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**The Sanctified Journey:
Labyrinths and Gospel Contemplation
in a Wesleyan Context**

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

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual formation is the process of following Jesus and how we become like him. Although some view this process as a linear experience, the pattern of a labyrinth is another way to describe this spiritual journey. The image of a labyrinth is not only used as the model of spiritual formation, but is also the metaphor employed throughout a spiritual autobiography and a summary of a ministry research project. Research was conducted at Holt Free Methodist Church and involved a small group that had the opportunity to walk a canvas labyrinth while practicing Gospel contemplation. A narrative methodology was used for interpreting the data that was collected through field notes, the use of a denominational survey, and exit interviews. Just as individuals walk a labyrinth at a unique pace, the same result is seen in the practice of Gospel contemplation. The uniqueness of an individual is a key component to the process of spiritual formation. The outcome of this research project resulted in spiritual growth for the researcher, the participants and the congregation in general.

DEDICATION

To my children, Naomi, Eden & Micah. Follow Jesus and stay on the path.

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GOD WORKS IN CYCLES AND SEASONS

God works in cycles and seasons,
God works in rhythms and years.
God moves through long generations –
God guides through joys and through tears.

‘For everything there’s a season,’
Time for all things in God’s plan.
God works in exquisite freedom,
God has the cosmos in hand.

God works through lines and through circles,
God works in things small and great.
God renews life and guides history;
He is no prisoner of fate.

God works through ways straight and crooked;
God works in both time and space.
God owns both order and chaos;
God works in judgment and grace.

....

God simplifies the deepest mysteries
God complicates best-laid plans.
We walk in wonder before him,
Trust our ways in his hands.

.....

(Ps. 150; Eccl. 1-3; Gen. 9; Ps. 18:26; Eph. 1:10, 2:10; 1 Pet. 4:10)

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Abbreviations

<i>FM:</i>	Free Methodist
<i>FMC:</i>	Free Methodist Church
<i>FMCiC:</i>	Free Methodist Church in Canada
<i>JDS:</i>	Journey Discipleship Survey

All Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

John Bunyan's work *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a spiritual classic that describes the Christian faith through the metaphor of a journey. While there are several biblical terms and images that are suitable for conversations about spiritual formation (Wilhoit 2008, 19), Charles Foster observed, "The metaphors from the journey are directly applicable to the everyday business of living" (Foster 2010, 150). Furthermore, "Bunyan was a shrewd writer. He knew that real, muddy, chafing, mile-eating pilgrimages were the best vehicle for the spiritual lessons he had to teach..." (Foster 2010, 200). The metaphor of a journey continues to be used in the works of others, such as M. Robert Mulholland's *Invitation to a Journey*, or David Benner's book *Spirituality and the Awakening of the Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation*.

In writing my spiritual autobiography (chapter 2), rather than following the example of John Bunyan and describing my life in terms of a linear pilgrimage, I have used the metaphor of a journey that follows a labyrinth path. The labyrinth is distinct from a maze in that the only choice to be made is the decision to enter the path. There are no dead ends in a labyrinth, only a centre which can be a place of reflection, followed by an opportunity to journey back out along the same path. One theory regarding the purpose of labyrinths is that they are a substitute for a physical pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Tarrant and Dakin 2004, 6). As a spiritual discipline (more is said about spiritual disciplines in chapter 3), a labyrinth is a resource that can be used to facilitate an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit:

The labyrinth is an evocative tool. It works through the imagination and the senses, creating an awareness of how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the Holy. To reap the benefits of these insights demands that we be able to ‘experience our experience’ in a conscious way. (Artress 2006, 97)

The labyrinth design became the basis for my model of spiritual formation (chapter 3), and a canvas labyrinth was used as a resource in my research project (chapter 5). The theory behind my research project was a combination of my model of spiritual formation and the introduction of Gospel contemplation for a Wesleyan context (chapter 4).

One can have confidence when following the path in a labyrinth that there is always a destination. It is not an aimless, directionless wandering without a reference point. The biblical Greek word *telos* is an end or purpose, and it is an achievement to fulfill spiritual formation as in 1 Tim. 1:5 (Kittel 1997, 1161). If spiritual formation is a process of being “... changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God” (Howard 2018, 18), the *telos* of formation is a renewal of the image of God. This purposeful movement unites each of the chapters in this project. James K.A. Smith recognizes that:

...there is an intimate and inextricable link between the *telos* to which we are being oriented and the practices that are shaping us in that direction. The practices ‘carry’ the *telos* in them. Just as we desiring animals are intentional and teleological, so the practices themselves are teleological – a specific vision of a *telos* – which is then communicated or transmitted to our desire through the practice. (Smith 2009, 62)

The practices related to a specific vision of a *telos* are more than just the spiritual disciplines. Spiritual formation occurs through the teleological practices that are also contained in the church, the home, and in works of mercy. The *telos* is what establishes the interconnectedness of the spiritual journey.

Ronald Rolheiser began his book *The Holy Longing* with a chapter on desire. In the opening paragraph of his book he observes, "...desire lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, and in the deepest recesses of the soul" (Rolheiser 1999, 3). A few pages later he says:

...spirituality is not about serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Long before we do anything religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality. (Rolheiser 1999, 6-7)

This channeling of desire is another way of speaking about *telos*, and it is not something that is discovered at the end but rather is present from the beginning of the spiritual journey. *Telos* draws an individual into the journey.

My working definition of spiritual formation comes from the text *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*. Spiritual formation is:

...a Spirit-and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God. (Howard 2018, 18)

This will be the definition of spiritual formation throughout this project. A sanctified journey leads to spiritual formation, and in the Free Methodist tradition, sanctification is one of the "Articles of Religion":

... that saving work of God beginning with new life in Christ whereby the Holy Spirit renews His people after the likeness of God, changing them through crisis and process, from one degree of glory to another, and conforming them to the image of Christ.

As believers surrender to God in faith and die to self through full consecration, the Holy Spirit fills them with love and purifies them from sin. This sanctifying relationship with God remedies the divided mind, redirects the heart to God, and empowers believers to please and serve God in their daily lives. (The Free Methodist Church in Canada, 2019. chap. 1, p. 5)

The crisis and process of sanctification is suggestive of a labyrinth path moving repeatedly back and forth towards a center. Sanctification is a grace of the Holy Spirit in co-operation with an individual's response to the ongoing work of God.

Although conversion is a significant and necessary moment in the process of spiritual formation, that topic is not included in my model of formation for two reasons. The topic of conversion is omitted due to the scope of this assignment. For a further study on the topic of conversion, see Witherington's text *A Shared Christian Life* and Grenz's work *Theology for the Community of God*. Both books have entire chapters devoted to conversion and justification by faith. Secondly, the term 'conversion' can imply the work of justification is complete and no further growth is needed. "As a result (John Wesley) increasingly avoided the word 'conversion' and when he did use it he was careful to define it in a way synonymous with sanctification: 'a thorough change of heart and life from sin to holiness'" (Maddox 1994, 152). Conversion is an ongoing process as much as it is a singular event.

The labyrinth is a relevant image to describe this ongoing process of spiritual formation. It is the shape of the labyrinth, which is more complex than a series of concentric circles, one's sense of perspective and place in a labyrinth, and the necessity of perseverance that relate to the process of spiritual formation.

One obvious feature with regards to the shape of a labyrinth is the single path. Jesus said that he is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), and Christians in the book of Acts were originally known as people who belong to

“The Way” (Acts 9:2). There is a beautiful simplicity to walking a labyrinth, as Melissa Gayle West notes:

The labyrinth’s gift is simplicity, both the simplicity of stripping away all external dos and don’ts to listen to our own voices and the simplicity of the walk itself. No advanced degrees are necessary to master the labyrinth, no long training sessions, no technical manuals. There are no ‘levels’ to complete, nothing to memorize, no tests to take. All that is really required in walking the labyrinth is to show up, place one foot in front of another, and breathe. (West 2000, 13)

When Jesus called his disciples He said, “Follow me” and then necessary training was provided along the way.

Labyrinths have a single path to follow, and they are typically round. “The circle of the labyrinth is the image simultaneously of both the clock and the compass, the instrument that measures time and the one that measures space” (Scholl 2014, 87). There are two biblical Greek words translated for time *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is the root to the English word, chronology, and is understood as time that is measured by the clock. *Kairos*, however, is God’s time and a moment of divine action. Two different words are used to describe time because there is an important distinction between clock time and God’s time, for “Time becomes a burden unless we convert it to God’s time” (Nouwen 2013, 84). With regards to the compass, the question “Where are you?” is the first question that God asks in Scripture. As Lauren Artress suggests, “What seems to work best when preparing to walk the labyrinth is to take a moment to reflect on where you are in life” (Artress 2006, 79). The questions “Where are you?” and “What time is it?” are questions of spiritual formation, and answering those questions can only properly be done through a relationship with God and in light of the Gospel.

It is necessary when speaking of the gospel to refer to the cross of Jesus. The cross is linked with spiritual formation, and when using the labyrinth as a model of spiritual formation, it is important to consider the location of the cross. The Gospel and the message of the cross are not just necessary for a moment of conversion, but are essential to the path of following Jesus. James Wilhoit writes:

A major task in spiritual formation involves increasing our awareness of our need for grace. One way of doing this is by letting the cross grow larger. This means facing up to the reality of sin and growing in awe of the majestic holiness of God. We are at our best spiritually when our sin drives us to the cross, when we cling to it and nothing else. (Wilhoit 2008, 106)

The cross is at the center of the Gospel and is essential for spiritual formation and maturing in a relationship with God. The cross is not only at the center of the Gospel, but is also embedded in the structure of a labyrinth.

Although labyrinths all have a single path and are typically round, there can be diversity in the shape. One common labyrinth pattern is based on a design found on the floor of a cathedral in France, presented below in figure 1.



Figure 1. Chartres Labyrinth

There is meaning in the shape of the Chartres labyrinth:

The Chartres labyrinth, named after the permanent stone labyrinth set in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France during the thirteenth century, has

eleven concentric paths that wind through four quadrants of the circle. It is a distinctly Christian pattern, an equal-armed cross visible in its elegant layout. (West 2000, 7-8)

The cross that is contained in the path of the labyrinth becomes even more visible in the seven-circuit design, presented below in figure 2:



Figure 2. 7-Circuit Labyrinth

While the curves of the labyrinth and the concentric circles may be the most noticeable feature of the path, the cross may be the most important feature. It has been said that "...the most ancient of labyrinths is drawn first by drawing a cross ...and the labyrinth's cross is not the center. The cross is *in* the path, embedded in its way. The cross is not the center. It is the path *to* the center" (Scholl 2014, 122123). Part of what it means to follow Jesus along the way is to carry a cross (Matthew 10:38, 16:24) just as Jesus carried his own cross. The labyrinth path is the way of the cross.

The shape of the labyrinth has significance through the single way, the circle and the embedded cross in the path. On entering a labyrinth, the shape of the path takes on new meaning based on one's perspective and place in it:

At times you are close to the center; further along the path you may be farther from the center. This represents the realities of the spiritual journey. But as we keep moving, we are always getting closer to the center

and to God, no matter how far away it looks in real space. (Calhoun 2015, 263)

A sense of being far from the center can constitute what is often described as the dark night of the soul or a form of desolation. At this point one might wonder “How long?” until the center is reached.

Eve Eschner Hogan expands on this idea of the perspective of place in her book *Way of the Winding Path* as an illustration of the perseverance that is required to walk to the center of a labyrinth. Almost immediately upon entering the labyrinth she writes that she was “gratifyingly close to the center” (Hogan 2003, 67). But the path of the labyrinth is long:

...after encountering turn after turn that took me what seemed like further and further from the goal, I had a sense that I would never reach my destination. I realized that I had been ‘so close and yet so far’ (Hogan 2003, 67)

As she continued to move forward on the path, she discovered that perseverance became necessary:

After a long stretch around the outer rim, I found myself almost right back where I started, separated from the entrance by only a single line. Thinking I had made no progress at all and would never reach the middle, I ventured on to find that I was only a few short turns from the center. (Hogan 2003, 67)

The path of a labyrinth is long and there are no short cuts to the center. Just as perseverance is required to walk a labyrinth, perseverance is necessary in the process of spiritual formation.

The word ‘perseverance’ is translated from the New Testament Greek word ὑπομονή (*hypomonē*). Anyone on a journey, and especially those who embark on a pilgrimage, know that perseverance is required to reach the

destination. Prior research confirms the necessity of perseverance for spiritual formation.

In 2011 Willow Creek Community Church published a study that explored the best practices in the church that encourage spiritual growth. If perseverance is lacking, however, best practices alone will not produce spiritual growth:

No matter what the journey – travelling foreign lands, nurturing children toward adulthood, achieving expertise in a chosen field – progress depends, at least in part, on overcoming the various obstacles along the way. That’s a given in any kind of journey. And spiritual growth is no exception. (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 169)

Later in the same study they refer to perseverance and include some biblical references:

Once again this finding – that little investment equals little growth – should not surprise us. In fact, the Scriptures consistently affirm that the process of spiritual growth isn’t automatic or passive – it sometimes requires great effort. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul uses two athletic metaphors – running a race and boxing against an opponent – to emphasize the importance of enduring effort and perseverance in the Christian life. Again, in Luke 8:15 we find Jesus teaching his disciples that it is not enough to simply hear God’s Word and respond to it half-heartedly. The seed that produces a lasting harvest falls on good soil, representing ‘those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by *persevering* produce a crop’ (emphasis added). (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 174-175)

Along with references to perseverance by Jesus and Paul, the term can also be found in the book of Hebrews, “Written to a persecuted church, Hebrews strongly exhorts *hypomonē* (10:32, 36; 12:1). The gaze of Christians should be on Christ, who himself endured the cross (12:2)” (Kittel 1997, 583). The book of James also contains a reference to *hypomonē*. James 1:3-4 refers to the testing of faith that produces perseverance, and *telos* of *hypomonē* is maturity. Later in the book of James, the example of Job is given to demonstrate that, “...the Lord will prove to

be compassionate to believers if they are steadfast (5:11; cf. 1:12; Mt. 5:12)”
(Kittel and Friedrich 1997, 583).

While the word *hypomonè* is found throughout the New Testament, Evan Howard listed some examples of perseverance from the Older Testament:

Indeed, perseverance, or what psychologists call grit, is characteristic of authentic Christian ongoing salvation. Moses perseveres through the obstacle of the Red Sea, Hannah perseveres through her barrenness, Job perseveres through his complaint to God, and Paul perseveres with his thorn. When we persevere through trials, we let them have their full beneficial effect in our lives; and strengthened through willingness, we fully devote our heart to God. (Howard 2018, 118)

The long path of the labyrinth teaches perseverance which is an important biblical theme and also crucial for spiritual formation.

Even the word labyrinth has an etymological meaning that relates to perseverance. The labyrinth:

...is a symbol of travel, of pilgrimage, of wandering. It is a symbol of the way life brings us from one day to another, each day bringing enough trouble – and joy – of its own. It is a symbol, of life’s labor (*labor* and *labyrinth* share the same etymological root), a symbol of the hard work that life exacts from us, sometimes with purpose, sometimes without. It is a symbol of all the ways life revolves around a center, the moon around the earth, the earth around the sun, my own life around whatever it is that my heart most desires. (Scholl 2014, 40)

The only way to reach the center of the labyrinth is to continually place one foot in front of another. Perseverance in spiritual formation is not optional.

Returning to Howard’s definition of spiritual formation, there are details that relate to labyrinths. Spiritual formation is:

...a Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God. (Howard 2018, 18)

The process can be understood as a labyrinth path rather than a linear path from one point to another. Perseverance is required for the process of journeying through a labyrinth and for spiritual formation. The potential for changing and the life and gospel of God is found at the cross which is central to the path of a labyrinth. This definition of spiritual formation can be found within the metaphor of the labyrinth design.

The labyrinth's shape, one's perspective from within it, and the necessity of perseverance are developed in the following chapters. My spiritual autobiography (chapter 2), the model of spiritual formation (chapter 3), the theory of Gospel contemplation in a Wesleyan context (chapter 4) and the research project (chapter 5) all reflect a labyrinth journey.

CHAPTER II: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I first learned about labyrinths during my M.Div. studies and later at the hospital where I volunteered. I was initially skeptical about the value and use of labyrinths until I finally walked one during a two-day silent retreat at the monastic community of the Sisterhood of Saint John the Divine (Toronto, ON). My first experience walking a labyrinth taught me three important spiritual lessons.

The first lesson in walking a labyrinth that I needed to learn was one of humility. The labyrinth where I went for a personal retreat was outside and was visible to a nearby hospital parking lot. I was very self-conscious as I started to wander around in circles and thought that I must look ridiculous. As I looked around to see if I was about to become a spectacle, I was tempted to quit and leave the path. My next thought was a point of conviction, “I will walk with the path before me and I will be a fool for Jesus.”

The second lesson that I gained from the experience of walking a labyrinth was a reminder of the importance of trust. The entire labyrinth could be surveyed in a single glance. The path seemed simple and straight forward. There were no dead ends and it was not a hedge maze. But once in the labyrinth, the way was surprisingly disorienting. One writer notes:

As one steps into the labyrinth, what is known and can be seen is the center, but the way to get there remains a mystery. Deceptive and confusing, the design of the labyrinth, especially the intricate eleven-circuit as opposed to the simpler seven-circuit kind, cleverly disguises how one arrives at the center. To enter a labyrinth means to step out in faith and trust that God will guide you along the path and bring you safely home. Each of the circuits contains twists and turns that resemble our paths through life. (Dunham 2012, 21)

My first experience of walking a labyrinth reminded me of the trust and perseverance that is necessary in the growth in grace. There were no short cuts to the center.

The third lesson that I gained from walking a labyrinth was the reality that surprises are part of the spiritual journey. As I circled the labyrinth and drew closer to the center, I saw a rock on which previous walkers had left behind various objects (a button, a small rock, a coin). I could imagine the conversations some individuals may have had with God as they prayed their way along the path while holding onto these trinkets, only to release them in the center. Once I arrived in the center I could look at the rock much closer, and among the various objects left behind I found “The Amazing Spiderman” Lego keychain. Although I was at the monastery for a silent retreat, a laugh almost escaped my lips. I never expected to find Lego in a monastery and I was reminded that we serve a God of surprises (see Isaiah 55:8). The practice of walking a labyrinth has been compared with the pilgrimages (Ferré 2016, 40-41) and Leonard Hjalmarson has noted, “Pilgrims love to be surprised, and are looking to *see*, to connect with something larger, something other than themselves” (Hjalmarson 2014, 45). Surprises are part of the spiritual journey.

Instead of describing my life in terms of a singular labyrinth walk, I see three different labyrinth journeys in three distinct periods of my life: childhood, education, and ministry. Each of these stages is like their own labyrinth journey. I have walked many labyrinths, both literal and metaphorical, and I am thankful for those who have accompanied me and encouraged me as I navigate the twists and

turns of life. Ultimately I'm thankful for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in my life as I continue to move around the corner to discover whatever is next.

Childhood

I was born into a Christian home and that my parents had a faith of their own. It's truly a blessing that I can say I had a happy childhood. The labyrinth that describes my childhood is like one set in a monastery and surrounded by a peaceful garden. My childhood context facilitated an encounter with God. My parents prayed with me and read children's Bible stories to me. We went to church Sunday, said grace before meals, and prayed at night. I grew up watching my parents become involved in a church plant and serve on a board.

As an infant I was baptized at Arlington Woods Free Methodist Church (in Ottawa, ON). Arlington Woods Church began in 1930, and I imagine that the pastor who started that church prayed that it would be one that would raise up people for ministry. Over the years there have been eighteen men and women connected to that church who entered into ministry.

I credit my paternal grandmother Hazel Ball as an important early spiritual mentor in my life. She had a unique way of encouraging my faith and taking my young child's imagination seriously. Grandma gave me a set of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In fact, she reminded me of the professor from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In that story four siblings have an adventure in a magical land they enter through a wardrobe. The adventure begins with just two of the four children who visit Narnia first, followed by a scene where the other two children approach a wise professor seeking some advice. The older two children were puzzled as to

how they should deal with their younger siblings and their crazy story about a magical land in a wardrobe. The professor treated the matter very seriously:

...the Professor said ‘Come in,’ and he got up and found chairs for them and said he was quite at their disposal. Then he sat listening to them with the tips of his fingers pressed together and never interrupting, till they had finished the whole story. Then he cleared his throat and said the last thing either of them expected:

‘How do you know,’ he asked, ‘that your sister’s story is not true?’

‘Oh but—’ began Susan, and then stopped. Anyone could see from the old man’s face that he was perfectly serious. (Lewis 1994, 47)

The conversation between the professor and children continued for a bit and then we read, “Susan looked at him very hard and was quite sure from the expression on his face that he was not making fun of them” (Lewis 1994, 48). I felt the same way about my grandmother. One time when I was sharing a vision of heaven, my grandmother, much like the professor in the Narnia story, seemed to be truly interested in everything I had to say.

The first time I walked a labyrinth I needed a brochure to guide me and explain the use of the winding path. My grandmother’s encouragement served as an affirmation that I was travelling the right way.

Today my memory of that childhood experience is different from the actual present-moment experience. Now, as I look back on that story, I have become the skeptical adult who is amused by the wild story and the fanciful imagination of a child. Even today I’m not really sure what I had actually experienced. Maybe it was just a dream and nothing more. But if I were to let the six-year-old me write the paragraphs above and describe that event, I would argue that my vision of heaven was very, very real. This was one of the first times that I was aware of God being involved with my life.

I knew from a young age that the church was the people of God and not the building. From the church where I was baptized as an infant, my parents joined a small group that later became a church plant. On Sundays, my family would go to be with the people who were meeting wherever they could. I remember the church plant began as a Bible study in a home, and then as the fellowship grew we met in other locations such as a library, or a trailer or by renting space in another church. I saw my father teach Sunday School, and I would help my father by counting change in the offering (it was a good way to learn math). I remember the one time during a morning worship service when I put a chocolate coin in the offering plate. My father taught me on that, and many other occasions, about giving to God. (I didn't receive my chocolate coin back like I expected.)

Of course, growing up in a Christian home, a person must move from having the faith of one's parents to having a faith that is personal. As a young teen I became aware of social issues, and situations of pain and tragedy that led me to question the goodness of God. The simple faith and firm conviction of my childhood would not survive this inner turmoil. Inevitably a path in a labyrinth turns a corner and a new orientation becomes necessary.

My departure from my initial childhood faith was strictly of the mind and heart. Outwardly I still acted as if I truly believed. I didn't become the prodigal son of Luke chapter 15 by entering a period of rebellion and wild living. There were no grand acts of defiance against my parents or the Church. But internally I

questioned and I doubted everything. While continuing to play a role, I really wanted nothing to do with God if God couldn't govern the world with justice.

The best description of my spiritual state at this point in my life comes from C.S. Lewis. In his own autobiography he describes an atheist who is full of contradictions: "I was at this time living, like so many Atheists or Antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world" (Lewis 2012, 115). Depending on the day I might have been on one side of that contradiction or another. The moment I would, like Lewis, "Admit that God was God" (Lewis 2012, 228) occurred in 1992, at a youth event on Good Friday.

During an afternoon session of that youth event, there were some Christian music videos shown on a big screen. One video really caught my attention. The song was by the Christian rock group Petra and was based on the parable from Matthew chapter 7 of the house built on the rock. The Holy Spirit used that video as a point of conviction. In that moment I heard and understood that Scripture passage like never before. It was obvious to me that I identified more with the house on the sand than the house on the rock. While this video prepared me for repentance, it was the concert later that evening that finally led me to Christ.

The youth event finished with an evening concert and the guest musician that year was Steve Camp. At one point during his concert he stopped to preach a fiery sermon. The message was that our friends are sinners in the hands of an angry God and we need to share the faith. He was making an appeal for the Christian youth in attendance to do the work of evangelists. At first I was ready to

respond by adding evangelism to my acting. While I was still a whirl of contradictions, in acting like I still believed, I thought that by starting to share the faith I would look like a really good Christian. It was with that thought that the Holy Spirit fully convicted me and I knew that if I was going to share the faith, I would need to have it first. In that moment I could admit that I need God's grace. My acting like a believer was nothing less than a sinful and rebellious act against God, and that God was God no matter what happens in life. My repentance was a rejection of my own sense of self-sufficiency and morality. My first confession before God was that I too needed the grace and mercy of God, and with that my prayer contained an admission that injustice and even death do not diminish the glory or goodness of God. I grew up knowing about God, but now I was going to start living for God and with God.

After seeing one Petra video I became curious about the rest of their music. I went out and bought album after album. Bob Hartman, the main lyricist for Petra, published a devotional that had a commentary on various songs along with Scripture references for a Bible study (Hartman 1997). Petra lyrics are biblically based and I listened to their music with my Bible open. This was one of the ways that my faith was beginning to be formed. Engaging Scripture is one of the most important practices for developing faith, an idea that is explored in the following chapters of this project.

The labyrinth journey is one with many turns, and my next major turn in life occurred because of a freakish leg injury that I suffered when I was in grade nine. Two years after that initial injury I woke up with an excruciating pain in my

leg. Little did I know when I woke up that morning that I would suffer with chronic pain for eighteen long months. During this time of chronic pain, I spent multiple nights in the emergency department getting a dose of pain medication. I was admitted to the hospital for multiple stays including a one-week period and another time for an entire month. The chronic pain interrupted my social and academic life, and it made me wonder about the future. Doctors frequently told me to learn to live with it. The path in a labyrinth moves back and forth, and this time of chronic pain was intense with many sudden and unexpected turns.

It took an entire year before I finally got a diagnosis of what was causing the excruciating pain. My pain was due to nerves that had been cut two years earlier, tried to heal, and instead of making a smooth connection they formed a knot. It was this knot of nerves (called a neuroma) that was causing my pain.

A neurosurgeon can attempt to correct a neuroma, but chronic pain can create other issues for the body. My experience of pain was actually similar to those who experience “phantom limb.” Phantom limb occurs when nerves can’t stop remembering. A nerve sends a signal for a lifetime, and in the case of an amputation, the remaining nerves may continue to send a signal that the limb is still present. My nerves had sent a pain signal for so long that even though a neurosurgeon corrected the neuroma, the surrounding nerves continued to send a pain signal. When my pain returned after surgery, I heard the familiar refrain from doctors once more: “Learn to live with it.”

Where was God in all of this pain? During times of pain I would listen to Christian music. My interest in looking into the Scripture references of Petra

songs became one of the only things that I could do. One of the most meaningful songs for me during this time was the Petra song “No Doubt.” The song was released in 1995, during my chronic pain, and I felt like every line spoke into my situation. My faith was young, and I had only been a follower of Jesus for just a few years, but in the midst of turmoil I knew a peace that passes understanding and I continued to trust in the goodness of God. Although I felt like life was full of unexpected redirections, I was not yet disoriented or lost.

Evidence of the love of God showed up one time at the hospital. After yet another appointment, and another treatment, and another doctor saying the terrifying words “Learn to live with it,” my mother and I found encouragement from a surprising source. Just before leaving the hospital we encountered a friendly stranger in the lobby. This gentleman didn’t seem to be waiting for anyone in particular and, as far as I could tell, he wasn’t a patient. He was just there. We talked with this stranger for a few moments. Our conversation was one where he offered me encouragement not to give up hope. He told us to keep asking questions, and though we were thankful for his kind words, we really thought little of the conversation. Nothing about that encounter seemed special, unusual or out of the ordinary. After leaving the hospital my mother and I stopped for lunch at a nearby restaurant, and part way through our meal we both suddenly blurted out at the same time, “That was an angel!” It wasn’t a case of one of us suggesting the idea to the other. We said it simultaneously and with such conviction that we both had no doubt that we had in fact met an angel. We were so convinced of it that we rushed back to the hospital to speak with him again,

only to find that he was no longer there. While the stranger's general words of encouragement offered us hope, we were encouraged even more from the revelation by the Holy Spirit. Just as my grandmother served to validate my beginning, this encounter was another example of a guide—a surprising one—along the way affirming the direction around yet another bend in the path. And my faith grew.

What brought an end to my pain and all of the medication for pain control was what some would consider a lucky coincidence. I believe that it was God who delivered me from the pain I had to endure, and it happened on an overnight school trip to Toronto. For my travels I packed the necessary drugs and carried a note from my parents explaining my medical condition. Sure enough, the morphine patch was not enough to control my pain and during this school trip I found myself once again at the hospital. Throughout my eighteen months of chronic pain, I had been to various hospital emergency departments, but the doctor that I saw that night just happened to work in a pain clinic. Mercifully, he prescribed something for my immediate relief of pain, but he also gave me a prescription for an epilepsy medication.

If chronic pain is caused by nerves sending the wrong signal (like the phantom limb condition), then epilepsy medication may be a solution. He knew that epilepsy medication was effective in treating some of the patients in his pain clinic and so he prescribed it for me. Over the course of the eighteen months of pure agony, I had so many false starts and various treatments that provided

temporary relief, but nothing ever lasted long term. It was that medication prescribed by a random doctor that ended my eighteen months of chronic pain.

The following summer I was free again to live life fully, and I biked over one thousand kilometers (and a single day with a one hundred km trip). It began with damage from a bizarre injury, and it ended with the blessing of by being seen by the right doctor at the right time.

During this time of reversal upon reversal, my faith was sustained by Christian music, Christian friends, Christian parents, a church family that loved me, and random events that were clearly acts of God. I continued to have a deep trust in God as my faith began to grow. My house on the rock was standing firm through perseverance. I was enduring the first test of my faith.

I thank God that I was healed and set free from a life sentence of chronic pain. In looking back over this time in my life, I also recognize that I was delivered from a possible addiction to drugs, for some begin with medication to control pain, and then through addiction, the drugs begin to control them.

My childhood in a Christian home was context where my faith could be formed like a labyrinth in a monastery. My childhood vision of heaven was God's grace drawing me closer to Him. I shared this labyrinth path with Christian parents and friends. This shared path is essential in spiritual formation, and the Biblical word *allēlōn* ('one another') becomes a major theme in the next chapter. Relationships with others is part of the formational process that happens in the church, in families, through works of mercy and ultimately is part of the development and practice of the fruit of the spirit. At this point in my spiritual

journey, I was being formed through relationships with my parents and friends. The eighteen months of chronic pain was a path full of surprising bends that forced me to change directions and find a new orientation. I persevered and learned to trust. Now that I was pain free and more confident in the faith, I was ready to journey the next labyrinth as I went to the University of Ottawa.

Education

I once attended a bereavement workshop that included a labyrinth walk. At that event I was reflecting on my own losses in life, and at the same time I was contemplating the role that a labyrinth can play in facilitating the grief process. The context of that particular labyrinth journey facilitated the flow of ideas. The bereavement workshop was a time of both teaching and healing. Perhaps it's inaccurate of me to call this chapter or stage of my life 'education' since all of life is a learning experience, but throughout my post-secondary education, at both the University of Ottawa and at Tyndale Seminary, the teaching was in a setting that facilitated the flow of ideas and was an important part of my ongoing spiritual formation. Just as the theme of *allēlōn* was important in my childhood, my spiritual formation during this time of education also included *allēlōn* relationships.

I went to the University of Ottawa to study English Literature. In the summer after my first year of university, I made my course selections and saw on the reading list for one class some books by C.S. Lewis. I was feeling spiritually isolated and in need of fellowship, and so I was excited by the thought of another Christian taking that course for the same reason as me (an interest in C.S. Lewis).

I prayed for friendship and I prayed that there would be a Christian in that specific class. God answered my prayer and there were two Christians in that class. They were both part of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship and they invited me to their Friday evening meeting. As part of this group, the *allēlōn* relationships would continue to form my faith.

The campus ministry met on Friday nights and when I went to the meeting I found what I was looking for, both in terms of friendship and fellowship. I encountered other followers of Jesus from all sorts of traditions and backgrounds. After the meeting, some from the group went to a downtown restaurant for a late night snack while others decided to linger on the campus and pray for a bit. Since the two who had invited me to the large group meeting were among those who were going to pray, I also went for prayer.

The spontaneous prayer meeting was only supposed to be about a ten-minute event, and we planned on joining the others who went out for dessert. But the Spirit of God moved in such a way that our prayer meeting lasted for a full two hours and the janitor had to kick us out so that he could close up the building. It was during this time of prayer that my soul began the next labyrinth journey. I was reawakened in my love for God and my faith grew.

The one spontaneous prayer meeting turned into a regular event as they continued each week. These prayer meetings were a blessing. One of the many incredible things about them was that each one was unique. Some nights were characterized by loud prayers full of praise and worship, while other nights were full of quiet reflection. Some nights had honest confession and tears, and other

nights had deep and genuine laughter. There was never an attempt to recreate whatever had happened the week before, and each week the prayer meeting began with an openness to whatever God may want to do. Every time that group got together for prayer it lasted for hours even though it only ever felt like minutes had gone by. With one friend from Inter-Varsity, we returned to his apartment and spent an entire night in prayer. And my faith continued to grow.

One night, during my time in University, my chronic pain returned. It had been years since I experienced any pain, and I no longer had any pain medication to control it. The reason why my pain returned was because I was sick with a cold, and as a student I was also overtired and stressed with exams. Those in the prayer group could see that I was in agony, and they began to pray for my healing. I was thankful for their prayers but I remembered all of the intercessory prayers that were offered for me during the eighteen months of chronic pain. The only relief from pain came from the medication that I had or from a trip to the hospital. But during this prayer I actually had hope. My hope was that the prayer would be brief so that I could go home and get some help. I had no expectation or faith that I would be healed from my pain, and yet here's what happened: my pain, for the first time ever, stopped without medication because God answered prayer. I, along with everyone else in that prayer meeting, saw a miracle. I stood up. I ran around the room. It was not my faith (or the faith of those praying for me) that brought the healing, but God's mercy and grace that worked in the situation to increase everyone's faith.

After graduating with a degree in English Literature, I was planning on applying to a Bachelor of Education program. I had the application filled out and ready to be mailed. The envelope just needed a stamp, but for some reason I couldn't put it in the mail. Like the claim that my mother and I had met an angel, somehow I just knew that my calling was not to teach in high school. Instead of mailing that application, I filled out a separate application form for seminary. And my faith grew.

The journey through a labyrinth can be filled with surprises, and I certainly encountered surprises while I was a student at the University of Ottawa. I am thankful for the Christian friends who shared the path with me during this time of life.

I started my seminary training in September of 2001 and with that date people will forever ask, "Where were you when ...?" I first learned about the terrorist attack on the United States while I was at the bookstore of Tyndale University College & Seminary. Like everyone else, I assumed that the first plane that hit a tower was just a terrible accident, but when the second plane hit the other tower I knew that it was a declaration of war. Later that week, flights were still grounded and the sky over Toronto was eerily quiet. I went to a meeting of the C.S. Lewis Institute of Toronto, and someone read a passage from the essay, "On Living in an Atomic Age" (Lewis 1998, 115-121). What Lewis wrote concerning the uncertainty and fear of a generation past was timeless wisdom for understanding the current changing world. The comparison between living in an atomic age and living in a terrorist age was obvious to all in attendance, and it

was exactly what I needed to hear during the confusion of that week. As I remember the uncertainty of that week, I reflect on the idea that the labyrinth path can sometimes be one that is shared, and it is in the sharing of the path that one can discover insights.

During my first year of seminary I had my first course in spiritual formation, SPIR 0542, “Foundation of Christian Spirituality.” In that class the professor, Dr. Sherbino, introduced us to the idea of spiritual direction, and then he added that the saints of old can teach us much like a spiritual director. It’s possible to have a posthumous mentor and here I thought about all of the assignments that I did during my undergraduate studies on the work of C.S. Lewis. I’ve always liked the writings of Lewis, but in that class on spiritual formation I began to appreciate how the works of Lewis have shaped me.

The writings of C.S. Lewis shaped my faith before I had a mentor in seminary. I first read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a child, and I continued to read the works of C.S. Lewis throughout high school and university. During my undergraduate studies I wrote several papers about the works of C.S. Lewis, including one that explored the idea of *sehnsucht*. *Sehnsucht* is a German word that can be translated as an intense and insatiable longing for the Divine. This longing is the desire that draws one into the spiritual journey. In his book *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis explains the idea of *sehnsucht* in the afterword:

The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is to be somehow a delight. Other desires are felt as pleasures only if satisfaction is expected in the near future: hunger is pleasant only while we know (or believe) that we are soon going to eat. But this desire, even when there is no hope of possible satisfaction, continues to be

prized, and even to be preferred to anything else in the world, by those who have once felt it. This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than any other wealth. (Lewis 1996, 202)

From early on in my life, I have experienced this longing for more of God. While growing in my faith through events and circumstances during high school and university, the works of C.S. Lewis helped me to clarify this longing.

