up later or take a few minutes to seek for answers and then get back to the passage

Meditatio

Mediate on the scripture being read. It may involve savoring, repeating, thinking about or digesting the words so that they become personally meaningful and nourishing spiritually. Through meditation, you allow the text to soak into you; you permit the influence or power of scripture to act within.

1. Take a small portion of the passage:

Focus on an image, a phrase or even one word from the text at a time.

2. Ruminatio. Growling. Gnawing.

Take in scripture by reading and memorizing it, and then bringing it back up to chew it again and again until it could be digested and fully used.

- To know the text well enough that you can call it to mind when you are away from your Bibles
- To engage fully with the process of meditation.

3. Steps:

i. Slow Down

Begin with a simple prayer

Ask to be aware of God's presence and for the Spirit to teach you how to meditate

Use your breath as an anchor point

ii. Take it in

Repetition

Active engagement of our mind and heart and body with the text:

What is going on in this text?

What and whom do I see?

What do I hear?

What do my other senses take in?

What did the people say to one another?

Why do I think the people in the passage might have spoken as they did?

Why do I think Jesus related to the individuals in the passage as he did?

What is there to receive from the passage?

Is this a text in which God extends a blessing or a promise?

Does God extend a command or a warning or a word of love?

What should I praise God for?

What should I pray for on the basis of this verse?

Imaginative reflection

Focus on a particular story, phrase, or idea
Pay attention to the questions the scripture asks directly of you

iii. Take it away

Close with a prayer: ask God what you should take with you into the day ahead

Oratio

You pray with the scripture read. You pray back to God the promises found, and use this reading to cry out to God or listen to His voice for what you need. In a nutshell, prayer—communication with God—is the house that *Lectio Divina* inhabits:

1. Prayer before reading and meditating

Use this moment before reading as an occasion for laying yourselves before God, admitting/confessing who you are as you approach this text and asking for the particular kinds of guidance you know you need as you open the scriptures.

2. Prayer during reading and meditating

The Word is not only the center of our listening; it is also the center of our response. Use the language of scripture to help us form our own speech to God.

3. Prayer after reading and meditating

In your reading and meditation, the Spirit of God may plant a seed. Prayer, after reading and meditation waters this seed for growth. Inspired by something in the text, you may find yourselves praying for God to guide you regarding how to obey what you hear in the text and how to follow where you are led by the text.

4. You may ask:

Which person in this passage under study evokes the most emotion in me?

What feelings do I have about what took place?

What feelings do I have about Jesus' words to the people in the passage?

Contemplatio

You rest in God's presence through the scripture. That is, you rest and be present with the God of the text in contemplation. Christian contemplation is the intuition or awareness of the presence of God; it is being mindful of the presence of God. It is the enjoyment of his company. Contemplation is something you experience and is not something that you do. It is the encounter between one person (God) present to another.

1. God's presence

Through contemplative prayer you learn to pay attention to God's presence anywhere and everywhere
It is an approach to the text of scripture that pays special attention—beneath the mere analysis of words and questions – to the dynamics of your presence to God and God's presence to you through the Spirit

2. Silence

Pay attention to God's presence in an environment of silence.
An attitude of attentive alertness, of vigilance, and listening
Physical atmosphere
Condition of heart
What happens in contemplation is God's grace
Leave controls to God
Only await God's action toward you
Cultivate a disciplined silence that reflects a focused and listening stance

3. Love

Contemplation is simply the enjoyment of life with your Beloved
There is God's love for you
There is your union with God

4. Practices to calm our mind for contemplation:

“Brain dump” for a few minutes
Find a neutral spot to return to when you catch yourselves daydreaming
watch your breath
Prayerfully seek a prayer word or phrase that can serve as your anchor
Take note of certain thoughts that cause distractions
Redirect your thinking by naming this thought and then returning to your prayer anchor
Get things right with God—state of relationship with God
Use your body
Silence & solitude

I might ask: As I rest with what I have observed with my mind and with my heart, what stands out to me? Do I sense that God's Spirit is guiding my spirit into some new understanding or experience of His holy presence?

Incarnatio

Our mind is like water, ready to conform to whatever the scripture might suggest. We understand the teachings of Jesus when we do them. Now, let the scriptures lead you into action, into response.

