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Tyndale University College & Seminary

Spiritual Formation of Mature Believers:
How Glencairn MB Church Deepened Mature Believers
by Means of Spiritual Memoir Writing

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

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Abstract

Exploring spiritual formation in the local church, this research portfolio examines a potential three year model for helping mature disciples of Jesus deepen into Christ-centered life. First, disciples are encouraged to examine where the Triune God has already been at work through an in-depth reflection on the formative influences on their past. The author provides an example through the writing of her own spiritual autobiography. Second, the portfolio offers a spiritual formation model and curriculum designed for the local church to create an environment in which the believer and God's Spirit collaborate in the formation process. Third, a research study which implemented a portion of this curriculum in the context of a local church reveals the positive results that believers experience as they grow in Christ in community.

The primary conclusions are that spiritual growth can be powerfully experienced in an environment which structures the formation process around personal encounters with God, which are then processed in community. Secondly, spiritual growth can be successfully facilitated if the believer is first led to a deep encounter with the self, then guided in the process of spiritual formation for inner change, and finally released on mission. Furthermore the research herein discusses key environmental factors which facilitate spiritual formation in the context of a local church. When spiritual formation becomes an intentional focus of the congregation, maturity in Christ becomes both a desired outcome and a necessary component of Spirit-led mission.

Dedication and Acknowledgment

None of us come to any of our achievements in life alone. I'm no exception. I gladly share the credit for the completion of my doctorate studies at Tyndale, with those who were such generous companions on this journey.

First, I'm grateful to Scott, my husband of nearly three decades, and my two sons, Cameron and Steven. Each of them has supported me in their own meaningful way. They showed interest in my work, offered valuable opinions, they proof-read, made countless library pickups and drop offs for me, worked on the graphics, and generally excused my unavailability.

Secondly, I'm grateful to my Glencairn church family. Glencairn hired me onto their pastoral staff just as I embarked on the DMin journey. The leadership provided financial support and generous study leave, and along the way, embraced my leadership and spiritual formation ideas. I'm also grateful to those at Glencairn who were the willing test subjects and whose quotes you will read in the report chapter. The encouragement this group of Christ-followers offered me through their desire to deepen in their Christian walk is beyond measure.

Finally, I would have no interest in Christian ministry were it not for the love that pursued me, the love that saved me, the love that changed me – the love that the lover of my soul continues to lavish on me. My Lord Jesus took me out of darkness and brought me to live in his glorious light. For the desires that he continues to place into my heart and then so remarkably fulfills, I'm eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

The pages of this portfolio represent three years of doctoral level studies in the field of spiritual formation. I entered the program with a desire to be in a space saturated with the mystery of Christian formation. The mystery by which God's Spirit makes Christ's people into someone new, over and over again, often imperceptibly, yet persistently and unmistakably new. As a pastor in the Canadian Mennonite Brethren denomination and as a follower of Christ who has experienced excellent discipleship and who is passionate about the discipleship of others, such space offered the promise of new academic information, of professor and peer generated inspiration for spiritual formation ministry in my local church context, and above all, ongoing personal transformation. The chapters that follow reveal that this promise was met beyond my expectations. I trust that my passion for leading Christ's people into the abundant life that he promises to all who place their trust in him will also be clearly evident. Finally, I share with the reader my personal journey of living for Christ in an ever deepening way.

What weighs heavy on my heart is the spiritual subsistence of many who claim allegiance to Jesus. I see many settled in the base camp, listening with awe to the stories of those who climbed the summit, studying the trails, buying more

climbing equipment, but never reaching higher ground. I see those languishing in the desert, re-tracing the same old paths over and over again, but never quite making it past the borders of the Promised Land. Not only do these followers of Christ live a life that is far less than what the gospel of Christ promises, they are also minimally able to contribute to the sole purpose of the church, which is to bring glory to God by inviting others to follow Jesus with them, teaching and modeling what it means to live by all that Jesus embodied. Witnessing for Christ out of such pauper existence for Christ, without the power and freedom a Christ-centered life brings, is not a recipe for disciple-making success. Furthermore, such spiritual subsistence minimizes the ability to engage the Holy Spirit and therefore minimizes the positive effect of the Church on the surrounding culture. To these believers, the book of Acts and the history of the impact of the early church on the world read like fantastic tales of supernatural heroism, distant tales which no longer connect with the experience of the church in North America today. After studying the church in North America for decades, Barna has sadly concluded, “My research shows that most Americans who confess their sins to God and ask Christ to be their Saviour – live almost indistinguishable from the unrepentant sinners, and their lives bear little, if any fruit, for the kingdom of God” (Barna 2001, 79). Ogden suggests that “the lack of Christian influence on culture is a direct result of the lack of depth in transformative discipleship” (Ogden 2016, 23). Thankfully, the landscape of discipleship is shifting in a positive direction. In my connections with churches and denominations around the world, I see that programs in spiritual formation, once rare, are now popping up in seminaries

around North America and the world. Furthermore, spiritual direction is making its way into the Protestant milieu, and the language of transformation is becoming more common in the pulpits of our nation. The chapters of this portfolio discuss the current discipleship drought and offer resources to sooth the dryness.

My particular interest lies with mature believers, those who have known Christ for decades and who, as I have had to, often need to look outside their local church for spiritual nourishment adequate for significant deepening of their life with Christ. Ogden calls these the “Christ-centered people” (Ogden 2016, 214) and notes that the church often leaves these to themselves in favour of caring for those who are exploring and those new in Christ. My doctoral work focused on caring for this group of disciples in the context of the local church.

What to Expect

This portfolio is arranged into three distinct sections. The first section, Chapter 2, contains my own spiritual autobiography. As a reader, I trust you will see the depth of understanding I gained through the process of writing about the presence of God in the formative influences of my past. The gains to self-understanding, which led to increased self-acceptance, and which then led to greater inner freedom and ability to love God and others, birthed in me a desire to invite others into such an experience. Hence, the spiritual formation model presented in Chapter 3 begins the effort at deepening God’s people by guiding them to write their own story. My personal story is about a quest for freedom. Thus, it is not a surprise that the model I constructed serves less as a rigid

curriculum and more as a lattice around which those who desire growth can structure their growth in a way that personally suits them. My story also makes clear that to thrive I required certain conditions, an environment that suited my independent style and one that was rich in resources and rich in opportunities to experience God. The model strives to create such an environment for others.

I called the spiritual formation model *Three Years with Jesus*, intending to mimic the time Christ invited his disciples to be with him (Mark 3:14). Closeness to the Master during this time, shaped the ragged and oddly composed bunch of men into the image of their Rabbi, in community with one another, and while on mission. One colleague in my DMin cohort suggested that I call the model *Three Years with Jesus – A Life-Time with Jesus*, expressing the desired outcome of life-long impact. While I only refer to the model under the name *Three Years with Jesus*, I invite you, the reader, to anticipate the intended life-long results. The three-year model takes seriously the need to challenge mature believers to a deep level of commitment to grow in Christ. The first year focuses on the writing of a spiritual autobiography, augmented by reading and spiritual practices to facilitate spiritual formation. The second year builds on the experience of self-examination and on the community birthed in the first year experience, by inviting the participants to surrender deeper to the transforming work of God's Spirit. The third year reaps the fruits of the previous two, by sending these disciples on mission and by unleashing them to be powerful intercessors in the Kingdom.

Chapter 4 contains an in-ministry research project report on the outcomes of implementing the first year of *Three Years with Jesus* in my own church

community. This research project came about quite accidentally. I had completed the *Three Years with Jesus* model as part of my DMin studies, I then presented it to the elders of my church who approved it and blessed its use at Glencairn. It was March of 2016 and I was so excited about rolling this model out that I decided to do so right away. I contacted Dr. Paul Bramer, the head of the DMin department at Tyndale and the professor who guided me so aptly in writing my own spiritual autobiography, for some additional resource on the topic of spiritual autobiography. It was Dr. Bramer who suggested that I turn this ministry effort into a research project. I followed his advice and the results are captured herein.

He Endured the Cross

What is the ultimate motivation for all the effort that produced the many words on the pages that follow? I write this on the heels of Easter 2017 and the Passion of Christ is fresh in my mind. The scriptures remind me, again, that the Lord Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its shame, for the joy that was set before him and he now sits at the right hand of the Father until the culmination of the ages. I consider him who endured great opposition at the hands of violent people, and I determine to not grow weary or lose heart. The Great Commission was given to the Church in the context of the Great Claim and the Great Comfort. The Great Claim is that all authority on earth and in heaven rests in Jesus, that he truly is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The Great Comfort is that he is with his people always, even to the very end of the age. And if God is with us and if he is for us, who then can be against us? By this ever initiating grace, under his

authority and in his power let us press on upward following his call; let us press on to maturity, to grow up fully into his likeness.

The aim of this work is to equip those who minister in the local church to deepen Christ's followers for the glory of God, for the abundant life of his people, and for the sake of the Great Commission.

CHAPTER II:
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY:
THE QUEST TO BE FREE

It is a strange experience to write one's spiritual memoir. Above all, my desire is that the pieces of my life described here serve only as a testament to God's intimate interest in all people expressed through his constant, though often unseen, presence and guiding force. As a biography, this writing does contain the events of my life. However, the spiritual focus demands writing in line with the axis around which my life has been wrapped, the particular direction, the unique theme which God ordained, and which knowingly or un-knowingly directed the course of my life. This central image, this dynamic force, in the hands of God formed me, as it does each individual, into the person I eventually became.

Regarding the benefit of writing a spiritual memoir, Dillon states:

It is, indeed, a genuine psychological and therapeutic achievement for a person to bring this central image into conscious awareness and use it to gain a sense of the meaning of one's life and the direction it is seeking to go in the future. (Dillon 2011, 151)

For me, this force has been the pull to be free coupled with the desire to be wanted. Even the circumstances of my birth and early childhood were designed by God to wire me to be driven by these two desires. Of course, these two desires exist in tension with one another; they pull in opposite directions. For to be

wanted implies at some point to become another's – that the one who desires me eventually gets to have me, and in that having is the very loss of freedom. This was my tension – living with a driving need to be wanted and the opposing desire to be free. A life seemingly doomed to un-fulfillment.

I was born to a woman who was trapped into marriage by this very means. My mother was a beautiful woman. Doted upon by her good parents, adored by her younger sister, a darling of the village in which she grew up, and also popular in the big city where she ended up. While in university, she met the man who would become first my father, and then her husband.

The Father's Mother

He came from entirely different circumstances. His father died in the Second World War, leaving behind my then four year old father, his even younger brother, and their dreadfully immoral mother. I don't know if my fraternal grandmother was bad at the core or whether her circumstances made her so. I knew her only a little personally, but it was enough for me to instinctively know that she was dangerous. I sensed her all-consuming self-centeredness which made her ungenerous and mean.

I lived with my maternal grandmother for the first three years of my life, but I only stayed at my father's mother's house one night in all my life. I was in Grade 5, about eleven years old, and my father's distant cousin, a charming woman named Ellen, in her early twenties, took a shine to me. She decided to take me on an overnight train trip to visit my fraternal grandmother, who was her great

aunt. We had a great train ride there. The ride was long and dusty, but her company was pleasant and I thoroughly enjoyed our unending and lively conversation. In my home we did not talk to one another. My brother and I whispered, or communicated in our code, but there was never, as far as I can remember, simply fun, enjoyable and respectful conversation.

Ellen and I arrived in the city of Martin and eventually at my grandmother's one bedroom apartment. Her building was on a beautiful street, at the foot of a massive stone staircase that led to a large museum building. On both sides of the stairs were rows of tall poplars and beautiful terraced gardens. I loved wandering through these gardens in all seasons of the year, but especially in the fall. I felt so small under the giant trees with leaves heaped up to my waist.