My favourite C.S. Lewis book is *The Great Divorce* as it has compelling characters who make a choice between heaven and hell. It is a choice that we make every day. I could mention a long list of his other writings that have had an influence on my spiritual life. It seems like everything that I read by C.S. Lewis provided me with new insight and new challenges. Lewis gave me a new vocabulary and understanding for my faith and I was hopeful to be able to continue this study of *sehnsucht* in the works of C.S. Lewis as part of my studies at Tyndale.

Although I had wanted to make my Th.M. thesis on the theology of C.S. Lewis, another mentor entered my life. During my M.Div. studies, my theology professor was Dr. Victor Shepherd, and when I entered the Th.M. program he became my thesis supervisor. He redirected my passion for C.S. Lewis into an interest in John Wesley. There were times when I sat in his office and asked question after question. He welcomed not only my academic questions but also allowed me to share any general challenges and frustrations about life that I faced. I remember Dr. Shepherd for some of his own pithy statements that have forever left an imprint on my heart and mind. I can still hear him say “My ministry is dearer to me than life,” and “The best theologians were pastors first.”

During one class, Dr. Shepherd said a line that entered deep into my heart. It was a warning and he was completely serious as he said, “Your calling to ministry is what will keep you going when the knife gets stuck in your back.” When he said that, I noticed that he chose to use the word ‘when’ and not ‘if’. I heard it as a warning, and I was thankful that I was certain about my own calling to ministry. This calling was continually drawing me farther along the spiritual path, pulling me towards the center. Of course at that point pastoral ministry was just an aspiration, and the proverbial knife in the back was something that would come a few years later. From Dr. Shepherd’s classes and his mentoring, I was becoming equipped for ministry and life.

I had a calling to ministry through a conviction of the Holy Spirit prior to my enrollment at Tyndale, but my vision for ministry came from a course that I took in the winter term of 2002 called “Reading the Spiritual Classics: Mining for Gold in the Great Tradition.” One of the required texts for that course was *The Didache* and the line that resonated with me, 11.2, was that the trustworthy minister is one who “...fosters righteousness and knowledge of the Lord” (Sparks 1978, 315). When I read that line I adopted it as my vision for ministry, and when I’m old and grey, I want people to be able to think about all of my years in ministry and say that about me. Righteousness (also translated as holiness or justice) and knowledge of the Lord are inseparable.

The other mentor that I had during my seminary studies was the chaplain at a hospital who was my supervisor for one of my field placements. Joanne Davies was an excellent field placement supervisor because she offered me a wide

range of experiences in the hospital setting. What I enjoyed most about serving in chaplaincy and working in the spiritual care department was the pastoral care and connecting with people in a time of need. I still remember several patients that I met. Each patient that I saw had a remarkable story of their own, and I never knew what to expect when I entered a hospital room. In visiting with patients I learned to adopt the posture of a spiritual director and to remain open to what was being said by the patient and by God. I also learned to leave my assumptions and biases at the door.

One of the exercises that Joanne had me do was to write a verbatim report. A verbatim is, as best as one can remember, a transcript of a visit with a patient. In reviewing a verbatim, Joanne helped me to explore why I felt frustrated with visits that ended without me being able to pray or read the Bible. There were times when I would report to Joanne that after a visit that ended without Scripture and prayer I felt like I had failed to accomplish what I was sent in to do.

I grew up in the evangelical tradition where everything is measured by prayer and Bible study. To me a good hospital visit is one where the Word is proclaimed, followed by someone praying and all the people would answer with a robust “Amen.” Of course Joanne knew the value of Scripture reading and prayer during a hospital or pastoral visit, but she reminded me of other ways that God can work. One of the most important things that Joanne taught me was about being present with a patient. Being present meant being aware of both my own presence and the presence of God.

My evangelical upbringing gave me a linear worldview. I began my hospital field placement with the thinking that the patient and I would meet on one level, and we might both connect with God forming a sort of triangle. Joanne was teaching me a more circuitous model of pastoral care where both the patient and I were encircled by the activity of God. I soon learned that one reason for all of the detailed study of a verbatim was because the conversation itself can be an opportunity for the grace of God to work.

On a few occasions Joanne took me to rounds where experts from various disciplines presented case studies or difficult situations. It was professional brainstorming, and I would sit quietly through these rounds as I listened to and observed the practice of medicine. I really enjoyed seeing experts from various fields address complex cases, but one day the cases being studied started me on my first major lament.

After attending one of the clinical rounds during my field placement, I began writing a lament in February of 2003. It was a lament that would last for a few weeks. What upset me was hearing some of the cases being discussed. At the clinical rounds that day, the cases discussed involved complications with pregnancy. Each case was tragic. I know the Scripture which says we are fearfully and wonderfully made, yet there was nothing wonderful about what I heard that day. Laments can be a disorienting experience, and during this time I was feeling lost in the circuits of life's labyrinth.

God provided two things that helped to quiet my soul and resolve my lament. At church one Sunday I saw the table prepared for communion. I knew

the liturgy and was dreading that moment in the service when the minister would say, “Take and eat, with faith and thanksgiving in your heart.” I don’t remember much about the service, but I do remember wrestling with the decision of whether or not I should partake. After all, God and I were still not on good speaking terms! As the plate with the tiny pieces of bread was being passed from person to person, the time had come for me to make a decision: to eat, or not to eat.

The plate with bread now reached my pew and I decided to eat because I could admit that no matter how I felt about God, I could still recognize my need for God’s mercy and grace. Although I thought God was doing a terrible job at managing the universe, I could admit that I was probably wrong about a few things.

Another thought then came to my mind during the communion service. In the Free Methodist *Manual* there’s an explanation of our theology and practice of communion. Just after I decided to receive communion because I could admit I needed God’s grace, I also remembered a quote from the *Manual* about communion. The following quote had a direct impact on my lament:

In Communion we look **in** at ourselves and confess the things that have gone wrong. We look **back** to Calvary and praise Jesus for his death for us. We look **up** to his risen presence, longing to nourish us through the bread and cup which he said were his body and blood. We look **around** in love and fellowship with other guests at God’s table. We look **forward** to his return at the end of all history, the marriage supper of the Lamb, of which every Communion is a foretaste. And then we look **out** to a needy world; Communion is battle rations for Christian soldiers. [Adapted slightly from Michael Green, *One to One* (Moorings, 1995) p. 102]. (The Free Methodist Church in Canada, 2019. chap. 7, p. 6)

I was lamenting because the world is a mess. Pregnancy loss is an ugly thing. But looking forward, when Jesus comes again, I knew that all will be well. I received

communion that day as a pledge and promise that God won't forget about us. Up to that point I had always received communion looking in and looking back, but my lament was softened as I received communion and looked forward. This way of receiving communion answers the question, "how long?" The question "how long?" is raised during a time of lament, and is the same question that is asked when weariness from a long labyrinth journey begins to set in. The heaviness of the lament began to gradually be replaced with peace. I was preparing to move into the next circuit of the labyrinth.

The other thing that helped to bring my lament to an end was some encouragement that I received from George Sweetman (Dean of Student Life at Tyndale). It was just a passing conversation in the hall, but he took the time to listen to my story and my lament, and then he gently said about my experience: "Use it redemptively." At the time I wasn't sure how I would use it redemptively, but opportunities to do so would come more than once as I entered into ministry. The time of lament was a time of disorientation where I felt lost in the labyrinth of life. But navigating that confusing time was a necessary part of the process of moving to the center.

I am thankful for all that I gained through my studies at Tyndale. I have been blessed with excellent mentors, a sense of vision for ministry, a spiritual reorientation through a season of lament, and my relationship with my wife.

I met Joy at Tyndale in the fall of 2003, and the very first thought that came to mind when Joy said her name was, "Huh. C.S. Lewis married a Joy." Joy borrowed my Petra album *Jekyll & Hyde* and left playful ransom notes. We

started dating in 2004 and the first test of our relationship came during the summer when we had to leave residence and return home. Joy was living in Fort Erie and I was in Ottawa, with a big lake and six hours of driving between us. Of course this was the digital age and we could talk on the computer, but we also made use of the mail service and sent letters the old fashioned way. I also sent a few quirky love letters with random quotes from the saints of old, people like Gregory of Nyssa. In some letters I included puzzle pieces and I'm thankful that none of the letters with puzzle pieces got lost in the mail! I'm sure Joy thought that the last puzzle piece would come with a ring, and eventually a letter arrived in the mail with the last puzzle piece. (The ring came separately after a romantic dinner on another night.) We were engaged on December 18, 2004 and planned to be married the following July.

My M.Div. was completed and I was working on my Th.M. thesis. Now was the time to find a church and begin ministry. I applied to a few different churches, and Joy said little about the application process. She was eager to see me start in ministry and willing to follow me anywhere.

Eventually I interviewed at a church in Bracebridge, Ontario. I accepted the call to that church and began ministry there in March of 2005. I was excited to begin ministry and to lead a church into the celebration of Easter. Joy and I were married in July of 2005. The next chapter in my life was about to begin.

The labyrinth during this education time of my life was like one at the bereavement workshop that facilitated the flow of ideas, healing and spiritual growth. I was learning and growing in the faith during my studies at the

University of Ottawa and at Tyndale Seminary. My time of lament created the disorientation that is often experienced in a labyrinth. Letting go of my lament and focusing on my calling to ministry reoriented me to the path forward.

Ultimately, as I look back at my time at Tyndale, I can say that I was surprised by Joy.

Ministry

When journeying through a labyrinth, there are places where you can only take a few short steps before having to turn a corner and change direction. Other parts of the labyrinth form a wide sweeping path around the outer edge. On those long curves one can pick up the pace and take a slightly longer stride. My ministry began with an incredible sense of momentum and forward progress. The first few years of ministry were like walking with ease along that outer edge of a labyrinth.

A metaphorical location of this ministry labyrinth would be a public park where one must remain alert to wayward Frisbees and be compassionate of people who are enjoying a leisurely stroll and yet are oblivious to the fact that they are walking straight through a labyrinth. Ministry is rarely done in solitude, and it can be challenging to navigate a labyrinth while sharing the path with others who are moving in a completely different direction. Once again the theme of *allēlōn* is evident as ministry can be understood as facilitating the multiple one-another relationships that should exist in the church.

During this first year of married life and ministry, I was feeling a sense of hope, and it wasn't just because the church I was at was called New Hope. I

started ministry at New Hope Free Methodist Church in Bracebridge. I began ministry in March, was married in July, and then for the first time I got to lead a church through the season of Advent and Christmas. The good people at New Hope FM Church treated Joy and I well. I was called. I was leading. I had freedom to experiment. Some ideas worked, while others failed. But even in things that didn't work, like the community coffee house or the healing service with a new worship leader who played a new song a little too long, the church continued to love and support us.

One of the highlights of my time in Bracebridge occurred when I was exploring the attic of the church. In some dusty corner of the attic I found a plaque that said, "For King and Country" and listed the members of the church who had served during World War II. As soon as I found it I knew that I had discovered a hidden treasure. The year 2005 was also known as "The Year of the Veteran" and before I had the plaque out of the attic I began to plan a special service where it would be restored to a place of honour. I researched the names on the plaque, and had a veteran do the restoration work on the frame. I wrote up the story for the paper and announced the date of the service. Invitations went out to representatives of the legion, including a colour guard and piper, and of course I made sure that there was the necessary media presence to publish this event after it was all over. On the day of the service I saw the small church full of people and I knew that if I could just produce a few more events of this caliber, then the Bracebridge church would really begin to grow.

But life can change quickly. In the same week that Joy and I found out the apartment we were renting was up for sale, we also received that wonderfully terrifying news that we were expecting our first child. Not only would we have to move, but with the birth of a child I would also need some supplemental income. My position as pastor at New Hope was only a part-time salary, but that was ideal for me to complete my Th.M. work. I said to the board that I felt like I was only getting started in my ministry. The need was desperate. We needed the extra income and we needed a place to live. We were pressed for time, and in fact we stayed an extra month in the basement apartment with the new landlord. But as we couldn't find any opportunities for extra income and a suitable place to live, together Joy and I began to look at the profiles for all of the churches that were looking for a pastor.

Joy said to me that the decision to go to Bracebridge was really my decision and one made before we were married, but now in our time of need we were making our first major ministry decision together. I reassured the church that we weren't trying to run away from a difficult situation. In fact, I told them that it was my preference to stay. After all, I had just caught a ten pound, thirty inch, northern pike on Lake Muskoka. Whenever I tell this part of the story, I always say that it had to be the call of God to get me out of cottage country. I was once eager to begin ministry and I applied to several different churches, now I was married and serving a congregation. Together Joy and I saw the list of all of the churches looking for a pastor, but we felt called to only one: Holt Free Methodist.

When I announced my upcoming move it was a shock to the congregation and they were sad to see us go. I started ministry in March of 2005 and by the end of October 2006 we were now out of cottage country and into farm land. In the following spring we were learning about parenthood.

As we were learning to be new parents, we were also continuing to learn about how to minister in a new place – Holt, Ontario. Growing up in the city and serving a church in cottage country taught me that rain was a nuisance that spoiled a summer day. When it was a particularly dry summer, I remember a farmer in the Holt church ask for prayer for rain, and he said it with tears in his eyes. Rain for the people of New Hope and rain to the people of Holt meant two different things.

In moving to Holt, life continued to get better. In April of 2007, my daughter Naomi was born, and in May of that year I graduated with my Th.M. My thesis was on the vocabulary and imagery of the atonement in the Eucharistic hymnal of John and Charles Wesley. In 2008, I was invited to teach the Wesleyan theology course for the Free Methodist Church in Canada.

During the first few years at Holt FMC it was as if I was moving swiftly and confidently through a labyrinth. I led the Bible study at two denominational camps, we successfully completed an elevator building project, filled the church for a 100th anniversary celebration, and I was part of the denomination's *Study Commission on Doctrine* (SCOD). One year I provided the members of SCOD with a position paper on the care of creation, and I contributed to writing the doctrine that was eventually included in *The Manual*:

As Christians we affirm with Scripture that all creation declares the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-4). Since we worship the Creator and believe that

Christ's redeeming work "...reconciles to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven..." (Colossians 1:20), we value creation and participate in activity that restores, protects, and respects the earth. This demonstrates our love for God. (FMCiC, 2019. chap. 6, p. 23)

I was certain that the care of creation would be a form of outreach and a way that we could connect with our neighbours. One day we set up a table at the doorway of a grocery store and handed out saplings for planting. The possibilities for creation care outreach are endless.

There was also an ongoing ministry at Holt in the form of a program offered once a month at a nearby institution for those with special needs. Our program consisted of Bible stories, songs and snacks. We celebrated birthdays and made deep relationships with the residents that were part of that community. At times there were over fifty people with special needs that participated in our monthly program. While I knew that I would not find the next worship leader, board member, or trustee among this community, I was convinced that this was the ministry the church should be doing. I explained to my congregation that we do ministry that is right, that honours God, that cares for the poor and the marginalized, and then trust that God will bless in His own way. I was pleased that the leaders in my congregation enabled this program to run for close to two years.

In this early season of ministry, I felt like I was making big strides in moving forward. I was ordained and serving on a committee to write doctrine. I was teaching a course and was a Bible study leader at two camps. I filled two churches with two big events. The elevator project was a miracle as God provided for the people of Holt. The church was sustaining a monthly program that cared

for the marginalized. All of this is what I expected ministry to be like and the journey to the center seemed easy.

The thing about those long curves that sweep along the edge of the labyrinth is that they can lead to a point where you seem furthest from the center. In some labyrinth designs the entrance leads almost directly to the center, and then the path begins to meander back and forth to the outer edge. The long curve along the outside edge is easy to navigate, but then you reach a point where you seem distant from the center. This is only a matter of perspective, of course, because at that point you have already journeyed through half of labyrinth. Although one may feel distant from the center, at that point you are in fact closer to the center than when you first began.

This sense of distance from the center can be described as the dark night of the soul. Although ministry during this time had a sense of momentum and forward progress, I was about to lament and become completely disoriented. The proverbial knife in the back was coming.

The summer that I led Bible studies at two camps was 2008. The second camp was actually close to home. During family camp we put a sign on the door of the Church with a map directing any possible visitors to the worship services down the road. My responsibilities in teaching the Bible study were for the weekdays, Monday to Friday, and I used the same format as I did during my first week leading a Bible study at the other camp. My lesson plan was based off a course that I had taken at Tyndale called “Little Known Books of the Bible with Large Significance.” It was a study that covered the books of Ecclesiastes, Esther,

Song of Songs, Ruth and ended on Friday with a session on the book of Lamentations.

At that point, Joy and I only had one daughter, Naomi, and we were expecting another baby. We had some concern for the pregnancy and after the morning Bible study on Lamentations we went to the hospital. During the examination Joy and I got to listen to one of the most beautiful sounds in the world – we heard the rhythm of a tiny heartbeat in the womb. The medical team did some blood work on Joy and then they handed me a slip of paper that had four letters and four numbers on it. They never said what the letters meant, but we were told to give that piece of paper to our family doctor on Monday. We never got the chance to give it to our family doctor, and the note that should have gone to our family doctor still remains inside the pages of my Bible. On the last Sunday of camp Joy suffered a miscarriage.

Returning to the hospital we saw the same doctor on Sunday that we had seen on Friday. I think he knew we would be back. While they took Joy away to the operating room, I was told to go wait in a room down the hall. The waiting room was dark. I felt lost and I wasn't sure I was where I needed to be. I punched a wall in total frustration. I didn't recognize it at the time, but Joy and I were spared having to make a difficult, heart-breaking decision like the ones made by the advisory committee at the hospital. Whereas I was once at a table where complex pregnancy cases were being discussed in medical rounds, the decision to terminate our baby's life was made for us. Another term for a miscarriage is spontaneous abortion. Joy said that during the procedure she felt the peace and

presence of God. I knew that at some point I might feel that too. After it was all done, Joy returned home, and I went back to camp to let everyone know the news.

I entered the sanctuary at camp as the evening service was beginning. The final service at this camp ends with the people making a big circle around the sanctuary, and after several testimonies about all of the great things that God has done during camp, the congregation would sing a chorus about being glad to be part of the family of God. I was numb and in shock. Great things? Perhaps for others but not for me. I remember exactly where I stood in that sanctuary and what I said. I didn't say very much but I thanked the people for their prayers and then I asked for their continued prayer. I closed by saying that I had heard a little heart beat on Friday and now it was quiet; on Friday I taught about lament and now I was going to live it.

Camp was over and the next day I found myself cutting the grass. The parsonage at Holt is right next door to the church. Beside the church is an old cemetery where many of the stones are broken and faded. I've seen the church record though, and I know that buried beside the church were young women who died in childbirth. Just like my great-grandmother Elizabeth who died the day after giving birth to a premature girl. One hundred years ago that would have been Joy. I know in that cemetery there are children who didn't survive infancy. There are also people buried there who once lived long and full lives, had children, and even lived to see their grandchildren. I could picture families gathered around a grave for a committal service and flowers being left behind. Now many of the stones in that cemetery are barely legible. While I looked at these memorial

stones, I lamented that I had nothing to mark the place for the child I never got to hold. As I cut the grass and slowed the riding lawn mower down to manoeuvre carefully around the headstones, I thought about Ecclesiastes and a time for everything. I thought about lament. It was just days from my birthday and I thought about birthdays. I thought about what I would say the next Sunday from the pulpit. What could I say?

Use it redemptively. Before leaving the hospital Joy said that we should return to camp for prayer. Being a man who wants to fix everything and just do something to do anything, I wanted to go back to camp on the Monday (instead of cutting the grass). But Joy said that she wanted some time to heal. So I continued to cut the grass thinking about what we might say during that time of prayer. I listened to the riding lawnmower sing its song as I thought about everything and nothing.

Later that week I contacted a Free Methodist chaplain to see if he had any resources for prayer after a miscarriage. He sent me a naming and blessing ceremony. After reviewing it with Joy, my wife said to me that she thought this resource should be available online for other pastors to use. Eventually the time came for us to return to camp.

When we arrived at camp we didn't see any cars. The camp was quiet. The motto for that camp is "A Peaceful Place in the Pines" and we were utterly alone. It was perfect for what Joy and I went there to do. We walked around camp and still didn't see anyone. On entering the sanctuary, we went straight to the front of the chapel to pray together.

During that time of prayer, I led the service and Joy read a letter that she had written. The letter was partly a prayer and partly a reflection, and as she read it I was thinking as a husband, a father, and also as a pastor and aspiring theologian. What Joy had written was profound and touching, and I wanted a copy for my files. I intended to include her work in my updated version of the naming and blessing ceremony that I would give SCOD. There was no question in my mind that the poetry and beauty of Joy's writing was going to improve the service.

Naomi was just a toddler and as we prayed we let her play on her own. We should have known that she was getting into something when she brought us a single Kleenex tissue. In the moment we thought it was a sweet gesture from a concerned child. Naomi has always been a caring soul, but after we finished our time of prayer we found that she had actually emptied a whole box of Kleenex.

The cute scene of a toddler at play provided us with a light-hearted moment after a difficult time of prayer. After cleaning up the mess that Naomi had made, we made one last walk around camp. Again we saw no one at the camp. On getting in the car, Joy suddenly realized that she had forgotten the letter in the sanctuary.

She quickly got out of the car and I left the engine running as I waited for her to come back with the letter in hand. And I waited. And waited. And waited. I began to wonder what was taking her so long. Was she back in prayer? Was she upset? I turned off the car and entered the sanctuary, completely unsure of what I was going to find. What I found was Joy standing still and saying to me that the

letter was gone. “Gone?! What do you mean gone?” I said. I couldn’t believe it. I got down on my hands and knees to scan under every pew. I hunted for that letter in my Bible and among my notes. We dumped out the bag of the Kleenex. We retraced our steps around camp. We rummaged through the car. We returned to the sanctuary for a second look. My search for Joy’s letter was about to become desperate and frantic when Joy said once again, “It’s gone.” I wanted that letter both as a sentimental memento and personal reminder of the event, and also for the future work that I was going to do on that service. I really, really wanted that letter and I knew that Joy wouldn’t be able to write it again. I was beginning to grow impatient with Joy, especially when I saw her ready to give up the search. I certainly wasn’t satisfied with her calm “It’s gone.” It just had to be there, somewhere.

Then Joy said to me that God took the letter and it was a sign that He was with us. I was still not willing to believe it, and I questioned her by asking why God would take the letter. With absolute perfect peace Joy said to me that the letter was not for us. There’s really no rational explanation for how we lost that letter. There was no one at camp who could have wandered off with it. The sanctuary was protected and it’s not like the wind rushed in and carried the precious paper away. But since I couldn’t come up with a rational explanation for what happened to the letter, I had to reluctantly accept that God took it. I didn’t want to admit that we would never find it, no matter how long we looked, but in the end we left camp without the letter and with a sense of having met with God in yet another surprising way.

Returning to camp the next year was extremely difficult. I wondered how I could serve as a pastor and pray for those responding to the messages. Often during camp there's a healing service. Could I, in faith, offer prayers for the healing of others? I felt like returning to camp was like returning to a previous circuit of the labyrinth that I had wanted to leave behind. I simply wasn't sure how I could ever pray for healing of others when I felt like God failed me on that part of the path the year before.

The years continued. The service of naming and blessing for miscarriage or stillbirth was reviewed and approved by the Study Commission on Doctrine. It was added to the list of resources on the FMCiC website. But even after seeing our lament used in a redemptive way, returning to camp each year remained difficult. As we were seeking continued healing, our pain from the miscarriage was complicated by new losses related to camp.

After the success of the elevator project and the 100th anniversary celebration for Holt FMC, the obvious question was: what's next? The board decided to hire a dynamic youth leader, and we created a kid's program to attract new families to the church. We did a mass mailing distribution and had a float in the local Santa Clause Parade where we gave out candies with an invite to the program (we also won first prize for our float). Posters went up on the bulletin boards at the local bank, post office and pizza shop. We even invited a few kids from other churches to help kick-start our program (with the approval of their pastor). Oh, and of, course there was prayer, too, as I called on the church to seek God's blessing for our new program. The program was a quality production and

done with excellence, but there was one major problem. On the first day we had no children. Standing around waiting for someone –anyone– to show up, were the leaders who were all set to run a fun and exciting program.

The disappointment was heavy but we had hope that the second week might be different. On the second week a few kids came and the program was officially launched. But after a few more weeks of low attendance, it was clear that this program was a failure and not sustainable. There was some conversation about what could have been done differently (were we offering the program on the wrong day or at the wrong time?) but there was total agreement that this program was finished.

Discouragement set in. One person from the board actually told me that this failed kid's program was the last hope for the church. After the failed kid's program, one by one families began to leave our church fellowship. The crisis began to develop as the decline began a trend. In an eighteen-month span, a few families, including three board members, left Holt FMC in unhealthy ways. Their departure created anguish and confusion in me. It was at this point where I felt disoriented in the labyrinth and far from the center.

The Bible describes the Church as a family and as a body. When a family or a body loses a member, life is forever different. In the example of a body, after losing a member, the rest of the body experiences phantom pain. When a church family loses a member, the remaining congregation will experience pain although a member is no longer present.

I lamented as I saw people leave the fellowship at Holt FMC. If people were leaving Holt FMC in order to pursue a ministry opportunity, I would be sad at their departure but would bless them in their future endeavors. While we welcome people into fellowship of the Church with a membership service, no one leaving Holt FMC ever allowed us an opportunity to give a congregational or personal blessing in their departure. In one case, I was even ridiculed for making the suggestion.

What I found truly bizarre in all of this was that some of these families who left Holt FMC returned each year to our family camp in August. There were, however, those who left both Holt FMC and the family camp. It's easier to forget about them because I never see them again. But these families from Holt FMC, especially the ones who were once board members, remained deeply connected and even involved with ministry at camp. As Joy and I were seeking healing from the loss of the miscarriage, we were confronted each year with the reminder of a loss in ministry. Now our lament at camp was complicated by this annual reunion. For us camp became synonymous with loss. First, there was the loss of a child. Now, there was the loss of ministry support.

As my inner turmoil began to grow, I allowed bitterness and anger to take root in my heart. I resented those who left. I hated them. To me they were foolish, selfish and ignorant people. I was oblivious to my own hypocrisy where I could preach about reconciliation, forgiveness, and love, and yet allow for my own personal exceptions.

During the first five years of ministry I felt respected and successful, now I felt like a rejected failure. This sense of failure was amplified at camp. For fifty weeks of the year I could try to be happy at Holt FMC (and those who remained continued to love and support me), but for two weeks of the year I would have to face ‘those people.’ I actually managed to avoid speaking to any of them for a few years. During camp I would take the long way to the washroom to avoid passing by certain cottages. I also made sure that my focus in ministry at camp was devoted to ‘my people’ and I could rationalize this by thinking that if those who left Holt rejected my ministry, why would they want me to minister to them at camp?

This was a very dark season in my life and it’s embarrassing to confess, yet even Henri Nouwen once admitted to “...a tendency to divide people into good ones and evil ones, as if I could see into people’s hearts and know for sure why they act the way they do” (Nouwen 2013, 23). At camp, I saw two types of people: those who were faithful and those who were not. The pain I experienced at camp only increased each year as I continued to nurture bitterness. I was deliberately ignoring the *allēlōn* teaching of Scripture.

During family camp of 2014, I experienced a dark night of the soul. I thought that other pastors at camp were respected as spiritual leaders, yet I felt like I was being treated as if my training and gifts were non-existent. There were issues during that particular camp that prompted me to stay awake for an entire night considering my options. The big question before me was whether I would stay at Holt and continue to endure the annual reminder of loss, or was this finally

time for me to leave? Was this really the center and the end this journey at Holt FMC? Was it finally time to change direction, leave Holt FMC and leave this labyrinth path?

No one would want to continue ministry under these conditions. I was more than ready to quit, to wash my hands, to walk away and knock the dust from my feet. I came home from camp ready to start preparing my resume for the next application. But there was a slight hesitation on my part. I knew that before I could answer the question of whether I should stay or leave, that night I needed to hear from God. I prayed during part of the night. I also paced around the room and even watched one of *The Hobbit* movies. I wasn't sure what my long term plans were going to be, let alone attending the morning service and being present for the final day of camp. After all, the final day of camp was the anniversary of when Joy had a miscarriage. Maybe I would just stay home and figure out my next move during the following week.

Around 4:00 A.M one Scripture came to mind: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Ephesians 4:31). Then another: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). And another: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2nd Corinthians 5:18). It was clear that I needed to humble myself, seek forgiveness, and reconcile with those who left.

Although I might have thought that those who left did so for foolish or selfish reasons, I realized that they were still people just trying to get through life

as best they knew how. I was under conviction for the way I was treating them and I knew that I would have to reconcile with them.

As for the question of whether I should stay at Holt or move, that question was answered through a variety of means. This wasn't my first time considering a move between churches. I answered that same question when I left Bracebridge. But there was a difference between the time I left Bracebridge and that moment when I was considering leaving Holt. Leaving Bracebridge, I knew that I was also called *to* Holt FMC. Leaving Holt would only be a movement where I was going *from* a calling. During the years of decline at Holt FMC, a larger church asked me to apply for a lead pastoral position. Through an exercise of discernment, Joy and I both knew that God was not calling us to that church and so I didn't apply. During that dark night I knew that the decision to leave Holt FMC must be made with discernment.

Discernment, and the labyrinth path, both raise the question of time (the *chronos* and *kairos* distinction). Not only was this not the time for me to leave Holt, but this was, in fact, a moment when God was about to do something significant. Staying would require change, and the change would have to begin with me.

I went to camp in the morning and began the process of reconciliation. In the course of many conversations I had with people at camp, conversations where I humbled myself and sought forgiveness, I remembered the prayer of St. Francis. The line that came to mind was: "Lord, help me not to be understood but to understand." I came to understand that others are just as broken as I am. This was

a moment of illumination. We are all walking the same labyrinth path. Our pace may vary, and we may even encounter others who are going in a different direction, but the journey in the labyrinth is one that is shared. My dysfunction in ministry during this time of decline was because I was not making space for others to travel according to their own unique way. That afternoon I did a baptism in the camp pool and then I had a much needed nap.

My recovery would be completed if I ended with the reconciliation at camp, but that's not, in fact, where this story ends. There was one day that Joy and I were alone in the church and had a time of prayer. It's not language that I would normally use, but that time of prayer is best described as 'taking heaven by storm'. We were united and passionate in calling on God to move in our church and to bless our fellowship. It was now time for Holt to grow and we recognized that the need was desperate. As part of our prayer we pleaded with God for workers in the harvest.

As it turned out, Joy would be one of the first to say, "Here I am, send me." She began a small group for mothers that was structured with open and honest vulnerability. Joy also began a kid's program using Lego, and suddenly there's a joyful noise in the church once again. Others in the church began to take responsibility for ministry, and with each new family that joined our fellowship there was an increased sense of hope and thanksgiving. People from some of the new families became involved in serving, even offering to clean the church.

I'm now amazed at what God is currently doing at Holt FMC. Had Joy and I left this church family back in 2014, we would have missed this blessing

and carried our pain to another church. Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit that occurs through crisis and process. My crisis was reaching a climax during the dark night, and through perseverance I discovered a place of illumination, and eventually a sense of union with God that empowered me to continue to serve faithfully at Holt FMC. The labyrinth of ministry was a journey filled with twists and turns, and was a two-way street where I had to share the path with others.

Overview

As I close my spiritual autobiography, I should also mention my other children. Eden (born 2010) loves the labyrinth as much as her father. One of her favourite books is called *Living the Labyrinth: 101 Paths to a Deeper Connection with the Sacred* (Geoffrion 2000). That book has different suggestions for how to walk a labyrinth path, and Eden is always willing to try a new approach to journeying to the center. Micah (born 2013) is a busy boy and a loud extravert. He's an enthusiast who loves life, and yet when he comes across a table top labyrinth, somewhere and somehow he discovers a thing called patience. Micah using a finger labyrinth is one of the rare times when he is quiet. Countless books about labyrinths have been written, but Jesus said something about the faith of a child. This is one of the gifts of a labyrinth: it requires no training in order to walk the path. The journey to the center is a simple process of putting one foot in front of another. It's a simple process that requires only openness to whatever God may say to you through it.

My spiritual journey has been a path that included moments of consolation and desolation. I have had experiences where I have felt close to God and

moments when I felt far from God. The Gospel and the message of the cross was not just present at the beginning of my journey, but has drawn me farther along the path. In every season of my life, my faith was being formed by the work of the Holy Spirit, through crisis and process, and required my perseverance and relationship with others.

My life has had a labyrinthine structure, and the path of my spiritual journey has included both church and home, spiritual disciplines and works of mercy. It is a path that is enriched through relationships with others. These themes become important elements of my model of spiritual formation as presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Just over one hundred years after John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Wesley published a sermon in 1781 that mentions making “progress in religion” and presents what he considers to be “...the entire, connected, system of Christianity” (Wesley 1986, 314). John Wesley’s progress in religion is contained in the following quote taken from the sermon “On Zeal”:

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all the *holy tempers*: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance – and if any other is comprised in ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’ In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that these are real *means of grace*, although that is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety*: reading and hearing the Word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord’s Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one – *the church*, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation. (Wesley 1986, 313-314)

Kenneth Collins commented on the significance of this quote in his book *The Scripture Way of Salvation* and said that it is:

...perhaps the most lucid expression of the value and necessity of personal, inward transformation (inward religion) for the undertaking of works of mercy or piety, both temporal and spiritual ... which epitomizes his thought in this area and which provides insight into his ethical motivation and concern. Here Wesley places love at the center of things and explores its rippling effects in the Christian life. (Collins 1997, 167)

The use of the term ‘rippling effects’ evokes the impact of a single drop on still water. A visual diagram of John Wesley’s connected system of Christianity is presented in figure 3:

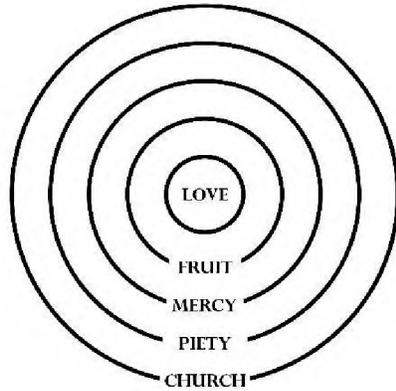


Figure 3. John Wesley's Connected System

My model of spiritual formation is based on John Wesley's connected system of Christianity, understood not in terms of concentric circles but rather the pathway of a labyrinth. Very little adjustment is needed to transform the concentric circles in the diagram above into the shape of a labyrinth.

An important component to labyrinths is the significance of the center, for "The center of the labyrinth, the heart, represents the sacred destination. For some the center represents illumination, while others consider it a 'resting place'" (Hogan 2003, 10). In adapting Wesley's quote about zeal into the shape of a labyrinth, it is appropriate to place both love and the fruit of the spirit in the center as an aim of spiritual formation, and the surrounding path includes all of the other areas of works of piety, works of mercy and the church.

Although family is only mentioned by John Wesley in terms of a specific spiritual discipline of prayer, it is appropriate to add family as its own context for spiritual formation. The new design for my model of formation, based off of the work of John Wesley, places love and fruit of the spirit at the center of a labyrinth path, surrounded by works of mercy, spiritual disciplines, church and family. It is crucial to see the interconnectedness of the various sections of this pathway in a u.