1. Consider asking the following questions in order to ponder for proper response:
Is there a command to obey?

Is there a promise to claim?
Is there a virtue to cultivate?
Is there an image to savor?
Is there a warning to heed?
Is there an example to follow?
Ponder deeper into your own life:
Do I sense in my inner being any invitation from God to receive more grace, to embrace truth, or to take action in a particular area of my life?

2. Our lives draw us into scripture and draw the scripture into us:

The content of scripture
The concrete life situations
Reflection to action and action to reflection

3. Key Guideline for action

Appropriate response to scripture is response to the living God, and godly actions must be conformed (obedient), not to the surrounding culture, but to the character of Christ.

(Wilhoit 2012)

**Appendix 6: The Steps for Practicing Group
*Lectio Divina***

Group *Lectio Divina* may include the following steps:

1. Open with prayer
2. Read the passage
3. Mull over the word or phrase that God speaks to each group member
4. A time of sharing with others in the group
5. Read the passage again
6. Reflect on the words and phrase further exploring the emotions felt
7. More time for sharing among group members
8. Read the passage for the third time
9. Another silent contemplation to seek God on why these feelings are provoked by these words and phrases
10. A final and more lengthy time of sharing ends the session with each person telling the small group what God is saying through the text.

(Jones 2005, 54)

Appendix 7: The Practice of Spiritual Friendships

Spiritual friendships are a gift of hospitality, presence, and dialogue; these components of doing are also grounded in ways of being. These unique friendships do not interrupt, judge, attempt to solve problems, prematurely or inappropriately advise, or assume what worked for us will work for others.

Hospitality involves making space in one's life for others, which is more demanding than giving advice, money, or some other form of help. But the essence of hospitality is taking another person into one's space, into one's life. It is also the essence of being a spiritual companion. David G. Benner points out the following:

When I have begun to be a person with a quiet, still center, I can invite others to come and rest there. It is out of this place that soul friends offer their gifts of presence, stillness, safety and love. I must first be still to myself if I am to be still with another. And, of course, I must learn to be still before God if I am to learn to be still in myself. Presence begins with a still place within one's self. If I have no such still inner place, I cannot really be present for others. (2002, 46–47)

This kind of hospitality provides a safe place to spiritual companions where anything can be said without fear of criticism or ridicule. So that masks and pretensions can be set aside. It is a place where it is safe to share deep secrets, dark fears, acute sources of shame, disturbing questions or anxieties. It is also a place of grace—a place where others are accepted as they are for the sake of who they may become. Richard Lamb adds some practical advice that, “Hospitality involves making a welcoming space for relationships to grow. And relationships

need different kinds of space in which to flourish including physical space, temporal space, social space, emotional space and spiritual space” (2003, 41).

Keith R. Anderson agrees and shares that “Friendship is creating hospitality; it is creating a free and open space where we can receive each other as a gift for our lives” (1997, 19).

Presence begins with attentiveness which demands that one focus on the other person and his or her experience. Listening to one another is critically important. Anderson also quoted Stephen R. Covey of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* on empathic listening:

“When another person speaks, we’re usually ‘listening’ at one of four levels. We may be ignoring another person, not really listening at all. We may practice pretending. ‘Yeah. Uh-huh. Right.’ We may practice selective listening, hearing only certain parts of the conversation... Or we may even practice attentive listening, paying attention and focusing energy on the words that are being said. But very few of us ever practice the fifth level, the highest form of listening, empathic listening.” Empathic listening means that I attempt to listen so well that I get inside your mind and see what you see. I empty myself of my preoccupation of how it is for you and let your words paint the inner landscape for me. (1998, 60)

Indeed, presence involves spiritual friends who set aside their own interests and preoccupations, stop analyzing what they are hearing or rehearsing how they are to respond, resisting impulse to solve problems or fix things that appear broken.

David G. Benner reminds us how to extend the gift of presence and be genuinely present to others:

To be present to you means that I must be prepared, temporarily, to be absent to me. I must therefore set aside all the things I carry with me in consciousness all day long—my planning for what comes next, my evaluation of how I am doing and my reflection on what is presently transpiring. These are the noises that drown out silence. These are the distractions that keep me focused on myself and make it impossible for me

to be present to another person. Genuine presence involves being genuine myself. I can be genuinely present to myself only when I can be genuinely present to God.