My father's mother's apartment building was just at the bottom of the staircase, on the left side of the street. Her building had a large garden plot for the tenants so each apartment had a sizeable garden in which people grew flowers, vegetables, herbs and the like. I always lingered in this garden, postponing the inevitable entry into the building as long as I could. My father's mother's apartment building was only three stories high and she lived on the top floor. The smell of her apartment oozed out into the hall even through the closed door. I always entered last, hoping not to be noticed. This time the cheery Ellen happily greeted my father's mother and proceeded to tell her about our journey while still in the entry way. I remember being afraid (as always) that I would throw up from the smell of the apartment. It was a heavy and thick smell, a mixture of urine,

sweat, old cooking grease, some decomposing vegetables and other unidentifiable, horrid smelling things.

My father's mother always looked anxious, nervous and worried about something. Eventually her anxiously darting eyes landed on me. She called me by a short form of my name that I hated. Nobody except my father when he was angry at me used that name for me. I dislike it to this day. Then she focused on me disapprovingly, grabbed my chin with her heavy, damp hand and lifted my face toward hers. She was a short, stocky woman, with an extraordinarily round face, tiny eyes and generally unflattering features. She constantly wiped her mouth and her nose with her hands, I think that is why her hands were always damp and now one of those hands was squeezing my chin hard. I did not smile, only politely answered her aggressive "How are you" question. I let her hold my chin a few more seconds and then defiantly reclaimed it. My pulling away was met with more disapproving, "Tsk, tsk" and shaking of her head.

It was dinner time and the still cheery Ellen announced that we had not had dinner yet and were starving from the journey. Every grandmother in Slovakia (and around the world) loves to cook for her grandchildren and young grand-nieces. So Ellen was justified in expecting a feast. Instead we were each given a plate of broth – just broth, no noodles or vegetables in it. It was pale orange in colour with large grease puddles floating on top. We were also given two large hunks of very stale bread and were seated at a tiny table in the oppressively cluttered kitchen. With that my father's mother commanded with a slight tone of resentment, "Eat." This was the first time that I had actually eaten at

my father's mother's house. We visited her occasionally, but always only for a short time and never for a meal.

I waited for Ellen to go first, she was quieter now, clearly surprised by the lack of hospitality. She tasted the soup and her face told me it was as bad as it looked. "Eat!" said my father's mother even more forcefully to me. I put half of spoonful in my mouth. To this day I am certain that the lukewarm, pale-orange, greasy liquid was the water in which she washed the last load of dishes. I was afraid I would throw up. At this point my father's mother turned to her stove and out of nowhere produced a plate of schnitzel and potatoes saying, "I didn't know you would need dinner, so I cooked only for me." She proceeded to eat her meal with us, as Ellen looked on in disbelief. I was really hungry and the sight of the schnitzel made it worse. I took a bite of the really stale bread, it tasted moldy, so I announced that I was not hungry and set down the bread and my spoon. Ellen apparently felt the same way. So the two of us watched my father's mother eat. I sat in silence, Ellen carried on the conversation with more and more effort.

After the "dinner," Ellen said that she was meeting some friends in a nearby nightclub and that she would take me with her. I've never been to a nightclub. These were the days when eleven year olds were allowed in nightclubs. I loved the lights, the noise, the fancy drinks everyone was drinking, and the delicious dinner Ellen bought for both of us. Ellen's friends (all young males) found me to be quite the novelty, an eleven year old life of the party in a nightclub. I knew instinctively how to flirt with the young men and how to be

funny. I was a completely different person here than the silent and defiant girl in my father's mother's kitchen.

Eventually, I became very good at adapting my personality to suit the occasion. With my parents I was sullen, cautious, attentive to any sign of danger in their voices or mannerism. To this day, I am sensitive to the slightest evidence of anger, or frustration hiding deep within people. I am amazed that others don't see it. This "gift" is the legacy of abuse, it makes its victims vigilant: to read people's micro-expressions in a dangerous environment is necessary for survival. Today, I am glad for this ability. It serves me well each time I meet with someone to offer counseling or spiritual direction, each time I negotiate a deal, or pitch a leadership idea.

The real me was outgoing, gregarious and bubbly, loud and easily brought to giggles. Around my parents, however, I felt as a defenseless animal, expecting an ambush at any moment, but unable to escape; away from my parents, I was fearless, strong and confident, a natural leader.

It would take decades and enormous grace of God before I would live out of my true center, before I stopped adapting to situations and taking on suitable personas like a chameleon. Freedom is being who you truly are, the "you" that God envisioned and delights to bring forth. The "you" that is oriented toward God and since he is the only one whose opinion truly matters, you can be the same with all people. The chameleon, the false, adaptive me, the Carl Jung's persona, was a prison which offered me protection, but it was a prison nevertheless, and it took a lot of effort to maintain.

Ellen and I spent the night at my father's mother's house; we got up very early and left for the train station before breakfast. I remember my father's mother lamenting that we were leaving so early. In hind sight I think she lived in a terrible prison of her own - one of greed, fear, and utter loneliness. She wanted us there, but at the same time she was afraid of what that would cost her. Even a cup of tea and a pastry were too great a cost to pay for our company.

I never saw Auntie Ellen again, and the next time my family visited my father's mother I insisted on staying outside in the garden and around the museum steps. I refused to enter the building for years to come, even though it meant punishment from my father.

This was the woman that raised him, his younger brother, and two illegitimate sons who my father never acknowledged as his brothers. When he and my mother were dating and she asked who those boys in his apartment were, he denied them and said they were neighbourhood kids, friends of his younger brother. I heard from my uncle that she would often eat in front of her four hungry boys and send them to bed hungry; and that she slept around with men a lot. Needless to say my father grew up to innately hate women. He often commented on how all women were vastly inferior to men and that they were all "whores." In fact, I heard it said more than once, that when I, to his great disappointment, was born a girl, the words that escaped from my father's lips were, "Another whore came into the world."

This was the man that pursued my pretty, intelligent, popular and quite spoiled mother. He was fascinated not only by her, but also by her well-to-do,

stable and loving family. He pursued and the prey that desired to be desired gave in sometime in November 1962. Nature did not disappoint and my mother became pregnant with me. She did not love this man and suspected that perhaps he didn't love her either; his open promiscuity might have been the clue, so she refused to marry him and declared that she would be a single mother. This was a daring, outright rebellious decision. A single mother in Eastern Europe, in a small village in the 60's was a complete scandal, but one I am sure my mother could have weathered. I am also confident that she would have been able to marry even with a child, such was her charisma. Had she stuck to her decision, her life and mine would have taken a decidedly different course. In God's sovereign plan, my father's sweet talk and the pressure of her parents prevailed. Surely this man could not have been all that bad, surely he could and would improve with proper influence and support from my mom's parents. But he really was that bad and there was not to be an improvement, only ever increasing revelation of the depth of this darkness. My parents married in February 1963, I was born that August. My mother's wedding picture shows the sadness in her eyes.

I was the reason for this sorry union, and when against all hopes I was born a girl, all the stars aligned against me. Each time either of my parents looked at me, they saw their error and their regret. I mostly kept out of sight and quiet.

What I most wanted was to be wanted—but also to be free. My birth circumstances and the nature of my parents' marriage denied me both these desires. I was unwanted and I lived in a prison with two very cruel guards.

My Heaven on Earth

But there was a heaven, a wonderful other world in my unhappy childhood. It was in fact the silver lining to being an unwanted child. I was born in the middle of August. My mother was a teacher and she was ambitious. There was no way she would give up her career for me. So she nursed me for a few weeks and come September she went to work and left me in the care of her parents. My maternal grandmother's name was Francesca. She was a strong, influential woman, respected, wise, and a force to be reckoned with. Yet, she was a feminine woman. She liked pretty things, she was always proper in her dress and demeanor, she loved to cook, sew, embroider and garden. She was a wonderful combination of strength and loveliness. She could, in one moment, tear a strip off a foolish nephew who drank too much and made his wife unhappy, and in the next she could tear up with joy at the sight of a perfect daisy. She was a woman who worked hard all her life – yet always stopped to notice the beauty around her. Grandmother Francesca loved me unconditionally. I was her first grandchild, and she loved children dearly, plus I was born to her favourite daughter. In my Grandmother Francesca's house, I was safe, I was loved, I was free. I was always completely content and happy. My grandpa was also always wonderful to me. My mother complained that he got me used to falling asleep rocked in his arms and that it was impossible to get me to sleep otherwise.

I lived in my Grandma Francesca's home until I was three. Then my parents took me to live with them and placed me in a government run preschool. However, I always considered my Grandmother's house to be my real home. I

spent most weekends and all holidays there. While there, I lived life alongside Francesca. She was always busy, either meeting with people or working with her hands, or both. She talked to me at all times: as we walked to the bus, as we weeded the garden, as we rolled out dough. She shared all her knowledge with me freely: how to best pull out dandelion roots, how to make black currant wine, when to pick chamomile flowers so they make the best tea, how to deal with stupid people, how to save money, and on it went. Grandma Francesca was particularly careful to make sure I did not become “boy-crazy” as she put it. She told me that boys like touching girls’ breasts but that I should never let a boy do that as that will make my breasts go saggy. I listened to all her advice and took it to heart. She also constantly affirmed me and praised me. I would hear from her often that I was good, kind, smart, good with my hands, good at riding my bike, and so on. Her love and devotion to me led me to develop a very healthy sense of self-worth and I never did go “boy-crazy.” I attribute my love of gardening, handicrafts like needlework and knitting, and my general work ethic to her example.

There were more blessings in Grandma Francesca’s home. My Aunt Janie, my mother’s younger sister, gave birth to a son eleven months after I was born. Robbie and I grew up as brother and sister. I remember being three years old, he would have been two, playing hide and seek. I hid in a large wardrobe and I could see him through the key hole looking around for me. When he couldn’t find me he called out my name, “Ika, Ika”, not pronouncing it properly yet. I still remember the heart-breaking love I felt for him in that moment. This new, unfamiliar feeling

overwhelmed me, I stood frozen in the darkness of the wardrobe, observing what my heart was feeling – this was love, full, heart-wrenching, “I would die for you” kind of love. I stepped out of the wardrobe with a big smile playfully shouting, “You found me!” His delight at seeing me brought another wave of love over my heart. This was my first experience of true love; love that went through and through, love that was pure, love that was about the good of the other, love that demanded surrender, love that intertwined the hearts and souls of two people.

Robbie always loved me and I always loved him. We were thick as thieves, covering for each other, taking punishment for each other, sharing all we had evenly. Oh yes, we grew up as brother and sister, and had those moments when we fought, but those were few and far between, quickly regretted, and quickly forgiven. Robbie was the best possible brother anyone could have. He was sensitive and caring, he knew what I liked and didn't like. He was strong and did I say he loved me? Robbie and I were best friends; we had endless adventures until we were separated when my family escaped Czechoslovakia to come to Canada. I was fifteen then and I had no idea how lost I would be without the anchor that Robbie's love and the love of everyone in Grandma Francesca's house. I have since wondered what my life might have been like had I stayed. Robbie had so many faithful friends; he cared for me so much. What would it have been like to grow up loved and protected and treasured?

But God chose in his gracious wisdom that I should only have tastes of such a life. As I turned fifteen and we left to find freedom in the West, my dark

years came. I forgot what light was, like Gollum in his dark caves, I grew twisted in the constant experience of threat and maltreatment.

Auntie Janie

I could write a whole book on the adventures Robbie and I had. I could talk about the time we went fishing together and got stuck in hip-deep mud, or about the time I challenged us to walk through the sewer pipes the full length of the village. We walked through raw sewage for several kilometers, but we accomplished our goal. The punishment we got for coming home late and filthy was worth it. Or about the time we invisibly taped an apple to a pear tree and nearly died laughing watching our grandma carefully inspect the unexpected fruit. There was so much joy in our times together. We spent our entire summers together and nearly every weekend. We were mostly unsupervised, we got to run wild, to the river, to the forest, just the two of us and our dog, eating berries, or wild radishes, or the odd chocolate we packed with us.

From age three when my parents took me from Grandma Francesca's home until I turned fifteen, when we left the country, I would get on the train nearly every Friday after school and live in bliss until Sunday evening when I had to go back to my dark prison.