The connected system of Christianity adapted for my model of spiritual formation is presented in figure 4:

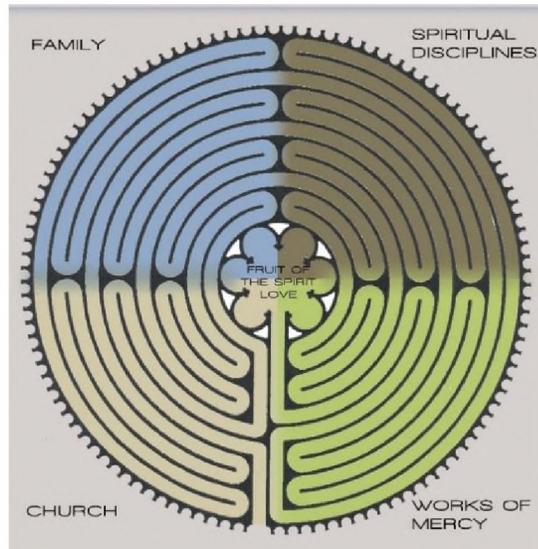


Figure 4. A Model of Spiritual Formation

Wilhoit compares spiritual formation in terms of a linear curriculum and then emphasizes the benefits of a spiral curriculum where topics are represented and re-appropriated (Wilhoit 2008, 50). Using a labyrinth for the structure for Wesley's quote on zeal should be understood as a spiral curriculum:

A spiral curriculum has the student constantly revisiting topics and truths, with the aim of working these truths deeper into the fabric of our lives.... A linear curriculum has much to commend it in many eras of study, but the wisdom of the ages saw the circular curriculum, analogous to the church year, as far more appropriate for spiritual formation. The circular curriculum re-presents subjects again and again and provides opportunities to go deeper into these subjects. (Wilhoit 2008, 119)

The above figure shows no solid division between the spiritual disciplines and works of mercy. The different areas in this labyrinth path are interconnected, and each of these topics repeats throughout the journey to the center of the labyrinth.

The spiral curriculum is presented in other works on spiritual formation such as *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith, Spirituality and the*

Awakening of the Self, and *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Each of those books describes spiritual formation in terms of a circular pattern. As Benner put it, “The journey is far from linear. Do not trust any map of the journey that reduces it to a formula or leads you to expect a simple straightforward path” (Benner 2012, 68). In Wesleyan theology there exists a “...spiraling interaction of God’s *gracious* provenience and our *responsible* cooperation throughout the Christian journey” (Maddox 1998, 41). This model of spiritual formation is to be understood in terms of the spiral curriculum where there is fluidity between the various chapters, and moments of returning to earlier themes, supported by the spiraling interaction of the grace of God and our cooperative response.

The Church

The senior demon in *The Screwtape Letters* laments that the human his nephew is tempting has become a Christian, but he notes that humans do not share the same perspective as the demons, especially when it comes to the nature of the Church. Screwtape’s advice to his nephew Wormwood is that he should distract the new believer with the physical condition of the church and the presence of neighbours because the new Christian is unaware of the spiritual reality of the Church. John Wesley refers to this spiritual reality of the Church when he says that local congregations are “a little emblem of the Church universal”. With regards to spiritual formation, the Church is essential.

A relationship with others in the life of a local church is spiritually formative due to the nature of the Church, as understood through biblical terms

such as family, *ekklēsia*, *koinonia*, and *allēlōn*. The Church is also formational through the ministries of the Word, sacrament, worship, and mission.

In the book *The Essence of the Church*, Craig Van Gelder distinguishes between the nature of the Church, the function of the Church, and the structure of the Church. Problems arise when the Church is defined by its function or organization, so the starting point for understanding the Church is to consider the nature of the Church. “The nature of the church is based on God’s presence through the Spirit. The ministry of the church flows out of the church’s nature. The organization of the church is designed to support the ministry of the church” (Van Gelder 2000, 37). The nature of the Church is God’s presence through the Spirit, which transforms a random collection of people into the body of Christ.

Robert Webber once said:

The church is therefore to be regarded as a kind of continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world. Jesus is not only seated at the right hand of the Father, but is visibly and tangibly present in and to the world through the church. This is an incarnational understanding of the church. (Webber 2004, 70)

Not only is the Church a manifestation of the body of Christ, as 1st Corinthians 12 describes, but is also an expression of the kingdom of God. Glen Scorgie said, “The church is to be a *prototype* of the coming kingdom of God” (Scorgie 2007, 64). This is evident in the teaching of Jesus with regards to the kingdom of God in terms of being “...visible, tangible, capable of being experienced, even though not yet perfected” (Lohfink 1984, 70).

The nature of the Church, as defined by the presence of Jesus and the reality of the kingdom of God, leads to the spiritual formation of those who are

part of the Church. In the book *Becoming a Blessed Church*, Graham Standish writes, “To be a church of presence means to be a church that intentionally tries to awaken people to God’s presence and grace in their midst so that they can connect with Christ more powerfully in their daily lives” (Standish 2016, 81). A church of presence will spiritually form people into the life and likeness of the Gospel.

There are multiple verses in Scripture that describe the Church as a family of believers (Gal. 6:10, Eph. 3:15, 1 Thes. 4:10, Heb. 2:11, 1 Pet. 2:18, 1 Pet. 5:9). Concerning the topic of family, Jesus refers to this new family, in Mark 10:29-30, and promises that those who have left home and family will, “...receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” Fathers are curiously absent from the list of what is restored to those who follow Jesus because:

... in the new family there are to be no ‘fathers.’ They are too symbolic of patriarchal domination. Jesus’ community of disciples and together with it the true Israel are to have only a single father, the One in heaven. This is shown by Matt. 23:9. (Lohfink 1984, 45, 49)

Spiritual formation occurs as followers of Jesus relate to one another in the Church in terms of a new spiritual family that sees God as Father. The formational aspect of family spirituality is developed in the next section of this model of formation.

One biblical word that is often translated as Church is *ekklēsia*, which is a word that has both a secular and sacred understanding. This word: “...was a common word in first-century Roman world. Arising from the verb ‘to call’ (*kaleo*) plus the preposition ‘out of’ (*ek*), *ekklēsia* simply meant ‘assembly’”

(Grenz 1998, 208). The religious connotation of this term goes back to the Septuagint which used this word in translating *qahal* (Lohfink 1984, 77). To be part of the *ekklēsia* is not just to be a separate group distinct from the world, but a people who are part of God's chosen people and the true Israel. It was Dallas Willard who said, "The presence of God in the midst is the only sure mark of the true *ecclesia*" (Willard 2012, 245). The presence of God is what made the *qahal* in the Older Testament a distinct nation apart from all other nations. Likewise, the presence of God makes the Church an *ekklēsia* as opposed to any other social organization or community group.

Another New Testament Greek term for understanding the nature of the Church is *koinonia*. This word "...was highly significant for the early church" (Lohfink 1984, 99). It is often translated as 'fellowship' but the word:

...has an active sense. It means the sharing in common or participation in common with others in something. The result of such participating in common can be fellowship, but *koinonia* is the process, not the product; the activity, not the outcome. (Witherington III 2012, 13)

Koinonia is a process which is part of the spiritual formation that is available through being part of the family in the Church. The definition of spiritual formation for this project refers to communities maturing in relationship with God. Spiritual formation that happens through *koinonia* occurs due to a regular and ongoing practice. In other words, perseverance is necessary for *koinonia* to be effective.

The third biblical term for spiritual formation in the Church is *allēlōn* which is translated as "one-another." Gerhard Lofink does a study of this term and lists twenty-three examples of it in the New Testament. From this list he

concludes, “Paul speaks of edifying or building up the community much more frequently in connection with the *responsibility which all in the community have for one another*” (Lohfink 1984, 102). Ephesians 5:21 says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” As followers of Jesus practice *allēlōn*, mutual spiritual formation occurs. Ultimately it can be said, “The church is a social community, a community made up of people who are reconciled with God and one another” (Van Gelder 2000, 108). People who are reconciled with one another will practice the multiple *allēlōn*’s that are listed in the New Testament.

While these biblical terms for the church sound idealistic, the practice of *koinonia* and *allēlōn* can be a challenge, especially when there are differences in opinion that can easily divide people. Effort is required for *koinonia* and *allēlōn* to take place in the *ekklēsia*, and yet the differences are in fact what make the Church a place of spiritual formation:

To be in apostolic community, church, is not necessarily to be with others with whom we are emotionally, ideologically, and otherwise compatible. Rather it is to stand, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, precisely with people who are very different from ourselves, and with them, hear a common word, say a common creed, share a common bread, and offer a mutual forgiveness so as, in that way, to bridge our differences and become a common heart. (Rolheiser 1999, 115)

These three biblical terms, *ekklēsia*, *koinonia*, and *allēlōn*, all relate to the process of spiritual formation that occurs in the Church where differences are bridged and a common heart is formed. There is, of course, one other term that could be added to this list. “The early church’s most beautiful word for the new reality which spread in the community given by God is *agape* (love)” (Lohfink 1984, 109). Love becomes the focus of the final section in this chapter.

Having covered the nature of the Church, it is appropriate to consider the function of the Church for worship. The encounter with Christ through worship is possible because of the nature of the Church. Richard Averbeck describes how worship is a spiritually formative:

Worship is one of the most transforming activities for us to engage in as Christians. Through worship experiences, the Holy Spirit intends to so impress us with God the Father and the things he has freely given to us in Christ Jesus his Son that the other things of life become less and less impressive to us. (Averbeck 2008, 38)

James K.A. Smith also identifies worship as a formative practice which is "...the heart of discipleship...the church is the very body of Christ, animated by the Spirit of God and composed of Spirit-led practices" (Smith 2016, 68). Worship is spiritually formative because of the nature of the Church. Through worship one encounters Christ, or the Spirit of God at work, in such a way that transformation can occur. Worship becomes a participation in the life of Christ.

In the book *Ancient-Future Faith*, Webber lists the Word among tangible signs of the presence of Christ in worship (Webber 2004, 102). Worship is far more than just songs being sung, but:

...a rehearsal of the covenantal relationship God has established with Israel and the church. ...the covenant and meaning of classical worship tells and acts out the story of God's saving work in history, culminating in the work of Christ to overthrow the powers of evil and to ultimately establish his kingdom over creation. This story is in our hymns and songs, in our prayers and testimonies, and, supremely, in the reading of Scripture, preaching, and the Eucharist. (Webber 2004, 103,104)

The Church is a setting where the Word is proclaimed, and during worship the people gathered have an opportunity to enter into the greater story of God. To receive communion is to experience the story of God through the sharing of a

common bread and a common cup at the Table. Communion is a community event where the *allēlōn* can be practiced.

In the book *The Good and Beautiful Community*, James Bryan Smith refers to spiritual formation through worship and its connection with mission:

The soul-shaping role of the church is not just for our own spiritual nurture – it is meant to propel us out into mission. We gather together to worship, and in doing so we learn our ancient family language, tell our family narratives and enact our sacred moments. We also listen to the Spirit speak to us through sermon and song. In so doing we are shaped into a people, a community being transformed into goodness by our God who alone is good. But then we are sent. (Smith 2010c, 130)

Being sent into the world with a mission can take many forms. Of course evangelism and works of mercy are important expressions of the mission of the Church, and yet *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* suggests an approach to being sent out into all of the world with a mission that is often overlooked:

Their worship was not evangelistic; it was not ‘seeker sensitive.’ Their intent in worshipping was to glorify God rather than to attract outsiders. And since they believed that authentic worship formed the worshipers, they believed that in the course of time the behavior of those so formed would attract outsiders. (Kreider 2016, 189)

The best apologetic is a godly life which is developed through the process of spiritual formation. The mission of the Church, therefore, is spiritual formation:

Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period. It represents neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body of Christ. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to form. (Wilhoit 2008, 15)

The mission of the Church must begin as a discipline or grace of spiritual formation, and through spiritual formation individuals and communities will be empowered to engage in future mission.

Family

In the entire and connected system of Christianity that John Wesley referred to in his sermon “On Zeal,” the topic of family was only listed as an example of a particular work of piety. Rather than reducing the concept of family to a spiritual discipline of family prayers, the concept of family actually provides a broader context for spiritual formation. In Richard Foster’s *Streams of Living Water*, the family is part of the “Incarnational Stream.” Under the heading, “The arena of everyday life” Foster writes:

Here we come to the most fundamental arena of the Incarnational Tradition: the arena of everyday life. It is the place, par excellence, in which we make visible and manifest the invisible realm of the Spirit... The most basic place of our sacramental living is in our marriages and homes and families. Here we live together in well-reasoned love for everyone around us. ... We miss the point of this way of life if we are off conducting prayer meetings and other churchly enterprises when the duty of the present moment is to be home, playing with our children or caring for other domestic responsibilities. (Foster 1998b, 263)

The chapter on the incarnational stream opens with part of a Susanna Wesley prayer for a growth in grace through everything in daily life (see Appendix A for the full prayer). Foster calls this prayer one of the finest expressions of the Incarnational Tradition.

Before going further in considering family as a context for spiritual formation, the term ‘Family’ needs clarification. Even the phrase ‘biblical family values’ must be reconsidered in light of what the Scriptures actually say about the family. In discussions of spiritual formation, the use of the term ‘family’ must be highly contextual and broad enough to include college students, a young couple with children, and a retired couple (Smith 2016, 128). Howard chooses to speak of the formation of households as opposed to family (Howard 2018, 154). His

focus includes "...nuclear families, extended families, or small-scale dwelling communities...[and] new monastic expressions" (Howard 2018, 154). Wendy Wright also acknowledges a variety of configurations that families can take (Wright 2007, 19). Edith Schaeffer defined a family as "A formation center for human relationships" (Schaeffer 1978, 92). Ultimately there are many different ways to define a family.

In this model of spiritual formation, family is understood as Foster's incarnational spirituality and in *Home Economics*, Wendell Berry used the phrase "tangible incarnation" (Berry 1987, 119) to describe a family. Family, as part of this model of spiritual formation, is the lived experience of faith outside of the formal gathering of the Church in a local congregation. Understanding the definition of family as incarnational spirituality is broad enough to include non-traditional families, and those who are single.

The phrase 'biblical family values' is an expression that is heard in some political conversations, and yet biblical families were often polygamous. Thomas Groome's definition of the family as 'all sustaining networks of domestic life' (Groome 2011, 202) is closest to what is found in Scripture:

The Israelites had no real conception of the nuclear family. What we call the nuclear family they saw seamlessly woven into the multigenerational extended family. Every family centered on a patriarch. Each son, with his wife, children and (in some cases) servants, lived in a separate shelter. So a Hebrew household or family would actually be a small village consisting of several adjacent buildings. What's more, these households would sometimes induct and include as members of the family aliens or sojourners who had permanently taken shelter with them. So Judges 17:2 speaks of a sojourning Levite being 'installed' in the house of Micah. (Clapp 1993, 35-36)

The cultural context of family as led by a patriarch is contained in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15. Even though culture has changed how families function, biblical insight can still be applied to families today.

Jack and Judith Balswick developed a theology of the family that has four sequential but non-linear stages: covenant, grace, empowerment and intimacy. “These elements of family relationships are derived from an examination of biblical writings on how God enters into and sustains relationships with humanity (Balswick and Balswick 1991, 22). With regards to biblical writings about the family, the household codes of the New Testament letters receive much attention, especially the call for submission in Ephesians chapter 5. A proper interpretation of this text removes any potential for abuse and domestic violence:

...it is clear that headship, if that is to be the view one espouses, is to be understood not in the hierarchical sense of the husband’s lording it over his wife, but rather in the sense of taking the role of a suffering servant. Christ’s example as a compassionate servant who gave his life for his bride, the church, is the model of how the husband is to act as head. Wives, too, are called to this same self-giving, suffering-servant role. Mutual submissiveness, then, is the overriding message of Ephesians 5. (Balswick and Balswick 1991, 87)

Likewise, instruction for children in Colossians 3:20-21 and Ephesians 6:1-4 needs to be understood in its context:

...the household codes appeal to divine authority in support of children’s obedience: ‘obey your parents *in the Lord*’ (Eph. 6:1); ‘this is your acceptable duty *in the Lord*’ (Col. 3:20). The qualifying phrase ‘in the Lord’ does more than simply provide religious legitimation for a general ethical ideal carried over into a Christian context. *‘In the Lord’ qualified obedience as taking place within the larger framework of one’s relationship to Christ. ... Parents stand alongside their children under the Lord.* (Bunge 2001, 55-56)

Although the cultural context for families has changed, the teaching of Scripture with regards to family continues to have relevant application for today, and the phrase ‘biblical family values’ makes sense only when one thinks of covenant, grace, empowerment, intimacy, and submission to one another and to Christ.

In this model of spiritual formation, the path in the labyrinth that journeys through the Church leads into the family. Family is properly understood through the relationship with the Church. James K.A. Smith writes of the idolatry of the family where there is a cultural “...pressure on the family to function as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous unit” (Smith 2016, 117). The idolatry of the family is like placing the family at the center of a labyrinth and having all of life revolve around it. The relationship a family has with a local church is vital to a healthy family spirituality:

...our households need to be caught up in the wider household of God: the liturgies of our homes should grow out of, and amplify, the formative liturgy of Word and Table...The formative liturgies of a Christian home depend on the ecclesial capital of the church’s worship. (Smith 2016, 128)

Reversing the order and viewing the family as primary and the Church as secondary will cause problems for both home and Church:

With the private-public separation and the idealization of the home as a haven, I am afraid Christian families today often live for themselves. They think the church exists to serve them. They buy books that make spiritual disciplines important *because* they will strengthen the family, that tell them to go to church *because* going to church will make the family happier. But this gets it all backwards. ‘The family that prays together, stays together’ is not such an innocent statement. It is in fact just one more way to pervert both the church and the gospel according to the dictates of the economic exchange model. If we worship and pray to God because that will strengthen our family, then we make worship and prayer (and God) into investment techniques that serve our ends. And ironically, the family hurts itself when it makes the family the goal and object of Christian mission and spiritual disciplines. (Clapp 1993, 162-163)

The goal and object of Christian mission and spiritual disciplines is what is in the center of the labyrinth, the heart where love is on the throne and reigns without a rival. Both the Church and the family share the same *telos* of spiritual formation, which is sanctification. This love, as described as being patient and kind in 1st Corinthians chapter 13, informs both family and Church, and “only as witness to and exemplars of God’s love can church and family enable their members to resist the alternatives presented by the world” (Balswick and Balswick 1991, 300). Furthermore, “The primary locus of *koinōnia* is the church. In form the church should resemble a family; its members after all are described as the children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ....The church, then, is to be a family to families” (Balswick and Balswick 1991, 304). The family will find its fullest meaning in a proper relationship with the Church.

Since the term family is one word that is used to describe the Church that which makes the Church a context for spiritual formation can also be applied to the family. Just as the Church has a mission, a family can be a context for spiritual formation through an engagement in mission:

The strength and happiness of families is an important thing. But it is a by-product of service to a kingdom larger than the family, not the object of the service to that kingdom. To be healthy, the family needs a mission or purpose beyond itself. (Clapp 1993, 163)

Rodney Clapp expands on this theme of mission by saying, “Christian family, of all places, is where we put our lives back together, where we live not so much in a public or private world as in God’s one good and redeemed world. The Christian home is a mission base” (Clapp 1993, 169). The mission of the Church is to

spiritually form individuals so that they may be sent into the world. The mission of a family should be aligned with that of the Church, just as a labyrinth path continues from one area to the next.

Spiritual formation in both the Church and in the family context occurs through the practice of the *allēlōn* relationships. There is no church without the *allēlōn* relationships, and this is crucial for families as well. Wright put it this way:

Families are, first and foremost, Easter people. They are communities called to offer and accept forgiveness together. Opportunities occur daily because family members live in such close proximity. The demands of simply being together call forth innumerable occasions for husband, wife, parent, child, brother, sister and in-laws to admit that they have hurt and failed one another, to ask for forgiveness, to acknowledge that there has been hurt and to freely offer to forgive. (Wright 2007, 135)

Howard says something similar about the necessity of the *allēlōn* relationships in the family context:

Households offer a distinctive setting for Christian spiritual formation. First, members live in proximity to one another. We share washrooms, refrigerators, and garbage containers. We experience one another's ups and downs firsthand. When I fail to keep my devotional commitments or when I am especially impatient with another household member, everybody knows. (Howard 2018, 154)

A family that nurtures spiritual formation is one where there is a covenant of love, mutual grace, empowerment and mission. "Members of a family that is based on a covenant and lives in an atmosphere of grace and empowering will be able to so communicate and express themselves that they intimately know and are known by one another" (Balswick and Balswick 1991, 31). In the experience of walking a labyrinth, one has to remember that the path to the center may be shared with

others. Making the physical journey through a labyrinth in the company of others can present challenges:

Often as we walk, we encounter someone in front of us who is walking slower or someone who is on our heels walking faster. As in all relationships, we must find a way to honor our own pace and those of the people with whom we are in relationship. (Hogan 2003, 69)

Honouring the unique pace of others is essential for family spirituality.

The sense of otherness in the spirituality of married life also comes from the fact that husband and wife are simply different personalities with diverse interests, backgrounds and goals. While sometimes this can be frustrating, diversity can also change us and teach us something of God's ways. For it is easy to think that our own ways of being, doing and understanding are normative for everyone. (Wright 2007, 96-97)

The uniqueness of each person's spiritual journey is conveniently overlooked when pursuing a discipline of 'family prayers' together. In fact, "To realize that someone else, especially someone you know and love well, prays differently, and, in fact, experiences God in a way you do not can be illuminating" (Wright 2007, 97). For a family to be a healthy context of spiritual formation, the uniqueness of each individual must be honoured. With regards to children, Erik Erikson has described the various stages of psychological development (Stonehouse 1998, 44). In a similar fashion, Karen-Marie Yust proposes age-related aspects of faithfulness (Yust 2004, 14-15) and age-related concepts of God (Yust 2004, 125). Although the spiritual needs of children vary depending upon age, at every age or stage of development, children always need to experience love and acceptance.

Practices are teleological, whether they are spiritual disciplines or habits of a particular household, therefore it is wise to give careful attention to how one lives. Groome commented:

Atmosphere entails the family's shared lifestyle and the values and ethic that suffuse it, the self-understanding it nurtures, the outlook on life it encourages, and the patterns of relationship and language that shape its shared life. The whole atmosphere of the home is what matters most, because family nurture comes much more by osmosis than direct instruction. (Groome 2011, 205-206)

This has a broad practical application, but one important area for consideration is the topic of stewardship. As Wright puts it:

Each family must decide where the cutting edge is for itself: What simplifies our life, makes us freer to love each other, our Lord and our neighbor? Which things that we own are idols or more burden than we need to carry? What do we genuinely need to sustain ourselves economically so that we are neither consumed by our consumption nor so impoverished that we do not have the reserves to freely give to one another, to others, and to our God? (Wright 2007, 144)

Shopping habits and entertainment choices communicate values and priorities.

The atmosphere of a family is an environment that can foster or hinder spiritual formation. Smith said, "...we should be attentive to the rhythms and rituals that constitute the background hum of our families and should consider the *telos* toward which these activities are oriented" (Smith 2006, 113). He went on to say:

...we should be concerned about the ethos of our households – the unspoken 'vibe' carried in our daily rituals. Every household has a 'hum,' and that hum has a tune that is attuned to some end, some *telos*. We need to tune our homes, and thus our hearts, to sing his grace. That tuning requires intentionality with regard to the hum, the constant background noise generated by routines and rhythms. That background noise is a kind of imaginative wallpaper that influences how we imagine the world, and it can either be a melody that reinforces God's desires for his creation or it can (often unintentionally) be a background tune that is dissonant with the Lord's song. You could have Bible 'inputs' every day and yet still have a household whose frantic rhythms are humming along with the consumerist

myth of production and consumption. You might have Bible verses on the wall in every room of the house and yet the unspoken rituals reinforce self-centeredness rather than sacrifice. (Smith 2006, 127)

The tuning of a heart that reinforces God's desire begins with an intentional orientation. The labyrinth path of the family is an intentional movement that is done with purpose towards a center where sanctification is a reality.

Although a detailed description of the spiritual formation of children is beyond the scope of this work, it should be recognized that children can play an active role in the spiritual life of the family. While some parents may expect the Church to provide the crucial context for the spiritual formation of children, "The family exerts the primary influence on a child's development. This is as true for religious and spiritual development as it is for cognitive or social development" (Ratcliff 2004, 236). In the book *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*, Yust has a chapter on the different ways to pray with children. Parents can engage with children through practices of silence, centering prayer, meditative prayer, prayer with poetry and art, lament, praise, confession, forgiveness, intercession, thanksgiving, and guided meditation that involves the imagination of a child (Yust 2004, 93-120). Later in this text, in a chapter called "Acting Out Our Spirituality with Children" there is a section of suggested activities for encouraging compassion (Yust 2004, 154). Children, like adults, can practice the spiritual disciplines and works of mercy as they actively participate in the spiritual life of the family.

In the chapter of her book *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Application* entitled "Children in Wesleyan Thought," Catherine

Stonehouse notes that the spiritual formation of children can begin at birth, since “...Wesley’s theology is ‘child friendly.’ It describes grace as it relates to all of life, from birth to death, and this calls for understanding how God is at work in the lives of children” (Ratcliff 2004, 134). John Wesley’s life and ministry provides several examples of what it means to pay attention to the spiritual needs of children.

John and Charles Wesley certainly had very different households. John Wesley never had children, while Charles was a devoted father. Not only was Charles a father, but he was also a poet and a theologian, therefore, “No family event, however mundane, seemed to escape Charles’s poetical pen” (Tyson 2007 206). Among the vast output of poetry and hymns, there is a poetical prayer by Charles Wesley that God would relieve his child suffering from teething pains. Although not a father himself, John had equal concern for the spiritual well-being of children:

Wesley studied what the scholars of his day had to say about the education and upbringing of children. His journals record the religious experiences of children, his interactions with them and their response to him, indicating that he observed the children, seeking to understand what was best for them. Although some of Wesley’s rules for schoolchildren seem austere to us, accounts of his interactions with children show a deep sensitivity, tenderness, and love for them. On one occasion, after preaching, Wesley took some children for a ride on his “rig.” Another time a child had been denied the Lord’s Supper, and when Wesley discovered this, he took her on his knee and gave her communion (Ratcliff 2004, 133)

Both John and Charles valued the spiritual formation of children because of their shared family of origin. Their mother, Susannah instructed her children, both boys and girls, and gave them individual attention. John Wesley “...valued Susannah’s methods and sought her wisdom as he guided the education of children in the

Methodist movement” (Ratcliff 2004, 134). John and Charles Wesley were raised in a family context where an intentional effort was made to spiritually form children. It is not surprising, therefore, that:

Early Methodists nurtured children in their societies and through their outreach. Wesley, however, seems to present the home as the most important setting for the spiritual care and formation of children. Wesley instructed parents to offer more than a series of lessons to be delivered or propositions to be taught. He challenged parents to set an example of godly living for children to follow. (Ratcliff 2004, 141)

John Wesley’s sermons “On Family Religion” and “On the Education of Children” refer to the intentional spiritual formation that should occur in a home.

About these two sermons, Stonehouse says:

Wesley believed strongly in the power of life experience to teach and he showed parents how to weave instruction into the everyday life of the family. The “disease of human nature” can be cured, or at least checked, by the way parents and children live their lives together. For example, if parents talk with their children about everything but God, they foster atheism. Therefore, Wesley believed that talking about God and worshipping God in the flow of life is the antidote for atheism and the food of faith. Even the eating habits of a family Wesley viewed as formative behaviour. (Ratcliff 2004, 144)

As previously noted, the atmosphere created by the daily rhythms and rituals in a home are spiritually formative and teleological. Children can be active participants in the spiritual life of a home, a fact recognized by both John and Charles Wesley.

Before moving into the next section on spiritual disciplines, the topic of singleness must be addressed. The definition of family in this model of spiritual formation is an incarnational spirituality. The term ‘family’ must be broad enough to include non-traditional families, and those who are single. In the book *Families*

at the Crossroads, Clapp has a chapter called “The Superiority of Singleness.” He refers to two passages of Scripture, Matthew 19 and 1st Corinthians 7, and says:

... a right understanding and practice of singleness is crucial to the health of Christian family – especially in a postmodern world. To put it strongly, there is at least one sure sign of a flawed vision of the Christian family: it denigrates and dishonors singleness. (Clapp 1993, 89)

The definition of singles must also be expansive enough to include many different life experiences such as those who have never been married, single parents, those who are engaged, divorced, and widowed. Jana Marguerite Bennett has written on the theology of singleness in her work *Singleness and the Church: A New Theology of the Single Life*. In the introduction of this text she describes the diversity contained in the category of singles:

I am currently a married woman with three children, but I was once never-married with no view even toward getting married; I was once engaged; I can assume that someday I may be widowed or (hopefully more improbably) divorced; if I am widowed or divorced early in my children’s lives, I can expect an extensive bout of single parenting. In other words, people need to assume the likelihood of having more than one season of singleness in a lifetime. (Bennett 2017, 2)

Each chapter of this text has a reference to some historical example, such as the lives of Augustine, Aelred of Riveaulx, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Stanely Hauerwas, and Dorothy Day. She also has a chapter that explores John Wesley’s concept of perfection and his varying relationships with different women.

Although Wesleyan theology traces back to the early Methodists, the experience of marriage for John and Charles Wesley was vastly different. “Quite unlike his older brother John, Charles Wesley was happily married, a devoted husband, and a doting father” (Tyson 1989, 311). John Wesley, however, had

several failed relationships with women (Sophy Hokey, Grace Murray and Molly Vazeille).

From an early age John Wesley was focused on being devoted to God to the exclusion of marriage:

Wesley describes how, as young as “six or seven” he considered he would never marry because he would be unable to find a woman as good as the one his father had found. As a young adult, he read early Church fathers and meditated on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he became convinced that “Marriage was the less perfect state . . .” because of its power to distract from service to the Lord. (Bennett 2017, 100)

When John Wesley finally married Molly, he continued his itinerant preaching and was also receiving correspondence from women, “...a fact that angered his new wife, who rightfully thought he ought to cease from furthering relationships that had a borderline romantic aspect to them” (Bennett 2017, 101-102).

Ultimately, “Wesley’s marriage turned sour and ultimately failed, by both eighteenth century standards as well as our own standards today. Wesley did not seek divorce, but he and Molly lived apart for most of their marriage” (Bennett 2017, 101). Bennet’s diagnosis of this failed marriage is due to the fact that:

Wesley was already “married to the Lord” and had been for some time—at least that was Wesley’s spiritual discussion. Wesley also did not seem able to foster excellent relationships with women; he appears to have been too willing to be involved in his female parishioners’ lives, while also being too demanding (in terms of discipleship) in his wife’s life. He could not readily or easily include domestic concerns into his life, however much his wife was purported to be a generous, kind- hearted, and willing disciple. (Bennett 2017, 101)

John Wesley made a vow of celibacy as part of his Oxford Holy Club, and it is clear that he was not suitable for marriage like his younger brother Charles.

Bennett devotes a chapter in her book on singleness to the failed relationships of John Wesley because "...Wesley consistently directs our gaze away from any particular idealized concept of marriage, because the ideal for Christians is God" (Bennett 2017, 102). This reality of singleness is presented by Lauren Winner in her book *Real Sex*. There is a chapter in that text entitled, "What Singleness Teaches the Church." Two things that singleness teach the church include "a radical dependence on God" and the reminder that "the Church is our primary family" (Winner 2005, 145). Another way of putting it, according to Christine Colón and Bonnie Field is "Christian singleness testifies to the truth that ultimate completeness is found in God, not in a human companion, leaving us free to marry or to remain single, for in both states we find our ultimate fulfillment in God" (Colón and Field 2009, 169). This is important for spiritual formation, because "What transforms us into mature Christians are not the externals of marriage or singleness but rather the work that we allow God to do within our hearts. Marriage cannot be the answer to spiritual maturity" (Colón and Field 2009, 204).

Spiritual formation in a family occurs through the practice of *allēlōn* and through mission. Those who are single are still called to have relationships with others. Bennett is blunt when she says, "It is simply too broad and bold a brushstroke to paint Christian thought about singleness as stating something like, 'Single? Okay, no sex for you. Lonely? Go join a monastery!'" (Bennett 2017, 207). The topic of loneliness is addressed by Albert Hsu. He makes a distinction between loneliness and aloneness. Loneliness can be caused by a variety of

factors including negative childhood experiences, trauma experienced later in life, or a spiritual root of a lack of relationship with God (Hsu 1997, 101). This means that the experience of loneliness is not exclusive to those who are single.

“Whatever the cause, we must recognize that singleness itself does not cause loneliness. There is no direct relationship between the two. After all, many married people are lonely, and many singles are not” (Hsu 1997, 101). Singles are not excluded from the benefits of the *allēlōn* relationships.

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn entitled “For a Friend” which his daughter Sally edited to read, “His Wife” (Tyson 2007, 168). Friendship is available to those who are single. A medieval monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote *On Spiritual Friendship*. For him, “...friendship is necessary for living human life. People cannot do without friends. Aelred even suggests that a person without a friend is more like an animal than a human, and is truly, truly alone” (Bennett 2017, 118). Friendship is one way a person who is single can experience an *allēlōn* relationship.

Mission is also important for those who are single. Bennett writes about singleness by devoting each chapter to differing experiences of singleness. She also adds an historical figure as a guide who is “...someone from the Christian tradition broadly construed who inhabited that single state of life and who commented on it” (Bennett 2017, 21). Bennett makes reference to these historical figures for their “...views on Christian discipleship and what it means to be church, with their views of marriage, family, being unmarried, divorced, and so on. ... in bringing these themes together, the guides offer wisdom to all of us

Christians, not just the single among us” (Bennett 2017, 21). At the conclusion of the text she writes, “What least surprised me was the fact that many of the guides mentioned in this book sought some form of specific Christian community for their states of singleness” (Bennett 2017. 209). These communities were active in mission, and

...were not mere age- related clubs, or dating services for never- marrieds, or bereavement groups for widows. Rather, the Christian community each person sought was meant specifically to enable further and deeper Christian discipleship and the life of the church more broadly, especially as it touched on their specific state of life. (Bennett 2017, 209)

Those who are single can participate in a mission through the hospitality available in their own home or through partnership with others in a broader community of faith.

Spiritual Disciplines

In his entire connected system of Christianity, John Wesley referred to a few specific spiritual disciplines, such as the reading and hearing of the Word, prayer (including public, family and private prayer), receiving the Lord’s Supper, and fasting or abstinence. These he called works of piety. The list of what would constitute a spiritual discipline is vast, as seen in the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Calhoun, 2015) which covers more than sixty spiritual practices! James Bryan Smith even lists play as a potential spiritual exercise because “when we play, we are training our bodies and souls to live with genuine excitement. This is what the kingdom of God is all about” (Smith 2010b, 49). Spiritual disciplines include more than just prayer and the reading of Scripture.

The practice of walking a labyrinth is counted among the many spiritual disciplines, and yet principles related to walking a labyrinth apply to the function of the various disciplines in spiritual formation in general.

Walking a labyrinth is a spiritual discipline that involves the body, and there are no spiritual disciplines that are separate from a physical body. Just as each body is personal, so too are the ways spiritual disciplines are applied. The spiritual disciplines that are suitable for one individual may in fact be unsuitable for another. The suitability of a spiritual discipline may depend on many things such as context, life situation, age, and personality type. This fact becomes clear in chapter 5 with some of the results of the research project.

In the previous section on the family, spirituality of the home is described as a tangible incarnation. A tangible incarnation is another way to define all spiritual exercises that involve the body. The Greek dualism that separates the spiritual from the physical world is inconsistent with the biblical narrative where God created a world and pronounced it very good. The value of the physical body can be found in the creation account. Unfortunately:

...the interpretation of the *imago Dei* among systematic theologians almost universally exclude the *body* from the image (whether explicitly or by omission), thus entrenching a dualistic reading of the human condition. (Middleton 2005, 24).

The list of spiritual disciplines includes caring for one's physical body. The body is necessary for spiritual disciplines and furthermore:

We cannot neglect the body in pursuit of spiritual growth. In fact, neglecting our bodies necessarily impedes our spiritual growth. Everything we do in our lives, including the practices of spiritual formation, we do in and with our bodies. (Smith 2010a, 34)

Obviously walking a labyrinth requires the movement of the body, so too all spiritual disciplines involve the body, even in acts of stillness.

Just as each body is personal and unique, so too must the application of spiritual disciplines be personalized to each individual's needs. A spiritual director can help an individual discover spiritual needs that may not be apparent. A personalized approach to spiritual disciplines is similar to the practice of walking a labyrinth. In walking a labyrinth, the pace is dictated by none other than oneself. West writes:

The labyrinth provides a marvelous opportunity to recover the rhythms of our own breath, our own gait, the innate ebb and flow of our own thoughts and feelings. Since there is no 'right way' to walk the labyrinth, we are free to discover our own way to walk each time we step foot into its circuits. (West 2000, 21)

That statement was made with regards to the practice of walking a labyrinth, yet it applies to the practice of the spiritual disciplines in general. Willard's perspective is, "The walk with Christ certainly is one that leaves room for and even *calls for* individual creativity and experimentation with such matters" (Willard 1988, 190). Nouwen points out that "There are no two followers of Jesus who are the same. Look at the great variety of saints. They all have their own unique style of discipleship" (Nouwen 2019, 48). Adapting the spiritual disciplines for a personalized approach requires discernment, and is best done in the context of community that is found in both the family and the Church. Ruth Haley Barton notes, "It is impossible to overstate the importance of community in the spiritual transformation process" (Barton 2006, 160). Both family and Church should have space to honour the unique personalization of spiritual practices.