Being genuine does not mean communicating everything I feel or think. But it does mean that what I do communicate, I genuinely feel, believe and think. But ultimately the presence that transforms lives is not mine but God's. As I bring my true self-in-Christ to relationships of spiritual friendship, what the other person encounters is not just me but Christ in me. Spiritual friends help each other discern God's presence and respond to him in loving surrender and service. They seek therefore to discern God's presence. (2002, 50–52)

Dialogue is one of the deepest forms of soul engagement we can experience with another person because it is richer than simple conversation, advice giving, or communication. Dialogue involves shared inquiry designed to increase the awareness and understanding of all parties. Keith R. Anderson is helpful in explaining what this dialogue may entail:

Soul-friend talk includes both faith-talk and idea-talk in their normal ebb and flow of conversations—talk which is enriched by a kingdom perspective and which seeks to wrestle with truth questions. Soul-friend conversation is sacramental for it sees the deep spiritual meaning in the tapestry of daily events. It isn't always about "spiritual" or "religious" matters but it reaches deeply into the meaning of every event, experience or issues of life. (1997, 117)

Indeed, we should not assume that such dialogue should always be intense and relates only to serious or religious matters. The dialogue, in fact, is sharing of the soul. They go deep only as they learn to tell each other their stories and reveal their unmasked selves. Spiritual friends believe in the whole person and are just as anxious to know about heart and soul as about emotions and body. David G.

Benner tries to explain what qualify as dialogue among spiritual friends:

If my conversation never involves disclosing my deepest longings, anxieties or experiences of God, it cannot appropriately be called dialogue. Dialogue involves the risk of revealing what is most precious to me. If I

remain in a safe zone of opinions, facts, and information, I have not exposed my deepest self. Nor have I ventured to the place of deep encounter with others that is called dialogue. (2002, 57)

In dialogue the intent is exploration, discovery, and insight. David G.

Benner further explains the purpose of dialogue, “In dialogue I attempt to share how I experience the world and seek to understand how you do so. In this process each participant touches and is touched by others. This result in each person’s being changed” (2002, 55). It is important to note that mutual respect is the foundation of dialogue. If we see each other through the eyes of Christ and recognize that everyone is made in the image of God, we see the others’ worth and dignity with respect. David G. Benner points out that when we see people in this light, “I also see what they can become, not simply what they are. And I am really willing to see them as God sees them, I see Jesus in them; I see them as imagers of the God who was fully represented in Jesus” (2002, 56). The practice of spiritual friendships should consist of at least five key traits:

- 1) The openness of a listening friend
- 2) The encouragement of a caring friend
- 3) The toughness of an honest friend
- 4) The respect of a humble friend
- 5) The wisdom of a spirit-minded friend

Keith R. Anderson affirms these traits and points out that God intends the church to be a community of friends, who are willing and able to speak the truth in love through words of confirmation and contradiction in order to build each other up spiritually, “A friend is one who provides confirmation when needed and

challenge or contradiction when that is needed. Friendship is not the flattery of telling us only what we want to hear; it is also telling us what we need to hear” (1997, 89). Friends tell us the truth about who we are, encouraging us and helping us grow. Therefore, to encourage can mean affirmation or confrontation, acceptance or contradiction, the grace of hope or the grace of honest critique. But, encouragement is always grounded in truth telling.

It is critically important for spiritual friends to have a teachable spirit (Proverbs 23:12) and softness of heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27) in order to receive wise counsel and rebuke for spiritual transformation. Ajith Fernando suggests the following:

Some people are not very teachable because they try to protect an image that they are mature or learned. They build walls around themselves, and their minds are difficult to penetrate, especially when someone wants to address their faults. The Bible, on the other hand, has much to say about the value of soft hearts easily penetrated by God’s Spirit and Christians who are agents of the Spirit. (1991, 108)