Besides my Grandma, Grandpa and Robbie, there was another bright light in that special home – my Auntie Janie. She was my mother's sister, but she was the exact opposite of my mother. Janie was unsophisticated, homely looking, chubby from birth, but always bubbling over with joy and laughter. She was a

woman with an enormous capacity to give and to love. Janie's response to just about anything in life was laughter – she had a contagious, happy, ringing laugh. She laughed when she was surprised, when disappointed, when praised and when criticized. The smallest thing, like a breeze blowing the curtains into the kitchen could cause that wonderful laughter to bubble up. I am certain that I learned to laugh as freely as I do under Janie's influence. Not only my propensity to laughter but also the lilting tenor of my laugh are far more like Janie's than like my birth mom's.

Janie loved me as her own. She would bundle up Robbie and me and take us out for walks every day. Between Grandma Francesca and Janie, I had two wonderful mothers in this home. Janie was also a ferocious reader and a fabulous story teller. And she was full of stories. She knew all the legends and all the folk tales. I don't remember my mother ever reading to me, but I know Janie instilled in me the love of books and the love of stories. My passion for literary analysis, especially of the Hebrew biblical narratives is but one passion that Janie's love of literature birthed in me.

Aunt Janie was also the only religious person I knew in all my growing up years. She was the only person I knew who had a prayer book, a rosary, and a few small pictures of Jesus and Mary. She taught me how to pray the Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary when I was still very young. She encouraged me to pray to God for help. I loved being on my knees beside Aunt Janie's bed, reciting the familiar words of the two prayers I knew. I would sometimes pray on my own, but I think it was only to evoke the feeling of being beside Janie. Because she loved Jesus, I

loved Jesus. But Janie did not understand the gospel, so she could never explain the Protestant way of surrendering to Christ. Her faith was more based on superstition and need. It was better to be on God's side, so let's be on God's side.

Janie had been repeatedly suggesting to my parents that they should baptize me. She was worried that without baptism I would not get to heaven if I died. When I was five years old and my brother Joe was born, Janie decided to have us both baptized. Without my parent's knowledge, she took both of us to the village priest. Since Ingrid is not a Christian name, she gave me the name Francesca as my baptismal middle name. I remember repeating the oath after the priest and the feel of the water poured over my forehead. I believe that though I did not know it, God was already claiming me. Although I did not then know the meaning of the words I spoke, what my promise to live for God really meant, I believe that God took the words of that child seriously, and by his grace helped me to keep that promise many years later.

Thus by God's wise choice, my childhood was terribly awful and wonderfully rich and happy at the same time. Monday to Friday were the dark days. Saturdays and Sundays and all holidays were bliss. I got to go home, home to the people who loved me and whom I loved. Home, where I was understood, where I had no inhibitions, where I could giggle, sing and tell the truth about how I was feeling. The place where I could request dishes I liked for dinner; where I was taught the love of nature and gardening, and the enjoyment of working with my hands, as well as the art of relationships. This is where I was loved and wanted. I was loved *and* free.

The Great Betrayal

I would confidently wager that every human being has experienced betrayal on a significant level. The capacity to betray others lies deep in our collective fallen nature. Satan betrayed God, Adam and Eve did so likewise. Adam was quick to betray the “flesh of his flesh,” and his son Cain did not hesitate to betray his brother all the way to death. We, as they, so easily forget the debt of love and honour we owe to one another simply by virtue of being God-image bearers.

My great betrayal came early. I had just turned four, my dear cousin Robbie just turned three. It was early November 1967, days were short and dreary, the constant cold drizzle dripping on every moment of our life. I was at my Grandmothers’ house for the weekend, as usual, and happy as could be. There was an exceptional cause for joy this weekend. The circus came and gave our otherwise insignificant village instant metropolis status. Robbie and I would go Saturday evening with Robbie’s father Emil. He was a rather absent father-figure in Robbie’s life, but I did see him occasionally. He was a Hungarian by birth, therefore his words sounded curious to my ears. Robbie and I spent the whole day in crazy anticipation. We kept checking the time, we argued and fought as the frustration of the wait built. Finally it was dark and it was time to go. Janie dressed Robbie and me in our little boots (it was rainy and muddy out) and in our little coats. I had a hat on my head and mittens on my hands and I could not wait to get going. The walk to the community center was not long, perhaps one

kilometer, up the hill, and across the busy main road, all in the dark of a drizzly November night. There were no street lights at all in the village those days.

We stood at the end of the line for our tickets. The lights coming out of the circus tent were so bright and so many. The smell of cotton candy intermingled with the smell of lion urine and elephant dung, the din of people everywhere. The circus ticket line was overwhelming to the senses. Robbie and I were squealing and giggling in excited anticipation. We finally got to the ticket booth and I heard my uncle Emil say, “One adult and one child,” then he turned to me and said, “You go home.”

I could not quite process what was happening. I thought that perhaps I misunderstood his words and his sentence as I so often did, but then I saw Robbie’s face. He got it before I did. His face showed the horror, the disappointment, the helplessness and sadness that was actually mine. Something in my heart broke in that moment, almost audibly. To this day I am sure that my devastation was so complete because I saw it on my beloved Robbie’s face. His pain showed me what I was feeling.

Without a word I turned around and started making my way home. Once away from the crowd, hot tears freely ran down my cold cheeks. I crossed the dark busy road and headed down the muddy hill back to my Grandmother’s house. I felt utterly rejected, utterly betrayed – at the last possible moment. I was utterly alone with my pain and my tears and the shame of being sent away.

And it was at this point that I became aware of my powerful survival instinct. Though I was small and broken, part of me was vigilantly processing my

environment. I had crossed the street carefully and nimbly and now I was mindful of the fact that there were many stray dogs and drunken gypsies in the village. I was grateful that I was small and that my gray coat camouflaged me on this foggy and wet night. I kept my sobbing and my steps quiet so as not attract unwanted attention from whatever predator might be interested in an unprotected four year old girl.

I made it to the house, managed to open the heavy garden gate and walked into the kitchen, my boots covered in mud, my clothes soaked from the rain, my face red-hot from crying. My Grandma and Auntie Janie were in shock to see me and asked what happened. In hindsight, it is funny to recall the outrage and the colourful list of juicy adjectives and descriptives that both women passionately, and at length, ascribed to my no-good Uncle Emil. They put me to bed. As I fell asleep I felt that I was somehow different. Somehow wiser, somehow harder, meaner, and more grown up. I resolved to be strong so that this kind of thing would never happen to me again.

Sunday morning Robbie and I were up long before breakfast as usual. The circus never came up in our conversation. I didn't ask and he instinctively knew he shouldn't tell. His father robbed us both of any joy the circus promised us. I hated my Uncle Emil from that point on. He is still alive as I write this, divorced from my Auntie Janie years ago. He is an alcoholic who amazingly continues to survive even though he goes missing for days, and wakes up in gutters. No family member wishes to see him. It is only Robbie who occasionally looks in on him and pays his electric bill to reconnect his power.

Writing this, I feel pity for Emil. Who knows what made him send me back that day? Was it the money? Was it annoyance at a giggly girl? It doesn't matter; and I am sure he has no memory of that event. I know Robbie doesn't. I asked him about it once when we were in our late twenties and the circus was in town again. He couldn't remember and I was glad for him.

The circus incident would haunt me for decades. It would show up in my mind as I was driving, laying on a beach, or falling asleep. It always brought the heat of those tears to my face. With each remembrance, I forcefully pushed it out of my mind. I could not face the pain that little girl suffered. I did not want to identify with her for fear of feeling vulnerable. The circus betrayal taught me to not trust anyone. I was certain that sooner or later everyone would betray me. I waited and looked for that betrayal, however slight, and when it came I dramatically ended the relationship. If the betrayal was long coming, I would orchestrate a situation in which the person I was setting up was likely to somehow fall short of perfect integrity and loyalty. I wrote off countless friends for the slightest breach of trust, for the slightest forgotten promise. I grew to despise people who would not keep their word, even about the smallest things, such as what they would eat for dinner. I considered all relationships as short-term, until that betrayal would come. Therefore I could not experience deep relationships with anyone. I also did not know how to relate to those people who somehow managed to pass my test over the years. I could not figure out those who did not betray me, so I let those precious relationships just fizzle out.

I was in my 40s before I faced the depth of rejection that wounded my heart that night. With God's courage I faced that event, felt the pain and cried those tears again, and then just let it all go. I surrendered to Jesus' call to forgive and I released the pain and mistrust it bred in me to the throne of Christ. At that point, I asked for his strength, love and life to move into that space instead. I felt a physical weight come off my shoulders and with it left a weight of much anger and bitterness.

I am not afraid to be vulnerable, or even to be betrayed anymore. I have been since then, even by some close friends, and in significant ways. But the peace of Christ that passes all understanding continues to rule my heart and the joy of his salvation continues to overcome any desire to hold on to pains caused by others.

You Are On Your Own – A Case of Mumps

How does one learn to be dependent on God when one has had to rely only on self?

It was a deep winter of 1968. I was five and sick with the mumps. Children in the First World are now all immunized against mumps, but I came by my immunity to mumps and measles and chicken pox the old-fashioned way – by living through the illness.

That winter we lived in a one bedroom apartment. I remember the hugely swollen glands in my neck, the pain and the fever. In the morning my mother had to go to work. She had some sort of a special project to oversee or had some

special dignitaries to impress. She dressed me in my winter coat and boots, put on my hat and mittens and gave me instructions on how to find the doctors' office.

Everything outside was covered with snow and my path would take me past a number of large apartment buildings. My mother drew the Red Cross sign for me, telling me to look for this symbol. I was too sick and too fevered to object. I set out in a fevered haze in the direction she pointed. I inspected every building I passed for the sign. She had told me that I had to cross the open space behind the buildings on our street. Therefore, when it felt right I set out through the deep snow to the back of the buildings. There were more buildings back there, all of them the same communist cement gray variety. They were too far for me to see any signs. I started to cry from the pain and the fever, and the tears made it harder to see. I simply chose one of the buildings and slowly made my way through the snow toward it. Sure enough, when I came closer, I saw that it had the medical sign on it. God has by his grace led me and protected me long before I became aware of his guiding. It took me a while to find the entrance and then the right floor and the right door, but eventually I stepped into the tiny reception area. I was exhausted, with no strength to take another step. The triage nurse immediately came to me, alarmed at my condition. She asked me what was wrong with me and where my mother was.

“I have the mumps and my mother is at work.” When I saw the look of shock on her face, I started to cry again. She took me in and announced to everyone that my mother sent me to the doctor alone in my condition. I don't remember much of the rest, I know that she walked me home, opened the door

with the key around my neck, put me to bed and gave me whatever medicine I was to take.

There are many things a child learns from experiences like these. On the one hand, each time I was left to fend for myself I got stronger, more determined, quicker and more resourceful in problem solving. On the other hand, I was growing up with an ever increasing conviction that I was on my own. That whatever life may throw my way, I better be able to handle it since help was not something I could ask for or expect. Some might consider such strength, such independence an admirable trait. And yes, to be self-reliant has served me well. But such independence is actually the trait of orphans. Sons and daughters learn to solve problems with their mothers and fathers. It is an orphan mentality that always goes it alone.

It is a great challenge for someone like me to live dependently. Yet, that is how God made us, and that is how in his great love he desires for us to live – dependent on him, turning to him with the smallest of problems, with simplest of questions. To “handle” life apart from God is actually sin, it denies his caring role and his leadership. Self-sufficiency draws our gaze away from him, leaving us alone with the problem.

It took me many years of living with Christ before God’s Spirit slowly reformed Ingrid, the orphan into Ingrid, the daughter. Even as I write this, I know that I don’t fully grasp the dependence that God desires of me. The lesson of relying on my community has taken even longer to learn.

My mothering was also greatly affected by how I was brought up. I became quite the opposite of my parents, doting on my children, perhaps not knowing when to stop parenting. I sought to always be there for my children, making sure they knew they are loved and accepted, and that I truly enjoy their unique personalities and their company.

Aurora – How Hard Can it be?