Although there is great diversity in the list of spiritual disciplines, the classical disciplines should be recognized. Among the classical disciplines are the reading of Scripture, worship, study, fasting, and prayer. These spiritual disciplines are what are referred to in Wesleyan theology as ‘the instituted means of grace’. These are spiritual practices that are found in Scripture and intended for everyone.

With regards to the reading of Scripture and to prayer, there are many different approaches to both of those practices. Research conducted by Willow Creek was clear:

Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip their people to read the Bible – specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives. (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 19)

Foster describes the classical disciplines as being “*central to experiential Christianity*.” In one form or another all of the devotional masters have affirmed the necessity of the Disciplines” (Foster 1998a, 1). There are certain spiritual disciplines that are essential, and then others that may be added with personalized practices. In Wesleyan theology the instituted means of grace are complimented by prudential means of grace.

The instituted means of grace are practices given directly by Jesus Christ. They are: prayer, searching the Scriptures, participating in the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist), fasting, and Christian conferencing (spiritual conversation). The prudential means of grace are practices that are wise and beneficial to do. (Leclerc and Maddix 2011, 75)

Spiritual disciplines should be a combination of instituted and prudential means of grace. Mulholland's view is that there must be a blending of the classical and personalized disciplines:

...personal disciplines can quickly become privatized and even pathological – privatized in the sense of keeping our relationship with God firmly under our control and permitting us to adjust the call to discipleship to fit our agenda, our likes and dislikes, our wants and wishes; pathological in the sense of spirituality that binds us to inadequate or destructive response of life. Without personal disciplines, on the other hand, the classical disciplines can quickly become a debilitating façade that covers one's deep needs for transformation. (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 90-91)

Churches must be open to more than just Scripture and prayer as expressions of the spiritual disciplines. For the process of spiritual formation, the personal and classical disciplines should be used together.

Barton has several suggestions with regards to adapting personalized spiritual disciplines. The approaches she suggests are that the disciplines chosen must be personal, realistic, balanced, and flexible. They are personal: "Your rhythm of spiritual practices will take into account your personality, your spiritual type, your season of life, the sin patterns you are contending with, the places where you know where God is trying to stretch you" (Barton 2006, 148). The balancing of disciplines should include practices that are easy and those that are a challenge. Her approach to spiritual formation is certainly one that requires patience and perseverance.

Willard suggests that a personalized approach to the spiritual disciplines can be done through self-examination. In what areas is spiritual growth required? This needs an honest answer:

Yet the range or extension of the disciplines is largely determined by our own established tendencies to sin that must be resisted, as well as by the possible avenues of loving service to God and humankind that offer themselves to such creatures as we are. Which disciplines must be central to our lives will be determined by the chief sins of commission and omission that entice or threaten us from day to day. (Willard 1988, 190-191)

The works of Foster, Mulholland, Barton, and Willard all emphasize a blend of the classical disciplines with personalized practices. Ultimately a labyrinth walk may not be a suitable spiritual discipline for one person, while two other individuals may both share the same labyrinth path and yet walk it in very distinct ways. Spiritual disciplines must be personalized.

Many of those who write on spiritual formation describe the role of spiritual disciplines. It is the role of the spiritual disciplines to create space for the Spirit of God to work in a life and bring transformation. Jeannette Bakke writes:

A Christian discipline is any practice that helps us listen to and follow God. It is something we do to make ourselves available to hear and respond to the Spirit of God more intentionally and wholeheartedly. We attempt to focus more attention on God and less on other things that crowd into our hearts, minds, and lives by setting aside time and space for God. The practices themselves have no particular power or goodness, but we hope that the Holy Spirit will use them to enable us to see God, culture, our families, and ourselves from God's perspective and help us to be awake and attentive to God. (Bakke 2000, 230-231)

James Bryan Smith called them "...wise practices that develop and enhance our life with God" (Smith 2010b, 207). Willard describes spiritual exercises as follows: "the disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order" (Willard 1988, 68). Winner put it this way: "The spiritual disciplines are things that we do; they are things that we practice. They are ways we orient our

whole selves –our bodies and minds and hearts, our communities and rhythms and ways of being in the world– toward God” (Winner 2005, 124). When spiritual disciplines create an opportunity for God to work in a life, spiritual formation may occur. As Foster put it, “The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits” (Foster 1998a, 62). All of these authors describe spiritual formation in terms of the spiritual disciplines being a means of grace. Through the discipline, one may encounter the transforming work of the grace of God. The discipline becomes the conduit for grace.

It is crucial to recognize that the spiritual disciplines do not contain formative power in and of themselves. The role of the individual is to offer the disciplines to God and trust that God will work through these various means. But the practice of the discipline in and of itself is not a form of magic that compels God to act. It is therefore possible to misuse the spiritual disciplines as a vehicle for self-righteousness. When the spiritual disciplines are mistaken as an end rather than a means, they are cut off from the appropriate role of creating space for God.

The spiritual disciplines are part of the labyrinth in my model of formation, but they are not the center. Wilhoit wrote that “Spiritual disciplines in themselves can do very little by the way of spiritual change, but when we use them to place ourselves in God’s presence, God can do his loving, restorative work” (Wilhoit 2008, 93). Willard is blunt when he says:

...the activities constituting the disciplines *have no value in themselves*. The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living, and so forth. Rather, it is effective and full

enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed. (Willard 1988, 138)

Foster begins his book on the spiritual disciplines by saying that they are "...an inward and spiritual reality, and inner attitude of the heart is far more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life" (Foster 1998a, 3). In his book, *Invitation to a Journey*, the proper use of the disciplines is described by Mulholland as follows:

A genuine spiritual discipline is a discipline of loving obedience offered to God with no strings attached. We put no condition on it. We put no time limits on it. We add no expectation of how we want God to change us through it. We simply offer the discipline to God and keep on offering it for as long as God wants us to keep on. (Mulholland 2016, 152)

Willard, Foster, and Mulholland all describe spiritual disciplines as practices that create space for God. It is the role of God to work through the disciplines, and not the disciplines themselves, that bring spiritual formation.

One effective metaphor that describes the function of spiritual disciplines comes from James Bryan Smith who writes:

We must *do* something, but we rely on God to provide what is needed in order to change. Sleep is a perfect example of the combination of discipline and grace. You cannot make yourself sleep. You cannot force your body to sleep. Sleep is an act of surrender. It's a declaration of trust. It is admitting that we are not God (who never sleeps), and that is good news. We cannot make ourselves sleep, but we can create the conditions necessary for sleep. (Smith 2010a, 34)

The spiritual disciplines are practices that help create the conditions for God to work in a transforming way, much like preparing for rest. Spiritual disciplines are things that we can do as we trust that God and the work of the Holy Spirit will produce formation through the spiritual practices that are offered in faith. This is

the spiraling dance between the grace of God and the cooperation of the individual.

The spiral of spiritual disciplines as an action that is cooperation between people and God returns us to the role of the disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are:

...an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (*charis*) is gift (*charisma*), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts. (Willard 1988, 156)

This is spiritual formation that occurs through the practice of the spiritual disciplines. “Through spiritual disciplines, God cleanses, clears, and refreshes our hearts, perceptions, attitudes, and actions” (Bakke 2000, 243). Spiritual disciplines are an essential part of my model of formation where the path leads to the center of the labyrinth where love reigns without a rival.

This path to the center of the labyrinth connects spiritual disciplines with family and church contexts, and is closely linked with what is covered in the next chapter. Works of mercy should be seen as a by-product of spiritual disciplines, as Willard said, “Discipline, strictly speaking, is activity carried on to prepare us indirectly for some activity other than itself” (Willard 1988, 120). The spiritual disciplines are truly formative when they change a heart and lead to mission. Without mission, the spiritual disciplines are incomplete.

Works of Mercy

Works of mercy are just as important for spiritual formation as the spiritual disciplines, and just like the spiritual disciplines, the formation that occurs from works of mercy occurs when there is perseverance. A work of mercy,

like a spiritual discipline, is to be a regular, ongoing practice. Works of mercy and the spiritual disciplines are mutually reinforcing activities in the life of faith.

Scripture relates spiritual disciplines with the works of mercy (as in Isaiah 58 and the worthlessness of a fast without compassion for the poor), and a biblical survey of the topic of poverty supports John Wesley's view that the works of mercy are not optional. Of course John Wesley is not a unique voice on this matter, and he is surrounded by other spiritual writers, both before and after him, who also insist that works of mercy are necessary for spiritual formation.

Distinctions can be made in the various types of works of mercy, and there are some important questions to be asked in evaluating them. Ultimately it will be shown that works of mercy contribute to spiritual formation much like a spiritual discipline. Just as spiritual disciplines create an opportunity to encounter the work of God, so too a work of mercy can be an encounter with Jesus.

For John Wesley, a work of mercy is a real means of grace, just like the works of piety. His view of works of mercy as a means of grace is seen most clearly in the sermon "On Visiting the Sick." In that sermon he lists the works of piety (Scripture, Lord's Supper, prayer, fasting) and then asks if God is limited in conveying grace to those means alone. His answer:

Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace. They are more especially such to those that perform them with a single eye. And those that neglect them, do not receive the grace which otherwise they might. Yea, and they lose, by a continued neglect, the grace which they had received. Is it not hence that many who were once strong in the faith are now weak and feeble-minded? And yet they are not sensible whence that weakness comes, as they neglect none of the ordinances of God. (Wesley 1986, 385)

Practicing a diverse range of the works of piety and yet lacking the works of mercy will lead to spiritual atrophy. The necessity of works of mercy is abundantly clear in the context of the rest of Scripture, or what John Wesley often referred to as ‘the general tenor of Scripture’.

Isaiah chapter 58 is a passage of Scripture about fasting, yet the message of the prophet is that God is not pleased with the mere mechanics of a ritual where people avoid food while at the same time the poor are exploited. A work of piety, such as fasting, without a work of mercy is not acceptable to God. Matthew chapter 25 is another passage of Scripture where service for the poor is characteristic of those who are true followers of Jesus. It is a theme found throughout the book of James. In fact, the frequency of this topic in Scripture is such that there is no spiritual formation without works of mercy:

More than a few Christians might be surprised to learn that the call to be involved in creating justice for the poor is just as essential and nonnegotiable within the spiritual life as is Jesus’ commandment to pray and keep our private lives in order. Jesus’ teaching on this is very strong, consistent throughout all the Gospels, and leaves no room for equivocation. (Rolheiser 1999, 64)

The implication of this brief biblical study on the topic of poverty is clear. Works of mercy are not optional.

The importance of works of mercy is also found in the teaching and wisdom that comes from the early Church. Compassion for the poor is found in the early Church document *Apostolic Tradition*. During the second and third century, it was actually difficult to join a congregation and belong to the Church. There was a lengthy process of discipleship and examination, and one of the questions asked with regards to a candidates’ suitability for baptism was whether

or not they served the poor: “Have they honored the widows, visited the sick, fulfilled all good works?” (Kreider 2016, 156). What is shocking is that this question was given prominence above other areas of spiritual formation:

The leaders did not ask about the candidates’ orthodoxy, about their mastery of doctrine, about their memorization of biblical passages, about their piety or prayer life. They did not ask about the many areas of distinctive Christian habitus that catechumens were attempting to master. They did not ask about the candidates’ opinions and attitudes – for example, what they thought about poor people. They did, however, want to know how the candidates treated poor people. Actions said it all. (Kreider 2016, 156)

Modern writers also insist on the necessity of works of mercy for spiritual formation. Ron Sider makes this case in the book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, as does John B. Cobb who writes:

...in a world in which global poverty is here to stay, we are called as Christians to identify with the poor. That has always been Christian teaching, but when we thought that our own affluence contributed to the spread of affluence around the world, we could evade that teaching. Now we know that riches can exist in one quarter only at the expense of the poverty of others. In a world divided between oppressor and oppressed, rich and poor, the Christian cannot remain identified with the oppressor and the rich. (Schut 1999, 121)

The teaching of Scripture and the faithful witness of the Church throughout the ages is consistent in emphasizing the necessity of works of mercy. A path of spiritual formation that travels through church and family, and one that also includes spiritual exercises but goes no further will not reach the center and ultimate aim of formation. There is no spiritual formation without works of mercy.

In each section of this model of spiritual formation there could be an addition of creation and environmentalism¹. Caring for the earth is a legitimate function of the Church in participating in the kingdom of God. Creation care should be part of the mission of a family or household, and it is also a practice that can be included among the various spiritual disciplines. Here, in a section on the works of mercy, creation care is being considered because Howard Snyder points out in *Salvation Means Creation Healed*: “Failing to care for the land, we have in fact broken every one of the Ten Commandments – for all touch the land in one way or another” (Snyder 2011, 83). This relates to works of mercy directly, as seen in the commandment “You shall not murder.” As Snyder notes:

We are to nurture the life of others, not destroy it. Yet, we now know that polluting the climate raises the death toll, especially among the poor. Environmental exploitation and death are linked at multiple levels. Creation care is pro-life. (Snyder 2011, 84)

Creation care is a legitimate work of mercy just as much as it can be a spiritual discipline.

Problems arise when the works of piety and works of mercy are separated. If compassion for the poor is seen as optional, or only a mandate of a few, it will result in John Wesley’s warning about a spiritual atrophy. Likewise, a robust practice of the works of mercy without the support of spiritual disciplines is also a serious spiritual threat:

Social action without personal piety can easily become self-righteous and insensitive and lead to burn out. Personal piety without social action can

¹ In a conversation with Howard Snyder, I presented my model of spiritual formation and asked him where he thought a discussion on creation care would be most suitable. His response was that creation care ‘permeates everything.’ (email, November 05, 2017).

also become self-righteous and insensitive and lead to burn out. The problems are, ironically, identical. (Smith 2010c, 13)

This is the spiral curriculum contained in the labyrinth as works of piety and works of mercy are connected, repeat and reinforce each other.

Just as discernment and community are needed for an appropriate and personalized practice of spiritual disciplines, discernment and community are also needed with works of mercy. There are some important questions regarding works of mercy that demand honest answers. For example:

Is our compassion ethnocentric? denominational? nationalistic? in any way chauvinistic? Is it merely an emotional response to the plight of those we love or of those who suffer some misfortune that we can understand or with which we can empathize or sympathize? Does it reach out to our political rivals? to our opponents in armed conflict? to criminals who have seriously wronged us? to people who do not particularly like us? Can we show compassion to people whom our society has dismissed as beyond our help or unworthy of our concern? It is precisely in such situations that the inbreaking of the reign of God can transform our own minds and hearts and offer us an alternative way of perceiving reality and living in the world. (Sapp 1993, 33)

These questions are more likely to be raised in the context of community of both family and church. As Sider points out, “Unless Christians anchor themselves in genuine Christian community, they will be unable to live the radical non-conformity commanded by Scripture and essential in our time” (Sider 2005, 217).

Webber links compassion for the poor with worship:

In acts of justice, we bring to God the worship of our lives and point the world to love, peace, and justice that ultimately are rooted in the person of Christ. Without acts of justice, worship is meaningless and repugnant in God’s eyes. Without worship, justice is mere activism and self-promotion. Worship and justice are not two separate ministries, but are vitally linked dimensions of the lives of Christ’s followers. (Webber 1994, 463)

Once more we encounter the spiral curriculum of spiritual formation. Works of mercy are a spiritually formative activity that must include the broader Church community.

Works of mercy are a means of grace that lead to spiritual formation because they are actions done in obedience to Scripture. They are spiritually formative because they are also an encounter with Christ, as seen in Matthew chapter 25. As Walter Kasper notes:

What ultimately is at stake in Christian mercy is the encounter with Jesus Christ himself in and through those who suffer. Therefore, mercy is principally not a matter of morality, but a matter of faith in Christ, discipleship, and an encounter with him. (Kasper 2013, 150)

In addition to an encounter with Christ, there are further ways that works of mercy function as a spiritual forming activity. Willard suggested, “I may also serve another to train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life” (Willard 1988, 182). Foster’s view is “nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness” (Foster 1998a, 130). As John Wesley said, the works of mercy are a means of developing and improving the fruit of the Spirit (Wesley 1986, 313-314). The works of mercy are spiritually formative because they are an encounter with Christ that transforms the individual engaged in the practice.

There is a prayer by Sister Faustina that Kasper says “...expresses very beautifully how deep the delicacy of feeling for mercy goes, what it can concretely mean for a Christian, and what it can concretely accomplish” (Kasper

2013, 144). That prayer is included in Appendix B, and ends with the line “O my Jesus, transform me into Yourself, for you alone can do all things” (Kasper 2013, 144-145). Transformation will occur as one perseveres and follows the path through the contexts of the Church and family, through spiritual disciplines that lead to works of mercy, resulting in a development of the fruit of the Spirit.

Fruit of the Spirit

John Wesley places love in the center of a life surrounded by a circle that contains what he calls ‘holy tempers’. The holy tempers listed in his sermon “On Zeal” are fruit of the Spirit and he also includes with them the renewal of the mind, or as he put it, “the mind which was in Christ Jesus.” The fruit of the Spirit are listed in Galatians chapter 5 and in my model of spiritual formation, the fruit of the Spirit shares the center of the labyrinth with love. Love is, of course, first in the list of the fruit of the Spirit. For John Wesley, “the capacity for simple, responsive love is an affection; an enduring disposition to love is a (holy) temper” (Maddox 1998, 41). The fruit of the Spirit is not a momentary emotional state, but an inner and enduring disposition that can be nurtured in a growth of grace.

The definition of spiritual formation that entails maturing in a relationship with God and conforming to the life and likeness of the Gospel is evident in the presence of the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 refer to nine characteristics that some people might read as a list to be checked off. Yet that approach to the fruit of the Spirit is only possible with poor exegesis for: “...the word *fruit* (*karpos* in the Greek) is definitely in the singular. All the qualities, temperaments, attributes, and virtues listed under that heading

are collectively called, ‘fruit’” (Witherington III 2012, 68). Furthermore, even if one took the list as a singular whole and thought that they had somehow ‘achieved’ all nine of the fruit, it is not the entire scope of spiritual formation. Just as the multiple lists of the gifts of the Spirit vary (Romans 12:6-8 and 1st Corinthians 12:8-10), the list of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit are also not exhaustive:

The lists, therefore, are not intended to be either delimiting or exhaustive, as though by a careful word study of these 24 items we would have a complete handle on works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. Rather, as Paul indicates in both cases – by his use of $\tau\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\ \omicron\{\mu\omicron\iota\alpha\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\zeta$ (‘such things as these’) and $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\ \tau\omega\tilde{n}\ \tau\omicron\iota\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\tau\omega\tilde{n}$ (‘against such things’) – he intends these lists to be merely representative. (Fee 1994, 440)

Other traits that Gordon Fee would include with the fruit of the spirit are “...thankfulness, forgiveness, humility, gracious talk, and endurance” (Fee 1994, 445). The fruit of the Spirit is a singular expression with many qualities to it.

In addition to love being first among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5, the primacy of love is stated in other parts of Scripture as well (see John 3:16, 1st John 4:8, 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 5:6, Colossians 3:12-14).

Another view of the primacy of love and the singularity of the fruit of the Spirit is found in the book *Life on the Vine* by Philip Kenneson:

Thus that love heads Paul’s list of the Spirit’s fruit is hardly accidental. Indeed, many Christian thinkers across the ages have insisted that the fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul are not nine separate fruit, of which love is simply the first. Rather, love – as embodied in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) – most fully reflects the character of God. Love ought, therefore, to be *the* primary disposition of the Christian life. The eight other virtues or disposition that follow in Paul’s list might best be understood as amplifying and further specifying what is entailed by this way of love. In short, these other eight dispositions, taken together, characterize a life lived in, by and through

God's love. In this sense, love is much like a light, which, when passing through a prism, breaks into its component colors. (Kenneson 1999, 36-37)

Love is the first trait in the list of the fruit of the Spirit, and is the focus of the final section in this chapter. To develop the fruit of the Spirit is to be transformed into greater likeness of the life and Gospel of God. Not surprisingly, "...most of the characteristic fruit Christians should bear are attributes of God found elsewhere in Scripture (peace, Isa. 9:6; patience, Jer. 15:15; goodness, Ps. 27:13; faith, Ps. 146:6; gentleness, Ps. 18:35; etc.)" (Konsmo 2010, 108). The process of spiritual formation which leads to a change into ever greater likeness to the life and gospel of God will be a process that produces the fruit of the Spirit expressed by love in all its component colors.

Cultivating fruit requires intentionality and discipline. There are certain practices that a gardener will do in order to see fruit develop:

There are the blossoms; to get fruit you have to learn to be a gardener. You have to discover how to tend and prune, how to irrigate the field, how to keep the birds and squirrels away. You have to watch for blight and mold, cut away ivy and other parasites that suck the life out of the tree, and make sure the young trunk can stand firm in strong winds. Only then will the fruit appear. (Wright 2010, 196)

The practices that result in fruit are the works of mercy, the regular practice of spiritual disciplines, an incarnational spirituality that is lived in a family context and participation in the life of the Church. Fee suggests that "...by calling them 'the fruit of the Spirit,' Paul does not intend something passive on the part of the believer" (Fee 1994, 443). Following the list of the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:24-25 says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its

passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” On this verse Fee writes:

Not only do people who walk by the Spirit not walk in the ways of the flesh just described, but also the Spirit effectively produces in them the very character of God.

Thus, the activities and attitudes of those who are ‘led by the Spirit’ are designated as *fruit*; they are the ‘product’ of a life in the Spirit. Paul’s point, of course, is that when the Galatians properly use their freedom, by serving one another through love, they are empowered to do so by the Spirit, who produces such ‘fruit’ in/among them. But they are not passive; they must walk, live, conform to the Spirit. After all, in almost every case these various ‘fruit’ appear elsewhere in the form of imperatives! (Fee 1994, 444)

Although the fruit is a product of the work of the Holy Spirit, there are three specific things that can be done to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. One way the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated is through journeying the labyrinth path. Specific ways of growing the fruit of the Spirit include the renewal of the mind, the support of community, and perseverance.

Along with the holy tempers, or fruit of the spirit, John Wesley also referred to having whatever was in the mind of Christ. The renewal of the mind is necessary in producing the fruit of the Spirit in a life:

In order to change we first have to change our minds. ... *Metanoia* refers to the changing of one’s mind. Jesus understood that transformation begins in the mind. The apostle Paul said the same thing when he proclaimed, ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your *minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12:2, italics added). (Smith 2010a, 26)

In the book *After You Believe*, N.T. Wright has an entire chapter on being “Transformed by the renewing of the mind.” The renewing of the mind is linked with cultivating the fruit of the Spirit:

Christian virtue, including the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, is *both* the gift of God *and* the result of a person of faith making conscious decisions to cultivate this way of life and these habits of heart and mind. ...the varieties of spiritual fruit Paul names, like the Christian virtues, remain both a work of the Spirit and the result of conscious choice and work on the part of the person concerned. (Wright 2010, 197)

The mind is where the cultivation of the fruit of the spirit begins. A renewal of the mind is not only something that happens in conversion, but an ongoing work of God. The process of walking a labyrinth is like the renewal of the mind in that the labyrinth journey begins with an intentional decision to enter the winding path. Along the way, one gains a greater perspective through perseverance by looking in every direction. Ultimately seemingly confusing path leads to a center. The labyrinth journey is one that is focused, similar to Colossians 3:2 that states “set your minds on things above.” As a spiritual discipline, a labyrinth journey can contribute to the renewal of the mind as one perseveres and becomes open to the work of God.

Both the development and demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit depends on an interaction with others, and a relationship with others is implied in the list of the fruit of the Spirit. The support that comes from participation in a community of faith where the *allēlōn* is evident cultivates the fruit of the Spirit.:

The challenge to strive for corporate virtue is after all precisely what we should expect if the key individual virtue, and the firstfruit of the Spirit, is love. The thought of two or three Christians, or two or three hundred or thousand Christians, all trying to practice ‘love’ – while remaining determinedly in their own hermetically sealed worlds of private spirituality and virtue! – is of course a contradiction in terms. The Christian virtues, unlike the classical or cardinal virtues expounded by Aristotle and others, are designed to produce, not grand isolated heroes, leading a nation in politics and war, but integrated communities modeling a life of self-giving love. (Wright 2010, 217-218)

Walking a labyrinth is an easier task in solitude, but once the path is shared with others the fruit of the Spirit known as patience and kindness become essential. A labyrinth journey that is shared requires humility and grace to accommodate others who may travel in a different direction. This was made apparent in the spiritual autobiography and the interaction with others that occurred at camp. A shared labyrinth journey is an exercise of *allēlōn*. Once again, perseverance is necessary.

A key word from chapter one and the journey through a labyrinth is perseverance. Perseverance is required in every labyrinth walk, and perseverance is required in the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit. As in nature so in spiritual formation; growth takes time. N.T. Wright was direct when he said, “Character is a slowly forming thing” (Wright 2010, 35). Whether the focus is the virtues of faith, hope and love, or the fruit of the Spirit, perseverance is necessary.

In *The Deeper Journey*, Mulholland refers to virtues and the need to abide in Christ:

One of the greatest detriments to a growing and maturing life in loving union with God is focusing too much on avoiding the vices, on putting to death our false self. Even if we could rid the soil of our life of every weed, every evil growth, all that would remain is a barren, sterile plot of dust. Our vices must be replaced with virtues; our false self supplanted by our hidden life with Christ in God. (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 117-118)

A life hidden with Christ in God is one that abides in Him. Whether the focus is virtues or the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of this work of God is not based on emotional feeling but how one relates to others:

Put on, then, Paul says, ‘compassion, kindness, lowliness, gentleness, patience’ (Col 3:12). Once again Paul makes the inseparable connection between our life with God and our life with others. We can put none of

these virtues in a privatized, individualized relationship with God. Each of them is situated in the midst of our often messy relationships with others. (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 120-121)

Messy relationships with others can be difficult to navigate, but Scripture does not leave us wondering:

But how do we do this? Paul provides us two basic contexts in which we are to put on the virtues: relationships in which we must (1) *forebear one another*, and (2) *forgive one another* (Col 3:13). Many translations make these appear as if they are two more items on the list of virtues. Paul's Greek is unmistakably clear, however. Forbearing and forgiving are not two more items on the list. They are the contexts in which we put on the virtues of the new nature. (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 124)

To forebear with others and to forgive may need to be practiced more than once (Matthew 18:22). Tensions in a community of faith are inevitable, but perseverance and a commitment to one another is what will sustain unity.

The fruit of the Spirit must be applied in works of mercy, in the spiritual disciplines, in the family and in the Church. The journey to the center of the labyrinth results in fruit of the Spirit that are manifest on the return journey out of the labyrinth.

Sanctification

Sanctification is a process where the Holy Spirit renews people after the likeness of God and conforming them to the image of Christ. In the sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" John Wesley refers to sanctification and then uses the term "perfection." "But what is perfection?" Wesley asks, "The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul" (Wesley 1985, 160). John Wesley placed love at the center of his entire, connected system of Christianity, and that is

just another way to describe sanctification. Sanctification is love filling the heart and reigning without a rival. Of course he is not the only writer to emphasize the primacy of love. Contemporary authors also consider love to be the central focus for spiritual formation. For example, Willard wrote about the renovation of the heart. It is a theme in the works of James K.A. Smith and his cultural liturgies project, and also of Witherington, who has also emphasized the primacy of love for spiritual formation:

Love is the sine qua non of the Christian spiritual life and character and should be the guide of all its behavior. At the heart of spiritual formation is loving God with your whole heart and loving neighbors – even strangers and enemies – as one’s self. And this of course is not natural; it is supernatural. It is a product of the Spirit’s prompting, equipping, and internal transforming of our lives. Loving God with whole heart and neighbour as self is also, not incidentally, the essence of what Wesley meant by perfection or entire sanctification. (Witherington III 2012, 71)

John Wesley’s emphasis on love as a focus for spiritual formation is a biblical concept that has been amplified throughout Church history and continues to be a focus for contemporary authors.

Love is in the center of the labyrinth, and yet an important part of the experience of walking a labyrinth is the journey back out. Artress has compared the labyrinth with a mystical path of purgation, illumination and union:

Union begins as we leave the center of the labyrinth, following the same path back out that brought us in. In this stage, our meditation often produces a grounded, empowered feeling...Union means communing, or communion with the Holy. (Artress 2006, 30)

Another writer has said this about the exit journey from the labyrinth:

The one who exits the labyrinth, even though her steps tread the same path, is different from the one who entered it. The path is the same but the steps are reversed. Thus, the vantage points are completely changed. The lines of sight are utterly new. This then is how the heart changes, the path

of *metanoia*: to see the same space with new eyes, to walk the same places with new steps. (Scholl 2014, 87)

As love begins to fill a heart and reigns without a rival, the fruit of the spirit increases, works of mercy and works of piety will occur, and the family and the church are strengthened. It is a reverse of the path to the center of love. Love is developed by journeying through the previous sections in this chapter, love is a product of spiritual formation, and yet love also affects the same chapters during the return journey.

With love at the center of this model of spiritual formation, it is necessary to speak of the image of God. Sanctification is a process of renewing the image of God in people where human love becomes a reflection of God's love. The Scripture says that God is love (1 John 4:8) and Galatians 4:19 talks about Christ himself being formed in the individual. A restoration of the image of God where love reigns in a heart is the *telos* of spiritual formation. The aim of spiritual formation is the renewal of the image of God in an individual whose love mirrors a God who is love. This is found in the works of many Christian writers, including Mulholland who said, "The process of spiritual formation is to form us in *the image of Christ*" (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 41). Stanley Grenz identifies the *telos* for humanity as formation of the *imago Dei*:

...the humankind created in the *imago dei* is none other than the new humanity conformed to the *imago Christi*, and the *telos* toward which the Genesis creation narrative points is the eschatological community of glorified saints. (Grenz 2001, 18)

Although the above quote refers to an eschatological community, the process of renewing the image of God is something that occurs during this lifetime and is a present reality. Later in the same text he writes:

The biblical narrative of the *imago dei* moves from creation to Christ and then on to new creation. It begins with the creation of humankind to be the divine image, and moves to Christ as the fullness of the divine image, before concluding with the glorified new humanity sharing in the divine image. But the story contains a present component as well. The new humanity destined to participate in the *imago dei* through their participation in Christ's resurrection are in an important sense sharers in the divine image because of their union with Christ. For this reason, the New Testament also depicts the *imago dei* as a present reality. In so far as they reflect the new corporate reality in Christ, believers are in the process of becoming the image of God and hence of fulfilling their divinely given, human destiny. (Grenz 2001, 240)

Spiritual formation is that process where individuals and communities are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God. Spiritual formation is a restoration of the *imago Dei*.

In developing a theology of the *imago Dei* from the opening chapters of Genesis, Richard Middleton writes:

In what must be acknowledged as one of the most daring acts of theological imagination within Scripture, this unknown author chose to crystallize the central Israelite insight about being human in a term typically applied only to idols, kings, and priests – *š elem 'ēlōhîm* – and thereby profoundly affected the worldview and theological imagination of generations of biblical readers. (Middleton 2005, 231)

It is no exaggeration to say that *š elem 'ēlōhîm (imago Dei)* profoundly affected the worldview and theological imagination of many. Grenz has said:

The Bible contains only five texts that directly connect humankind to the image of God. Although the idea is not absent from the New Testament, being mentioned in 1 Cor. 11:7 and James 3:9, the exegetically significant references are in the Old Testament, more particularly in the early chapters of Genesis (Gen. 1:26-27; Gen. 5:1-3; Gen. 9:5-6), to which could be added the 'best commentary' on Gen. 1:26-28 available, Psalm 8. Despite

the seemingly scant attention devoted to concept by the biblical writers, the idea of the presence of the divine image in humankind occupies a central place in the Christian theological tradition. (Grenz 2001, 184)

This is a topic that is crucial for any model of spiritual formation, after all, spiritual formation is that process where individuals and communities "...are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God" (Howard 2018, 18).

John Wesley thought of the image of God in three ways: a natural image, a political image and a moral image (Runyon 1998, 14-19). The natural image is what distinguishes humanity from animals as seen in our capacity and capability of responding to God. The political image is understood to be the dominion and rule of humanity as God's representative on earth, and the moral image is a continuous, ongoing and living relationship with the Creator.

The moral image of God is a participation in the life of God (2 Pet. 1:4). Many writers have explored this idea in terms of spiritual formation. Mulholland has said, "The indwelling presence of Christ in us is not merely a theological concept, it is a vital, intimate, relational reality at the very core of our being" (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 89). Ray Anderson put it this way, "Being in the image of God is not a religious overlay on our natural humanity. On the contrary, being in the image of God is itself fundamental to our true humanity" (Anderson 1982, 84). Both of these authors moved a theology of the *imago Dei* to a point where it becomes the definition of true humanity and a tangible reality more than just a theological or abstract ideal. A restoration of the *imago Dei* is what it means to be human and is the *telos* of spiritual formation.

Imago Dei is one term for understanding love filling a heart and reigning without a rival. Another theological term for love filling a heart is sanctification. Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit, renewing people through crisis and process, as they surrender to God and die to self. The *telos* of faith is not escapism to heaven, but restoration of the image of God, through sanctification, where one is empowered to please and serve God. This is what it means to be truly human, and the article of religion in the Free Methodist doctrine on sanctification concludes with this line: “Thus, God sets His people free to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves” (FMCiC, 2019. chap. 1, p.5). Concerning the topic of sanctification, Willard has said:

So what shall we say about sanctification? It is a consciously chosen and sustained relationship of interaction between the Lord and his apprentice, in which the apprentice is able to do, and routinely does, what he or she knows to be right before God because all aspects of his or her person have been substantially transformed. (Willard 2012, 226)

Sanctification and the restoration of the image of God are implied in John Wesley’s insistence that love is the center of a life, filling a heart, and reigning without a rival:

Entire sanctification, then, is love replacing sin, love conquering every vile passion and temper. The *imago Dei*, especially the moral image, has been renewed in its glory and splendor. The creature, once steeped in sin, now reflects the goodness of the Creator in a remarkable way. There is nothing higher than this, nothing greater than the love of God reigning in the soul without a rival. (Collins 1997, 177)

The journey of spiritual formation is this pathway to holiness. Howard’s view is that:

One term frequently used to identify the ultimate aim of spiritual formation is holiness. In fact, the word sanctification (Greek *hagiasmos*) has its origins in holiness (Greek *hagios*, Latin *sanctus*). First Peter affirms the aim of holiness clearly: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15–16). (Howard 2018, 55)

A key phrase from 1 Peter 1:15-16 is ‘in all you do’. Holiness becomes a way of life where the ripple effect of love is manifest in works of mercy, works of piety, the home and the Church.

Although John Wesley was not unique in placing love at the center, it was his starting point in his definition of an entire, connected system of Christianity. In my model of spiritual formation, love is the aim of spiritual formation and at the same time it is also the beginning of a life that is in fact a mature relationship with God and in conformity with the life and likeness of the Gospel.

Adapting a Model of Formation for Ministry

This model of spiritual formation has application to the life of the local church. Congregations will be healthier with a biblical understanding of the nature of the Church, and families will be improved when they practice an incarnational spirituality. The spiritual disciplines and works of mercy are intricately linked, and the ministry of spiritual formation is the basis for mission. The biblical concept of *allēlōn* is also a reality that can influence group spiritual direction in a positive manner. A spiritual director needs to be sensitive and aware of the extent that *allēlōn* is being practiced.

The labyrinth journey is a metaphor for a spiral curriculum that requires perseverance. For a local church to adapt this model of spiritual formation, the various sections of this chapter need to be constantly revisited. There is no linear

acquisition model where topics are covered once and then left behind. The family, the church, the spiritual disciplines and works of mercy reinforce each other much like a labyrinth path that returns over and over to the same area. The returning to a previous section is a new experience because of the benefits gained from the journey.

CHAPTER IV: A FORMATIONAL READING OF SCRIPTURE (GOSPEL CONTEMPLATION IN A WESLEYAN CONTEXT)

Just as there is no single method for how a labyrinth can be used as a spiritual discipline, the same thing can be said for the reading of Scripture. Small groups at Holt FMC have typically used evangelical material that rely on an inductive approach to Scripture, but an inductive Bible study is only one of many different ways of reading of Scripture. One could engage Scripture while using *Lectio Divina*, practicing Bible art journaling, or by working on memorization. Gospel contemplation, a spiritual discipline that is often associated with Ignatius of Loyola, is yet another method for reading Scripture.