**Appendix 8: A Guide to Shepherding a
Congregation**

CATEGORIES	HOW WELL DO I KNOW MY SHEEP? <i>(Rate yourself a beginner, intermediate, advanced)</i>	DECISIONS I NEED TO MAKE TO BECOME A BETTER LEADER IN THIS AREA	STEPS I WILL TAKE TO OWNING AND UNDERSTANDING THIS AREA OF LEADING
FEEDING MY MEMBERS <i>(Who are my hungry sheep?)</i>			
LEADING MY MEMBERS TO REST <i>(Who are my driven sheep?)</i>			
SEEKING THE LOST SHEEP <i>(Who is far from God?)</i>			
BRINGING BACK THE SCATTERED <i>(Who needs direction/ guidance?)</i>			
BINDING UP THE BROKEN AND STRENGTHENING THE SICK <i>(Who needs emotional support /healing?)</i>			

Appendix 9 An Assessment for the Lifestyle of Disciples

Stouffville Grace Baptist Church Assessment and Shepherding Plan for 5Gs Lifestyle of Disciples

Name	Good Stewardship	Group	Growth	Gifts	Grace

Group leaders are instructed in the use of progress trackers in their training. They are encouraged to use this template to track changes with their group members every six months, providing plans to encourage growth in key spiritual areas. A leadership coach or pastor will work with group leaders to map progress and to help adjust current plans to account for losses in focus or direction. Through the tracking of their small group members and the supervision by coaches and pastors, small group leaders will also be encouraged to mature in their leadership skills and spiritual mentorship.

Appendix 10: G.P.S. Plan

Stouffville Grace Baptist Church

G.P.S. for Small Group Template

Our Mission:

Sharing Life Together ... Bringing Christ's Love to Others

Our Vision:

Develop devoted disciples of Christ:

- Submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to live out a God-centered life
- Form a community that experiences, witnesses, serves and glorifies God

Goals
Process
Story

Appendix 11: Small Group Covenant Template

Stouffville Grace Baptist Church
Small Group Covenant Template

Group Name: _____

Leader: _____ Apprentice(s): _____

The purpose(s) of our group is to _____

The common goal(s) for next twelve months: _____

We will meet _____ times a month for ____ months, after which we will evaluate our direction.

We will gather from _____ to _____, and we will arrive on time so we can start and end on time.

We will gather at _____ (place).

We will develop and grow by _____ (what we are to study or discuss together).

We will connect with Christ and one another by _____

_____ (activities outside group time).

We will serve the church and the world by _____

We will agree to the following primary values of our group :

Commitment: Commit to give priority to attend group meetings and activities

Confidentiality: Anything of a personal nature that is said in the meeting is never repeated outside of meeting.

Participation: Everyone is given the right to their own opinion, and no questions are too trivial or unwise to be brought up.

Healthy Communication: Respect and accept one another. Be authentic and genuine. Be non-judgmental. Be empathetic. Speak the truth in love. Stay on the subject during discussions. Be open-minded.

Discernment: To listen to one another and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Self-discipline: To complete readings before group discussion if required.

Accountability: Give permission to others to hold each other accountable for spiritual growth.

Welcoming: open chair for newcomers.

Leadership development and multiplication: develop apprentice leaders and leadership team for the group. Strive for group birth and multiplications.

Appendix 12: Recommended Resources and Additional Reading

Recommended Reading for Spiritual Practices

Lectio Divina

Barton, Ruth Haley. 2006. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*, 45–61. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Howard, Evan B. 2012. “*Lectio Divina* in the Evangelical Tradition.” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5, no. 1: 56–77.

Jones, Tony. 2005. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*, 47–55. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Ortberg, John. 2002. *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, 173–192. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Wilhoit, James C. and Evan B. Howard. 2012. *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Silence and Solitude

Barton, Ruth Haley. 2004. *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

———. 2006. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*, 29–44. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Foster, Richard J. 1988. *Celebration of Disciplines: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 96–109. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Jones, Tony. 2005. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*, 37–46. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Ortberg, John. 2002. *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, 76–92. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Spiritual Direction

Anderson, Keith R. and Randy D. Reese. 1999. *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Moon, Gary W. and David G. Benner. 2004. *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Nouwen, Henri. 2006. *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Reese, Randy D. and Robert Loane. 2012. *Deep Mentoring: Guiding Others on Their Leadership Journey*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Smith, Gordon T. 2014. *Spiritual Direction: A Guide to Giving and Receiving Direction*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Spiritual Direction in Small Groups

Barton, Ruth Haley. 2012. *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Dougherty, Rose Mary. 1995. *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. New York: Paulist Press.