I did not realize until quite late in life that not everyone is as natural at leadership as I am, and that I ought to steward this gift responsibly. From a very early age others looked to me for cues and for direction. My ability to inspire and mobilize people to take on even seemingly impossible tasks became evident early in life. One of my favourite childhood leadership stories takes place when I was in grade five, about ten years old. Though we moved from town to town often, in every new place I soon had a gang of kids around me, ready for whatever adventure I suggested.

At this point we lived in the small town of Trstena, in the northern region of Slovakia, about five kilometers from the Polish border. Our apartment building stood on the banks of the river Oravica. Not only was the river a lovely sight in all seasons, it was also a source of endless adventures. One late October Saturday, the boys from my gang found a 12 foot plank of pine wood on the river bank. I was swinging on the swings when they came to report their finding to me. “Ingrid, we found a long plank of wood by the river,” they said, expecting that I should know what to do with it.

I did not think this odd, of course. It felt natural that they should report their finding to me. No one had told me that people can sense the leader in their midst and they instinctively follow. I immediately instructed all the other children on the swings to stop playing around and come along to take a look at what the boys had found. Everyone followed to the riverbank where the boys proudly produced the plank for me to see. They had hidden it under some brush for safe-keeping. It was a prize find indeed. Construction materials were very difficult to find, and they were never left out in the open because they would be stolen immediately. We always lived in apartments, so planks of wood were unfamiliar to me. It was a pine plank about 12 feet long and 10-12 inches wide and about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. I noticed how nearly perfectly white it was, there was hardly a knot in it.

“What do you want to do with it?” the boys asked with expectation. I looked over the plank again, ran my hand over it and assessed the way it stretched along the ground. Then I stood up, looked over the river and back to the plank. The answer was obvious. “We are going to build a boat,” I said with authority and complete confidence. Many of my future co-workers and later my co-labourers in ministry observed that my life motto is, “I’ve never done this before but how hard can it be?” That is how I felt when I decided to build a boat on the river bank. The astounded look on my little gang’s faces did not dissuade me at all. I already knew what had to be done to make this boat project happen. “You two, you have to find more wood. Find another long piece like this and then we will have the two sides. Then find a short piece for across the back – same height – and more

pieces for the floor. Those can be any kind of wood.” Turning to the younger boys I commanded, “All of you will bring ten nails each from your house. You Martin, you bring a hammer. We will meet here tomorrow after lunch and start building the boat. Oh, and hide this piece really well and don’t tell anyone about this. If you do, you will not get to ride in the boat.” Everyone dispersed excitedly. I went home with the confidence that tomorrow the next steps in the process would reveal themselves to me.

The next day, right after Sunday lunch, the whole gang was waiting for me at the spot by the river. One by one the kids showed me what they brought. The boys, quite amazingly, found (or stole – I didn’t ask) another long plank, not quite as long as the first one and not nearly as nice, but it would have to do. There were also a few shorter pieces. We nailed the back piece to the original long plank at a 90 degree angle, then we nailed the other long plank onto the back.

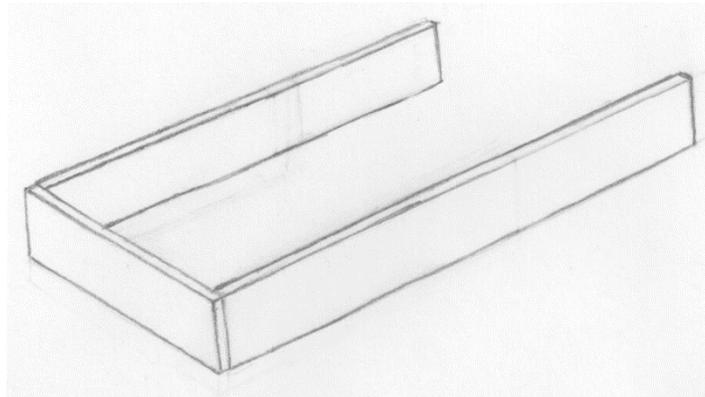


Figure 1 - Building Stage 1

Building stage 1 was complete.

Next we had to construct a pointed bow. We forced the open ends of the long planks together and nailed in many nails to keep them there. Our boat now looked like this:

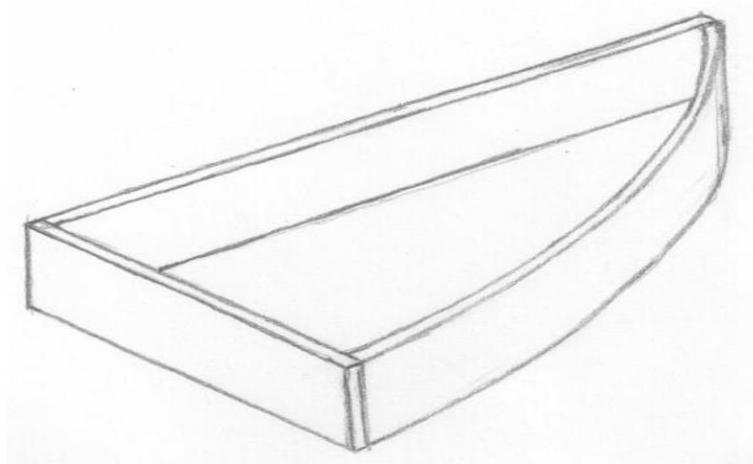


Figure 2 - Building Stage 2

The left side didn't bend at all, so the boat wasn't even, but it had to do. I explained to my team that we had neither the expertise, the tools, nor the materials to build a perfect looking boat, so we would build the best boat we could with what we had. This made good sense to everyone and we proceeded to cut the floor boards and nail them as best as we could. After nearly a week of stealing various building supplies and secret construction meetings, our boat looked quite like a boat. There were very large gaps between all the planks, several inches wide in places. Some of the children pointed this problem out to me, but I answered that since all wood floats, the boat will float also, leaks and all.

We were nearly ready for the maiden voyage. I knew that every boat needed a name and we were not about to launch a no-name boat. This was a

beautiful creation of our hands. It had to be properly named and launched. My mother was an art and literature teacher so we had paints and brushes at home. I ran to get some – secretly. I chose bright red oil paint and a wide brush and proudly painted AURORA across the stern. Growing up in communist Czechoslovakia, at age ten, Aurora was the only boat name I knew. Aurora was the ship whose cannon blast at the Czar’s summer palace in St. Petersburg started the Bolshevik revolution. It was a boat name of distinction and history, and our boat was worthy of its name.

I next appointed the captain. I picked Duschan, a boy that particularly liked me and who was one of the original finders of the plank. I appointed the first crew, five or six children, the older ones were given long poles (stripped thick branches) as tools for navigating the river. It was important for the morale of my team to see Aurora in water, and details like proper oars were unimportant to me. My younger brother Joe, who was still in kindergarten, got the special privilege to participate in the maiden voyage, though he put in little work into the construction process. We would launch Aurora on a cold, drizzly October day. We were all damp and cold to the bones, willingly ignoring our discomfort for the sake of this momentous occasion. I think that I inwardly knew that there was no way this boat would float, at least not for long. However, I sensed that my team needed the joy of seeing some results for all the work they had done. I gave Duschan the solemn charge to be the captain of Aurora. My last words to him as we were ready to push off were, “And remember, the captain goes down with the ship.”

I think the reason I did not get into Aurora was mostly because I did not want to walk home in wet shoes and pants, but perhaps also to fulfill my responsibility as the leader, who would have to direct the inevitable rescue operations. The designated, honoured few stepped into the boat which was on the flat river bank. I instructed them all to squat for balance (Aurora did not offer any seating options). There was great hooting and hollering going on as the rest of us pushed the boat and crew into the moving water. Aurora actually did float, for a moment or two. As the water gushed in through the wide gaps between the planks, the excited cheers of both the crew and the launch team turned to panicked screams. Aurora was moving fast downstream and away from the bank. Equally fast, the ship was going down under water. Fortunately, the river was only waist deep at the spot where Aurora hit bottom. The maiden voyage was all of forty feet and lasted less than two minutes.

The crew was now screaming at the top of their voices, waist deep in the icy water. My brother was the smallest and the water was chest deep on him. Everyone was abandoning Aurora with a panic and fervor worthy of the Titanic, except for captain Duschan. He stood in the boat which was now securely resting on the bottom of the river, helplessly looking at those fortunates who were allowed to save their lives. I gave him a moment to cherish his role. Then I nodded and called out to him, “You can come out now, the boat has sunk.”

One would think that such a setback would dampen my determination or even cast doubt on my leadership role. Not so. I ordered the older boys to go back into the river and drag Aurora out. “We only have to patch up the gaps and she

will float fine. She floated down the river from here all the way to there. That's pretty good for having so many leaks and being so full of people." This ability to turn failure into a positive experience, and a future opportunity, has been a gift from God that was with me from childhood to this day. It has made me fearless and up to attempting anything; after all, how hard could it be?

My little construction gang wanted to know how we were going to patch up Aurora. "We need pitch," I said, knowing that no-one, including me knew exactly what pitch was or how to obtain it. But a solution occurred to me in the moment. "Duschan, you and the boys will cut out chunks of asphalt from the road after it gets dark. Don't get hit by a car and don't let anyone see you. We will melt it down and make Aurora waterproof with it."

The next day we all met at the river bank again, dug a hole in which we set a fire, put chunks of asphalt into empty food cans that everyone had brought and we proceeded to waterproof Aurora. Some of the asphalt chunks were enormous, weighing as much as forty pounds. Duschan told me they had to "borrow" a wheelbarrow to move them. We then needed to "borrow" axes to chop them into smaller pieces. It was a good day of work by the river, around the fire, melting road asphalt. I was wearing a newer pair of red corduroys that day. When I came home I was wet, freezing cold, with burns on my hands and my red corduroys were covered with long, fine, black strands of asphalt. My mother asked me what on earth I had been doing to which I replied, "Nothing." She was satisfied with my answer, and gave me a routine scolding for ruining the pants. I went to bed feeling a deep sense of satisfaction. Making things happen was invigorating to

me. I also thoroughly enjoyed involving others in the process, giving them the opportunity to be part of something great. I sensed that it was good for my friends to have a sense of purpose and to belong to a team; and even if Aurora would never float, it was better that we tried than to have spent those cold October weeks just playing around. I have never lacked for volunteers to whatever endeavour the Lord called me to.

The next day our family drove over the bridge over river Oravica, not far from our secret ship yard. I instinctively looked out the car window toward the spot where Aurora was hiding, as my father cursed at the all the new giant pot holes that seemed to appear on the bridge overnight. I smiled, knowing that I was ultimately responsible. The asphalt on the bridge was softer than elsewhere so this is where Duschan and his friends came that night, with axes, to carry out my orders.

It poured icy rain the next few days and none of us could make it to check on Aurora. On the third day, Duschan told me in school that Aurora was gone, someone stole it. I saw that he was crushed, so I said, “They stole it because it was an awesome boat. We did a great job with it and you were Aurora’s only captain.” He eyes opened wide and he said with a grin, “It *was* an awesome boat.”

“Maybe we will build another one in the summer,” I offered. That was enough. Everyone in the gang was convinced that we accomplished the impossible – we built such a great boat out of one plank that someone wanted to steal it.

In hind sight, I wish I had parents who could have seen in me the natural abilities to lead. How different things might have been if my leadership gifts had been pointed out to me and encouraged in me. Without such guidance, I operated by instinct, knowing that people would do as I say, but without the sense of responsibility that comes with the gift of leadership. I have often, to my regret, abandoned people and causes, not realizing how much my confident and exhorting style of leaderships served as their anchor.

Figure it Out – Red or Green?

I have a relative who specializes in genetics and her answer to why human beings are the way they are is always, “It’s partly nature and partly nurture.” It is hard to know much of our behavior and responses is a result of our DNA, and how much is the result of our circumstances. Along with my ability to lead, God gave me a gift for problem solving. Whether he gave it to me through my DNA, or wrought it in me through my circumstances, I cannot tell. But I know that solving problems has always been a joy for me.