Both labyrinth walking and Gospel contemplation are spiritual disciplines, and as such they are practices that create space for God to work through the Holy Spirit in order to bring transformation. One writer on the discipline of contemplation has said:

Contemplation (contemplative prayer) is the act or experience whereby our human spirit opens to and attends to the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ who is continually revealing himself to us and bearing witness to our spirit that we are children of God, loved by God in Christ, but in such a way that this opening of our spirit is in fact due to the movement of God's Spirit by which we even cry out to God – 'Abba, Father' – in the first place.... What that experience will be like is not something we can control; it is up to the Holy Spirit to do what he wills. The Spirit's work may be consoling or it may be self-revealing or purgative. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 31)

The outcome of any spiritual discipline is based on the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. In practicing spiritual disciplines, individuals open themselves up to the transforming work of God, therefore, "...contemplation is both receptive

and responsive to divine revelation, and is not primarily a generative act” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 168). This is similar to Maddox who described the spiraling interactive of God’s grace and our responsible co-operation (Maddox 1998, 41). Contemplation is, therefore, no different from any other spiritual exercise.

The practice of contemplation can take many forms. For example, one can focus on the cross (a prominent feature in the Ignatian spiritual exercises), practice a form that is entirely wordless, experience a Beatific vision, or even centering prayer with a single word. Evangelicals may resonate with the idea of spiritual growth through inductive Bible studies being the result of the work of the Holy Spirit and not self-generated discovery. That same understanding of the grace of God made available through the spiritual disciplines must also be applied to the discipline of contemplation, whatever form it may take.

Another point of comparison between labyrinths and Gospel contemplation is that both spiritual disciplines face the criticism of being a form of New Age mysticism. Although labyrinths are found in cultures that predate Christianity, there is evidence of a labyrinth in a Christian context going back to the early Church in the fourth century. Labyrinths were also a prominent feature of some Cathedrals as early as the 1200s. While some use labyrinths in a non-Christian way, it is the orientation of the individual that is pivotal. In Psalm 121 the Psalmist looks to the hills and asks “where does my help come from?” The hills or mountains were the location for pagan temples but the Psalmist could look to the same hills and direct the heart towards God.

An apologetic for contemplation is also needed to defend it from similar accusations of New Age spirituality. The book *Embracing Contemplation* aims to provide a biblical and theological basis for this spiritual discipline by answering the question, “What is a distinctly evangelical understanding of contemplation?” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 2). The opening chapter of the text, “*The Controversy Over Contemplation and Contemplative Prayer: A Historical, Theological, and Biblical Resolution*” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 19-36) emphasizes the ontological difference between God and humanity. This ontological distinction differentiates Gospel contemplation from New Age spirituality.

New Age spirituality is an expression of pantheism or panentheism. It is the belief “...that the human person shares ontologically in some kind of kinship of spirit with universal Spirit or the being of God” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 22). With contemplative prayer from this perspective, individuals are “...not dependent on God revealing himself but on intellectual techniques and acts of devotion to ‘reach’ or ‘ascend’ to know God” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 23). New Age spirituality lacks a concept of original sin and the need for the work of Christ. Ultimately:

unbiblical and sub-Christian approaches to contemplation or contemplative prayer represent the attempt of human effort and natural fortitude to meet the deep hunger for God apart from the true revelation of God in Christ and the empowering work of his indwelling Spirit. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 23).

This chapter in *Embracing Contemplation* about a distinctly evangelical understanding of contemplation concludes with a summary of how Christian contemplation is different from New Age spirituality. The contrast is clear:

The Christian, biblical approach to contemplation and contemplative prayer primarily highlights the human spirit in response to the person and sanctifying work of the indwelling Spirit on the basis of the revelation of God in Christ, which alone meets the deepest human hunger for reality and the living God. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 36)

Christian contemplation is clearly not a New Age practice, but in fact has biblical support.

Biblical references to support contemplation include Ephesians 3:14-19 and Ephesians 1:17-19. Commenting on these passages of Scripture, Coe writes:

These prayers are at the heart of Paul's new covenant spirituality of what it is to be in Christ and to open to the reality of Christ in us. The historical practice of Christian contemplation and contemplative prayer merely mirrors these biblical texts on our behalf. Thus contemplation or contemplative prayer is merely obedience to Paul's injunction to attend to the presence and reality of the indwelling Spirit of Christ and his work in the inner person. There could be nothing simpler than and more biblical than this. It is one of the relational aspects of the Christian faith that evangelicalism has always insisted on. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 33)

Although the book *Embracing Contemplation* demonstrates that contemplation is compatible with an evangelical spirituality in general, the question to be considered at this point is, "In what way is Gospel contemplation, a particular form of contemplation, appropriate for a Wesleyan context?"

Brendan Byrne begins an article entitled, "*Ignatius cf Loyola and John Wesley: Experience and Strategies cf Conversion*" with a story about an event that occurred in 1748. While John Wesley was preaching one day, someone in the congregation thought that he was a Jesuit:

On May 15, 1748 John Wesley preached twice on Oxmantown Green near Dublin, Ireland. At the evening service a man in the crowd, after listening for a time, cried out, 'Aye, he is a Jesuit. That's plain.' A Roman priest, who happened to be near, replied aloud, 'No, he is not. I would to God he was!' ... It is...only one instance of a comparison made with some frequency between John Wesley and Ignatius Loyola. The comparison

usually occurs as a charge aimed at Wesley by adversaries, but the similarity is also noted by more sympathetic writers. (Byrne 1986, 54)

The article acknowledges that while Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley were separated by two hundred years, had distinct personalities and faced diverse circumstances, "... there are indeed striking parallels to be drawn, both in terms of inward spiritual aspiration and the more outward pattern of their careers and religious legacy" (Byrne 1986, 54). Looking at the ministries of Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley, it is as if they are walking the same labyrinth path, separated only by two hundred years. John Wesley's sermon "The Catholic Spirit" (Wesley 1985) is the first indication that there is compatibility between these two Church leaders. In that sermon John Wesley is willing to overlook doctrinal differences if there is mutual agreement in love for God and love for neighbour. Although Wesley claimed to be a man of one book, he found inspiration from a variety of sources:

He did not limit himself to the Bible. His scriptural foundation gave him a place to stand in his quest for spiritual life, but he was free to search for meaningful inspiration through a wide range of devotional material. Wesley knew the classics. He drew on Anglican, Puritan, Moravian and Roman Catholic sources. Consequently, his devotional life had a depth and variety which no single source could have provided. Using the Bible as his focus, Wesley was able to achieve a useful synthesis of spiritual input from these various sources. (Harper 1983, 14-15)

The example of John Wesley suggests that those in the Wesleyan tradition may have a robust devotional life that draws on a variety of Christian traditions.

While the article comparing Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley primarily focuses on the experience and conversion strategies of both men, other points of comparison between Ignatius and Wesley are explored. For example, both men

shared similar pastoral strategies. Those in the Jesuit community say, “The world is our house” which is strikingly similar to John Wesley’s statement, “the world is my parish” (Byrne 1986, 54). Furthermore, German Wesley scholar, Martin Schmidt, claims that John Wesley made “explicit though strictly qualified admiration for Ignatius Loyola” and that “Wesley ‘incorporated into Methodist hymnody specific items from Loyola's Spiritual Exercises’” (Byrne 1986, 54). The article concludes with an invitation to consider further points of comparison between Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley, such as their respective view of “perfect love”, faith community or religious societies, and the Methodist movement within the Anglican communion as something that is similar to a religious order within the Roman Catholic Church (Byrne 1986, 54). This article reveals many points of comparison between Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley, although one point of comparison between these two historical figures that is not suggested is their respective use of Scripture for spiritual formation.

The Ignatian use of Scripture for spiritual formation involves Gospel contemplation, or praying the Scripture. In fact:

Ignatius’s way of praying the Gospels has been so identified with him that the Christian spiritual tradition identifies it as Ignatian contemplation... Imaginative prayer is recognized as one of the hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality. (Fleming 2008, 55)

It should be noted that:

Imaginative contemplation of Scripture is one of several types of prayer Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) prescribes in his *Spiritual Exercises*. While Ignatius... did not invent this type of prayer, he did sharpen its focus and made specific suggestions for its practice. (Miller 1999, 13)

The Ignatian contemplation of Scripture is something that is not immediately recognizable in the Wesleyan tradition, and yet the ‘specific suggestions for its practice’ make this use of Scripture compatible with Wesleyanism.

Ignatian contemplation is a spiritual discipline that is not restricted to or reserved for Jesuits. “Ignatius crafted the Exercises as a layman, and he intended them to benefit the entire church. He honed them as he offered the Exercises to a variety of people” (O’Brien 2011, 13). Ignatian contemplation can be used in the Wesleyan tradition because of mutual views of the role of experience, discernment, and the aim or use of Scripture. Before looking at each of these topics, however, one must define Ignatian Gospel contemplation.

As stated above, contemplation is a spiritual discipline, and one definition of the practice is that it is “...a loving attentiveness or grateful gazing on God” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 100). Ignatian Gospel contemplation is praying the Scripture through the use of the imagination. This is prayer practice that is especially suitable for passages from the Gospels. It has been noted that:

In the course of the Exercises, Ignatius proposes many such scenes from the Gospels for imaginative contemplation. He chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn’t want us to *think* about Jesus. He wants us to *experience* him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him. (Fleming 2008, 58)

This type of prayer has been compared with filming a scene in a movie (O’Brien 2011, 141). The details of the scene are created as all of the senses are engaged, and then prayer begins as one enters the story and initiates dialogue with the other

characters and with Jesus. One author describes Ignatian contemplation in the following example:

We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passerby. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus – the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospels. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done. (Fleming 2008, 57)

Gospel contemplation is therefore a combination of mediation (a focused attention on a specific word or image often from Scripture) with contemplation (a loving gaze upon God). David Miller describes Gospel contemplation as a practice that is: "Like meditation, it focuses on images and scenes from Biblical stories, expecting God will be revealed there. Like contemplation, it involves periods of quiet resting in God's grace and goodness and a passive receptiveness to God" (Miller 1999, 14). Gospel contemplation is a spiritual discipline where one enters into the story of Scripture in order to encounter Jesus.

Although this encounter with Jesus is a loving gaze upon God, a sanctified imagination engaged in Gospel contemplation also has the potential of encountering a reciprocal loving gaze from Jesus. Even though the gaze from Jesus is always one that is filled with love, a look from Jesus may make an individual feel uncomfortable. Frederica Mathewes-Green refers to the seriousness and gravity of an icon and says:

The sober presence of the Lord in an icon makes us uncomfortable because it makes us realize how far short we fall from the ineffable beauty

and power of God....The steady, unsettling gaze of the Lord in an icon is like the gaze of a surgeon as he looks at a patient's wounded, broken body. The surgeon understands the woundedness better than the patient does, and he knows exactly what it will take to heal it. Our Lord sees brokenness and failures in us that we can't, that we simply won't, that we could not bear to see. And he invites us to open ourselves to his healing, a healing that will progress very gently, very gradually, as we are able to bear it. (Jones 2005, 98-99)

As the Holy Spirit works through contemplation to address issues of sin, shame or brokenness, the experience may be overwhelming. Examples of individuals who are awestruck with the glory and goodness of God are found in both the Old and New Testaments (Isaiah 6:5, Luke 5:8, Revelation 1:17). Gospel contemplation is a spiritual discipline that can result in both affirmation and conviction. As described earlier, the work of the Holy Spirit may be consoling, self-revealing, or purgative.

The emphasis in Gospel contemplation on the use of the imagination places this spiritual discipline in the cataphatic tradition. This is another point of comparison between Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley. Both leaders operated with a cataphatic spirituality.

Cataphatic spirituality is faith experienced through words and images. This is how one author described the cataphatic spirituality of Ignatius and its function in spiritual formation:

What Ignatius clearly understood was that it's not what you know intellectually that affects your life; it's what you experience, what is concrete and tangible, that transforms your life. And the central place where we experience spiritual realities is the imagination. Ignatius clearly saw the need for abstract ideas to be incarnated in our imagination if they are to have transforming power. He also understood that the God who became incarnate and who inspired Scripture isn't above becoming so 'concrete' in our experience. As Foster wrote 'To believe that God can

sanctify and utilize the imagination is simply to take seriously the Christian idea of incarnation.’ (Boyd 2004, 93)

Whereas an inductive Bible study employs the faculty of reason, the cataphatic tradition uses the imagination for a concrete experience. It has been said, “...contemplation is part of the sanctifying process on the part of the believer, so it leads to an increased personal knowledge of God. Intellect is not enough” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 168). The increased personal knowledge of God is not an intellectual exercise but an experience and an encounter. Here is the foundation of the cataphatic tradition:

The basic conviction behind cataphatic spirituality is that everything we do in our spiritual lives will likely be enhanced if it is done with vivid mental images. The cataphatic tradition simply anticipated what modern neuroscience has discovered. Our brains operate by re-presenting experience rather than by reproducing abstract information. (Boyd 2004, 98)

The cataphatic tradition is the foundation to Ignatian Gospel contemplation, and is compatible with the Wesleyan tradition through John Wesley’s vocabulary of spiritual sensation. A vocabulary of spiritual sensation is the tangible incarnation of spiritual reality. A sanctified imagination that enters into a Gospel account is using the spiritual senses including sight and sound to experience God.

John Wesley’s language of the spiritual senses comes from his reading of Scripture:

Wesley prefers to use biblical phrases or words to name his theological terms. If a text refers to tasting or seeing, feeling or hearing, to the blind receiving sight, to sweetness, to those who hear but hear not, or see but see not, or to light or to darkness, or in effect makes any reference related to the senses, then Wesley will use it to express his category of spiritual sensation. (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012, 243)

The vocabulary of spiritual sensation also comes to John Wesley through his reading of Church history. His published library of spiritual classics includes writers who were part of the cataphatic tradition. John Wesley's use of the cataphatic tradition is also evident in his definition of faith:

Over the course of his career, Wesley defines faith in three main ways: as an assent to the truths of the faith on the warrant of revelation alone; as a sure trust and confidence; and as the spiritual sensation of God and the thing of God, or, equally, as an *elenchos*, the demonstrative evidence of things unseen. The first definition belongs to an early period in his theology, from the time of his ordination in 1725 to some point in the mid 1730s, perhaps 1738. He uses the second definition, taken from the wording of an Anglican formulary (Cramner's sermon on faith), as one of his characteristic definitions of faith from 1738 to his death in 1791. He first formally makes the third definition of faith in 1743 in the definition of faith quoted ...from the *Earnest Appeal*. From 1743 to 1791 this is his main definition of faith. (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012, 249)

Other early Methodist leaders also used the vocabulary of spiritual sensation including Sarah Jones (1754-1794) and Francis Asbury (1745-1816). Francis Asbury once wrote:

Monday 22. I found Christ in me the hope of glory: but felt a pleasing, painful sensation of spiritual hunger and thirst for more of God. On Tuesday I rode to Burlington, and on the way my soul was filled with holy peace, and employed in heavenly contemplations. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 115)

The Wesleyan tradition has the example of John Wesley and other Methodist leaders who use the vocabulary of the cataphatic tradition, and Asbury who specifically refers to an act of contemplation. Both Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley, therefore, use the cataphatic tradition as a way to encounter God and experience spiritual formation.

A theology of experience in the Ignatian tradition is what supports the use of imagination in prayer. "What was the original genial insight of Ignatius of

Loyola? I would say that it was the idea that God can be found in all things, that every human experience has a religious dimension and religious meaning” (Barry 2001, 91). This is a central theme to Ignatian spirituality in general, and “the phrase ‘finding God in all things’ has become a hallmark of Ignatian spirituality” (Barry 2001, 136). Furthermore, “in the Exercises, a contemplation refers to imaginative prayer. Ignatius was convinced, through his own experience, that God speaks to us in our imaginings” (O’Brien 2011, 130). A sanctified imagination that is employed in contemplation is one way an individual can encounter God.

In the text *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*, one can find the Ignatian hallmark of finding God in all things. Although the imagination is not specifically mentioned, and there is no direction to use the imagination in a prayerful reading of Scripture, the theology of experience in the Wesleyan tradition is compatible with the Ignatian tradition. In a chapter on listening to God, it is noted that:

John Wesley calls us to watch for God, to look for his fingerprints in ordinary life. To watch for how he is working in our lives and in the lives of those around us....Watching is one metaphor; listening is another. ...God wants to communicate with us, and he often uses ordinary aspects of life to do so.We also hear God from any place that we inhabit. From the church sanctuary to the streets, from the highway to the mountaintops, from the study to the supermarket, God is present and waiting for us to turn our attention toward him. The challenge is for us to be fully present to the spaces we inhabit. ...We are passing through many spaces every day without actually being present to the beauty they possess. As we connect to our environment, we open ourselves up to the beauty that points us toward God. (Leclerc and Maddix 2011, 139, 141)

Hearing God from any place that we inhabit certainly includes the imagination. Although the reference is to the external world, the experience of the inner thought life also presents an opportunity to encounter God.

This theology of experience in the Wesleyan tradition applies to the reading of Scripture for “Wesley did not merely read Scripture; he listened to God personally speaking to him in its pages. Scripture represented the *living* words of God” (Thorsen 2005, 77). The encounter with God through Scripture is a theme that is the focus of a poem by Charles Wesley (Appendix C) which describes the role of faith in the reading of Scripture. The opening stanza of the poem in Appendix C claims that apart from an encounter with God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the reading of Scripture is unprofitable. Imaginative prayer in the Ignatian tradition is therefore one way to experience the living words of God as described in the Wesleyan tradition.

Obviously discernment is essential for Ignatian contemplation, and the practice of discernment is yet another point of compatibility between the Ignatian and Wesleyan tradition. From the Ignatian perspective:

When we use our imaginations in prayer, we are aware that much of what happens is based on our own past experience. How can we be sure that the whole thing is not just a fanciful daydream that we piously call prayer? I would first suggest that we trust in tradition. God has, it seems, used the imaginations of saints such as Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, and Margaret Mary Alacoque to draw them into a deep intimate friendship with God. Then I would point to a need for discernment, a discernment that does not start with being suspicious of our human nature, but rather with trusting that God has made us good. (Barry 2001, 103)

Discernment in this context begins with tradition and a recognition of who we are in Christ. Further assistance is available through discernment, which may benefit from the support of a spiritual director. One of the practices that an Ignatian spiritual director may use is to consider consolation and desolation. If one were

distressed with the content of Gospel contemplation, a spiritual director might say:

We might initially worry about going beyond the text of the Gospel. If you have offered your time of prayer to God, then begin by trusting that God is communicating with you. If you wonder if your imagination is going 'too far,' then do some discernment with how you are praying. Where did your imagining lead you: Closer to God or farther away? Is your imagination bringing you consolation or desolation? (O'Brien 2011, 141-142)

Consolation and desolation are important terms in the Ignatian tradition, and relate to the practice of discernment. A spiritual director would help an individual discern the activity of God in moments of consolation and desolation.

John Wesley, being a Protestant, generally avoided the use of the term "tradition" and instead chose to speak of Christian antiquity. Nevertheless, his explanation of discernment refers to the authority of tradition. In his preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, John Wesley writes:

O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone – only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book for this end, to find the way to heaven. (Outler 1964, 89)

John Wesley makes the claim to being a man of one book, and yet he read more than just the Bible. Any reading of Scripture requires discernment, and only a few sentences after John Wesley says that he is a man of one book, he then acknowledges the role of tradition for biblical interpretation:

I meditate with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God and then the writings whereby being dead they yet speak. (Outler 1964, 90)

John Wesley's *Christian Library* is evidence of the fact that he found inspiration from other Christian writers. Just as the Ignatian tradition uses tradition and spiritual directors who are 'experienced in the things of God', the same understanding of discernment is found in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley meditates on Scripture and if additional help is needed he turns to tradition or historic texts where the dead have a voice. There is also a practice in the Wesleyan tradition that spiritual claims are to be tested through testimony. The community of faith practicing the *allēlōn* will direct one another in their shared journey of faith. John Wesley organized the Methodist people into classes and bands for mutual support and encouragement. These small groups were a system of accountability.

In addition to a theology of experience and the practice of discernment, the aim of the use of Scripture is yet another point of compatibility between the Ignatian and Wesleyan traditions. Ignatian contemplation is to be more than an exercise in daydreaming:

Contemplating a Gospel scene is not simply remembering it or going back in time. Through the act of contemplation, the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus' life in a way that is meaningful for you now. Use your imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal, evocative way. (O'Brien 2011, 141)

The communication with God in a personal and evocative way makes Gospel contemplation a prayer exercise and a practice for spiritual formation:

Imaginative Ignatian prayer teaches us things about Jesus that we would not learn through scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Christ to penetrate into places that the intellect does not touch. It brings Jesus into our hearts. It engages our feelings ... Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the Gospels *our* Jesus. It helps us develop a unique personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus' face. We listen to the

way he speaks. We notice how people respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person. (Fleming 2008, 58)

One critique of the practice of formational prayer is that it can lead to a separation from ordinary life (Foster 1992, 58), and this will inevitably be the result whenever a spiritual discipline is separated from the works of mercy. Although it is a possibility that contemplation can lead to inaction, the opposite should in fact occur. A healthy practice of Gospel contemplation should lead to action:

Ignatius's choice of scripture passages for contemplating the public life of Jesus tend to portray a man-in-action. Jesus is on a mission – one who is sent. From the Call of the King exercise to the contemplations of the second, third, and fourth weeks of the Exercises we realize that Jesus calls us to share his mission. (Fleming 2008, 67)

To put it another way, “The practice of imaginative prayer teaches us who Jesus is and how he acts and how he decides. This kind of contemplation schools our hearts and guides us to the decisions that bring us closer to God” (Fleming 2008, 94). Any spiritual discipline should be done with an openness to God where the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to transform a life which will lead to mission. Spiritual disciplines and works of mercy must be integrated in the spiral curriculum found in the labyrinth path.

The mission that God calls each person to is only understood to the extent that a person is aware of who they are, who God is, and how God is at work in the world around them. This awareness can be achieved through contemplation:

The contemplative Carmelite William McNamara once called it ‘a pure intuition of being, born of love. It is experiential awareness of reality and a way of entering into immediate communion with reality.’ And what is reality? ‘People, trees, lakes, mountains. You can study things, but unless you enter into this intuitive communion with them, you can only know *about* them, you don’t *know*, them. To take a long loving look at

something – a child, a glass of wine, a beautiful meal – this is a natural act of contemplation, of loving admiration ...what alone is excluded from contemplation is abstraction, the ‘spaced out,’ where a leaf is no longer green, water no longer ripples, a man no longer breathes, and God no longer smiles. What I contemplate is always what is most real: what philosophers call the ‘concrete singular’. (Traub 2008, 91-92)

To apply this mindfulness to a prayerful reading of Scripture is what constitutes the Ignatian contemplative practice:

Ignatian meditation, then, is not a form of rational (formal logic) analysis, nor does it seek historical and scientific accuracy. It is rather a manner of experiencing and then discerning, that is, evaluating, the spiritual effects of (what Ignatius calls) ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’, first in the course of such imaginative exercises, then in contemplating the world around that God made, and finally at the heart of daily human living. (Traub 2008, 140)

The Ignatian use of Scripture includes experience and discernment with the aim of entering the mission of God that is to be expressed in ‘the heart of daily living’ (Traub 2008, 140).

The aim of Ignatian contemplation is not to understand the passage, but to experience it. Through the imagination Jesus is encountered as a living person:

The goal of this way of prayer is not to seek answers and solutions to our problems ...nor is the goal of contemplation to collect new intellectual insights about God...The goal of contemplation is to fall ever more deeply in love with God. (Miller 1999, 25-26)

Contemplation is a loving attentiveness and grateful gaze on God. Gospel contemplation is a meditation of the Scriptural text that should lead to a place of personal encounter with God that moves one into mission. This aim of the use of Scripture in the Ignatian tradition is spiritual formation.

The use of Scripture in the Ignatian tradition is compatible with the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley created a movement in the Church that earned

the named “Methodist.” The title was initially an insult hurled at the members of the Holy Club at Oxford who were methodical in their practice of the faith. John Wesley had rules for singing, and he also created rules for the reading of Scripture. His rules for the reading of Scripture were written with the aim of his use of Scripture in mind:

To insure that his Bible study times were unhurried, Wesley chose the early hours of the morning and the quiet hours of the evening. These times allow him the space to meditate on what he read. His main goal was quality not quantity. It is true that Wesley normally read a chapter per sitting, but sometimes he would read only a few verses. His desire was to encounter God, and when he did that, the amount he read was not the most important thing. (Harper 1983, 29)

The encounter of God through the reading of Scripture is an experience and is identical to the use of Scripture in the Ignatian tradition. To be clear, “While this participatory experience of the Spirit of Jesus Christ adds nothing to the substance of biblical truth, it confirms and vitalizes these truths in the believer’s life” (Thorsen 2005, 49). The use of Scripture is to be more than expanding knowledge through inductive Bible study, but a transformational encounter with the Divine. As such, Scripture becomes a means of grace.

John Wesley’s sermon called “The Means of Grace” says that there are ordinary channels that God has appointed for conveying prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace. “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) ...” (Outler 1984, 381). Note that in this description of the use of Scripture that John Wesley includes meditating. This is where one discovers the compatibility of Ignatian contemplation in the Wesleyan tradition.

The purpose of reading or meditating on Scripture is to be receptive to the grace of God. A more detailed explanation of John Wesley's aim of reading Scripture can be found in his comments on 2 Timothy 3:16:

The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence *it is so profitable for doctrine*, for instruction of the ignorant, *for the reproof* or conviction of them that are in error or sin, *for the correction* or amendment of whatever is amiss, and for instructing or training up the children of God *in all righteousness*. (Wesley 1983, n.p.)

A summary of John Wesley's rules for Scripture and his use of Scripture for spiritual formation is found in the text *Shaped by the Word* by Mulholland. His chapter on "Wesley's Guidelines for Reading Scripture" begins:

John Wesley's guidelines for reading scripture provide an excellent description of the posture necessary for our reading to become an encounter with the living, penetrating Word of God. They move us from the informational to the formational level of reading, from the functional to the relational aspect of response to what we read, and from the 'doing' to the 'being' mode of implementation of what we read. (Mulholland 2000, 123)

The implementation of what we read implies a mission which is also part of the Ignatian tradition. Furthermore, "Wesley indicates in his third guideline that you should approach each passage 'with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it.' This focal intention is the heart of the approach to scripture in spiritual formation" (Mulholland 2000, 127). A fixed resolution to do the will of God is a call to action. Ultimately:

The dynamics of these guidelines will allow the scripture to become iconographic. Using these guidelines will draw us into those dimensions of kairotic existence through which God can transform our distorted word into the word God speaks us forth to be in the world. By this process, scripture becomes the means of grace by which God shapes our lives. (Mulholland 2000, 132)

The aims of a prayerful reading of Scripture in the Wesleyan tradition, as with experience and discernment, are compatible between the Ignatian and Wesleyan tradition.

Adapting a spiritual discipline, such as Gospel contemplation, into a Wesleyan context is not without issues and problems to be avoided. As already mentioned, any example of formational prayer can become a practice that is separated from daily life. James Pedlar's article, "Sensing the Spirit: Wesley's Empiricism and His Use of the Language of Spiritual Sensation" identifies further potential issues with contemplative prayer. His article ends with an effort to "...address challenges that Wesley's use of the language of spiritual sensation poses for both the coherence and the adequacy of his theology" (Pedlar 2012, 86). With regards to the adequacy of theology behind Wesley's vocabulary of the spiritual sensations, Pedlar identifies three potential weaknesses, "...all arising from the individualistic character of his account of the Spirit's work" (Pedlar 2012, 95).

The first weakness with Wesley's vocabulary of spiritual sensation is that it could undermine the role of the Church where the *allēlōn* is to be practiced. Although John Wesley was faithfully committed to ministry in the context of the Church, those who followed after him lacked this understanding of the role of the Church. "It is not surprising, therefore, that the various movements that have emerged from Methodism after Wesley have tended to have underdeveloped ecclesiologies" (Pedlar 2012, 95). The role of the church for spiritual formation was discussed previously, in chapter three. In the book *A Shared Christian Life*,

the connection between spiritual formation and community life is explored from a Wesleyan perspective:

If there is one thing that becomes clear from examining both Wesley and Paul on the Lord's Supper it is that in order to do spiritual formation right, one needs to have an adequate ecclesiology, and adequate understanding of sharing in common in the body of Christ. (Witherington 2012, 144)

The afterword entitled "What Does a Normal Christian Life Entail?" concludes with the thought:

Spiritual formation is of course a deeply personal matter; but it is never a private matter, for God is a public God who lives in the community of the Trinity, and if we would mirror the divine life, we must live in the community of his body, not isolate ourselves from it. (Witherington 2012, 181)

Wesley's vocabulary of spiritual sensation can undermine the role of the Christian community when it is practiced independently of this loving community of faith.

An experience of spiritual sensation can be intimate and personal, but proper spiritual disciplines should lead to works of mercy and the fruit of the spirit, as shown in the model of spiritual formation in chapter three. The labyrinth path reverses direction and the path of the spiritual disciplines will lead to family and church life where the *allēlōn* is to be practiced. The vocabulary of spiritual sensation only becomes a problem when it is seen as an end rather than a means of grace.

Secondly, the vocabulary of spiritual senses can undermine the role of doctrinal content. Victor Shepherd stressed the importance of doctrine in his article, "Neither Mist nor Mud." "The truth is Wesley knew that doctrine has to do with the truth of God; that doctrine is essential to the soundness of anyone's

faith and essential to the soundness of the church” (Shepherd 2010, 214). As

Pedlar notes:

Wesley himself was clearly rooted in the historic faith of the Church. However, his transformative experience of the Spirit came after a high-church upbringing and an Oxford education, which enabled him to assume an orthodox theology of the Spirit. Most of his hearers did not have this grounding in the historic faith, and so, many Methodist movements, as time went on, became increasingly rooted in experience, expressed either in terms of a liberal ethic of brotherly love, or a revivalistic fervor. (Pedlar 2012, 95)

The language of spiritual sensation can undermine doctrine when personal experience is elevated above the authority of Scripture.

The third potential weakness behind Wesley’s vocabulary of spiritual sensation is that it could be highly divisive:

When the individually and intuitively discerned experience of the Spirit becomes a line of demarcation between the real Christians and the pretenders, this can lead to divisions ad infinitum, especially if the line of demarcation becomes an experience cut loose from the grounding of scripture, the historic faith of the Church, and the historic visible continuity of the Church itself. (Pedlar, 2012 95)

These three weaknesses were identified with Wesley’s vocabulary of spiritual sensation, and they could also be applied to Ignatian Gospel contemplation.

With regards to the first weakness, that individualistic spiritual sensation may diminish the role of the Church, my model of spiritual formation begins with entry into the Church. The community of faith is essential to spiritual formation, and Gospel contemplation is strengthened by discernment that can come through the community of faith. Gospel contemplation should be integrated into a spiritual life that is holistic and includes every area in my model of spiritual formation.

This potential problem with Gospel contemplation may be avoided when it is used

in a spirituality that includes ongoing participation in the life of the Church. Gospel contemplation that is done in the context of a healthy church may not necessarily result in a weakened ecclesiology.

As for the second weakness, that the vocabulary of spiritual sensation may undermine doctrinal content, when one thinks of Gospel contemplation as a spiritual exercise, the imagination must submit to the authority of Scripture. A phrase that John Wesley used often was the ‘general tenor of Scripture’. The ecclesiology that addresses the first weakness can also address the second weakness. The Church is founded on the confession of the prophet and apostles, and supported by the creeds of the early Church. As stated above, Gospel contemplation can only confirm the faith and not alter the content of faith.

The third criticism of the inadequacy of Wesley’s vocabulary of spiritual sensation is that it can result in elitism and division. This issue is addressed in the text *Embracing Contemplation*. In the chapter entitled “*Is Thoughtless Prayer Really Christian? A Biblical / Evangelical Response to Evagrius cf Pontus,*” Evan Howard ends with a few recommendations. His first recommendation is that:

It seems good and natural that we would – and even should – foster different experiences of prayer appropriate to different stages of our maturity in Christ. It seems false, however, that we should demand or even expect our maturity to be tightly linked to any particular practice or experience. (Coe and Strobel 2019, 50)

The teaching of Evagrius on the subject of wordless prayer was that it was the pinnacle of Christian maturity. My initial reporting on the research project in the next chapter unintentionally positioned Gospel contemplation above inductive Bible study. It was not the participants of the research project who were showing

evidence of elitism and division, but me as a researcher. After my initial project report, the professor commented:

You might want to clarify that you are not suggesting that people should not use inductive approaches to scripture but that they are inadequate for certain aspects of spiritual formation.

You have set them up in your paper as in opposition to each other because that has been the experience of your church but there's no necessary reason for this to be the case. They could complement each other.

The opposition of two differing approaches to Scripture was unintentional on my part, but I now recognize that the introduction of Gospel contemplation in a Wesleyan context should be done in a manner that allows for other approaches to prayer and engaging Scripture.

The ministry project described in the following chapter took place in the local church. Prior to the small group study, the research in this chapter informed and influenced my preaching to the extent that I referred to Gospel contemplation and a sanctified imagination from the pulpit and provided both an explanation and a biblical basis for the practice. When making an appeal for participants in the research project, I shared with the congregation a line from the text *Seeing is Believing*, and said, "If our faith is going to be powerful and transformative, it is going to have to be imaginative and experiential." (Boyd 2004, 79).

When the research project began, the participants of the small group received a handout that had teaching on labyrinths and also Gospel contemplation. The introductory comments on Gospel contemplation were taken from the book *Friendship with Jesus: A Way to Pray the Gospel cf Mark*, including the following quote:

...we need only imaginatively enter and participate in the biblical stories for God's revelation to become a present event for us. It happens now as we watch the stories unfold – in our mind's eye – and listen to what God moves in our hearts. Jesus draws us into the world of the story and reveals his grace to us. (Miller 1999, 13)

The introductory handout included practical steps for Gospel contemplation and an additional note from *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999, 13) about the goal of contemplation.

Whenever there was concern during the research project about going beyond the text of the Gospel, I would summarize the role of discernment in Gospel contemplation as well as reaffirming the authority of Scripture.

During week 8 of the research project multiple participants reported a sense of conviction. It was something that was unexpected and the following week I was better prepared to address issues of participants feeling uncomfortable in their contemplation.

Throughout the research project I referred to the text *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* and the idea that all of life is an opportunity to encounter God. I made available to the participants all relevant textbooks including *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* which has a chapter on the theology of John Wesley, and the article by Pedlar, “*Sensing the Spirit: Wesley's Empiricism and His Use of the Language of Spiritual Sensation.*” The potential pitfalls that Dr. Pedlar identifies with Wesley's spiritual sensation vocabulary were not evident when this small group practiced Gospel contemplation, but I did remain vigilant to see if any of them would be an issue for people at Holt FMC.

CHAPTER V: RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project took place at Holt FMC from September to December of 2018. A small group at Holt FMC met to practice Gospel contemplation with an invitation to walk a labyrinth.

Opportunity or Problem

In the previous chapter it was demonstrated that Gospel contemplation is a spiritual discipline that can lead to spiritual formation and that it is also a practice that is compatible with the Wesleyan tradition. Previous research on the topic of spiritual formation indicates that "...the range of strategies is wide, best-practice churches share a focused and firm commitment to get their people to engage with the Bible in an ongoing fashion" (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 225). The Free Methodist Church is part of the evangelical tradition, and members of Holt FMC have participated in various small group Bible studies that use an inductive approach to Scripture. Although inductive Bible study is one form of engaging of Scripture, gospel contemplation can also contribute to spiritual formation.

Since Gospel contemplation is suitable for individual or group use, a small group research project was designed to help believers at Holt FMC reflect on Scripture in a new way. The research project also explores the compatibility of Gospel contemplation in this particular Wesleyan context. Although this project has a specific focus on Gospel contemplation, inductive Bible study and Gospel contemplation are not mutually exclusive activities.

Response or Innovation

During the development of the project proposal, I stayed at a monastery for two days as I read through the Gospel of Mark and the book *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999). I prayerfully considered what passages of Scripture would be used for the study and designed a ten-week program for a small group at Holt FMC.