Morris, Danny E., and Charles M. Olsen. 2012. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Herndon: Alban Institute.

Reed, Angela H., Richard R. Osmer and Marcus G. Smucker. 2015. *Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Recommended Resources for Small Groups Leadership

Barton, Ruth Haley. 2012. *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discerning Practice for Leadership Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

Cloud, Henry and John Townsend. 2003. *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Donahue, Bill. 2012. *Leading Life Changing Small Groups*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Donahue, Bill and Russ Robinson. 2001. *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Hull, Bill. 2006. *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Icenogle, Gareth Weldon. 1994. *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Worship

Donahue, Bill. 2002. *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 133. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

SmallGroups.com. 2013. "Worship Ideas." *Christianity Today*. Accessed March 24, 2017. <http://www.smallgroups.com/meeting-builder/worship-ideas/>.

Tools for Mentoring. 2017. "Worship Ideas for Small Groups." *Father Heart Ministries*. Accessed March 25, 2017. <http://www.toolsformentoring.com/resources/small-group-helps/worship-ideas.php>.

Welcome (Icebreakers and Life Stories)

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Appendix 13: Informed Consent

Research Subject:

A Storied Way of *Lectio Divina* to build deeper Spiritual Companionship in Small Group at Stouffville Grace Baptist Church

Researcher:

Rev. Hubert Poon-Tak Wu, DMin (candidate), Tyndale University College and Seminary, Doctor of Ministry Program

Purpose of the Study:

This research project will explore in what ways *Lectio Divina* practiced privately on regular basis influence corporate sharing in small groups and its contribution to their spiritual companionship.

Invitation to Participate:

You are invited to participate in this study.

The following are the expectations for participating in this project:

1. Participate and share their life story authentically in 5 meetings to be held at the dining room of the group leader's home at following time:

Oct. 1: Saturday, 4:00–6:30 pm

Oct. 15: Saturday, 4:00–6:30 pm*

Nov. 5: Saturday, 4:00–6:30 pm

Nov. 20: Sunday, 1:30–4:00 pm

Dec. 3: Saturday, 4:00–6:30 pm

*From this date onward, all meetings were held in the facilitator's dining room

2. Practice *Lectio Divina* for personal devotion at least 2 times in-between group meetings and be prepared to share your spiritual journey in small groups.

3. Use a journal to write down insights or thoughts during personal devotion, keep it to yourselves, and use it as a reminder to determine what to share .

4. Participate in the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires

5. Participate in individual interview and a focus group

6. Participate in two sessions on data coding, one for review and one for interpretation. This might be done through communication by emails as well.

7. Participate in reviewing the draft of final report and provide feedback.

Voluntary and Informed Consent: (Verbal)

It is important that you fully understand that participation in this project is entirely voluntary. As a participant of this research project, you have the option whether or not to be a part of the research project. There will be no negative consequences for dropping out of the research at any time during the research process. You will be invited to share as much—or as little—as you feel comfortable. You also have full rights to withhold any information or part of what you shared to be used as research data.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

You can rest assured that any information collected in any form will be dealt with in the strictest of confidentiality. A code will be assigned to each participant and no personal names will be attached to any document. Your name will not be used in any public presentation of this research. All information given, conversations recorded and comments made will only be communicated publicly as aggregate data. No individuals will be identified unless specific permission to do so is given.

Information will be held secure in a secured cabinet in the researcher's home office and on a password-protected computer or mobile phone. Physical documents will not be copied and will be destroyed at the completion of the research project.

Accessibility to Research Finding:

All participants will review the draft of the final report and provide feedback and comment.

Verbal Consent by Participants:

By participating in this small group, you fully understand and accept the expectations of this research project as explained to you above. You are not waiving any legal rights if you choose to participate in this research. If you have any questions regarding to the participation in this project, please direct them to me, Rev. Hubert Poon-Tak Wu, at 647-449-5443 or hubertwu@stouffville-gbc.org, or Deacon Spencer Lui at 647-998-8377 or spencersgbc@gmail.com.