One summer, when Robbie and I were still very young, I was around five he four, we were playing in our Grandma Francesca’s garden as usual. We knew every nook and cranny of that garden, we noticed every new ant hill that had formed, every new bud and flower that appeared. On that particular day, we found a baby sparrow that had fallen out of the nest on the pear tree (the same one to which we taped the apple). Robbie had no fear of creatures of any kind, so without hesitation he picked up the tiny bird. I, on the other hand, was suspicious

of it and didn't want to touch it. As we examined the tiny creature, a question occurred to me and I immediately voiced it. "I wonder what colour is his blood," I said. Robbie looked at me in disbelief and said, "Red, blood is red."

"Yes, but birds live in trees so they might have green blood," I responded convincingly. Robbie was suddenly unsure and the two of us were facing an apparently unanswerable conundrum. After a moment of looking at the bird, Robbie asked, "How can we tell?" This was the right question as it was posed in the form of a problem that needed a solution. It only took my quick mind a moment to solve the problem. "Rip off its head," I commanded. Robbie hesitated but only for a moment. With his little hands he twisted and pulled the head off the tiny sparrow. We both noted with satisfaction that birds have red blood – problem solved.

I reminded Robbie of this story on his fiftieth birthday. He had no memory of this event either. I was glad as the memory has haunted me for many years and made me suspect that I might be a cruel, unfeeling monster for whom the answer to a question is more important than compassion for a living creature. I was glad that Robbie did not suffer similar effects. To this day, I am doubtful when people go on and on about my compassion and caring for them. I wonder if that cold and calculating me is still lurking beneath or whether God's love has transformed her altogether. In any case, I have not pulled anyone's head off recently – literally or figuratively.

Figure it Out – Ice Cream in Hungary

A few years later my family was driving to the Adriatic coast for our summer vacation. It was a yearly ritual for us. From the time I was five until I turned fifteen, our family spent three weeks camping right on the beautiful Croatian Adriatic coast. I hated to leave Grandma Francesca house for those weeks, but I really loved being by the sea, and my parents were somehow more forbearing during this time. My father loved to swim and I was a strong swimmer too. Together we would swim out several kilometers out to sea, to the point where the beach completely disappeared from view. I loved the long swims, the sun, the simple meals, and living in a bathing suit for weeks.

To get to Croatia we had to drive through Hungary. The Hungarians and the Slovaks have always been at odds with each other. Further, the Hungarian language always sounded unpleasant and unappealing to me. By the time I was ten I was fluent in Russian and Czech, and had a reasonable command of Polish and Croatian, but knew nothing in Hungarian except “Nemtudo Magyarén,” which means “I don’t understand Hungarian” and “Köszönöm,” which means “Thank you.”

It was a hot mid-day in August. We were somewhere in Hungary needing to refuel our car. My parents found a gas station, but the line-up was several blocks long, a fairly typical experience in the communist bloc. We sat hot, bored and sleepy in the car, not bothering to start it to move it in line, just getting out to give it a push forward now and again.

My father noticed a couple eating ice cream and he had an idea. “Ingrid, go buy us four ice-cream cones while we wait in line here.” He handed me a bunch of Forint bills and pointed down the street and said, “The people with ice-cream are coming from that direction.” I dubiously looked down the street of this foreign-looking town, then assessed the line-up. I had at least half an hour to get the ice cream and to get back here before they drove away. I was quite certain that if I was not back by the time they gassed up, they would drive away without me.

I set out down the street. There were no shops on this street at all and it shortly came to an end. I had to decide whether to turn left or right. I looked for people with ice cream cones but there were none. In fact the streets seemed completely dead; there was no traffic or people, perhaps due to the fact that it was the heat of the day. I decided to go left since the buildings in that direction seemed to look more like shops, though I did not see a sign that would promise ice cream. That street proved unfruitful as well. When it ended I turned right as there I finally saw a business sign. I could not tell what the words meant, but I pushed on the heavy door and walked into a dark pub where old men were smoking and drinking beer. I asked the bar keep for ice cream – using hand motions only. He understood and shook his head side to side to indicate they did not have ice cream here. I motioned out the door to indicate I wanted him to show me where to buy it. He came out with me and motioned left-right-right. I said, “Köszönöm”, and he went back in.

At this point I have been gone for what felt like more than ten minutes. I looked in the direction of the gas station – it was of course, out of sight as I took

two turns to get to where I was standing. I wondered how on earth I could carry ice cream back to the car in this heat, even if I ever did find the ice cream shop. But I felt that failure was not an option and that I had to complete this mission.

I carried on and a few more turns brought me to a small ice cream store. I ordered 4 ice cream cones, paid and hustled back to the gas station. Going back was a lot quicker, my great sense of direction (and God's grace I am sure) brought me back to the car with the ice creams reasonably intact. The surprise on my father's face showed that he did not really expect me to succeed. My mother scolded him for sending me away in a foreign country where I could have been lost or taken. It was only when I heard her words that I realized the danger my father put me in. I wondered why my mother did not stop him at the outset, and what was the point of the scolding now that I made it back? However, I figured it out, I solved the puzzle. I found a solution to the problem of finding ice cream in Hungary. I had never done it before, but it wasn't all that hard in the end.

My parents would put me into such situations often. If I had considered the danger I was actually in I might have felt fear, but each time I saw it simply as a problem to solve. I have often thought about how busy the angels, charged with protecting me, must have been. I have dangled from trees and cliffs, I swam in wild currents. I walked at night in streets full of danger and by God's grace came through unscathed. The words of Psalm 121 echo in my mind as I write this:

My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber;
The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right
hand; ...the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life.
(NIV Psalm 121:2-3, 5-7)

Escape to the West

Just as I turned fifteen, my parents, my younger brother Joe, and I crossed the borders of the Iron Curtain in the hope of finding political freedom. It was 1978, and Cold War was raging. The story of our escape is long and fascinating, but only a few significant details belong here.

The first is the moment before we crossed the Austrian-Yugoslavian border. We had, with some challenges, obtained temporary visas from the Austrian embassy in Belgrade and were free to cross over to the West. As we stood in line at the border, my father said, “This is it, once we pass that guard, we can never come back. Who says we should go?” My mom nodded in acknowledgment of the weightiness of the decision. My brother was only ten and was not paying attention. In me welled up a great desire for freedom and adventure. I was not afraid of the unknown, especially if it promised freedom. I was too young to understand the significance of the loss of roots and home. “We should definitely go.” I said in my most confident and authoritarian voice. “Really?” My father seemed surprised, “You think we should go?” It was easy for me to list the arguments pro-defection. I had heard my parents talk many times about the communist oppression, the propaganda that we all had to pretend to swallow, the limits on career, possessions and self-actualization and so on. So I just listed those things I knew bothered them. Then I added, “It can only be better

in the West.” My negotiating and salesmanship skills worked. My father declared, “That’s it then, we are going.” The conversation was over, we were escaping.

I did not doubt this decision even in the worst days in the refugee camps when we slept in barracks with countless others, took public showers, were examined naked in large groups, or even when we were eating unrecognizable food with pieces of thick animal hide and hair in it. I focused on the best, I adapted to the tight quarters and lack of privacy. I learned German so quickly that in three months I was the official interpreter for all the new Iron Curtain intakes as I spoke all the Slavic languages, including Russian. I got to travel around Austria as a translator in doctor visits, car purchases and repairs, and job interviews.

At one point, my Grandma Francesca came to visit us in the refugee camp. I don’t know how many people she had to bribe to get permission to leave the country, but I know that she promised she was going to talk sense into us and have us return. She brought us some oranges and stayed two days with us. We took her to the stores in Austria where oranges were plentiful and told her that we were not coming back. She asked me privately if even I wanted to go, and I answered with a firm “Yes.” I did not understand that I would likely never see her again. I was thinking of our escape as an extended vacation which would eventually end and everything would go back to normal, not as a permanent separation. She left us very sad and I was sad to see her go.

Introduction to Religion

In the refugee camp, we were faced with two religious groups. The first were the Catholics, who realized that I was now fifteen and not yet confirmed. I was told immediately to start attending the confirmation classes along with the other kids of age from various East Block countries. The second group were Jehovah's Witnesses. One very old woman with particularly beautiful blue eyes veiled with glaucoma came to visit once per week without fail. My parents thought that religion would be good for me, so they let me participate in the confirmation youth group. Whenever the Jehovah's Witness woman came by, they would leave me alone with her for as long as she wanted.

Both, the Catholics and the JWs, brought out the Bible. I still have the big picture Bible in Slovak that was given to me as part of the confirmation class. The Catholic priest was an old man too, in his seventies at least, and had little patience for teens. I don't remember anything he taught us, but I know that I loved meeting my new friends in the confirmation class, that I respected him deeply, and that we behaved for him as best as a bunch of teen girls and boys can. One time I suggested to the girls in our group that we would practice singing *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* (Howe 1861) and perform it for our priest. The song had the words "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" in it, and that made it religious enough for me. I taught the Slovak lyrics to the group and we got quite good at singing it in unison and in harmony. We offered to sing it for him at the next confirmation class and he agreed. We sang it perfectly, but he disapproved. He scolded us for singing words we did not even understand and for mixing lyrics about love and

war with words reserved for God and worship. I was really angry at him for not appreciating our effort, however misplaced it might have been. What made me even angrier is that he then condemned all Slovak folk music because all Slovak folk songs are only about love, drinking, and fighting. According to him, those were all despicable topics to sing about. This man represented God to me and to my group of friends. He certainly made God look judgmental, disapproving, not appreciative of the Slovak culture, and an all-around kill-joy. I had been paying attention to the priest's words and quickly picked up on the fact that his words about the love of God did not match who he was. His religion did not seem genuine. I felt he was saying the right words, but did not live them out.

In preparation for our first communion, we had to go for our first confession. We were all quite nervous about making sure we did a good job confessing all of our sins. We helped each other come up with good sins to confess. I was going to confess that I had disobeyed my parents and lied to them, that I hit my brother, and that I stole money from my mother's purse once. All the other kids had the same sins and I wanted to do better than the group. I had by now read through the entire Slovak Bible. I found it to be the most bizarre book. I decided that if I were God, I would have wiped out those Israelites at the first or maybe second error. God seemed weak to me for always giving them yet another chance. The New Testament was even worse. I came to the conclusion that no-one could live up to the standard Jesus and the epistles expected. I was certainly not going to turn the other cheek or love my enemies. And so I rejected the Bible as an unreasonable book. But I did know the Ten Commandments and they came

in handy in helping to find a juicy sin to confess. I decided that I would confess that I broke the seventh commandment “Thou shall not commit adultery.” I wasn’t exactly sure what adultery was, but I knew it had to do with sexual immorality. I had been thinking about boys quite a bit in those days, I even kissed one, so I was pretty sure that I had committed adultery.

The space in the confessional felt good. I appreciated the intricate woodwork, and the cozy and quiet space. I could make out the priest’s face through the lattice and knew he was not the one who had led our confirmation class. I penitently listed the lesser sins, each accompanied by a solemn, “Hm, hm” from the priest. Then I pulled out the big guns and said as sorrowfully as I could muster, “And I also broke the seventh commandment.” To my astonishment, his reaction was exactly the same as to all the other sins. My greatest sin only got another, “Hm, hm.” I wanted to ask him if he heard me right, but it did not seem appropriate. He gave me my penance, my forgiveness, and blessed me. I guess I was good with God. The whole thing seemed like a sham to me.

However, I enjoyed attending the services. I soon learned the right responses, when to kneel and when to sit, and I liked singing the music out of the old prayer books. I attended services by myself nearly every Sunday for the ten months we were in Austria. It was my private world, a world my parents knew nothing about. I found comfort in the religious routine, in the image of the meek Jesus on the cross, though I did not respect him for his weakness. In all that time, I never really understood the Christian message. I did not know that I was like

faithless Israel, that God was giving me yet another chance, and that Jesus was the most powerful being there is, yet for me he chose to be weak.