Data was obtained through a Free Methodist discipleship survey used at the start and conclusion of the study, along with weekly field notes, and a semi-structured exit interview. The data was used to form an interim narrative about the experience of this small group, and following the ten-week study period, the narrative was shared with the small group during an evening of participant validation along with a summary of the findings. Participant validation ended with the members of the small group responding to and evaluating the provisional conclusion.

The project also included the use of a labyrinth because labyrinths have been used for contemplation, as explained in the book *Walking a Sacred Path* (Artress 2006, 26-28, 111-118). Modern research affirms this ancient practice of the Church, and in the article, “*Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking*” it is noted “While research indicates that being outdoors has many cognitive benefits, walking has a very specific benefit—the improvement of creativity” (Oppezzo and Schwartz 2014, 1148). Participants in this research project had the opportunity to walk a canvas labyrinth, or use a table top one, during their time of Gospel contemplation. The labyrinth walk was intended to facilitate the contemplation.

Supervision, permission, and access

This research project was conducted in accordance with terms and conditions required by the Research and Ethics Board (REB) of Tyndale University College & Seminary and in accordance with the Government of Canada guidelines as describe in *TCPS 2* (Tri-Council Policy Statement). Approval for this project was granted by the REB on September 21, 2018. Research was also conducted in a manner that is consistent with the doctrine, practices and values in *The Manual of the Free Methodist Church in Canada*.

Access to participants was obtained through a delegate from the official board who announced the project during a morning worship service and then distributed both the letters of invitation and consent forms (Appendix D, E and F). The delegate who distributed the consent forms organized the small group membership consisting of those who responded to the verbal invitation and letters. I collected written, informed consent prior to the study and the forms have been kept in a secure cabinet. When relevant information was shared during a Sunday morning worship service, or at other times outside of the small group setting, the informal feedback script (Appendix L) was used in order to obtain verbal and informed consent. There was anonymity in the reporting.

The use of the Journey Discipleship Survey (JDS) began with the official board approving the use of this survey on July 25, 2018. Survey responses were anonymous and participants placed their completed surveys in an envelope which was delivered to a representative of the FMCiC national leadership team. A data-management agreement (Appendix G) was signed prior to the delivery of the completed surveys.

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

This research project was compatible with my ongoing ministry at Holt FMC. Field notes are only a more detailed and accurate form of pastoral observations. The JDS is a denominational survey and the semi-structured interview was, from the participants' perspective, like any other pastoral conversation. Personal information of the participants gained through disclosure either during the small group sharing sessions or through the interview was consistent with issues that could be raised during normal visitation and pastoral care.

Mutual social responsibility existed between the congregation and me. I have been pastor of Holt FMC since 2006, and support for the D.Min program in general, and this project in particular, was endorsed by the official board.

Although not an issue during the ten weeks of this research project, I was prepared to address disturbing or problematic information through access to personal support from my denominational structure that includes an accountability partner, a network leader, and a regional coach.

Participants were made fully aware that they could address any concerns about this research project with me, the REB, the board chair, or the regional coach. During the study, I was prepared to respond to a crisis in a pastoral role only after I provided a verbal declaration that research has been halted and that sharing from that point forward would not be included as part of the study. Participants were always welcome to share their expectations and concerns about the research project.

The risks involved in this study were minimal. In the report to the REB, the following risks were addressed:

- a) The investigation uses procedures with the potential to induce possible emotional reactions.

Gospel contemplation uses the imagination and can indeed evoke emotional responses including affirmation or conviction. Due to the voluntary nature of the research, participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. The practice of contemplation can be ended at any time, and conversations of pastoral care could occur during the small group experience.

- b) The Participants and the researcher will be in a private room together. The semi-structured exit interviews took place in the study at the church. The study has windows, and whenever these conversations took place, others were present in the church.

- c) There are institutional/formal power relationships present between researcher and participant (e.g. student/teacher, employer/employee, counsellor/client, ministers/congregant members).

All research was in a manner that was consistent with ministry responsibility and conduct. Furthermore, both the labyrinth and the text *Friendship with Jesus: A Way to Pray the Gospel cf Mark* (Miller 1999) were available during a prayer weekend that took place during the research period. Those not wanting to participate in the research project still had access to the resources that make up the study, minus the small group experience.

Context

All research in this small group study occurred at Holt FMC. When my ministry began at Holt FMC in 2006, small groups were a regular part of the life of this congregation including Bible studies, book studies and Alpha's *The Marriage Course* (Alpha, 2000).

As the church experienced a decline in membership there was also a decline in small group commitment. At the time of this research project, only two other small groups were active at Holt FMC. One small group met for a Sunday School class following the morning worship service, and a ladies' small group gathered midweek for an inductive Bible study. Small groups at Holt FMC, past and present, use evangelical sources that follow an inductive approach to studying the Bible.

In 2017, the official board began studying the book *Becoming a Blessed Church* (Standish 2016). This text counters the rational functionalism that occurs when church boards make decisions based solely on reason and *Robert's Rules of Order* (Robert 2011). A blessed church, according to Standish, is one that is alive to the purpose, presence and power of Christ. Decisions made by the board of a blessed church should be made with prayerful discernment rather than a vote of personal preference. In this text there is mention of a variety of spiritual practices including the music of Taizé, walking a labyrinth, and the meditations of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In addition to having the board study this book in order to better understand what constitutes a blessed church, this book study was also intended to legitimize the exploration of new spiritual practices at Holt FMC.

After the announcement and invitation was made to the whole congregation, six individuals responded to be part of this research project. Having six participants in this research project met the criteria for a small group as found in the book *Building a Church of Small Groups* where the recommendation is that a small group should be made up of only 4 to 10 people (Donahue and Robinson 2001, 211). The six participants are: Ruth, Adam, John, Amy, Bethany, and Lillian (their names have been changed for anonymity).

Multiple relationships existed among those six participants. There were two married couples in the small group. There were two sisters in this group, and a mother and son. In addition to family connections, there were three board members, a worship leader and a property trustee. The concept of *allēlōn* that is essential to spiritual formation in both church and family was an element of this small group. Not only were the members of this small group very familiar with each other but they are also leaders who are actively engaged in the ongoing ministry at Holt FMC. The Journey Discipleship Survey (Appendix M) provides demographics of the small group participants. All six participants have been followers of Jesus and members of Holt FMC for at least twenty-five years (JDS #1 results).

The couples traveled together for the small group meeting at the church, and during the exit interview, both Lillian and Bethany referred to their travel and mentioned how they would talk with each other about the small group experience during the car ride (interview Lillian, Bethany).

The familiarity within the group had both a positive and negative impact on this study. Beginning with the first week together, the familiarity within the group established a high level of trust. This was a positive benefit because of the close relationships within this small group meant that they were used to sharing personal information with each other. (Admittedly not all gatherings of close family relationship share a level of trust or comfort with self-disclosure.) A negative aspect of these same close relationships was due to tension that was created when spouses had differing views of this spiritual exercise.

Hogan described the experience of walking a labyrinth with her husband. Her insight illustrates the dynamic of couples engaged in the same spiritual exercise with differing practices:

...as we continued to walk, I was surprised to discover that while we had entered the labyrinth close together, we were immediately walking on opposite sides, seemingly a long way apart. Before I knew it, we were walking side-by-side again, going in the same direction. Then, we were on opposite sides and, then again, the path amazingly brought us back together. In looking for the metaphor, I could see that our relationship was much like that. (Hogan 2003, 24-25)

Although it did not happen during the ten weeks of this study, due to the interrelationships that existed in this group, there was always the potential of a difficult issue arising in one household that would cause stress on at least half of the participants. The tension that was part of this project occurred when couples felt out of step with each other.

The spiritual context of this study was a church experiencing some new growth and a leadership team that was open to new ideas. The spiritual leaders of this small group were knowledgeable about the Bible. Whereas a new believer

would not have a preconceived notions or expectations of how to do a Bible study, the members of this small group had to learn to enter into a new way to both pray and read the Scripture.

Proposed Project, Methodology and Methods

Gospel contemplation is a practice of prayer where one enters into the narrative of Scripture. The research methodology is a narrative approach that compliments an exercise of participating in a greater narrative event.

FIELD

The initial proposal for this research project described a ten-week small group curriculum. Sunday evening was chosen because a congregational survey revealed that Sunday evening was the preferred time for a small group.

At the beginning of the study, participants were provided with a private journal that had two pages of introduction about Gospel contemplation and labyrinths. They were told that the journal would not be included in data collection. Each small group meeting started in the prayer room and began with a welcome followed by an opening prayer. Participants then received five sheets of lined paper and a handout that included the Scripture for the evening, from the NIV translation and without the verse markings. Chapter and verse notations are helpful in an inductive Bible study but are not necessary for Gospel contemplation and imaginative prayer. The handout also included some journal questions from the book *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999). After the reading of Scripture was an act of centering that varied from week to week. The entire group then moved to the fellowship hall where they were invited to walk the canvas labyrinth. The hall

had two tables set up, each with a tabletop labyrinth. In the hall, the Gospel narrative was read once more, this time from the book *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999). This second reading of the Scripture included imaginative details to help with Gospel contemplation. After the Gospel contemplation was complete, participants returned to the prayer room for a time of discussion and sharing. The evening concluded with a closing prayer. The following table provides details about the field for this research project. Images of physical resources used during the study are included in Appendix I, Physical Resources.

Table 1. Schedule of Events

Week #	Date	Title	Scripture	Centering
1	Sept. 30	“I want you” (Miller 1999, 38)	Mk. 1:14-20	Breath Prayers
2	Oct. 14	“Welcome to my feast” (Miller 1999, 46)	Mk. 2:13-22	Bless the Lord (Taizé Community Choir, 1999)
3	Oct. 21	“There’s enough for you” (Miller 1999, 66)	Mk. 6:30-44	“Manna” (Soulbreather 2012a)
4	Oct. 28	“Enter my new world” (Miller 1999, 68)	Mk. 6:45-56	Image of Rembrandt’s Storm on the Sea of Galilee
5	Nov. 4	“You are the child” (Miller 1999, 96)	Mk. 10:13-25	“Jesus Loves Little Children” (Rain for Roots 2012)
6	Nov. 11	“Your faith is your sight” (Miller 1999, 102)	Mk. 10:46-52	<i>Praying hands</i> , (Brown 2013, 180)
7	Nov. 18	“Share my humble glory” (Miller 1999, 104)	Mk. 11:1-11	Orthodox Prayer Ropes
8	Nov. 25	“I surrender to God’s holy dream” (Miller 1999, 124)	Mk. 14:22-31	Basin of water and towel for hand washing.
9	Dec. 02.	“Stand before my cross” (Miller 1999, 134)	Mk. 15:21-41	“The Weight of the World” (Souldbreather 2012b).
10	Dec. 09	“Go to Galilee” (Miller 1999, 138)	Mk. 16:1-8	“Awake” (Josh White, 2009)

Before the Scripture was read on the first evening, the participants completed the first Journey Discipleship Survey. The second survey was completed at the conclusion of the final session.

It was important to be flexible with the outline for the evening in order to respond to the needs of the participants in the small group. Changes were made to the format of the small group meeting after the very first session. Feedback received during week one revealed that participants wanted their own copy of the guided meditation from *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999). Beginning with the second week, participants received on their handout the Scripture, guided meditation, and the questions for journaling. This change was in response to feedback from the group and was intended to help them engage more fully in the practice of Gospel contemplation.

I also noted during week one that the participants were interested in the breath prayer for centering and for the remainder of the study, each week included the distribution of the key ring with breath prayers along with the scheduled act for centering.

Introductory comments were also added to the small group format. The first small group meeting began with a welcome, some basic instruction about the research project in general, and statement about the purpose of Gospel contemplation. The project proposal described the small group meetings beginning with a general welcome, but that welcome became a time of teaching by the second week.

On week three, I used the opening welcome to refer to the text *Walking the Labyrinth* and pointed out that the structure of the Gospel of Mark is similar to a labyrinth design (Scholl 2014, 11). On week four, I referred to a story in the news about an effort called “Project Trauma Support” (Osman 2018, CBC). The

story in the news was about a retreat program in Perth, Ontario that received federal funding for alternative treatment for traumatized veterans. The cover image with this online news story showed a group of participants hugging each other in the center of a labyrinth. Another week the introductory comments included a reference to A.W. Tozer and his essay “*The Value of a Sanctified Imagination*” (Tozer 1963, 92-95) and Foster’s book *Prayer* (Foster 1992). In addition to using the opening welcome as an opportunity for further instruction, it was also an occasion to encourage and affirm the progress of the group.

Following the third session, I received a phone call from Amy. Her concern was that the group was focused more on the guided meditation than on Scripture itself, that people were using the guided meditation as a source for Bible study, and that she wanted the focus of our group conversation to be on Christ’s message to us (field notes, informal feedback October 24). I responded with words of gratitude and encouragement. The welcome time for week four allowed for acknowledgement of and discussion about this mid-week phone call.

Prior to the session for week five, the church celebrated a ninety-ninth birthday on the Saturday and an infant dedication service during the Sunday morning worship. When the participants gathered for the small group meeting, decorations remained in the window sill and the aroma from the potluck lunch still lingered in the air. A similar situation occurred on week seven when there was another Sunday morning potluck lunch that produced a lingering aroma for when the small group met later that evening. Aromas can be a feature of labyrinths in a monastery or public park, just like they were in this research study.

The most significant change to the format occurred as a result of feedback received during week five. Conversation on that evening revealed the group's desire to remain in the prayer room for the guided meditation. There was a sense that after centering, it was disruptive to change locations (field notes, week five).

The introductory comments in week six explained the new format based on feedback from the previous week. While the Gospel contemplation would now take place in the prayer room, participants were free to go to the canvas labyrinth any time after centering for their time of contemplation. The two table top labyrinths were brought into the prayer room. Assurance was given that the group conversation would not begin until all participants returned to the prayer room (field notes, week six).

Aside from the major change of the setting for the contemplation, each week followed a similar format. The small group meeting began with a welcome and time of teaching, an opening prayer, the reading of Scripture and a time of centering. I read the Gospel contemplation from *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999) and gave the group time to prayerfully explore the passage with the option of walking the labyrinth or using a table top one. The evening concluded with the members of the small group sharing their insights and describing their experience followed by a closing prayer. The only exception and week which was different from that general outline was week eight.

The evening of week eight began like any other session in this research project. There was the usual opening time of welcome, instruction and encouragement, followed by a prayer and the reading of Scripture. The act for

centering this week was a kinesthetic experience that involved a basin of water and a towel. During the opening instruction for week eight I explained that the bowl evokes the act of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. I also explained that in some traditions the baptismal font is located near the entrance to the sanctuary. Touching the waters of baptism was a form of entrance into worship. For the time of centering, I invited the participants to dip their hands in a basin of water and dry them on a towel. Much like the personal and individual pace one may take in walking a labyrinth, each participant had a unique experience with the water. One participant soaked both hands in the bowl, while another only dipped their fingers in the water. One participant picked up the towel to dry his hands, while another wiped her hands on the towel. But it was more than the act of centering that was unusual on week eight.

Following the time of Gospel contemplation, the small group returned to the prayer room for discussion. During the sharing this week there was a heaviness of emotion with participants using vocabulary such as “unworthy,” “inadequate,” and “overwhelming” (field notes, week eight). I felt anxious because I was not expecting the purgative or convicting work of the Holy Spirit, and I said to the group, “I hear a lot of words like ‘heaviness’, ‘unworthy’, and ‘failure’, and I don’t want this experience to discourage. I pray that each of you will receive from Jesus” (field notes, week eight). In response to the heaviness expressed in the sharing, I had a participant read Psalm 118 (one of the Hallel Psalms often sung during Passover) and then someone suggested that we sing the chorus “Good to Me” (Musseau, 1990). Although I did not recognize it in the

moment, the contemplation on this evening was an opportunity for the group to practice confession with one another.

The week nine introductory comments summarized the experience from the previous week, and I covered the topic of desolation as a potentially positive spiritual experience. In the book *Companions of Christ*, we read:

The most profound growth almost always happens in the darkness. Bulbs and seeds grow in the darkness of the earth. Babies grow in the darkness of the womb. The process of growth is an invisible one. The nourishment that fosters growth comes in the darkness and has to be received by faith. (Silf 2004, 29-30)

Even though the Scripture this week covered the death of Christ, the sense of heaviness from the previous week was not present during session nine.

Week ten introduced a new option for participants as they practiced the contemplation. For that week I once again referred to the text *Walking the Labyrinth* which describes a monastery where the members of a certain religious order would form a circle around the perimeter of the labyrinth. At dawn on Easter Sunday they would begin a 3-step dance around the labyrinth, while "...the dean of the monastery would step his own dance to walk the path, singing the Easter sequence of psalms and sacred songs" (Scholl 2014, 227). In his hands, the dean held a large ball that he would throw to the members of the order on the outside of the labyrinth. They would return the ball to him, and so "The Easter dance was also, then, a game. The monks were playing catch, a child's game. They were playing the unknown, unsought joy of Easter in a game children play" (Scholl 2014, 227). Before the time of centering prayer on week 10, each participant was given a tennis ball for their own time of play on the labyrinth.

PHASES AND TIME TABLES

Table 2. Timeline of Research Project

EVENT	DATE
Distribution of Consent Form and Letters of Invite	Sept 16
Journey Discipleship Survey #1	Sept 30
Weekly Small Group Sessions, Field Notes	Sept 30-Dec 09
Report from FMCiC national leadership team Journey Discipleship Survey #1 results	Nov. 09
Journey Discipleship Survey #2	Dec 09
Semi-structured Interviews	Dec 10-21
Transcription of Interviews	Dec 21-Jan 14
Report from FMCiC national leadership team Journey Discipleship Survey #2 results	Jan 30
Participant validation	Feb 21

SCOPE

This study explored the impact of Gospel contemplation on spiritual formation and was limited to participants who were a part of this particular small group. Other small groups at Holt FMC continued to use inductive Bible study methods. The research did not employ resources commonly used in inductive Bible studies such as concordances, Bible commentaries, or Gospel parallel accounts; although participants were free to use those resources on their own.

The relationship between Gospel contemplation and labyrinths was also not a focus of this study. Labyrinths have been used for contemplation and prior research demonstrates the association that exists between walking and creativity. The labyrinth was a resource to help participants with their contemplation, but walking the canvas labyrinth or the use of either of the table top labyrinths was not a requirement for participation in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this research project is intended to reflect the purpose of this study. Since Gospel contemplation is an act of entering into the biblical narrative, this research project involves a narrative methodology.

Narrative research, as described in the book *Qualitative Research*, is "...primarily a vehicle for understanding and explaining lived experiences" (Sensing 2011, 157). This text goes on to explain, "By collecting narratives, lived experiences are collected and considered. Interpretation of lived experiences point to meaning. The process is both descriptive and interpretive" (Sensing 2011, 161). Data was shaped into a narrative and participants were invited to respond to that narrative summary.

Each week participants were invited to experience an imaginative practice of praying and engaging Scripture. At the close of the evening, when the group shared their insights with each other, their narrative of the experience was crucial. Their commentary in the semi-structured interview was also a key component of this study:

Selection, what choices are made for inclusion and exclusion, plays a major role in shaping the content of narratives. Whether they represent actual events or 'truths' is not pivotal to this methodology. Actual events are not being sought. The representation, the construction of reality, is the focus. How people tell their story and what message they desire their story to contain is critical. Actual events cannot be exactly 'recovered' anyway. Our memories 'selectively reconstruct' the past. (Sensing 2011, 163)

This research methodology is appropriate for a study that depends on the narrative interpretation of a shared group experience.

METHODS

The data from this study was collected in three forms: field notes recorded each week, including notes that were taken during any opportunity for informal feedback, survey results, and interviews. Immediately following the small group experience, I added to the field notes my personal interpretation and summary of that evening's activity. In retrospect, this form of data collection was not conducive to me leading the small group while simultaneously recording field notes. Both the small group and research study may have been better served with data collection through other means, such as an outside observer, video recording, verbatim or having the participants reflect on the evening and what was in their journal and then submit their own written summary the following week.

Secondly, the comparison of the data from both Journey Discipleship Surveys provided a report about the state of personal spiritual practices in the small group as a whole. The survey does not show the results of any one participant in particular but rather presents the progress of the entire group. Results of the survey are not meant to stand alone but rather they are used in conjunction with the first and third set of data. Survey results are available in Appendix M. This survey was designed for congregational use, and as such a sample size of only six participants meant that this group was too small for statistically accurate results. Furthermore, a survey is not often used in a narrative methodology, however, the research value of the survey was the discussion about the survey results with the small group during the evening of participant validation. That conversation with the participants about the survey results return the survey to a narrative methodology.

The third set of data comes from the semi-structured exit interview which provided the narrative of each participant's overall experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

After all of the data was obtained, provisional conclusions were presented to the participants on February 21, 2019. At that time, participants were able to address the interim proposed results of the study. That evening of participant validation confirmed and adjusted the results as necessary.

Findings, Interpretations, and Outcomes

The findings that come from the field notes, surveys, and interviews confirm the theory in chapter four that Gospel contemplation has the potential to contribute to spiritual formation and is appropriate for a Wesleyan context. Each participant had their own unique experience in this small group project. Their distinct voices are preserved in the description of the data from this study.

The field notes from a ten-week small group study amounted to seventy-two pages. These seventy-two pages were coded according to four categories: overall change, struggles, missed opportunities, and evidence of impact. Every narrative contains a plot driven by tension and the response of characters. The overall change highlighted in the field notes provides a basic outline of the plot. The tension in the narrative is found in both the struggles and missed opportunities, while evidence of impact reveals character development. These four categories used in the coding of the field notes helped to summarize the experience and describe what took place during the research project.

The semi-structured exit interviews produced two hours and thirty-one minutes of audio recording. All participants were asked the same set of questions. The interview transcripts were coded in three ways. Each interview was first examined for a narrative process, then language, and finally, moments. These codes come from the article, “From Interview Transcript to Interpretive Story: Part 1 – Viewing the Transcript through Multiple Lenses” (McCormack 2000, 282-297). The narrative process occurs when a speaker theorizes and provides augmentation. Language notes not only key terms or relevant expressions, but also words used for space and reflection (“um”). The moments that were coded in each interview were instances when the speaker identified an epiphany or turning point.

The initial proposal for this project did not include the various lenses for coding the transcripts, and the lenses were only developed after the data was fully collected. The same thing applies to the findings from the field notes. An attempt to interpret the data was made as the data was being collected; however, a detailed interpretation could not be completed until the lenses and coding were in place. If the research project began with clearly defined lenses, both the form of data collection and the content of data may have been different.

During the participant validation, members of the research project were presented with the results from comparing the two surveys. Both surveys were returned from the national leadership team of the FMCiC with commentary and interpretation, but it was the participants who provided the final interpretation of the survey results. Commentary from the FMCiC is omitted from appendix M.

FINDINGS: EXIT INTERVIEWS

Amy

During the exit interview, Amy recalled being part of small groups at Holt FMC that included a shared meal, followed by a structured, guided biblical study or book study that involved a measure of research during the week. Scripture was examined from a theological perspective with an investigation that included reference books or other biblical translations. These small group sessions were about building relationships and people were held accountable for doing their homework.

Amy said that she knew a little about Gospel contemplation based on what I had shared during sermons and from a few conversations that we had in the past. She was also aware of contemplative prayer from her familiarity with the 24/7 prayer movement, although the terminology of ‘Gospel contemplation’ was new. Later in the interview Amy said, “...even though I wouldn’t have given it that formal name, I think it’s kind of the way I have read Scripture all my life ...without realizing that that was how I read it” (interview, Amy). For her, this small group experience acted “...almost like a reinforcement of the way that I have read Scripture previously” (interview, Amy). Amy then referred to the influence of her mother and the way that she would read Bible stories and then invite reflection “like we did in the sessions” (interview, Amy). She was also able to reiterate the impact of the small group experience and for her, it “...gave me permission that it was OK to read Scripture the way I have been reading Scripture, like kind of sanctioned it” (interview, Amy).

Amy admitted that there were some nights she did not want to come because of "...things weighing on my mind" and yet she said, "...those were actually the nights that I felt God spoke in the quietness of that" (interview, Amy). One of the ways the field notes were coded was to identify moments of tension. The following exchange contains Amy's perception of tension throughout this project:

Matthew: what would make it, what would have made it a better experience, what would have helped the small group? What could have been different or changed?

Amy: well you know what, I think probably, the group as a whole, the for the most part were a little old fashioned, maybe I should put it that way. I don't think of myself that way, but, for the most part. Probably like a first session that was more of really kind of an introductory kind of discussion about the types of things, not getting actually right down into like the guided meditation and that sort of thing but more of a like as a group saying these are the types of things that we'll do during a session, this is what we're reading, this is how we're going to read it, this is how you should take it, this is how you shouldn't take it, it was like, a bit of a prep session I think would have been good. Where you didn't actually get into the detailed guided meditation.

Matthew: yes, I can see that. This was also a new experience for me. I've never led a group like this before. And I really felt like we were in the deep waters together.

Amy: ya. And deep waters and I would say at some points in time, my take on is it that people, like the rest of the group, and sometimes myself felt a little awkward only because of not being used to it and it kind of took a few weeks before I think we we even felt more comfortable, not with each other because we know each other so well, but comfortable with this type of conversation. (interview, Amy)

To improve the small group, Amy recommended an introductory discussion about the guided meditation. She could also envision a combined study of Scripture where "...a traditional Bible study can benefit from interjection of this type of study" (interview, Amy).

With regards to the use of the labyrinth in this small group, Amy had said that the labyrinth was interesting. For her, she got the most out of the tabletop labyrinth on the night that she did not want to come, and "...that was like a whole different experience" (interview Amy). Although the tabletop labyrinth contributed to her experience with God on that night, she then said:

I think because you talked about the labyrinth so much in the past, I kind of think people weren't all that receptive to actually doing it. So if you were going to use it again in the future, I'd dial it down a little bit. Just as a suggestion. (interview, Amy)

As my conversation with Amy drew to a close, she added that "Life is like a labyrinth." Amy also reported that during the week between the sessions she would discuss the small group experience with her husband John.

John

John is a board member at Holt FMC, Amy's husband, and also part of the same small groups that Amy attended. John was able to recall previous Bible studies and book studies at Holt FMC. This participant referred to himself as a "details person" and "numbers guy" (interview, John) and so he said that the one Bible study on the book of Thessalonians was good because it was "...more breaking down the individual pieces, quite different than what we were just doing" (interview, John).

After the small group experience and the focus on Gospel contemplation, John reported that now when he reads Scripture he is trying to put himself into it more. For him the strength of the small group was the discussion that followed the time of contemplation. The struggle that he referred to was not with Gospel contemplation, but instead, "...maybe it was some of the other stuff that was

around it” (interview, John). His concern here was the different practices for centering and the labyrinth. Although he could enter into the Gospel story through his imagination, his struggle with the discipline was because he had trouble seeing contemplation as a form of prayer:

I couldn't seem to get that connect between actually praying it, I mean it's one thing to actually put yourself into the story, and to think about the contemplation of what was going on and my reaction to it ...but to actually feel like I was ever really praying, no, I couldn't get to that. (interview, John)

A few moments later he explained why it was a struggle to pray through contemplation. The struggle with the prayer was because of “...different thought ...trained what prayer should look like ...and so Jesus was probably still speaking and speaking more, but it just didn't seem like it was prayer in quotations type of thing” (interview, John). This interview was interrupted by the phone in the church study ringing. After restarting the interview, I returned to the theme of Gospel contemplation and prayer:

Matthew: ...a conversation about prayer, Gospel contemplation was part of the healing prayer course in that it was a protocol it was an exercise of experiencing Scripture in that we discuss, you know kind of like the group conversation, and based on that we could pray. So it sounds like what would help you with this practice is use that as a form of meditating on the word.

John: ya

Matthew: and then once you received something, something stands out, some - then you could talk to God about that. Lord thank you for this.

John: ya

Matthew: um and maybe more prayer that could follow after

John: well and I noticed going through some of my notes, like after the fact that that there were you know maybe a few points that kind of came

out as far as you know just as they continued to use just you know where does, what does it mean for our church, what does it mean for me in this in community, in this setting, you know like, you know when he was helping people, just that whole thing that I just kind of seem to struggle with.
[Laugh] (interview, John)

My response was an expression of gratitude and sharing an observation that I had noticed in my field notes his frequent emphasis on an application for outreach. He also said that he had gained from the small group experience the time to “center on Scripture.” Being “black and white” in the way he reads things, Gospel contemplation means that he “...could spend more time in that contemplation of what individuals were thinking and then how does that pertain to myself” (interview, John).

Like his wife Amy, John also struggled with the labyrinth. Field notes recorded his resistance to the labyrinth, and he expressed the same in his interview:

Matthew: what would have improved the study for you? What could have been done different that would have made things better?

John: Gaither music! [Both laugh] I just had to throw that in. No, um, I mean it, to me it it made it you know even though I that as I was fairly clear I struggled with the whole labyrinth thing and and, still do, I think you know it will have its place, somewhere along the way, but it didn't have its place for me in that kind of setting. (interview, John)

Matthew: right.

John: but to have it as a separate place, you know to go and to and to contemplate or whatever, was way better when we kind of mixed that up a little bit part way.

Matthew: right

John: um, and you know, like I said, you know I think your experience with it at a monastery, outside you know or whatever with nobody around and it's more of a garden

Matthew: yes, that's right

John: and I mean I could walk out to my garden and get more out of it, than I could you know on that the way it was set up.

Matthew: ya

John: like I appreciate the work with it and everything.

Matthew: yes, yup

John: I think it, I'm not sure that it, you know I don't know what others thought but I'm not sure if it really fulfilled anything. It certainly didn't add anything to the group for me. (interview, John)

John was not opposed to the labyrinth in particular but the context and setting of the labyrinth in this project. During the participant validation evening he expanded on this idea of a garden and said that the labyrinth should be in a garden, although he acknowledged that for my project I could not help the setting (field notes: validation). The change in week 5 to remain in the prayer room for contemplation, and allow people to go to the labyrinth at their own discretion was affirmed by John in the above quote.

For John, the entire small group experience was "...all very new and kind of uncomfortable at times" (interview, John). In addition to the labyrinth being foreign, he did not like centering through the picture ("The Storm at Sea" by Rembrandt) or the washing of hands which seemed to him to be "disruptive." While the music had a calming effect, he had to stay in the room with the Scripture. If he left the prayer room to go walk the labyrinth, he said that he could not contemplate. By contrast, if he was in a repetitive back and forth action of cutting the lawn, around and around, "...that's a lot of racket and a lot of noise

and everything else going on, and yet I could think through and sort out stuff ...or when I actually kept a garden ...I could think stuff through better” (interview, John). Nearing the end of this interview we talked about the spirituality of work, and he mentioned a Benedictine dairy farm.

The dilemma that arises from the interview with John is that he admits, “...it was hard for a lot at the start, and I think it took me longer maybe than some” (interview, John). Yet at the board meeting when I introduced this idea and led a Gospel contemplation exercise, he said, “...we were all kind of wondering and then you went through one and I could see then that it would be something more” (interview, John). For him what would improve it was, “...just doing that part of it (the Gospel contemplation) without necessarily all the other stuff (labyrinth and centering).” He was also wondering about the time length, and suggested an eight-week period where it would be allowed for a person to be at only half of them. From his perspective, “...there was nothing that we did necessarily from week to week that you could miss a week, you would have missed understanding maybe that part of it, but you didn’t have to understand that part of it” (interview, John).

Concerning our church family, John said “...it seems like we struggle on any one particular thing for longer than seven or eight weeks” (interview, John). Even though he said he did not get bored with previous book studies, “it was certainly a comment from some in the midst of it all, ‘is this never going to end’ type of thing” (interview, John). Ultimately, John said that “...it is tough to think of anything more than six weeks” (interview, John).

Lillian

Lillian is John's mother and her previous small group experience is limited to the ladies' Bible study and the adult Sunday school class. She described her 'devotion time' by saying that she uses *The Daily Bread*, has read through the Bible two or three times, was reading *The Message* translation, has read the *New International Version*, and was reading Leviticus. She is a quiet individual who said of herself that she is not a "share-er" but her other small group leader said, "...you do a lot better at the Bible study than you used to" (interview, Lillian).

She described the ladies' small group Bible study by saying:

...it's a book and it has questions and we answer around the table, we read the Scripture part first, and then, we like it because the book, when you go to the back, then they have some answers ... (laughing) ... we kind of cheat that way. (interview, Lillian)

After this small group experience with Gospel contemplation, Lillian reported that she is "...trying to spend more time after for the listening" (interview, Lillian).

She reviewed her journal prior to the interview and said that she "...did not write a lot, but underlined a lot" (interview, Lillian). Twice she used the word "expected." Once she said that she felt that there was an expectation to "Write down something" and later she said that she, "...wasn't sure what was really expected of it all" (interview, Lillian). When I said to her that I wondered if she found the journal aspect of this small group to be a challenge, she answered, "Yes, I don't do that...I don't put my thoughts and stuff down where somebody else is going to...and I've never been a journal-er" (interview, Lillian).

For her this small group experience was "completely foreign" and it "...wasn't a Bible study and it wasn't a prayer meeting" (interview, Lillian). She

mentioned that she found the article by A.W. Tozer to be helpful as it was “something to build on” (interview, Lillian).

Prior to the series of interviews, I returned to the field notes to gain a sense of what had happened and what might be covered in the interview. During this interview I referred to two weeks where Lillian seemed to have a personal experience of Gospel contemplation. I wanted to see if she thought that these weeks were important:

Matthew: And then the other week was after session 6, and the healing of Bartimaeus, and you said you couldn't get into it, but then you showed me content

Lillian: yes

Matthew: the breath prayer you used

Lillian: yes

Matthew: and your prayer, that you wanted to see Jesus in the situation. which I thought was getting into it.

Lillian: yes [both laugh]...

Matthew: I think you were imagining

Lillian: ya

Matthew: and bringing your life into it

Lillian: ya

Matthew: which is the goal. I think those two weeks really stood out, and I wondered if you saw them that way. If those were two meaningful weeks

Lillian: I I think they were because the way I think like I went through this read what I have because I mainly I wrote down a few things, and I mainly underlined, and and stuff like that, I didn't write any journal kind of thing, but when I went over it, it all kind of came back and was a little bit more meaningful than right at the time. (interview, Lillian)

Lillian is someone who benefits from time for reflection. I had little data about Lillian in my field notes, but if the project was structured with participants being sent home with a Scripture passage, and the opportunity to practice a contemplation on their own, with a written submission or a discussion the following week, Lillian may have had more to share. In the week described above about the healing of Bartimaeus, Lillian showed me her journal and how she was interacting with the Gospel text.

Bethany

Bethany is Amy's sister, and also on the board at Holt FMC. Bethany included prayer meeting as a form of a small group, along with descriptions about her involvement with the ladies Bible study that Lillian attends. A good study, according to Bethany, has "the sharing of ideas and bringing people out of their shells and they might talk more..." (interview, Bethany). At the ladies Bible study, "...we answer the questions in the book. Everybody participates in the reading, and everybody participates in answering questions" (interview, Bethany).

As a result of this small group experience of Gospel contemplation, Bethany said, "...now when I read the Bible I kind of read it slower, and try to put myself into that situation" (interview, Bethany). Bethany also said that she was using Gospel contemplation with the lectionary readings.

Bethany used the terminology of 'pondering' to describe her current approach to Scripture, although she recognizes that "Sometimes I may need to spend more time, because in your beginning notes you say about just staying there

and seeing what God has to tell, or tell me. And so sometimes I could do that better” (interview, Bethany).

Bethany said that she appreciated the time of centering, because “...that helped too, it was very relaxing and helped me to get into the presence of the scene” (interview, Bethany). Among the various approaches to centering prayer, Bethany specifically mentioned “those little beads” (interview, Bethany).

Like others in this small group, Bethany also struggled with the labyrinth. After I asked the question “what would have helped in the study? What could have been different? What would have improved it?” (interview, Bethany), there was a thoughtful pause that lasted for 21 seconds. She had questions about the labyrinth, and for her, one issue was “...a warmer, lower basement” although she wondered if that would have made a difference since she said, “I don’t get much out the labyrinth” (interview, Bethany). She did like the table top one (the larger one without the sand), but readily admits “I would have gone down and tried to use it (the canvas labyrinth) more, but a lot of the times I didn’t go because I was cold and I didn’t want to take off my shoes” (interview, Bethany).