You may also direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary at reb@tyndale.ca.

Special Remarks:

Verbal consent was used since it is an existing group with a trusting relationship among group members and the researcher. The idea of written consent may damage such a trusting relationship and cause uncomfortable and negative connotation in the current context. In addition, Chinese culture prefer verbal consent over written ones. Therefore, I will read the content of the written consent slowly, clearly and fully to all participants at the orientation retreat before

they commit to participate and the beginning of actual intervention. Furthermore, participants will be given full understanding that their participation is entirely on a voluntary basis and that everyone has the right at any time to withdraw from the research project without any consequence and may continue to join the small group in their usual manner. A copy of such a consent will be kept by each participant. Informed consent as well as the right to withdraw anytime would provide an important ethical safeguard to the project.

**Appendix 14: Questionnaire 1
(Pre-intervention)**

Phenomenological Research Project at SGBC—First Questionnaire

Name (Code):

共七題 (Total seven questions)

請您詳細描述自己現在與神的關係及其狀況?

How do you describe your current relationship with God?

請詳細描述您平常在一個星期裏的靈修生活是如何的呢?

Describe your devotional practice in a typical week?

請分享您的靈修生活如何幫助您建立與神更親密的關係?

Share how your devotional practice has been helpful to your relationship with God?

請分享您的靈修生活如何幫助您的日常生活?

Share how your devotional practice has been helpful to your daily living?

您有沒有留意到神是何在您的生命中作工? 如果有, 請分享其中一次的經歷。

Have you noticed God's active work in your life? If so, please describe one such experience.

其他的組員有沒有在您的靈命成長上扮演一個角色? 如果有, 他們扮演甚麼角色及如何幫助您靈命成長呢?

Have other group members played a role in the development of your spiritual life? If so how?

您有沒有幫助其他的組員靈命成長呢? 如果有, 您是如何幫助他們的呢?

Have you contributed to the spiritual development of other group members? If so how?

**Appendix 15: Questionnaire 2
(Post-intervention)**

Phenomenological Research Project at SGBC—Second Questionnaire

Name: (Code) _____

請您詳細描述自己現在與神的關係及其狀況？

How do you describe your current relationship with God?

您對過去五次的小組聚會覺得如何？有甚麼感受及觀察？

Can you describe your experience or what you have observed during the small groups time when we are sharing life stories from what we have experienced from *Lectio Divina*?

在過去五次的小組聚會裏，我們彼此分享生命故事（個人靈修默想的領受及心得），請描述您當中有甚麼感受？體會？內心有甚麼經歷或迴響？對自己及組員與神的關係或靈程有甚麼觀察？

Please describe your thoughts and feelings from what you have experienced in the last five group meetings as we shared the life stories with each other? Did any of the stories shared resonate with you?

What are your observations in regards to your own relationship with God and with other group members? What observations have you made on other group members' relationships with God and one another?

Appendix 16: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Interviewee Code:

1. Describe your experience on your relationship with God after practicing *Lectio Divina* in the past 2 months.
2. Have other group members played a role in the development of your spiritual life? If so how?
3. Have you contributed to the spiritual development of other group members? If so how?

Appendix 18: Protocol for Observer of Participant Observation

Participant Observation for ARP at SGBC

Date/Time of Meeting: _____

Remarks:

Observe all of the elements below which includes paying attention not only to words, but to emotions, tone of voice, and body posture.

1. The room set up

2. The mood of the people

3. Their body language

4. The activity

5. The response

(How they interact with each other as they share. (e.g. Is there positive and meaningful support offered? Is the atmosphere one of judgment or of grace? Do the interactive discussions help illuminate and inspire a deepening relationship with God and one another?).

6. What they say and don't say. Stories that relate to:
- A. Their relationship with God

 - B. Their devotional practice

 - C. How their devotional practice has been helpful to their relationship with God

 - D. How their devotional practice has been helpful to their daily living

 - E. Their ability to notice God's active work in their life

 - F. Other group members played a role in the development of their spiritual life

 - G. How they contributed to the spiritual development of other group members

Appendix 19: The Steps for Practicing *Lectio Divina*

The Steps for Practicing *Lectio Divina*

According to Pope Benedict XVI in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (nos. 86–87), *Lectio Divina* is broken down into the following steps named in Latin:

Quieting down one’s heart (centering prayer)

Lectio (Reading),

Meditatio (Meditation),

Oratio (Prayer),

and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation).