The JW woman simply made me read out loud through her German Bible. In the ten months we met, I read through the whole book. I would read to her for an hour or more in German. My German reading became excellent (there is a story to be told about that) even if I did not understand the meaning of each word. She concluded each of our sessions together with the statement, “See, the word Trinity is not in the Bible.” I had to agree, as we did not ever come across the word “Trinity” in the whole Bible. I did not know why it mattered to her so much, but she was older and I wanted to show her respect.

By the end of our time in Austria, I had read through the Bible twice in two languages, Slovak and German, and neither reading made any sense to me. Though there was a certain beauty and attractive mystery to the book, I dismissed it as irrelevant to life.

My First Answered Prayer

All this religion, however, exposed me to much prayer. Most of it was rote and prescribed, but some was also spontaneous, and I read about spontaneous praying in the Bible. We spent the winter in Austria and now it was spring. We had been given some used winter clothes in the refugee camp, but other than that I only had flip-flops and summer clothes from last year’s vacation in Yugoslavia. One day my mom and I passed a shoe store in town. They had all the spring fashions in their window display. What caught my eye was a rainbow of pastel

ballet-style flats. They were so beautiful, in every shade of pastel, yellow, pale green, pale blue, and light pink, but I liked the white ones the best. I saw the price and my heart sank. Nevertheless, I looked at my mom questioningly, but she shook her head no. I would go by that store every day and look longingly at those shoes. One day as I stood there, I prayed to Jesus that he would give me those shoes in any colour, but preferably in white.

A few days later, my mother and I walked to the large refugee compound down the road to look through the clothes the locals donated to us refugees. It was a sunny day, the snow was almost all gone and the roads were dry. We walked into the large dark room and scanned the tables piled with dark, winter clothes. Most were unwearable, dirty and with considerable tears. There was also a pile of footwear that was donated, we moved through that fairly quickly too; pairs and pairs of muddy and worn out boots. But then, off to the side, I could not believe my eyes, I saw a pair of the white ballet flats. I tugged on my mother's sleeve and pointed to those shoes. She said, "Don't be crazy, those are not being given away, look at the kind of garbage in this room."

I was not ready to give up hope. I walked up to the woman running the clothing room and asked if those white shoes were also being given away. She nodded yes. I grabbed them as fast as I could and checked the size. What were the odds that the shoes I have been pining for would end up here and in my size? They were size seven – exactly my size. I tried them on and they fit perfectly. I would have taken them even if they didn't. I walked out of that room hugging my new shoes. My head was spinning in happiness and incredulity - this was

unbelievable. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. It was not my cleverness or scheming or hard work that got me those shoes. They were just there for the taking. I did not realize that this was an answer to prayer until many years later, and only then did I thank God for them. But I never forgot the amazing feeling of this “coincidence,” the seemingly miraculous way my need and desire were met.

Our family decided to apply for immigration to Canada. My father found a job in Austria working for a company that had a branch in Guelph, Ontario. They liked his work and promised him a job when we arrived in Canada. We arrived in April of 1978, on a Thursday. On the following Monday, my father went to work and our life in Canada started.

High School – My Bright Days

My life, like the lives of most I imagine, went through its seasons of highs and lows. Back then I thought that each such season was all there would ever be in life, and so I took the highs for granted and the valleys were difficult to bear. Now I know that nothing ever stays the same. I revel in the happy seasons and I know that dark times will not stay so for too long.

My high school experience in Canada was fabulous. After spending three months in an ESL class my English was good enough to allow me to start with the “normal” kids. There was only one other ESL student in the school with me. She was a Vietnamese girl. We became friends and had lunches together for those first three months in a land and a school that was new for both of us.

Once I was in the normal classes, all was new again. I did not know the name of a single person in any of my classes. Soon however, the “nice” kids reached out to me and invited me into their circle. It wasn’t long before I was quite popular; not so popular that I’d get to hang out with the football/cheerleader group (they were at the top of the high school social pyramid), but popular enough to be genuinely welcomed into multiple circles of “nice” kids. Our lunch crowd grew and grew and everyone was kind and sensitive.

By my second year, I mastered English to the point of being an A+ student. I loved the sciences and math and ended up with perfect marks in all maths, chemistry, and physics classes. In fact, my final grade in Grade 10 math was 104%.

My nice friends had a certain look. The girls didn’t wear makeup and dressed mostly to hide their body outline. They let their hair grow as it would and let it hang to cover much of their faces. I did not fit this mold. I dressed in clothes that I liked – some were tighter than my friends would dare to wear. I was always doing something new with my hair. By Grade 10 I started to wear makeup, though never in front of my parents.

My popularity and reputation for brains, confidence, and kindness grew. The geeky boys in my science classes wanted me to be the first girl to join the chess club. During one lunch hour I agreed to play a game of chess. I was pitted against the president of the club. I teased him terribly through the whole game. Only in retrospect do I realize how much he was in my power. I was good

looking, smart, and confident. I considered all high school boys to be quite inferior to me; no teen boy had a chance against me.

I won that chess game fair and square, he did not let me win. However, I suspect that he simply could not think because I was flirting with the whole chess club between moves. Everyone cheered wildly as I declared “Check-mate” in my most victorious voice. My opponent complained that the game was not fair and asked for a re-match. I dismissed him with my ringing laughter and never played another chess game in high school. I was the undefeated, cool, smart girl that was too good for the chess club.

And so I had high school wrapped around my little finger. The teachers liked me because I was respectful, worked hard, earned my marks, and helped after class. The kids liked me because I was kind, funny, cool, and confident beyond their dreams.

Oh, but I could be cruel. There was another ESL boy who came to our school in Grade 12. He was older, just past high-school age, but he needed his English and his high-school diploma so he ended up in my school. One day, as I was purposefully making my way up the beautiful stone staircase of the school, followed by my regular entourage, this boy blocked my way and said in broken English, “What is your name?”

I was taken aback by his boldness, but didn’t show it. He had an accent (I had gotten rid of mine by then), so I knew his weakness. Though I understood what he said I replied mockingly, “I don’t understand, say it again?” Everyone was watching. Turning red and forming his words as best as he could, this boy

repeated, “What is your name?” My reply was, “Ask me when you learn to speak English.” I stuck my chin up in the air and squeezed past the embarrassed young man. Little did I know that I had just instigated a relentless pursuit, driven by a mad determination to conquer me.

A Boy for Every Need

That young man in the stairwell, as I later learned, was from Chile and his name was Antonio, Tony for short. His body was extremely fit and muscular, unlike most of the boys in high school. He was quite exotic looking, Caucasian features with a bit of Apache-like colour and flair. I later found out that his father was a blue-eyed Spaniard and his mother a Chilean native; she was the source of the “exotic” in him.

I loved the high school academics. I was good at all subjects and readily helped others. I tutored weaker students in math after school and one of my tutees offered me a job in the pizza shop where she worked. I gladly accepted and soon started working on weekends at Tasty Pizza, a somewhat seedy downtown pizza shop that was open all night on weekends.

Tony’s English did improve, though he kept the typical Hispanic accent. I was the reason he got up every morning and came to school. He stalked me, took the same classes as me, showed up at my weekend pizza shop job. He would even just come and sit with my lunch bunch, though no-one liked him and made their dislike obvious. In hind sight, I would describe him as an angry young man, considered to be a “jerk” by all my friends.

Tony pursued me relentlessly. I did not really like anything about Tony, except his looks, but his immense desire for me would prove to be irresistible. I wrestled with being wanted and being free. Tony's relentless displays of desire for me were unmistakable. He left me notes, he waited at the school door for me. He came to the pizza shop late at night and played mournful love ballads on the juke box. He would show up as I was leaving the mall and offer me a ride home...and on it went.

Here was my tension: I knew that he wanted me and that felt good. Yet I did not trust that being his would be good. I was wary of giving up my self-autonomy to this young man. I sensed that if I gave in, my independence, my freedom would somehow suffer. In numerous ways this was a repeat of the story of my father and my mother: the bad boy chasing the popular, competent girl. I was once told that we subconsciously seek to heal our wounds by getting close to the kinds of people that causes our deepest wounds. That answer seems to be the only way I can make sense of the fact that I chose to embrace someone who would end up cruel and destructive to me.

I did not have a "steady boyfriend" in high school. First of all, dates were complicated because I had to hide most of my friendships from my parents. They did not approve of even the best kinds of influences and I could never have friends over in our home. Secondly, I seemed to have liked only one aspect about every boy that asked me out: it was either intelligence, or looks, or sensitive nature, or musical ability, but none of them seemed to be the whole package. So I went out with many boys, often only on one date after which I realized they did

not really interest me. I discounted committing to any kind of exclusivity, which after all, would feel like the loss of freedom. The boys, however, seemed to think that perhaps there was still a chance and they were at my “disposal” should I be interested in the future. And so I had a “boy-friend” with whom I could discuss science, math, and issues of outer space. I had a “boy-friend” who would practice piano with me after school, another “boy-friend” who would walk me home carrying my back pack and holding my hand (his hands felt nice) and so the list went. They all knew that they were filling a specific need in my life and they seemed to be fine with their role. But I suspected that Tony would suffer no rivals.

In hindsight, I needed wise guidance from others, but there was no one to give it to me. My parents had no idea what was going on in my life. They only saw my report cards. As long as I was bringing in A’s, all was well. They did not know my work schedule and did not even see my pay-cheques from the pizza shop, though they knew my bank account balance was slowly rising. I could not have shared my budding romance with Tony with them. My Grandma Francesca was too far away. I am sure that had she met him she would have assessed him as “no good,” and would have told me, in no uncertain terms, to stop having anything to do with him. I am sure she would have also sent Robbie to watch out for me and threaten Tony a bit, should he continue to prowl around me. But having only my teen hormones and my confused desires for life to guide me, I gave in to Tony’s pursuits.

We snuck away to a quiet place of the school and there we kissed...and kissed. I was about to turn eighteen, and I had been accepted into the pre-med program of every university to which I had applied. I felt I was on top of the world and indestructible. God had no part in my life. Any remnants of faith or spirituality I experienced in Austria had been erased by the utter secularity of my high school existence. I did not know anyone who went to church. "I" was all there was, and "I" went to my family doctor and asked for a birth control pill prescription knowing that my parents would not be notified. I started taking the pill, planning for the right moment to sleep with Tony. I chose the place and the time, and told him to be there. Of course, he obliged.

I found love-making to be exhilarating. I felt in control, it felt great and I was hooked. I couldn't get enough of sex and Tony's body was great for sex. The rest of him, his mind, personality, attitude, and work ethic were largely undesirable, but I only really wanted him for sex. I had no idea then that God designed sex to create an inseparable bond between two people. I thought I could discard Tony after he fulfilled his purpose and I got tired of him. However, the covenant of blood was made and though I did not know it, I was now one with him.

The Darkest Cage

The most difficult part of my life was without a doubt the nearly five years I spent with Tony. Everything changed for the worse the summer I turned eighteen. My life consisted of working at my two summer jobs (I was saving

money for university) and of sneaking away to be with Tony, anywhere and often. Just after my eighteenth birthday, in the middle of August, my father noticed a hickie on my neck. All hell broke loose. I was grounded – I was not allowed to leave the house for any reason, I had to call in and quit my jobs, my father, mother, and brother became my rotating jailers, either dropping in or calling in to make sure I was home.

I lasted almost two weeks, two weeks of watching the August sunshine through the windows, two weeks of endless chores (something about idle hands), two weeks of sneaking phone calls with my friends and with Tony. Even my brother felt pity for me and would often bike away to the nearby Dairy Queen and bring me home a strawberry sundae to cheer me up. This prison was unbearable. It was the worst way my parents could have chosen to reform me. Any attempt to control me and to “cage” me was bound to backfire, but they had no idea what made me tick – and exerting their force on me was the worst way to go. Then, one day, I was done. I called Tony to let him know I would be moving in with him. I grabbed a few garbage bags and packed my clothes, my books, and school supplies, called a cab and left. I didn’t even leave a note. I remember ignoring the cab drivers’ curious looks as I loaded all my personal possessions into the trunk of his car. I remember glancing back at the house without regret as he pulled away. I knew that this was a step of monumental defiance and that there would be no coming back, yet I was unmoved by the gravity of my decision. I was done being used, abused, neglected and pressured by my family.