Bethany reported that she would drive Lillian home after the small group session, and that they would talk about imagination and what they thought of the evening. Bethany said it was good to be in the small group to connect and be with others, and she also said “the purpose of this was to get you through...I want to get you through school, no, it wasn’t, well yes, that was one thing, that was one of my agendas” (interview, Bethany). Participant bias was in full effect in that moment but did not prevent her from sharing about her feelings for the labyrinth.

The interview concluded with an opportunity for participants to respond with any final comments or questions of their own. Bethany chose that moment to ask for a better understanding about labyrinths:

Bethany: so for somebody, for so you you what would you say to somebody who just told you that they don't get anything out of the labyrinth? How would you, because you, you do. And so is it, and I know everything doesn't work for everybody,

Matthew: yup

Bethany: and you know I don't have to, but when you love it so much and I don't see it, what would you tell me, to help me to, appreciate it more, or so that I could use it more?

Matthew: Right. It is a spiritual exercise like any other spiritual exercise, we can't control or manipulate God, all we can do is make space for God and say, "Here I am" and trust that the Holy Spirit will move. So to walk a labyrinth, we treat it like fasting. Some people can fast and just feel hungry.

Bethany: so um,

Matthew: and that's a discipline of the body

Bethany: right

Matthew: but fasting can have a spiritual prayerful experience to it

Bethany: but you mentioned about a path, because John had mentioned about going for a walk

Matthew: yes

Bethany: now I've experienced that, going for a walk

Matthew: yes, so very similar. Very similar exercise. Both involve walking. and I would

Bethany: and both kind of a path

Matthew: yes, and I would encourage both. I think we should walk, just physical, it's good exercise to walk, um and I never answered Gerald well enough that night when he raised that question, you know why not just go

for a stroll, I get going for a stroll, when you go for a stroll it's easier for the mind to wander because you're always seeing new things.

Bethany: oh ok

Matthew: the path will keep you focused on this is where I'm going. And if your mind is focused on that, then you're free to think about what you need to be doing there.

Bethany: so maybe if I kept doing it more, um, it might help.

Matthew: as I said on the consent forms going into the study, there's no guarantees.

Bethany: no

Matthew: you can experience this that or the other, the same with the labyrinth. We are wired uniquely.

Bethany: but you can do Gospel contemplation with or without the labyrinth

Matthew: yes.

Bethany: the labyrinth is just a tool

Matthew: that's right

Bethany: right?

Matthew: yup. And the research has already been done that links walking and creativity. And it wasn't a spiritual thing at all, it was just science looking at ... how the brain works. So walking and creativity are linked, and the church has used a labyrinth for thousands of years for this purpose.

Bethany: so on a good side for the labyrinth, doing the one, the table one and shutting my eyes, and having God sort of, my finger was sort of walking around the labyrinth, but I couldn't see where I was going to go, that was kind of, neat. Because it's kind of like you know with God sometimes you go from point a to point b, but before you get to point b, c has happened you know, so sometimes you have to be open to the leading of the Spirit, and and you never knew where you were going to go.

Matthew: that's right, that's why I like it. Even if you know the path, and you can see it all, it's still a little bit disorienting

Bethany: and you want to get into the middle, faster.

Matthew: Have a look at the book, 101 paths to walk. [Both laugh]
(interview, Bethany)

This entire exchange is the result of participant bias, and without participant bias, I may not have had the opportunity for further conversation with Bethany about the spiritual discipline of labyrinths. After all of my teaching on labyrinths that took place during the small group, Bethany still needed help understanding the role of spiritual disciplines as a foundation for the use of a labyrinth.

Adam

The field notes show little response from Adam during the small group discussions, and during session eight he said that rather than focusing on the Gospel narrative for his time of contemplation, he was instead thinking about the toilets in the new washroom building project at camp. During the exit interview he said the first week was the only good week for him:

Adam: well the first week was the best, I actually thought it would get better but it actually got worse. The first week I could smell the sea, see the seagulls, could see the story.

Matthew: ok

Adam: I don't know, after that it was nothing really

Matthew: so what happened, why, what changed?

Adam: I don't know, I got tired, I was falling asleep, Sunday nights.
(interview, Adam)

He went on to comment that throughout the study period he was up late on Saturday nights because of work (sometimes until 3:00 AM).

Adam also compared the imaginative exercise with some recent reading that he had done from a book of New Age teaching that spoke of the power of visualization. Gospel contemplation is more than an exercise of imagining or an exercise of merely day dreaming. It is unclear if this participant understood the difference between New Age visualization and Gospel contemplation.

When asked about previous small groups, the small group that provided him with the clearest benefit was a Sunday School class that followed the morning service. My question to him was whether a contemplative small group experience, or a small group in general, would be better for him during the morning as opposed to Sunday evening at 7:00 PM. The on-going ministry question with this participant is to explore whether it was the inductive Bible study that made the Sunday School class a beneficial experience for him or whether it was the time of day that allowed him to be more alert and attentive, and therefore more receptive.

Ruth

Ruth is married to Adam and is also on the board at Holt FMC. She came to the exit interview with a prepared statement that she shared in response to my final question, “Is there anything else you would like to add?” Her detailed summary report is included in appendix N. In her summary she is able to identify what the Lord had said to her each week, the epiphany she had experienced, and the challenges she faced along the way.

Ruth described her faith by using the language of “spiritual maturity” and “spiritual walk.” She wants a small group that is engaging, strengthening, and

challenging. Spiritual maturity, for Ruth, means that she will be “involved with not only personal devotions but also corporately” (interview, Ruth). As part of her spiritual life, she values her accountability partner. She said that she was “eager to learn and try different approaches” and that she has a rich devotional life. In describing her devotional practice, Ruth was able to speak for over six minutes about all that she does for her spiritual life. Among her spiritual exercises, Ruth said that she regularly fasts, journals, worships through music, the reading of commentaries, and *Lectio Divina*.

Ruth has had many different small group experiences, including the Bible and book studies that involved John and Amy, a small group with staff at our local camp, and a small group led by my wife Joy. The small group led by Joy was for mothers, and Ruth described it as “diverse” and “very rewarding” (interview, Ruth). It was a small group that sometimes practiced silence, contemplation and *Lectio Divina*.

Ruth and I have had conversations about gospel contemplation prior to this study, and she had borrowed several books throughout the course of my D.Min program. She even read *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999) in advance of the small group meetings.

Like others in this study, Ruth experienced her own set of struggles. She said that she struggled with the idea of seeing God, even in the imagination:

...having that face to face kind of with God, or, Christ, I still struggle with that because of what Scripture talks about, you can't see the face of God and live...I don't want that kind of experience every day where I say wo is me and I just want to die, and that's too much, and so I still haven't embrace that kind but I certainly contemplate the scriptures, there's just a few different ways to do it. (interview, Ruth)

She also struggled with the group dynamic. While she respects each one who was part of the small group, she "...felt there were some people who just didn't understand what was going on and different dynamics I found distracting" (interview, Ruth). In referring to the struggles of her husband Adam, Ruth said, "I'm not afraid of Gospel contemplation, I don't see it as taking away from the word but just adding to it. So I was thankful that I had some previous practice with it, because it is very different from what we've been brought up with..." (interview, Ruth). Recognizing that she was facing distractions in the small group, Ruth said that she would practice the Gospel contemplation from Sunday night on the following Monday: "Every Monday when it was my fasting day and my day that I set aside, I would go over it again and I would go through the process again. And I found that lent itself well to having a deeper fuller experience" (interview, Ruth).

During the interview Ruth mentioned that she had always struggled with the passion narrative, and on a week that combined the passion narrative with some personal issues that had her feeling "weighted down" she experienced a spiritual breakthrough. The breakthrough did not occur Sunday night, or even on the following Monday. Her breakthrough was the result of spending a week in prayer. Her breakthrough was being able to come to terms with:

...seeing that the passion is all about the profane and the sacred being bound together, and and that's what it took for uh for Christ to go through what he had to go through for me to know that He paid the price and it was He alone who paid that price, and so so I'm I'm not afraid of my emotions because He has just given that to me to know that that price was a high price that he had to pay, and I can never, I cannot and should not

ever take lightly what Christ did and what He went through for me.
(interview, Ruth)

For Ruth, this breakthrough was worth the entire ten week sessions. Yet as she reports in Appendix N, she was able to receive something from the Lord for each week.

Before Ruth shared her prepared statement, she commented on the labyrinth, recognized that it was important for me, and said that "...it didn't seem to be working, but you kept talking about the labyrinth" (interview, Ruth).

Furthermore:

...people had so many hang ups with it. Like, ok, what I what it was just, something so foreign, and almost sacrilegious I might say, that that, we didn't know how to approach it even though you would speak of it, and speak well of it, and had spoken about it in church, it's just it's just, it was so hard to break those barriers down. So because I have, I have a dynamic devotion time, I wanted to be fair to it. But even me, I think I would have gained more, if I would have I think more guidance. You know, you know the ball, and throwing the ball? Even that, I'm like, I'm ok, I know what Matthew was saying and that, but I, it's just such a foreign idea, that I'm wondering if you would have entered into that more. And I know you were the almost like the onlooker to see. (interview, Ruth)

She had wondered if it would have helped if the group walked the labyrinth together, but in the end she "felt bad about that (the group's lack of engagement with the labyrinth) because I don't think we were able to arrive at a better place with that" (interview, Ruth). Our conversation together included a moment where Ruth described an outdoor walk that became a spiritual exercise:

Ruth: the trees had crystals, and I remember walking and just feeling like "ohh God." I was, it was just such a rich time with the Lord. So ya, one of the take aways was find the holiness in anything and everything. so that was one of my take aways when I think about that experience, like the tree that I still envision, and this was like 7 years ago, and I was just in awe of God and the ways that He works, and that was a sacred moment.

Matthew: I think all of life can be a sacred moment.

Ruth: yes, absolutely.

Matthew: so, with that understanding, walk a spiral path. [Ruth laughs]
Hop, skip and jump, throw a ball.

Ruth: ya

Matthew: God can speak to you through it. Imagine, imagine what God can say to you through it.

Like John, Ruth has an appreciation for nature, and a labyrinth in a garden setting may have been more meaningful to her than one in a church basement. Ruth was able to understand a walk as a spiritual discipline, but that did not translate into an appreciation for a labyrinth journey.

FINDINGS: TWO JOURNEY DISCIPLESHIP SURVEYS

The Journey Discipleship Survey (JDS) begins with participants identifying where they see themselves on a discipleship framework based on four mileposts. Appendix I, physical resources, has an image of this model of formation that was poster on display at Holt FMC. The results of the first survey are shown in table 3:

Table 3. JDS Survey #1

Level	Milepost	Count	%
1	Exploring a relationship with Jesus – I’m a seeker	0	0
2	Growing in relationship with Jesus – I’m a Jesus-follower	1	17
3	A close relationship with Jesus – I’m an active disciple; loving God and my neighbour	4	67
4	Jesus is the central relationship in my life – I’m a Jesus-centered, others-oriented disciple	1	17

The report after the second survey says, “If the same people filled out the survey in the second round it would seem to indicate some growth” (JDS #2 results).

Table four shows the results of the second survey:

Table 4. JDS Survey #2

Level	Milepost	Count	%
1	Exploring a relationship with Jesus – I’m a seeker	0	0
2	Growing in relationship with Jesus – I’m a Jesus-follower	0	0
3	A close relationship with Jesus – I’m an active disciple; loving God and my neighbour	4	67
4	Jesus is the central relationship in my life – I’m a Jesus-centered, others-oriented disciple	2	33

When presented with these results during the participant validation night, I asked whether the group thought that the person formally in Milepost two moved two levels ahead to join the Milepost four level, or whether two participants each moved a level up (Mileposts two to three and three to four respectively). John said that he thought the change in these two surveys represents “a natural progression” (field notes, validation). The rest of the group agreed with John’s interpretation. Ruth added that people have a “tendency to devalue self, and after ten weeks someone felt more comfortable” (field notes, validation).

The rest of the survey is divided up into two parts: “Core Beliefs and Attitudes” and “Disciplines / Practices that Help Me Grow.” Although the numerical values reported in the survey results are statistically insignificant, collectively they show a measure of overall growth in the group (see Appendix M). In the few examples where the scores were actually lower on the second survey, the report suggests:

a negative direction ... could be that the former MP2 person now sees themselves a MP3 and their beliefs are 'catching up.' It is good to remember here that none of these scores are lower than expected or outside what would be considered normal for these stages. (JDS #2)

This interpretation was affirmed during the participant validation evening. The final comment in the report after the second survey concludes with "...it does appear as though there has been positive movement in the living out of one's faith" (JDS #2). When my summary conclusion was given to the group, and mentioned that the survey feedback states that overall there has been positive movement in the living out of one's faith, there was no disagreement from the group.

FINDINGS: FIELD NOTES

Field notes were coded according to four categories (overall change, struggles, missed opportunities, and evidence of impact) that helped summarize the ten weeks of small group sessions into a narrative. These codes represent elements of a narrative. The overall changes note a tendency within the group to practice inductive Bible study. Tension arises as early as the second week as the group is surprised that there can be different views of the same event in the Gospel. The overall change shows the decrease of inductive Bible study and the increase of Gospel contemplation as the weeks progressed. My own summary notes of session five state, "this could be the turning point of the study" and in session six Ruth shared her own observation of progress within the group. Although the group seemed to become more comfortable with Gospel contemplation, tension or difficulties can still be found throughout the entire ten-week project.

My focus on field notes and the effort that went into accurately capturing the content of the discussion meant that sometimes meaning was overlooked. Although there is always a benefit of hindsight, my responses to some of the comments made by participants were either a generic affirmation or a general conversational drift onto the next topic. Missed opportunities represent moments that would have been better served with a follow up question for further reflection. Each participant, and the rest of the group as a whole, would have benefited from deeper conversation when these comments were made.

The struggles that were identified in the field notes represent moments when participants had questions about the practice of Gospel contemplation or the use of the labyrinth. Some of the struggle that was part of this research was a result of learning a new spiritual discipline. In trying to move the participants away from their understanding of “Bible study” I used the language of prayer, and yet this study was also redefining their practice of prayer. The struggles that were found throughout the study reveal the fact that people need constant assistance and affirmation when learning a new practice.

Significant moments of impact that were shared by members of this study included Ruth, with tears in her eyes, repeating “Thank you” during week seven, and her description of her time of contemplation as something she “...couldn’t adequately tell. Powerful. An exercise in totally being with Jesus” (field notes, week seven). John frequently linked his personal Gospel contemplation with the mission of the local church. Bethany had tears in her eyes during the contemplation on week five (Jesus blessing the children). She had prayed that

Jesus would touch her, and she reported a physical manifestation and felt a hand on her head (field notes, week five). Amy often had a word from the Lord through her time of contemplation, and Lillian showed me her journal from week six as that evening's session closed. Lillian's breath prayer was written out and her Gospel contemplation was relevant for a difficult life situation that she was facing.

The findings from the field notes were used to construct a narrative that was shared with members of the small group during the participant validation session. A good narrative has a plot that is driven by tension and the response of characters. My own role as researcher was included in the narrative as a character who responded to the tension that was driving the basic plot. The narrative was one that described some of the *allēlōn* that existed within this group. Had I proposed an alternative form of data collection instead of personally recording field notes, I could have practiced the Gospel contemplation with the participants of the small group. Since my presence in the small group was more of an observer rather than a participant, during the group conversation I could only refer to my own contemplation based on the personal retreat that I had at the monastery while developing the initial proposal.

FINDINGS: PARTICIPANT VALIDATION

The participation validation took place in February and I began the evening by offering the group my sincere gratitude for their involvement in this study and one of the first questions that I asked was whether they thought this small group experience made a difference. Lillian was the first to speak, and

although she considered herself to be quiet, she was quick to say, “Yes. Not all the time, but since we met, I continue reading and am closer to the Lord” (field notes, participant validation). Participants were asked what they felt worked, or did not work, and what from the study might contribute to the ongoing ministry at Holt FMC. With regards to the contribution to ministry at Holt FMC, three participants responded. Amy said, “spiritual growth in any individual will impact those around them.” Her sister Bethany said, “need commitment”. She was disappointed others weren’t able to participate. “Ten weeks is too much.” Adam then said, “in this small group, make it or don’t. Attendance doesn’t hurt the group.” (field notes, participant validation). The responses of Bethany and Adam are similar to what John had shared during his exit interview about the number of small group sessions.

Participants were invited to assess my provisional conclusions from the coded field notes, the results of the survey, and the interviews. I provided the group with some explanation of qualitative research and narrative methodology. Before reading to the small group the narrative based on all of the data that I had gathered, I encouraged them to consider the following story from the perspective of abductive analysis where “...fit, plausibility, and relevance ...constitute the three criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research” (Tavory 2014, 105). I then read the story that summarized our experience together. Their response to my narrative summary offered no corrections to my narrative summary and they agreed with my provisional conclusion that Gospel contemplation is suitable for

this Wesleyan context and leads to spiritual formation. To my narrative summary they responded with “Amen.”

Interpretations

The labyrinth is a model that summarizes the results and the findings in this research project. Navigating a labyrinth requires perseverance, the journey may contain surprises, and the path can be a shared spiritual exercise that people walk at their own unique pace.

When I created this proposal, I anticipated a greater engagement with the labyrinth than what I observed. Two possible explanations for why this group seemed to have a negative reaction to the labyrinth provide some context for the data. The first reason why there were so many questions and concerns about the labyrinth can be described as an oversaturation of the concept. During the second year of the D.Min. program, I preached a sermon series based on my model of spiritual formation. Prior to this study, the congregation was very familiar with my interest and research in labyrinths. The journal given to each participant included two pages of introduction, one of which contained teaching on labyrinths. After the first week of general introduction, I was confused by the lack of engagement with the labyrinth, and as a result my opening comments included teaching on labyrinths during seven of the following nine weeks. The more I encouraged the practice of walking a labyrinth for contemplation, the more the group seemed to resist the idea. As already mentioned, Amy said in the exit interview that a way to improve the small group experience would be to “dial down the labyrinth.” Dial down does not necessarily mean eliminate.

Another reason why there were so many questions about the labyrinth was discovered during the public presentation of my research at Maple Grove Free Methodist Camp. After I presented my topic of “labyrinths in the life of the faith community”, I had a participant in the audience compare the journey to the center of a labyrinth with the physical response that is made during an altar call at an evangelistic meeting. Although I had frequently explained the intended use of a labyrinth throughout the ten weeks of my research project, what I lacked was a shared metaphor that would help the participants better understand the purpose of a labyrinth. A journey to an altar is recognized as a spiritual response, and the altar is a significant location for prayer. The analogy of the altar call may have helped the participants in my research project better understand the purpose of the labyrinth and the significance of moving to a center for contemplation.

The location of the labyrinth also created issues for the small group. During the exit interview, Bethany said that she did not want to take off her shoes to walk the labyrinth on the cold church basement floor, while John commented that he could see the value of a labyrinth in a monastery setting, or one that was outdoors in a garden setting. The participants in the small group were clear about their preference to practice the contemplation in the prayer room, but the canvas labyrinth was located in the church hall which is normally used for potluck meals. The location of the labyrinth may have been an issue for members of the small group because it was in an unfamiliar setting for prayer.

Perseverance is required when walking a labyrinth and perseverance was necessary in this small group project because of the tendency of the participants to

resort to inductive Bible study methods. One of the challenges identified in this study was the result of not only redefining Bible study but also prayer. Although the group had a high degree of comfort with one another, it took several weeks for them to become comfortable with some new spiritual exercises. Every participant referred to struggles and yet no one withdrew from the study. This research project was a demonstration of perseverance of both myself as a researcher and pastor, and also that of the participants.

All feedback from the participants contain a degree of participant bias because I was their pastor. Although not a surprise, Bethany revealed a measure of participant bias when she said that part of her motivation in participating in this study was to support her pastor. Bethany, John and Ruth all made statements acknowledging that I personally value labyrinths as a spiritual exercise. Everyone in this small group had a level of comfort with each other and familiarity with me. Results would most likely be different if the group were comprised of strangers, or if I was unknown to the group.

What was surprising from the findings were the various references, during the exit interviews and the validation evening, about occasional small group attendance or short-term small group studies. Cultural values of convenience and comfort are reflected in the desire for a small group that lasts only six weeks.

Another finding from this study that is similar to the experience of walking a labyrinth is that participants all share a similar path and yet each journeys at their own pace. Of the six participants, Ruth and Adam are perhaps two extreme examples. Through the ten-week small group study, Ruth

experienced a spiritual breakthrough and received an epiphany, while her husband Adam fell asleep. John called himself a details and numbers person, while his mother Lillian is someone who self-identifies as someone who is quiet. This small group experience was new for everyone involved, and yet even John was able to practice Gospel contemplation, and Lillian, who is private and does not journal, did not hesitate one night to show me what she had written. The book *Friendship with Jesus* says, “What happens for different people varies widely, even when they pray the same story. Each of us comes to prayer with his or her unique history, experiences, and needs, and our minds and imaginations operate in different ways” (Miller 1999, 21). Not everyone is visual in their imagination, and some may sense the emotions of a scene from the Gospels or focus on words. For those suffering with aphantasia, an exercise of visio divina might be a way to adapt the practice of Gospel contemplation. The field notes and the exit interviews record the diversity of experiences even in a group of six people who are practicing contemplation of the same Gospel text. Some were able to practice Gospel contemplation easier than others, but everyone who engaged in the practice could respond with identifying a positive benefit from the experience.

Outcomes

When looking at the results of the field notes, the two surveys, the interviews, and the feedback received through the participant validation, the data suggests that this Gospel contemplation experience has contributed to the spiritual formation of the participants of this group. It will take time to appreciate the

effect of this study on the lives of each participant, and it may only be fully revealed in eternity.

An immediate outcome from this small group project was Amy's willingness to lead a Sunday school class and combine the typical inductive Bible study with an exercise of Gospel contemplation.

This small group experience was not only new for the participants but new for me as well. If I were to repeat this project, I would find another source of data collection other than personally recording field notes. I found it to be a frustrating experience to accurately document what was happening while simultaneously being attentive to the individual (and to the activity of the Holy Spirit). The decision to personally record field notes also created a situation where I felt unable to participate in Gospel contemplation with the small group. It was Ruth who said that she felt like my constant recording of field notes made her feel like a guinea pig, and that the group would have benefited more from my active leadership as opposed to me being a passive observer. There was more need for group spiritual direction in this project than what I had anticipated in my proposal.

In the model of spiritual formation from chapter three, the section on the Church explores the biblical vocabulary of *allēlōn*. In group spiritual direction, it is imperative that one is sensitive to the extent that members of the group relate to one another. I did not enter this research project fully appreciating the impact of the connectedness within the group. It is clear that an individual's ability to practice Gospel contemplation can be affected by their relationship with others in the group.

The official board of Holt FMC is presently discerning what kind of small groups should be offered, and an obvious question that needs to be addressed is both the length and commitment to a small group. The question about the length of time for a small group exposes a challenge in designing a similar small group for the future. The ten-week format was a limiting factor that prevented some people from committing to this small group. Would a small group practicing Gospel contemplation be effective if it only lasted for five weeks instead of ten? In this study it took several weeks for the participants in the small group to become familiar with the practice. During the exit interview, Amy said what would have helped was:

...a first session that was more of an introductory kind of discussion about the types of things, not getting actually right down into like the guided meditation and that sort of thing but more like saying 'these are the types of things that we'll do during a session, this is what we're reading, this is how we're going to read it, this is how you should take it, this is how you shouldn't take it.' A bit of a prep session I think would have been good. Where you didn't actually get into the detailed guided meditation.
(interview, Amy)

Would a single introductory session, one that was strictly teaching, provide the understanding in the small group that was eventually achieved after four weeks of this research project? For the effectiveness of Gospel contemplation in a small group setting, it is essential that a basic competency develops as soon as possible.

I experienced disappointment that the labyrinth was not well received or understood, but have come to recognize why it was a struggle for the members of this small group. Although I am aware of the danger of oversaturating the concept, the labyrinth was available for the congregation to use during Holy Week (and a children's Sunday school class made very good use of it).

This was my first time leading a small group in a weekly exercise of Gospel contemplation. Although this research project was met with challenges, on the Monday morning after the final small group session I experienced a measure of depression as I lamented the conclusion of these weekly meetings. Having learned from this experience, I am better equipped to lead it once again. I am hopeful that I will have the opportunity to lead a similar group in the near future.

After ten weeks of a small group practicing Gospel contemplation, some participants said that they have learned to listen to God and to read Scripture a little slower. Others could identify a word from God that they received through their imaginative contemplation. The hoped-for outcome was that this spiritual exercise would be beneficial in the process of spiritual formation. If the struggle of defaulting to inductive Bible study that occurred during the first few weeks of this small group persisted throughout the entire program, then after ten weeks it would be evident that this spiritual discipline may not be suitable for this particular Wesleyan context. It was a gradual process, but what was hoped for when the proposal was made to the board became evident during the final few sessions. Participants began to practice Gospel contemplation and they benefited from the experience.

Although the text *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999) says very clearly in the introduction that people can experience Gospel contemplation in a variety of ways, I entered the first small group meeting with my preconceived notions and expectations of what the participants should experience. From observing a small group of six people practicing Gospel contemplation over a ten-week period, I

now have a deeper appreciation for the diversity that is possible within this spiritual discipline.

The phrase I kept repeating to the group was “What did you say to Jesus and what did He say to you?”, but sometimes the experience of Gospel contemplation results in an encounter with Jesus that is not auditory, or a contemplation where someone hears ‘a word from God’ based on His presence alone. The effect of Gospel contemplation and a sanctified imagination may even be manifest in a physical encounter with God akin to the famous Methodist line of a “heart strangely warmed.”

CONCLUSION

This small group experience has equipped me to lead a similar small group and I am better prepared to address the issues and challenges that would be present in another small group new to Gospel contemplation. The spiritual discipline of Gospel contemplation can also be used in the ministry of healing prayer and therefore I am better equipped to offer pastoral care to individuals.

The starting point for introducing Gospel contemplation into a Wesley context is to recognize, that in this tradition, the means of grace are unlimited. Wesleyan theology often refers to the instituted and prudential means of grace. Both Gospel contemplation and the use of a labyrinth are examples of prudential means of grace, and therefore a sanctified imagination is a legitimate avenue for spiritual formation and discernment. It is also worth referring to the theology of John Wesley where the vocabulary of spiritual senses is found in our own tradition.

This research project relied on a previously published resource, *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller, 1999). Earlier in the study, when people reverted to inductive Bible study methods, the guided meditation was being used in place of Scripture. Participants studied the guided meditation from *Friendship with Jesus* (Miller 1999) as if they were studying the Bible, instead of using it as a prompt for prayer. An interesting question to explore in a future study would be to observe the Gospel contemplation in a group that does not have access to a guided meditation. Bethany said one week that she was distracted by a word in the guided meditation (field notes, week seven). There exist other resources for

Gospel contemplation, including audio recording or .mp3, and it is also possible to practice Gospel contemplation with only the Scripture text. These alternative forms of Gospel contemplation were not part of this study.

The participants in this group were those who responded to the invitation to be part of the small group research project. The ten-week commitment may have been a limiting factor that prevented some people from the congregation in participating. The demographics of the participants who were part of this group reflect a “Wesleyan context” and are products of many years of ministry at Holt FMC (JDS Survey demographics, Appendix M). Not only have all the participants in this small group attended Holt FMC for over twenty-five years, everyone involved in this small group is also Caucasian. The group lacked a multi-cultural perspective and due to the demographics of this small group, I was not able to observe how someone new to the Methodist tradition, a new Christian or even a seeker might experience this spiritual discipline. The suitability of Gospel contemplation for a new believer was a question raised by John, both during his exit interview and during the participant validation evening. When concerns were raised during the evening of participant validation about a new believer practicing Gospel contemplation, being “true to Scripture” and cultural relativism, Ruth responded by saying, “There are things in place. Scripture, the Body of Christ (the church) to guide, plus our leader and pastor. A new Christian could practice Gospel contemplation with guidance and support” (field notes, validation).

Gospel contemplation is a spiritual exercise that submits the imagination to the authority of the Holy Spirit. The book *Friendship with Jesus* says “Practicing this form of prayer does not require deep knowledge of the Bible or of Christian teaching, although such knowledge can enrich our prayer” (Miller 1999, 13). The dynamics of this project may have been entirely different with greater diversity in the demographic profile of this small group.

A consideration of personality types was beyond the scope of this project. The JDS survey did not include temperament among the demographic profile of a church. Personality assessments can be a useful tool for spiritual direction. Prior research on the MBTI personality types and spiritual exercises has pointed out that “All indicators point to a close relationship between our innate temperament and the type of prayer best suited to our needs” (Michael and Norrissey 1991, 14). Gospel contemplation is traditionally an Ignatian practice, and according to the above study on spiritual exercises and personality types, “The Ignatian style of prayer can be utilized by all temperaments, although people of the SP (“Sensors-Perceiving”) and NT (“Intuitive-Thinking”) temperament may have some difficulty with this type of prayer. However, Ignatian Prayer best suits the SJ (“Sensing-Judging”) temperament...” (Michael and Norrissey 1999, 46-47). Questions about personality type could also be applied to findings in this study about the labyrinth. Are certain personality types better suited to a contemplative labyrinth walk more than others? Another resource, *Sacred Pathways* (Thomas 2009), explores differing spiritual temperaments. The effectiveness of this

research project would vary based on the personality and spiritual temperaments represented in a particular small group.

Two important changes to my ministry have come from this research project. The labyrinth was always an optional resource for the members of the small group to use, and few made use of it. The book *Walking the Labyrinth* (Scholl 2014) is an example of someone who walked a labyrinth while practicing a form of Gospel contemplation. I have had meaningful experiences in a labyrinth, and previous research demonstrated the relationship between walking and creativity. The lack of engagement with the labyrinth by members of the small group confused me, and the findings and interpretations provide me with understanding and context for those results. The change to my ministry because of this study is that I know I need to be more cautious about my excitement and enthusiasm on topics that may be foreign to others.

I know that I can still use the labyrinth in my ministry context. A children's Sunday school teacher has requested that I would make the labyrinth available for her class. As a resource for bereavement, the labyrinth can facilitate conversation about the grief process. C.S. Lewis described his own grief journey by saying "Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral? (Lewis 2000, 56). I have met spiritual directors who use a labyrinth as part of their practice to help individuals center. There are many points of application where a labyrinth can be helpful in ministry, but I will only use this resource as the Holy Spirit prompts me. A spiral curriculum introduces an idea

and then revisits the same idea at a later point. The use of a labyrinth in ministry does not need to be a continual practice.

This first change to my ministry needs to be balanced with the second. I have served at Holt FMC since 2006, and previous small groups have all looked the same. It has been a few years since there has been a small group meeting Sunday evening, and several participants said that just being in a small group was of value in and of itself. The process of making a proposal, and then leading a small group into new spiritual disciplines, has given me an increased motivation to continue exploring new ideas. The collection of various forms of data was essential in evaluating the effectiveness of this new approach to small groups. Without the field notes or data from the surveys, the exit interviews alone would have given me a limited perspective on what occurred during the ten weeks of this pilot project. This study has helped me to appreciate qualitative research in a ministry setting. While there have been some new ideas introduced at Holt FMC in the past few years, this project was possible because of the trust the congregation had in their pastor and their willingness to try something completely new. That willingness and trust of this board and congregation is a valuable asset in ministry. It is a gift that should be used in service of the kingdom of God.

The previous three years of study in this Doctor of Ministry program have been like walking a labyrinth. The first time I walked a labyrinth I began with questions, doubt and uncertainty, yet as I walked the labyrinth, it became for me a means of grace and an avenue for discovery. A labyrinth path leads to a center

which is a place of reflection and insight, and then as the journey is reversed the entrance becomes the exit.

The entrance becomes the exit. I sought out a spiritual director during a time of discernment prior to making an application for study in this program. I have been returned to a point of discernment. The shape of the labyrinth evokes the compass and the clock. I knew three years ago that it was time to begin a new academic program. The question is being asked once again, “What time is it?”

The journey into a labyrinth begins with a sense of *telos* drawing one into the path and towards the center. *Telos* was aroused in me through the spiritual formation that occurred during my childhood and through the reading of Lewis who described the idea of *sehnsucht*. In chapter four of this thesis I explored the possibility of Gospel contemplation in a Wesley context. Francis Asbury referred to a spiritual *telos* or his own sense of *sehnsucht* when he spoke of, “...Christ in me the hope of glory: ... a pleasing, painful sensation of spiritual hunger and thirst for more of God” (Coe and Strobel 2019, 115). *Telos* was the foundation of the small group research project in chapter five. Spiritual formation is “...a Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God” (Howard 2018, 18). Participants who practice Gospel contemplation have matured in their relationship with God. The research project was a concentrated effort to contribute to the spiritual growth of myself and those who are part of Holt FMC.

When I was looking for approval and support from the board prior to applying to the D.Min program I had said, “This program was designed to make me a better pastor. I will grow and you will have the opportunity to grow with me through an applied and relevant research project.” The D.Min program as a whole, and my research project in particular, have been part of that Spirit and human led process where individuals and a community matured in relationship with God. I have gained leadership skills, developed in preaching, expanded my approach to pastoral care and developed personal rhythms of a rule of life that keep me spiritually healthy.

The metaphor of a labyrinth describes the process of spiritual formation, my life in general, my experience in the D.Min program, and findings from my research project. In every aspect of this project, perseverance is a major theme. The path is not linear, but the long spiral path requires perseverance. The path can at times be disorienting, but it may also contain surprises. Surprises can be found in each chapter of this thesis, whether it is my encounter with an angel, the model of formation which becomes a two-way street, the similarity that exists between two very different church leaders (Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley), or the small group research project. Spiritual formation involves surprises for God said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” (Isaiah 55:8).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
SUSANNA WESLEY'S PRAYER

The reference to Susanna Wesley's Prayer in the book *Streams of Living Water* is only a partial quote. This prayer is included here as an expression of the incarnational spirituality that is part of the family context in my model of spiritual formation.

A Plea for Growth in Prayer

Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church, or closet, nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in Thy presence. So may my every word and action have a moral content.

As defects and infirmities betray themselves in the daily accidents and common conversations of life, grant me Thy grace, O lord, that I may watch over, regulate and govern them. Enable me so to know myself and those with whom I have to do, that I may conform to the precepts of the Gospel and train myself to those rules of wisdom and virtue of which I am capable.

Help me to discern the proper season and the just occasion of every virtue, and then to apply myself to attain it, by exercising it in those beneficent activities which, for want of due reflection, may not seem of any great importance.

May all the happenings of my life prove useful and beneficial to me. May all things instruct me and afford me an opportunity of exercising some virtue and daily learning and growing toward Thy likeness, let the world go which way it will. Amen. (Kline 1980, 42)

APPENDIX B
SISTER FAUSTINA, PRAYER OF MERCY

This prayer expresses the spiritual formation through works of mercy.

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbor's souls and come to their rescue.

Help me, O Lord, that my ears may be merciful, so that I may give heed to my neighbor's needs and not be indifferent to their pains and moanings.

Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful, so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbor, but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all.

Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful and filled with good deeds, so that I may do only good to my neighbors and take upon myself the more difficult and toilsome tasks.

Help me, O Lord, that my feet may be merciful, so that I may hurry to assist my neighbor, overcoming my own fatigue and weariness. My true rest is the service of my neighbor.

Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbor. I will refuse my heart to no one. I will be sincere even with those who, I know, will abuse my kindness. And I will lock myself up in the most merciful Heart of Jesus. I will bear my own suffering in silence. Your mercy, O Lord, rest upon me.

You Yourself command me to exercise three degrees of mercy. The first: the act of mercy, of whatever kind. The second: the word of mercy – if I cannot carry out a work of mercy, I will assist by my words. The third: prayer – if I cannot show mercy by my deeds or words, I can always do so by prayer. My prayer reaches out even there where I cannot reach out physically. O my Jesus, transform me into Yourself, for you alone can do all things. (Kasper 2013, 144-145)

APPENDIX C
CHARLES WESLEY POEM ON SCRIPTURE

This poem reflects the formational aspect of the reading of Scripture.

Whether the Word be Preached or Read (1783)

(2 Cor. 3:5-6)

Whether the Word be preached or read,
no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letter dead;
unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear
and see its heavenly character.

Unmixed with faith, the Scripture gives
No comfort, life, or light to see,
but me in darker darkness leaves,
implunged in deeper misery,
overwhelmed with nature's sorest ills.
The Spirit saves, the letter kills.