Each of these steps together form a process by which we encounter God in his sacred word and respond to his grace. They form parts of a larger whole, but each one comes with a certain set of skills for our us to master. Let’s look briefly at each step.

Quieting down one’s heart (Centering prayer)

Before *Lectio*, please quiet down your mind and heart. Suggest to follow one of the following exercises through following weblinks:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SuFPZg2bdc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVrgTIBafGM>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZr_EUYCCog

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZumEIi2DvA>

Lectio (Reading)

In the first phase of *Lectio Divina* we understand what the passage we are reading says in itself. This is the literal meaning of the Scripture passage and the lessons everyone should recognize in reading it. At this stage we do not yet consider our own lives in connection with the Scriptures. We do not let our opinions influence our reading, but seek to understand the message of the passage as interpreted by the Church independently of anyone’s opinions. This phase is summarized with the question: What does the text say that everyone should understand?

Meditatio (Meditation)

In the meditation phase of *Lectio Divina*, we ask, what does this text say to me, today, and to my life? We allow God to pull up certain memories of people,

places, and events in our lives that relate to the passage we are reading. Meditation is also an opportunity to see ourselves in the text. We can consider our own feelings as if we were a participant in the text or try to understand what it would be like to be one of the people represented in the text. In this way we come to a deeper appreciation of how God is working in our lives through the sacred word. Having entered into the story ourselves, we can return to the present and consider the areas in our own lives that God is calling us to contemplate.

Oratio (Prayer)

Through a meditation on Scripture, we experience an intimate encounter with God that leads us to respond in prayer. Having met our Lord in his holy word, we courageously speak to him in our own words. In this way we consider prayer to be a simple conversation with God. It is a conversation that comes in various forms: we ask petitions (or requests) of him, we give him thanks, and we give him praise. We might also ask for the intercession of Mary or the saints represented in the passage we read. At this phase we can ask ourselves: What can I say to the Lord in response to his word?

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

A true encounter with the Lord always leads to transformation. Indeed, the Lord God proclaimed, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5). Through contemplation we come to an understanding of the parts of our lives that need to be transformed by God’s grace. We humble ourselves and open our lives up to his transformative power. This step comes with the willingness to change, an openness and trust in God, and the decision to follow God’s will rather than our own. With this decision comes a fear of losing what we find comfortable and safe. At the same time, we feel the excitement of a call to heroic adventure and a hopeful future of living the life we are meant to live. At this step in the *Lectio Divina* process, we ask ourselves: What conversion of the mind, heart, and life is the Lord asking of me?

Lectio Divina Based Devotional Guide

Devotional guide used by participants on their own between research small group

Meetings may be downloaded from this weblink:

<http://www.innerjourney.org.au/index.php?module=book&view=detail&id=887&lang=zh>

(Clue for Quiet Time by Lau Man Leung)

Participants are to practice *Lectio Divina* in the two weeks between each of the four group meetings with the following recommended passages:

Meeting 2:

John 14:23–26, 15:1–5, 16:6–10; Matthew 7:24–27; Hebrews 4:12–13;
Psalms 1:1–6

Meeting 3:

Matthew 8:5–13, 17:1–8, 26:6–3; Psalms 145: 14–21; Luke 10:38–42;
John 21:15–17

Meeting 4:

1 Peter 1:6–9; James 4:1–10; 2 Timothy 2:20–22; 1 Corinthians 13:4–8;
Luke 14:26–35; Proverbs 3:1–6

Meeting 5:

Isaiah 43:1–7; Hebrews 11:6; Luke 15: 11–24; John 1:45–51; Luke 17:11–19;
Philippians 4:4–7; John 10:7–15

Remarks:

The above passages were given to all group members after each of the meetings. For example, passages for sharing for meeting 2 were given to all participants promptly after the first meeting by emails with a copy of the devotional guide and reflection questions. During each of the meetings, participants chose from these passages which they practiced with *Lectio Divina* and shared their experience with one another.

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