When I got to Tony's place he thought I should let my parents' know that I was OK. I agreed. Later that evening, when I knew they would all be home, I called the house. My father answered. "It's me," I said. He yelled my name into the phone with full rage, "You get back here this minute!" I replied, "I left and I am not coming back," surprised at the calmness in my voice. I wanted to add that I was okay and they did not need to worry about me, that I would get my jobs back and take care of myself—but I couldn't get a word in over my father's yelling, cursing, and threats. So I just hung up the phone. That was done.

We lived in a small town, my parents knew where I worked and went to school. It would have been easy for them to meet me if they wanted. For a few months, when I saw a car similar to my father's, fear would well up in me. But soon I dealt with that fear. There was nothing my father could do to me anymore. He had no legal right to me – I was finally free.

And I was finally with someone who was crazy about me. Tony's life revolved around me and mine soon started to revolve only around his. Again, had someone been there to guide, they would have said, "Don't let him be the entirety of your life." But I felt free, I was my own and I could do whatever was right in my eyes.

I believe that only someone who has experienced the freedom that the love of God brings understands that doing what you want is actually not freedom at all. Doing what you want is an immature impulse of those who are irresponsibly self-centered. God's will brings true light and true freedom, self-will brings only small and dark spaces—and so my life slowly started to shrink.

First I lost my friends. I couldn't spend time with anyone since Tony insisted on being with me all the time. None of my friends liked him (I wasn't mature enough to recognize this as a huge red flag). So within a few months, I was isolated from the many people who had previously brought joy to my life. Then, Tony was fired from his job as a cook in a motel restaurant. He often did not show up for work and when he did, he would argue with his co-workers. I got Tony a job in the pizza shop where I was still working. So, except for the time when I was in class, completing Grade 13, I was with Tony.

I was embarrassed to admit, especially to my teachers and classmates, that I was living with a guy. These were the early 80s and I was a smart, good girl. Smart, good girls did not live with guys. The solution to my embarrassment came to me as Tony and I went to open a joint bank account. He wasn't working at the time. I had two jobs (plus school), but he was on the lease for the rent, so I needed to share my money with him. In those days, however, the bank could not open a joint bank account for two unrelated people. I decided that Tony and I would, therefore, get married. That would make the banking simpler and I wouldn't have to explain that I am living with a guy.

I presented my plan to Tony and he couldn't believe his luck—he agreed without hesitation. I have always been excellent at executing a plan. Once I know where I want to end up, I know exactly what steps to take to get there. I had never gotten married before but how hard could it be? It turns out that all it took was a ring, marriage license, a new dress, and an appointment at the city hall. It was February and I explained to my teachers that I would not be in school on Tuesday

because I was getting married. It is strange to me that none of them took me aside to bring me to my senses. I even told my mother with whom I worked at one of my jobs. She looked sad, but she nodded her head in agreement and let me go. My high-school classmates baked a cake and brought some balloons and held an impromptu reception for us at our apartment that evening after school. I went to school the next day wearing a wedding ring.

As time went on, Tony discouraged me from going to school. I had never skipped school before but now I started to miss classes and assignments. I started to feel disconnected from my school community—though my marks stayed high. Without thinking it through, I had applied to three universities for BSC (pre-med school). This had been my high school plan all along and I did not yet see that Tony and University were incompatible. I got accepted to all three – McMaster, Western, and U of T with scholarships, but I still needed a lot of money for tuition. My high school counselor told me to apply for OSAP, but OSAP declined me due to my parents' high income. I tried to explain that I had no access to that money, but I didn't know how to navigate the system on my own. I would not be going to university that year. I would find another job, work minimum wages and have sex with Tony. That was my life now. It was small and dark and little did I know that it could get far worse.

The Decision for Freedom

Tony's family liked me. I was respectful and responsible. When he didn't feel like driving to the airport to pick up his sister and little nephews, I would go

and do it. I started evening classes at the local college to learn Spanish so I could communicate with his sister and parents better. In the meantime, our financial situation was getting worse. Tony could not keep a job for more than five days. He'd start on a Monday and was fired by Friday, if not sooner. His arrogant attitude and his lack of intelligence made responding to direction nearly impossible. He would also often start physical fights on the job, in those cases he'd be fired on the spot. It was getting harder and harder to keep up with the bills. I then found out that Tony had been buying drugs with my hard-earned minimum wage money. He'd buy pot and hash, use some of it and try to re-sell the rest. He explained to me that there was good money to be made in selling drugs. I pointed out the fact that it was illegal and that I didn't want drugs in my apartment. He kept buying, smoking, and selling nonetheless. His clientele were mostly kids 2-3 years younger, still in high school. They'd often come to our apartment to "sample" the product. I never engaged in conversation with any of them and would just retreat into my bedroom to read, to cry, or both.

Tony's insane jealousy was another dark aspect of his personality. In high school, he'd sometimes physically attack a guy who just looked at me in passing. I thought it was amusing and a bit stupid. I had no idea how imprisoning his jealousy would become. He had often shown up during my college Spanish class, with that brooding look on his face and wait to drive me home. I liked that he came to pick me up, but could never understand why he'd tell my college friends off as they were saying good-bye to me. I had to quit my Spanish classes because

he called the college one evening and the security guard that answered the phone could not confirm that I was on the premises.

By God's grace I was protected from grasping much of what went on in Tony's mind. He was tortured by the conviction that I was not faithful to him. He felt I was much too good for him, much too attractive and popular with people to see anything in him. I never suspected him of unfaithfulness. He was never "missing" and despite our serious relational and financial problems our sex life continued to be great.

Nearly five years into our relationship, I was basically a shut-in. I could not go anywhere, call anyone or talk about anyone. Tony drove me to work and picked me up from work. His temper was more and more out of control. He'd often yell at me in rage for reasons I did not understand.

I was becoming despondent, this was certainly the lowest point in my life. I didn't think I could leave him and I even contemplated suicide as the only way out. It was my Grandma Francesca's love that kept me from thinking along this way. I knew it would kill her if she found out I died. I was rarely in touch with her now. She sent me letters regularly, but the village life she was describing was so far away now. Robbie, Janie, the dog, the mushroom picking outings – those were all distant memories. I could not write her anything positive, so I rarely wrote at all. I wouldn't have even known how to put into words how dark and small my life had become. Giving into the desire to be wanted led into a dark and cruel prison cell.

But God's grace brought two bright lights into my life. One was a very good job at Raytheon, where someone noticed my work ethic. He offered me a role in his department, mentored me, and encouraged me to go back to school to study business. I was thriving in the business world; I worked hard, knew how to get along with people and learned what I needed to know quickly.

The other bright light was Tae-Kwon-Do. I started taking martial arts for practical reasons. I was still working late nights at the pizza shop. Almost every weekend as the drinking establishments closed, the drunks would come to get something to eat. There were fights in the shop nearly every weekend and I had to call the police to get things settled down. Fights would often move behind the counter and into the kitchen. There was, at times, blood staining the wall, and food and broken dishes would end up all over the floor. I felt that I needed to be able to physically defend myself and martial arts seemed the way to go. I loved the discipline and the sheer physicality of Tae-Kwon-Do. As with most things, I was very good at it and quickly moved through the ranks, helping to run the school and teaching the newbies.

With the physical confidence from Tae-Kwon-Do and the boost to my self-esteem that my work at Raytheon gave me, I decided that things had to change. I gave Tony an ultimatum. He had to emotionally grow up and get a job that he could keep so we could buy a condo and start again, or I would leave. Tony agreed. His brother loaned us ten thousand dollars for the down payment and we moved into a nice townhouse. Tony's brother-in-law found him a real job

in Guelph. Oddly enough it was in the same company where my father was working, though my father never knew that Tony was married to his daughter.

Tony went to work every day and for a very short while life was good. Only a month after we had moved in, the bank called asking why we hadn't made any mortgage payments. I assured them that there must be some mistake. But when I confronted Tony, he sheepishly said, "I did not want to tell you because I was afraid you'd leave me." "Tell me what!" I was imagining the worst, but Tony's answer trumped my imagination. He had lost his job the day before we closed on the condo. On the day we signed the mortgage, he was (again) without a job. He had been going who knows where every day for a month – pretending to be employed.

I got in the car and drove to my mom's house. She had since separated from my father and my relationship with her was good. I made arrangements to get the rest of my stuff and declared the marriage over. Tony would follow me around for many months, kidnapped me once, but I managed to get away and call the police. I saw his car at my work and near my home a lot, but I wasn't afraid of him at all. He was just a minor nuisance. When I eventually filed for divorce, he asked to meet with me. He said he wouldn't sign it, to which I replied that I didn't care, eventually time would just run out and it would go through. I could see the anguish on his face, the fear that I had found someone better, and I said, "You know, I never cheated on you. The idea didn't even occur to me. The reason I am leaving you is because you won't grow up and because you can't keep a job." He cried, nodded his head and signed the divorce papers. I only saw him one other

time, years later. He was remarried, had a baby boy, and had been working as an electrician in the same factory for fifteen years.

I don't mind having lived through that time with Tony. By God's grace there have been no long-term negative effects to me. My sunny personality was never really gone, and neither was my strength, they were just put aside for a time. I don't even regret that I married him, though being divorced and being in ministry always takes a bit of explaining. I married him because at the time I felt it was the right thing to do. I had judged my mother for being stupid for marrying someone like my father. But, was I with Tony because I desired to be loved by a cruel person like my father? Was it a natural consequence of choices contrary to God's will for life? I still don't have the answers to these questions.

My experience with Tony has given me a great ability to empathize with women who are stuck in abusive or otherwise bad relationships. I don't wonder why they just don't leave. I don't think that they have low self-esteem and that's why they take it. I was strong and self-assured and still ended up in such a place. I know what isolation can do to a person's mind and I also understand that bond that keeps a woman with a man even when he is no good.

I have often cautioned young women about the men they are with. When I see a tendency toward control or abuse or neglect, I gently let the woman know that she should not commit unless she is sure that this man will be good for her, that he is someone whose wife she'd be proud to be. I wish someone had that talk me, but no-one did and that's okay too.

Love in the Flesh

After Tony came William. We met at work. I was now working in a high-tech company and was quickly moving through the corporate ranks. I managed a number of departments and was respected and called on often. William was in nearly every way the extreme opposite of Tony. He was Scottish, had a PhD in physics, was confident and had many friends. He was not particularly good looking (unlike Tony) but I soon fell in love with him. I think I first loved him out of gratitude. William, on the surface was the typical gruff Scot. He frequently swore with a distinct Scottish accent. He was highly respected by others, though in meetings he often aggressively disagreed with them. When we were alone, however, he would speak with me tenderly, genuinely caring for my well-being, asking how I was doing and if I needed help personally or professionally. William was exceedingly generous. When my car was being repaired due to an accident, William lent me his and he hitched rides to work for almost two weeks.

Our paths crossed many times each day. We sat in the same meetings, we worked on solving problems together, and we designed and developed systems together. After the treatment I received from Tony, I was immensely grateful for William's respect and tender attention. The Song of Songs teaches that gentleness and tender words are the greatest aphrodisiac to a woman, and my heart slowly started to melt for William.

Secondly, I loved his intellect. He was the first man I met who was intellectually by far my superior. He thought on a high plane, his vocabulary far exceeded mine, (I learned words like "vitriolic" from William) and I actually had

to think when I conversed with him about life or about work or anything else. He could discuss any topic. He was well-read and up on the latest news and developments.

Thirdly, I soon realized that William knew me better than I knew myself. He could read my tiniest facial expressions and body language cues. I loved him for it. In business and in personal situations he knew that I was tense before I knew I was tense. He could tell whether I agreed or disagreed though I did not say a word, he knew whether I was engaged or bored, when I felt confident or insecure. And he knew just what to say to help me. When there were upheavals in the work place and my VP was fired, it was William who helped me navigate not only the organizational politics, but also my feelings of frustration and worry about my career.