If God enlighten through his Word,
I shall my kind Enlightener bless;
but void and naked of my Lord,
what are all verbal promises?
Nothing to me, till faith divine
inspire, inspeak, and make them mine.

Jesus, the appropriating grace
'tis on sinners to bestow.
Open mine eyes to see thy face;
open my heart thyself to know.
And then I through thy Word obtain
sure present, and eternal gain.

(Gunter, Stephen, Jones, Campbell, Miles, and Maddox 1997, 7)

APPENDIX D RECRUITMENT PROCESS

This research project begins with third-party support. An announcement will be made during a Sunday morning worship service at Holt Free Methodist Church inviting people to participate in this research project. The following script will be read either by (names redacted). (Name redacted) will be the one who will organize the small group and submit the list of names of each participant.

We would like to try a new approach to small groups at Holt FMC. There is a way to read the Bible, and using your imagination, you make it a prayer where you respond to God. A small group will meet Sunday evenings, beginning September 23rd, to practice Gospel contemplation.

The small group will begin with a check-in and welcome. There will be a reading from the Gospel of Mark, followed by a time for settling or focusing on what has just been read. There will be a second reading of the same passage with a guided meditation. During this second reading you will have the opportunity to walk a labyrinth as you do your own personal reflection. Handouts and papers will be provided so that you can keep a journal to record your thoughts and prayers. The evening will end with a group discussion to share about the experience and insights gained.

This small group is part of a research project that will include an anonymous survey (one at the start and one at the end) and conversation about your experience.

In January or February, the group will meet once again for a single follow up session.

For more information about this small group project, speak with Pastor Matthew, or see (designated board member) who has letters of invitation and the consent forms.

APPENDIX E
LETTER OF INVITATION TO
PARTICIPATE IN A SMALL GROUP STUDY

September 2018

Dear Church Family,

I want to begin by thanking you for your support of my ongoing education. As you know, for the past three years I have been studying spiritual formation (how we grow in the faith). During the second year of my program I took a course called “Engaging Scripture” and in that class I learned about Gospel contemplation. Gospel contemplation is a way to use the imagination and experience a Gospel story as if you were actually present with Jesus. The reading of Scripture then becomes a prayer.

In this, my third and final year of my program, I now get to apply what I’ve been learning to a ministry project. I shared my project idea with the board, and I’m excited to invite you to participate in a small group that will practice Gospel contemplation (and walk a labyrinth). The purpose of this study is to see if this is a format that we can use for a small group at Holt FMC.

This fall there will be a small group that will meet Sunday nights (from September 23rd until December 2nd). Each week I’ll make notes during the small group to keep a record of how the evening went. The small group will respond to an anonymous survey at the beginning and end of the study, and then in December I’d like to meet with each participant for a one on one conversation so I can hear what you thought about this small group experience. That conversation should only take about 30 minutes. In January or February, I’ll invite the small group back together for a final meeting where I’ll present results of the survey. During that meeting I hope to get the group’s response to my own conclusions. Participation is voluntary and your personal information will remain confidential.

Everything I’ll be doing as a researcher is similar to all that I do as a pastor. You can ask me questions at any time during this study and you can choose to end your participation at any point.

If you are interested in joining this small group and being part of this study, please speak with (Name redacted) who has copies of the consent form.

In Him,

Pastor Matthew.

APPENDIX F CONSENT FORM

This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval through the Research Ethics Board of Tyndale University, College & Seminary.

Study period: September 23rd 2018 to February 28th, 2019

Principle Investigator: Matthew McEwen (researcher).
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Mark Chapman.

You are invited to participate in a research study. Questions about your rights in participating in this study can be directed to Pastor Matthew or to the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale, reb@tyndale.ca

Purpose: This research project involves a small group that engages the Bible with a special focus on the imagination. Following a reading of Scripture there will be an opportunity to walk a labyrinth. Labyrinths are a simple path for prayer. Both imaginative prayer and labyrinths have been used in the Church for centuries, and yet they are relatively new to the Free Methodist Church. This research seeks to expand the practice of small groups at Holt FMC.

Procedure: If you consent to participate in this research project, you will be part of a small group that will meet weekly, fill out an anonymous survey both in September and in December, and participate in a conversation with Pastor Matthew to summarize the overall experience.

The small group meeting will begin with a general welcome and sharing about the past week. Each week will include a reading from the Gospel of Mark, followed by a time of focusing through the use of silence, music or other medium. The group will then move to a larger room where there is a labyrinth (a path for walking and praying). The same passage of Scripture will be read a second time with added details to help guide the imagination. Handouts with the Scripture passage and questions for journal reflection will be provided. The small group meeting will end with a group discussion about the evening's experience. Sharing in any small group setting is always optional.

During the month of January or February there will be a feedback session where members of the small group will be able to hear the results of the two surveys and respond to what I think are the possible outcomes of this project.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are few and minimal. The practice of Gospel contemplation can evoke a range of emotions through the use of the imagination. The focus of this imaginative exercise is based on the person and work of Jesus as presented in the Gospel; therefore, the risk of experiencing

negative emotions is low. Participation is voluntary, and at any time the practice can be ended.

Benefits: While there are no guaranteed benefits from participating in this study, it may be possible to experience a sanctified imagination, gain a new method for prayer and Bible study, and discover personal insights. Any or all of these possible benefits may lead to a greater relationship with God, self, and others. You will be provided with a weekly handout that contains the Scripture passage and questions for journal reflection. Each week you will also receive 5 sheets of paper which will become the personal journal used through this study.

Anonymity in reporting and confidentiality will be kept. Written records will be kept for 1 year, in a locked cabinet, and then destroyed. Digital records and audio recordings will be saved on an encrypted USB that will either be in use or stored in the in the same locked cabinet.

Results of the anonymous Journey Discipleship Survey may be used for future purposes in the Free Methodist Church in Canada. Paper copies of the two surveys will be destroyed upon completion of data entry.

Your participation in this study is voluntary; and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

All research will be conducted at Holt Free Methodist Church.

There are no plans to re-contact participants for follow-up sessions or subsequent related studies. Results of the study will be published as part of the D.Min academic requirements.

There is an institutional relationship between the researcher and participants. I am pastor and employee of Holt FMC. As pastor I am subject to the direction of the Free Methodist Church in Canada. All research is consistent with the duties and responsibilities of the appointment by the FMCiC to the position of pastor at Holt FMC. (Name redacted), delegate for Holt FMC, will select the participants for the small group and will present me with the list of names of all individuals interested in this project.

I have read and understood the relevant information in this document, I understand that I may ask questions at any time in the future, and I offer my free consent to research participation by printing and signing my name on the lines below.

Name (please print)

(Signature)

(Date)

**APPENDIX G
NON-DISCLOSURE DATA MANAGEMENT
AGREEMENT**

**PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY FROM EVERYONE WITH ACCESS
TO RESEARCH DATA RELATED TO THE JOURNEY DISCIPLESHIP
SURVEY**

The purpose of this document is to ensure ethical behavior in research through informed agreement to comply with the measures for privacy and confidentiality set out in the research protocol for this project, as approved by the Tyndale Seminary (REB).

**I AGREE that I will protect the privacy of our research participants.
I AGREE that all information relating research participants should be kept confidential.
I WILL USE the information accessed only as needed to do my job.
Paper records of the survey will be shredded upon completion of data entry.**

Any information gathered from the survey can only be used for the purpose of this project or for use in the Free Methodist Church as it relates to the Journey Discipleship Survey in comparison with other congregations that have done the same survey.

I WILL NOT DIVULGE confidential information nor allow access by unauthorized persons.

By signing this document, I agree that I have read, understand and will comply with this agreement:

Name: _____ (please print)

Project: Sanctified Imagination: Gospel Contemplation for a Wesleyan Small Group

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX H DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENTS

Data from this study was collected in three forms. Field notes were created based on my own weekly observation of the group's activity. Secondly, the Journey Discipleship Survey (Appendix J) provided a report about the state of personal spiritual practices in the small group. This anonymous survey was completed in person both at the start and the conclusion of the study. Participants placed their surveys in an envelope which was delivered to an administrative assistant with the FMCiC for data entry, thus maintaining confidentiality. The administrative assistant signed the nondisclosure and data management agreement (Appendix G) prior to receiving the survey responses. Finally, the semi-structured exit interview provided me with the narrative of the participant's experience (see Appendix K for my semi-structured exit interview guidelines). Those conversations were recorded for an accurate transcript. When needed, additional data was collected after using the informal feedback script (appendix L).

APPENDIX I PHYSICAL RESOURCES



Canvas labyrinth 20x20.

This labyrinth was created by Shelly De Silva, following the directions available online:

<https://heatherplett.com/2014/10/make-inexpensive-portable-labyrinth/> (last accessed May 24, 2019)



Table top labyrinth similar to the one used in this research project.



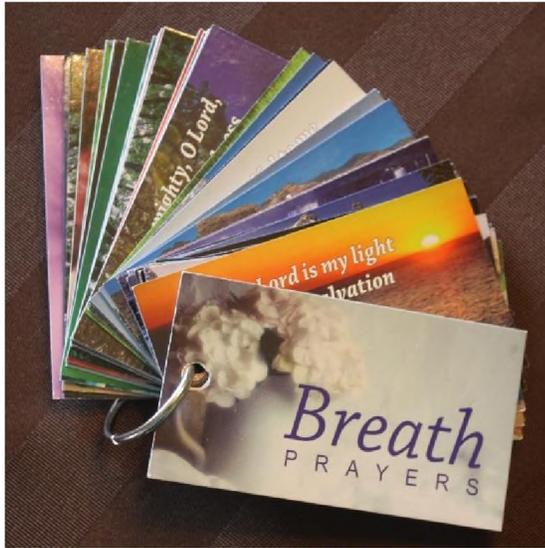
Sand labyrinth (Artress, Lauren. 2000. *The Sand Labyrinth Kit: Meditation at Your Fingertips*. Boston, MA: Journey Editions).



Rembrandt, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." Week Four, participants received an 8x10 reprint of this painting during the time of centering.

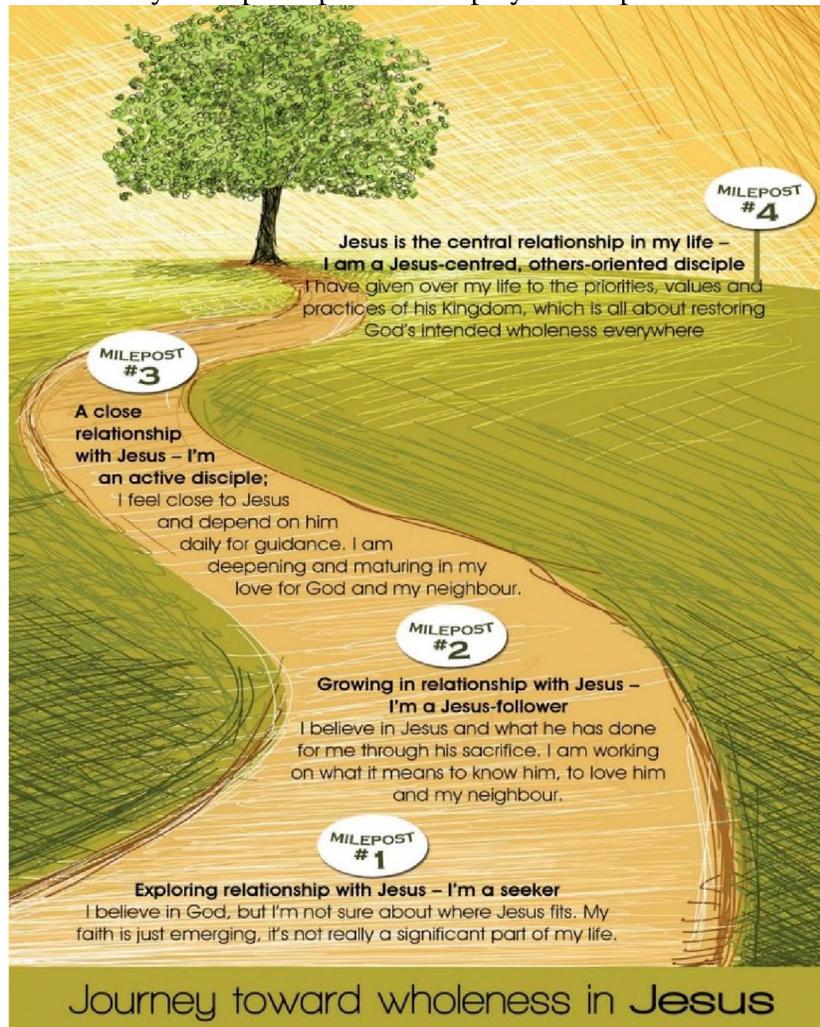


A prayer rope, or Chotky, donated by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Archangel Michael, in Bradford, Ontario. Each participant received a prayer rope on week seven for the time of centering.



Breath prayer cards. Each card has a verse from the NIV translation. Prepared by David Sherbino, 2006. Tyndale Seminary & Cornerstone Community Church.

The Journey Discipleship Model displayed as a poster on the wall at Holt FMC.



Other physical resources:

A basin of water and a towel were available on week eight. During the time of centering, participants were invited to dip their hands in the water and dry them on the towel.

Participants received a duo-tang at the start of the study, and each week they were provided with a handout that had the Scripture reference for the evening plus five sheets lined paper. This duo-tang served as their journal throughout the study. Participants were also given their own copy of the guided meditation. Song sheets were distributed whenever music was used for centering (weeks two, three, five, nine and ten). On week ten, each participant was given a tennis ball to use on the labyrinth.

APPENDIX J
THE JOURNEY DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

Permission to publish this survey was granted through an email received May 01, 2019 from Marc McAlister, director of Church Health (FMCiC).

THE Journey DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

The Free Methodist Church in Canada

INTEGRATED DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

We recognize that all of us are on a journey. This survey is designed to help our church know where you are on this journey and which practices you use to encourage your growth toward loving God and your neighbours. None of us have “fully arrived” at Christian maturity and some of us are at early stages in our spiritual journey; please be as honest as possible so we know how to support you on the journey (Philippians 3:12-14).

Part 1 – Personal Information

Please do not leave these blank!

Age _____ Female _____ Male _____

Estimate years as Christian believer _____

Estimate years since baptism _____

Estimate years as part of this congregation _____

Do you belong to a small group Yes _____ No _____

Part 2 - Where are you on the Journey?

Please indicate where you would place yourself on the Journey to Wholeness in Christ...

Exploring a relationship with Jesus – I'm a seeker	Growing in relationship with Jesus – I'm a Jesusfollower	A close relationship with Jesus – I'm an active disciple; loving God and my neighbour	Jesus is the central relationship in my life – I'm a Jesuscentred, othersoriented disciple
<p>I believe in God, but I'm not sure about where Jesus fits. My faith is just emerging, it's not really a significant part of my life.</p> <p>This is me! _____</p>	<p>I believe in Jesus and what he has done for me. I am working on what it means to know him and to be an active disciple, including noticing the needs of others.</p> <p>This is me! _____</p>	<p>I feel really close to Jesus and depend on him daily for guidance. I know that I am deepening and maturing my understanding and relationship with him, including his heart of compassion for others.</p> <p>This is me! _____</p>	<p>Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do. I actively reorganize my priorities around Kingdom values and practices, I am others centred.</p> <p>This is me! _____</p>

Part 3 - Personal Christian Growth – this section measures core beliefs and attitudes that promote Christian growth as well as your level of engagement with spiritual disciplines. Things like reflection on Scripture and prayer, and compassionate practices, advance the development of Christian maturity, intimacy with God and love of neighbour (Mark 1:29-39, 1 John 3:16-18).

Core beliefs and attitudes – please circle a number

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, the Life	I am convinced that Jesus is the Way to the God of Christian Scriptures.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Assurance of Salvation	I am confident in God's gift of forgiveness and healing in my life.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Personal God	God is actively at work in my life.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Jesus Is First	I want Jesus to be first. He is the ultimate authority and priority in my life.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Authority of the Bible	I actively reshape my perspectives and practices in response to what the bible says.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Work	I believe work, that makes good use of my abilities and that serves others, is an opportunity to serve God.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Identity as a follower of God	I exist to know, love and serve God.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Giving Away My Life	I surrender everything that is important for Jesus and for the sake of others.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Other-centred	I put others before myself by generously loving and serving my neighbours.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

The church is the people of God	I believe God draws people together to be formed, equipped, and sent out to live as Jesus-followers in their neighbourhood.
Not really 1 2 3 4 5 Absolutely	

Disciplines/Practices that help me grow as a follower of Jesus (means of grace)

Bible Reading	I spend time reading my Bible.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (daily)	

Reflection on the Bible	I spend time reflecting more deeply on what I read in the Bible and how it applies to my life.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Prayer for Guidance	I spend time in prayer asking God for wisdom and guidance.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (daily)	

Prayer to Confess Sins	I spend time in prayer honestly confessing my ungodly thoughts and actions to God.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (daily)	

Tithing	I commit my finances to be available for God's priorities.
Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 10% or more	

Solitude	I spend unhindered time alone with God.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (monthly)	

Worship with other Christians	I participate in Christian worship gatherings.
Rarely (1 Sunday/2 months) 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (3-4 Sundays/month)	

The Lord's Supper	I participate in communion with other Christians.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (as often as available)	

Fasting	I fast from food or other needs as a means of focusing my attention on God
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (monthly)	

Spiritual Friendships	I meet with or talk to a close friend who helps me grow spiritually.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Cell/Small Group	I meet with a small group for study, sharing, prayer, and accountability.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Spiritual Mentor	I meet with a mentor who provides helpful spiritual direction.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (monthly)	

Faith Sharing	I have meaningful spiritual conversations with non-Christians.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Disciple-making	I meet with one or more persons to help them build Christian foundations, disciplines, and character.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Hospitality	I open up my home, my time, and my life to connect with someone not in my regular circle of friends.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Serving those in need	I serve those in need (food, clothing, shelter, encouragement, education).
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Generosity	I make all of my resources (spiritual gifts, time, finances, material things) available to God.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Creation care	I consciously find ways to safeguard (steward) creation.
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 Regularly (weekly)	

Sabbath	I set aside time devoted to rest in God so that I am re-created and renewed by God
Rarely 1 2 3 4 5 1 day in 7	

APPENDIX K
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Opening remarks: Restatement of research purpose and gratitude for participation. Expected length of conversation: Thirty minutes.

TRADITION

Please describe to me your previous small group experiences.

Prompts: Was it helpful? / What made it helpful?

Were you familiar with Gospel contemplation before this study? If yes, please explain.

SCRIPTURE

Has this small group experience had an impact on how you read Scripture?

Prompt: impact, engagement, quantity / quality of reading.

If yes, please explain.

EXPERIENCE

Did you use Gospel contemplation on your own through the week?

If yes, please explain.

REASON

Would you participate in a similar small group in the future? Why?

Closing Remarks: Anything else to add?

Expression of gratitude for the value of this conversation as it relates to the study.

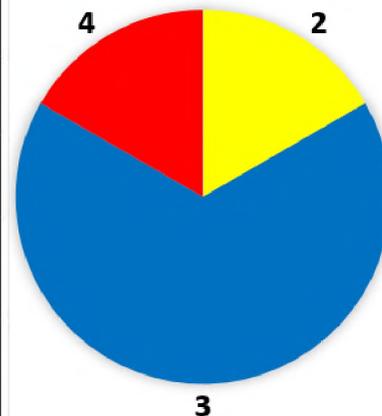
APPENDIX L
INFORMAL FEEDBACK SCRIPT

Thank you for sharing. Would you be willing to allow me to use that statement in my research project? As with all data in my study, I will maintain confidentiality. If you are willing, I'd like to explain the study further and then invite you to sign a consent form.

**APPENDIX M
JOURNEY DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY
RESULTS**

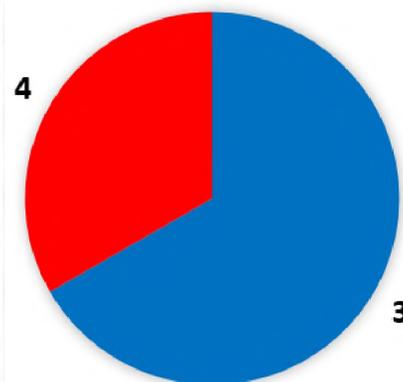
JDS Survey #1

Milepost	Count	Percentage
1. Exploring a relationship with Jesus – I'm a seeker.	0	0
2. Growing in a relationship with Jesus – I'm a Jesus-follower.	1	17
3. A close relationship with Jesus – I'm an active disciple; loving God and my neighbour.	4	67
4. Jesus is the central relationship in my life – I'm a Jesus-centered, others-oriented disciple.	1	17



JDS Survey #2

Milepost	Count	Percentage
1. Exploring a relationship with Jesus – I'm a seeker.	0	0
2. Growing in a relationship with Jesus – I'm a Jesus-follower.	0	0
3. A close relationship with Jesus – I'm an active disciple; loving God and my neighbour.	4	67
4. Jesus is the central relationship in my life – I'm a Jesus-centered, others-oriented disciple.	2	33

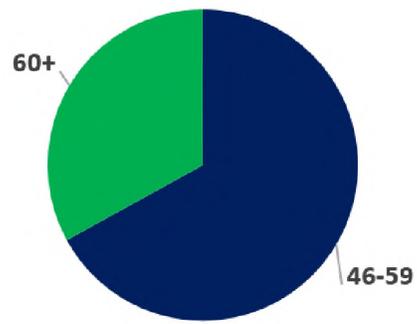


Gender Distribution for the Group

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	4	67
Male	2	33

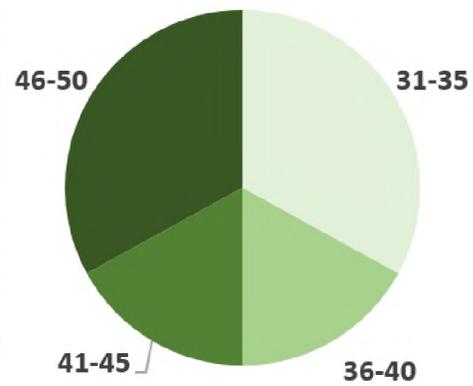
Age Distribution

Age Range	Count	Percentage
0-18	-	-
19-30	-	-
31-45	-	-
46-59	4	67
60+	2	33



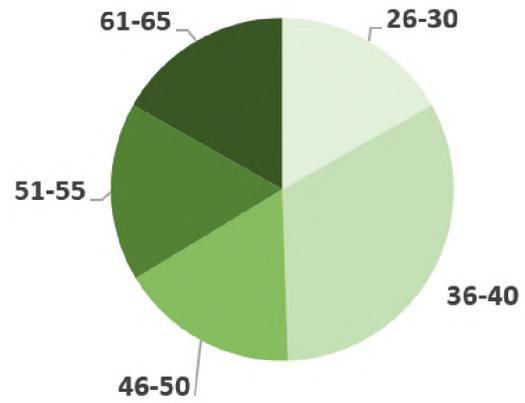
Years as a Christian Believer

Years	Count	Percentage
0-5		
6-10		
11-15		
16-20		
21-25		
26-30		
31-35	2	33
36-40	1	17
41-45	1	17
46-50	2	33
51-55		
56-60		
61-65		
66-70		
70+		

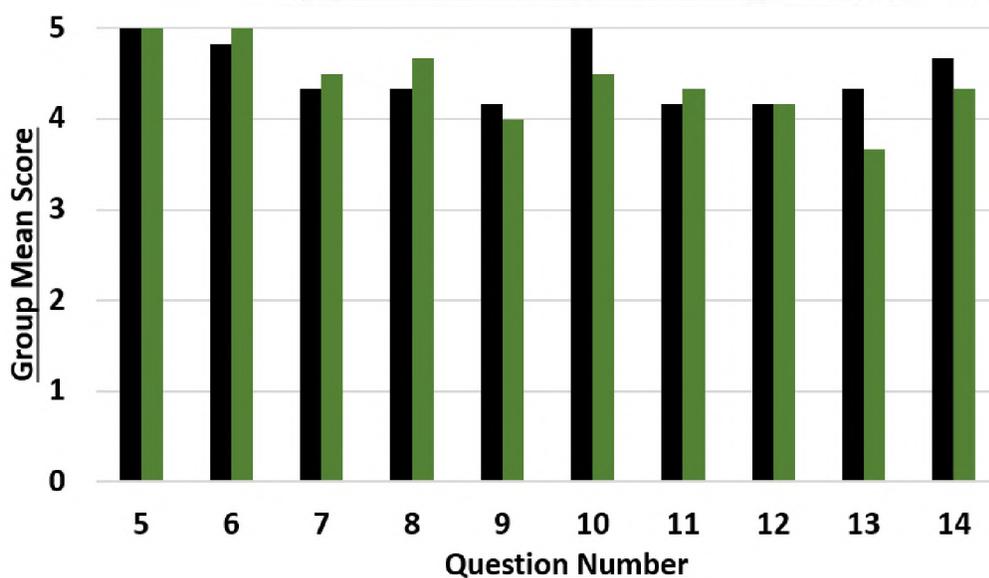


Years attending current congregation (Holt FMC)

Years	Count	Percentage
0-5	-	-
6-10	-	-
11-15	-	-
16-20	-	-
21-25	-	-
26-30	1	17
31-35	-	-
36-40	2	33
41-45	-	-
46-50	1	17
51-55	1	17
56-60	-	-
61-65	1	17
66-70	-	-
70+	-	-



Core Beliefs & Attitudes ■ Pre ■ Post



	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Pre	5	4.83	4.33	4.33	4.17	5	4.17	4.17	4.33	4.67
Post	5	5	4.5	4.67	4	4.5	4.33	4.17	3.67	4.33
Change	0	0.17	0.17	0.34	-0.17	-0.5	0.16	0	-0.66	-0.34

5. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, the Life: I am convinced that Jesus is the Way to the God of Christian Scriptures.

6. Assurance of Salvation: I am confident in God's gift of forgiveness and healing in my life.

7. Personal God: God is actively at work in my life.

8. Jesus Is First: I want Jesus to be first. He is the ultimate authority and priority in my life.

9. Authority of the Bible: I actively reshape my perspectives and practices in response to what the bible says.

10. Work: I believe work, that makes good use of my abilities and that serves others, is an opportunity to serve God.

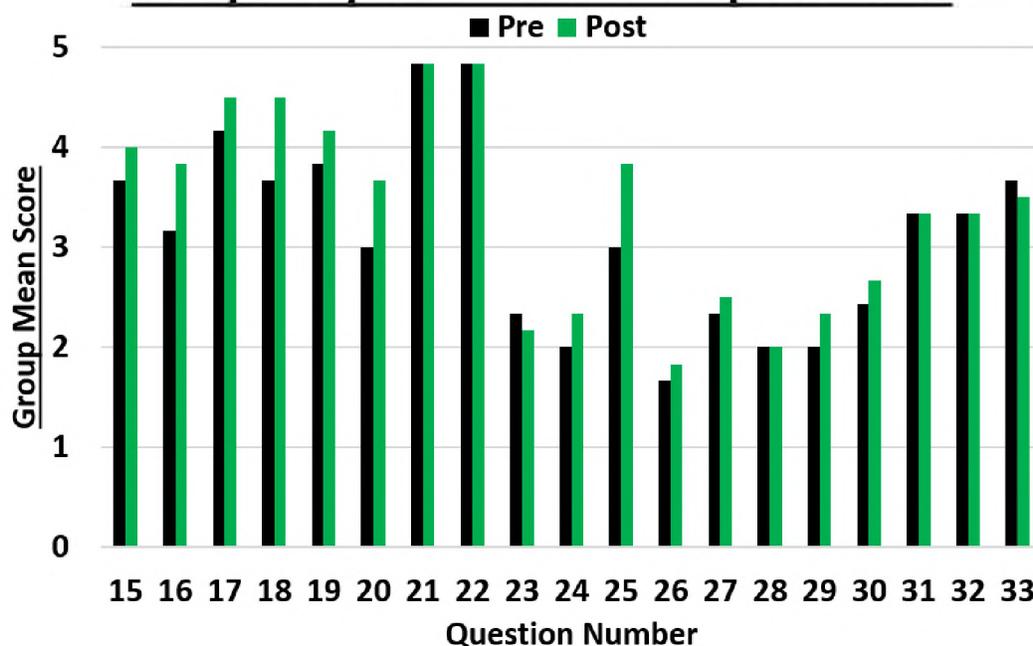
11. Identity as a follower of God: I exist to know, love and serve God.

12. Giving Away My Life: I surrender everything that is important for Jesus and for the sake of others.

13. Other-centred: I put others before myself by generously loving and serving my neighbours.

14. The church is the people of God: I believe God draws people together to be formed, equipped, and sent out to live as Jesus-followers in their neighbourhood.

Disciplines/Practices That Help Me Grow



	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33
Pre	3.67	3.17	4.17	3.67	3.83	3	4.83	4.83	2.33	2	3	1.67	2.33	2	2	2.43	3.33	3.33	3.67
Post	4	3.83	4.5	4.5	4.17	3.67	4.83	4.83	2.17	2.33	3.83	1.83	2.5	2	2.33	2.67	3.33	3.33	3.5
Change	0.33	0.66	0.33	0.83	0.34	0.67	0	0	-0.16	0.33	0.83	0.16	0.17	0	0.33	0.24	0	0	-0.17

15. Bible Reading: I spend time reading my Bible.
16. Reflection on the Bible: I spend time reflecting more deeply on what I read in the Bible and how it applies to my life.
17. Prayer for Guidance: I spend time in prayer asking God for wisdom and guidance.
18. Prayer to Confess Sins: I spend time in prayer honestly confessing my ungodly thoughts and actions.
19. Tithing: I commit my finances to be available to God's priorities.
20. Solitude: I spend unhindered time alone with God.
21. Worship with other Christians: I participate in worship gatherings.
22. The Lord's Supper: I participate in communion with other Christians (as much as possible)
23. Fasting: I fast from food or other needs as a means of focusing my attention on God.
24. Spiritual Friendship: I meet with or talk to a close friend who helps me grow spiritually.
25. Cell/Small Group: I meet with a small group for study, sharing, prayer, and accountability.
26. Spiritual Mentor: I meet with a mentor who provides helpful spiritual direction.
27. Faith Sharing: I have meaningful spiritual conversations with non-Christians.
28. Disciple-Making: I meet with one or more persons to help them build Christian foundations, disciplines, and character.
29. Hospitality: I open up my home, my time, and my life to connect with someone not in my regular circle of friends.
30. Serving those in need: I serve those in need (food, clothing, shelter, encouragement, education).
31. Generosity: I make all of my resources (spiritual gifts, time, finances, material things) available to God.
32. Creation care: I consciously find ways to safeguard (steward) creation.
33. Sabbath: I set aside time to rest in God so that I am re-created and renewed by God.

APPENDIX N
Ruth's Exit Interview, Prepared Statement

I'm trying to figure out Gospel contemplation and how it adds to my faith. First of all, it is decidedly an all-in thing to get the most out of it. So it's hard not to be distracted by others who are not getting it. Half our group is in that category demonstrating we're all at different points in our journey. I am called to walk my journey only. I have not seen God or Jesus in my imaginings, I have felt emotions and new perspective and greater sensitivity to the Lord's leading through the exercises, the Spirit is at work.

It has been interesting practicing different exercises for greater spiritual contemplation: the labyrinth, the exercises palm down, palms up, the worship songs, the knotted rope, breath prayers, these are tools only, means to entering into a more focused experience. Did any work more so than another? Not really, my practices have been in place that have worked, and you know I mentioned them like singing, and listening to greater sermons, fasting and journaling and accountability and prayer partner and memorizing Scripture. I have enjoyed spending more time with my church family. Each one of the group I truly value. They already had my respect and love. It's a joy journeying with them.

Pastor Matthew was gracious and patient, he was prepared and offered variety. It was a little distracting when he wrote notes and I felt like I was an experiment, just a little bit, and I don't think it would be fair to begrudge it, I feel confident enough with his leadership to concede the point. After all, it is part of his studies. Guinea pig, I'll be.

So that's what I wrote.

...

I've been so thankful for these past few sessions to be able to work through why the passion scriptures have been difficult for me. I have had an epiphany in my spirit. They have been difficult over the years because I have felt the horror of what my sin caused - Jesus' suffering, crucifixion and death. While it's still intense, I am able to go through the process moving beyond the horror of it all, and able to see the sacred. Processing that has caused a shift in my spirit helping me to realize why I have reacted all these years the way I do, and I realize for me, that's ok. That it causes so much emotion and response that can seem unmanigable, it's feeling in a greater sense the cost of the cross. Christ paid, fully and wholly, one He alone bore. Such love. He is my Saviour, my redeemer, Lord of all. Hallelujah.

And then, so, and then I said, this week was the culmination of a special week with God. To say that the class was the highlight of spiritual formation would be inaccurate. Why? Sometimes it's in action, and that's what I encountered this

week. And that's when I was emergency... (at the hospital)... the imagination can be in the action and it can be an involving experience as you step into the work God is doing in the here and now. The resurrection events didn't get their due, I felt. Maybe because it was wrote, whereas the class was asking us to be open to new experiences. Yet the study continued to play out the same format. In that like, we went through the Gospel from beginning to end, instead of jumping and doing, so the Passion Scriptures were 3 weeks in a row, and I just felt that by the time I got to the resurrection I wasn't able to like kind of fully engage in it, and I wonder if that was why. That was just something that kind of came to mind.

I did feel clinical at times, and I felt, I did feel like an experiment. I know I mentioned that at the beginning, but I was trying to understand why it took more than just that class to have a greater encounter that you were trying to pull, like you were trying to say, 'Did you see Jesus?'

...

and I'm like, why can't I see Jesus. I just like that, I didn't understand why I couldn't like through that time in the session get to that deep place, and so I think this was a little bit part of it. Part of it was what I touched on in the first, was that, like I just felt like there was half of us that weren't really getting very much of what was going on, and yet I respect that they're at a different place in their spiritual journey. I'm not trying to judge them, I'm just trying to understand why wasn't I able to get there when, you were, I know you were hoping for us to.

... that was your desire. And like, well why couldn't we. It's not like these aren't mature people in the faith, like they are. They are the pillars of our church. so why couldn't we, so that's why I thought what I said at the beginning, and I just felt like a little bit clinical, like you were writing notes and stuff like that. I value you engaging in the process but I felt for it you need to like remove yourself somewhat. I know you would share some stuff at the beginning which was good, to help us understand. Then I almost felt like you backed off. And I needed you to be in it because for me, you are like um part of the spiritually mature, and we need that one another to help us. So I just ah, I find that a little bit distracting. So it felt clinical at times and it felt like an experiment.

How did you feel? What did you experience? Did you see Jesus? Ugh, if this was supposed to be for me, why did I feel at times that it was about the course, the labyrinth. I said, Didn't you see it wasn't really working? Another thing you would ask when we got together: how was your week? No response. Week in and week out. That didn't work and I almost wish you had kind of retired it because I felt that what you were asking of us, you didn't get ... so the final thing just to kind of finish this up, the week after our sessions ended, I looked at each week we studied and captured a word or a phrase that I felt was of God. Then I took those and incorporated them into my prayer times that week which ended with 24/7 prayer at the church. I used them to pray for each of our church family. Take away? God continues to speak through the spiritual formation session. Be open. Be available

to God's leading. Know that He is accomplishing his good purposes through it all. So my take aways?

Number 1: Cast um cast off all that hinders, follow me.

Number 2: focus on Jesus. And that was the session on the fasting and being at the table, and um, and ah I thought about that because fasting is part of my spiritual discipline and sometimes I am focusing more on getting through that time frame and not thinking about eating, and what I the take away was that is that focus more on Jesus in during that time, and not on the fasting. And I that I tried that the next week and it worked so much better. So that was my take away, focus on Jesus.

Third one: no fear. Dwell on what is not what if. And again like just very powerful

Four. Jesus is always enough.

Five. Find the holiness in any and everything.

Six. Goal. Christ be glorified. And that was through the, the the especially the the last two, like the Passion Scriptures, just through it all Christ be glorified.

And then the final one, and I shared that, the resurrection one, and God spoke to me, be one with me in purpose, of mind and heart.

So those were my take aways, which are like are so amazing and you know what, you can go from each week and go, "alright, focusing on what I didn't feel that I was doing correctly" but when I went back and I saw what I had written and took out what I received, I went: WOW. and that's why um, why I said like, we've got to go back and look at it again sometime. And say, "God were you speaking to me?" [TAP TAP TAP]. He was speaking to me.

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