Soon I looked for any excuse to talk to him. He always welcomed my interruptions and reciprocated, dropping into my office often. Yet, I did not dare hope, that he felt any more than collegial fondness for me. I felt he was out of my league. William was six years older, successful, sophisticated, and though I was in many ways at least as successful as he, I felt like a school girl beside him. He'd invite me to lunch often and our conversations slowly became less about business and more about us. He told me about his family in Scotland and his reasons for coming to Canada. I told him more about me than I had told anyone else. He was the first person, apart from my Grandmother, Auntie Janie, and Robbie, whom I trusted completely and from whom I would eventually hide no secret.

It turned out that our feelings were mutual and our relationship moved from friends to lovers. Before long, the way William already knew how to read my thoughts and emotions soon became the way he could read my body. Making love with William was always a spiritual experience and we could not get enough of one another. Neither of us had moral boundaries which would suggest that pre-marital sex was wrong. As time passed, we freely took every opportunity to be together. I could not believe that William loved me, loved me! He not only professed his love for me with words, he showed me every day. This was the first time I understood how amazing healthy love between two adults can be.

At first I gave William access to only those inner parts of me that I knew he could not hurt. I would tell him about events but avoided disclosing my deep feelings. However, William was not satisfied with my cursory answers. In time, his probing questions led me to expose even the deep parts of my soul, my real fears, insecurities and hopes. He treated even these with tender care. He never used his intimate knowledge of me for my harm. With William I was fully known, I was deeply desired and I was tenderly loved. I believe that God was showing me through William the incredible nature of love. The more I realized how much William loved me, the more I loved him and the more of myself I wanted to give to him. Yet my love for him was not blind. I knew his weaknesses and his character flaws – he swore too much and could put people off. He was an introvert and didn't enjoy people nearly as much as I did. He had a tendency to drink too much beer or wine if he was in a bad mood, though he was never cross with me. I loved William with eyes wide open, I was able to project what these

traits would look like ten or twenty years into the future. I anticipated the difficulties we would have, as did he with my shortcomings. Yet, we loved each other and were committed to work through any future difficulties.

In one Star Trek episode, Captain Jean Luc Picard looks after a woman betrothed to a prince. This woman has the ability to imprint herself onto a man in such a way so as to be perfectly suited for him. The woman, however, chose to imprint herself on Jean Luc Picard instead of her future, less noble husband. She chose to do so because she liked who she was when she was with the intelligent, caring, strong and capable captain. She says to him, "I am for you." This is how I felt with William. I liked who I was with him and I felt that I *was* for him. I completely gave into his desire for me and though I was fully his, fully within his power I did not feel imprisoned. I was flourishing in his love. We were together for two wonderful years, we were engaged and I was at peace.

William's sudden death was my death too. My heart broke over and over again. It was William who released in me the capacity to love. I had not loved anyone this fully before. The realization that I was able to love this deeply but now had no object for my love was bewildering. With William, I had been awakened to a kind of love that I did not know was possible - a love that gives life, strength, security, value, joy. I had experienced a love that gives and gives, never takes, never consumes - a love to which the more you give yourself the more of yourself there is.

In *Befriending our Desires*, Philip Sheldrake draws a compelling comparison between the self-giving and commitment of sexual desire to the self-giving and commitment of the union of a soul with Christ. He states:

The scandal is not in linking sex to Jesus or to God's self-giving, but in the fact that our Christian faith while based on a particular instance of embodied love, has so little place for the religious significance of the erotic. Theological discussion has usually been limited to sexual ethics...outlets in safely prescribed contexts...How many people do you know, including yourself, would tell their spiritual history in terms based partly on sexual experience. How many of us, too, would see our sexual growth (pain or passion) as intimately associated with our following of Christ or as liberating us to enter more deeply into the desire of God? (Sheldrake 2001, 85-86)

Sheldrake also comments that "Eros [love] strives ultimately for union with whatever we perceive to be the source of all value for us" (Sheldrake 2001, 83). I am certain that William's love liberated me to eventually enter deeply and without fear into the union with Christ, my ultimate source of love and value. I am grateful for having had William in my life. After growing up in largely a hostile environment, without William I would not have known what love could be, nor that surrender to such love brings life. And if God had not taken William from me, I would not have wondered about love. I would not have sought its ultimate source, nor would I have been ready to trust it. Unbeknownst to me, through William's love, God showed me his love for me.

I Have Called You by Name

I wandered a bit after losing William. He left an emptiness in me that I knew could not be filled, so I did not try. I live with the sense of missing him to

this day, though it is not a sad feeling. I am simply aware that he was and now he is not.

William cured me of any desire for a lesser man and his love was good for my sense of worth. A few years later, I married a kind man and God gave us a wonderful baby boy. Everything in my life was good. I had a great marriage, successful and fulfilling career, great friends and excellent relationships with all members of my extended family. God gave me a wonderful son, Cameron, who was such a smart and fun baby, and I delighted in him, and in my life as a whole. Yet, there remained a void in my soul that no amount of happiness or success could fill. I attributed it to the loss of William, but had a nagging feeling that it was about more. I poured myself into work, and kept climbing the corporate ladder. I had a great boss at this time, his name was Steve, who was an ex-military man. I appreciated his directness and his discipline. He held a staff meeting with all his managers on Tuesday mornings at 10 a.m. You could not be late, and you could only miss the meeting if you were dead. Those were the rules. I learned how to run a good meeting from Steve.

In January 1994, my husband and I were expecting our second child, when I miscarried. I miscarried at home, alone, and was too devastated to think. When my husband came home, he suggested we go to the hospital. I refused to go, I was distraught. Besides, it was dark and cold outside, and I did not see how the hospital could help at this point. But as the evening progressed, the pains in my belly got worse. I finally agreed that something was wrong, so we packed up our two-year old Cameron and started out.

The pains were now excruciating. About five minutes away from the hospital something inside gave and I started to gush blood. By the time we pulled into the ER and they pulled me out of the car and onto the wheel chair. The blood had soaked through my winter coat, was now pooling on the car seat, and it was sloshing in my winter boots. I was rushed into a small room and as my pants were pulled off I noticed my thighs were completely red, covered in blood. There was blood everywhere, on the doctors and nurses that were attending me and even on the walls of the examining room. They started suctioning the blood and I watched the wall-mounted container reach the two liter mark in a matter of minutes. I wondered how much blood a person actually contained, I thought two liters was getting close. Simultaneously, they inserted five IVs in my arms in attempts to replenish my lost fluids. My blood type is 0- with positive antibodies which I acquired in the process of birthing Cameron, so transfusion was not an option. I started to lose consciousness. The doctors pulled in my husband, telling him to prepare for the worst. Because they were not able to stabilize me, they could not take me into surgery to deal with the source of the bleeding.

I woke up the next day, aware that I had nearly died. I felt extremely weak. When I looked in the mirror, I saw that my face was gray. I had lost a lot of blood. I was informed that I would stay in the hospital for eight to ten days to recover and then six weeks at home. I replied that I would be checking out the next day, which would be Friday. In my mind, I had four days to get well enough to be at the Tuesday 10 a.m. meeting.

The next day when I threatened to leave the hospital without permission, they reluctantly let me sign a waiver and I went home. I spent Saturday and Sunday in bed at home. On Monday morning, I was home alone and I made my way to the living room couch. I sat there exhausted and in complete silence, with our cat sleeping beside me. It was snowing outside and I was looking at the quiet snow, pondering the sadness in my soul. I then heard William's voice speak my name out loud. I looked in surprise in the direction of his voice. It was coming from over my left shoulder, from the spot where the front hallway met the living room. My surprise was primarily not because I heard William's voice, but because I did not hear anyone come in. The front door was nearby and our front hall had such terribly squeaky floor that even the weight of our cat was enough to get it creaking and cracking. How could anyone have walked down that hall to that spot without being heard? But I saw no-one. I stared at the spot for a long time. I knew exactly where the voice came from and I knew it was William's. There was no alarm or fear in me. I didn't think there was a ghost in the room. I did not even feel that my name was called, it was simply spoken.

I have thought about that moment a lot. I am quite certain that at that moment Jesus simply claimed me. "I have called you by name, You are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). That is what I believe happened. Perhaps it was due to the stillness that I was able to hear God call my name. If I had been at work or still in the hospital, the noise of life would have drowned out God's voice. By the way, I don't think that God has William's voice, I just think that to me William's voice was the voice of love.

The next day I made it to work for the 10 a.m. meeting. I struggled terribly to walk from the parking lot to my office. On the way up the stairs to the meeting room I had to rest several times. I was a few minutes late, so I sat a bit off to the side, not quite in the center of action as I normally would. The meeting went as usual. Steve went department head by department head, we all reported on progress, problems, customer audits, staff performance issues and the like. I was always in the know, always armed with up-to-date information, and always with an opinion to share. This time, I was quieter. Through the sleeves of my dress blouse, I could see the five large bruises the IV needles left in my arms. As the meeting progressed, I realized that I could have been dead. If I had died last Thursday, this meeting still would have happened. The same conversations would have occurred, except they would have to add an agenda item: who will take over Ingrid's departments now that she is dead. Then my office would be packed up, the many plaques of accomplishment taken off the walls and that would be the end. I would be remembered and missed for a while. However, everyone would move on with their lives, the way I moved on with mine after William died. I left that meeting with a profound conviction that my life had no meaning and that God was the only one who could give meaning to my life. I acknowledge God's grace in this; such a thought could not have occurred to me unless God had put it there. I had a purpose now. I was going to find God. This was Tuesday, February 01, 1994.

The Search for God

I had never looked for God before, but how hard could it be? Before I reached my desk, I had formulated a plan. I decided that finding God, should take four to six weeks. I decided that I would not go to church as I was not interested in religion. I was suddenly quite convinced that God was real and I wanted to meet him face to face and say, “Here I am, do what you wish with me.” My experience of church taught me that it is not a place where God is present in this way. I also discounted reading the Bible, I had done that already (in Austria) and again, I did not remember God being in that book. I was also sure that there would be other people who had already met God, in the way I wanted to meet God. However, I also concluded that they could not possibly live anywhere nearby – certainly not in Southern Ontario. My reasoning was based on the fact that I had not personally met a single person who had met God in a life-changing way. I fully expected that meeting God would radically change my life.

At that time, the genocide in Rwanda was raging strong. I heard there were people going to Rwanda to help the many refugees. It seemed reasonable that this is where people who knew God would go, that they would be in places where they could bring about real change. I decided therefore to go to Africa where I could find a missionary who could tell me how to find God. I figured that going with a relief agency into Rwanda was the best way to go. I called the Red Cross. They were indeed looking for volunteers for Rwanda. However, they were looking for doctors or nurses, I was neither. They asked if I spoke French and I did not. I

figured that I could learn French faster than I could become a nurse, so I enrolled in the local college evening class in French.

I also had to tell my husband that I would be leaving for Africa soon. I decided to tell him at our Valentine's dinner out. I started to explain that I had a strong sense that I needed to find God. Scott was supportive as always and asked if I wanted to start attending church. "No, I don't think God can be found in a church. I am thinking of going to Africa to find God." This was a surprise, so I had to explain my reasoning. Scott dubiously asked, "So, you would take a leave of absence from work and be gone for a few weeks or a month?" I told him, "Something like that." Although, in fact, I was thinking, "*If I find God, I am never coming back.*"

With my husband's half-hearted blessing, I proceeded with my French classes. I also took a contract in Montreal to practice my French, to be ready to go to Africa to find God. I had called a number of other African contacts. The darker the better I thought, so I called organizations that worked in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and the like. I offered to do business training, English teaching, and various other services, but nobody would take me. My original four to six week deadline had long passed, and I had not yet found God. I was growing impatient and a bit fearful that this might be harder than I anticipated.

Scott and I started attending his parents' church, the United church in Waterloo where we had married. I joined the missions committee, since I was going to Africa. I joined the young women's group, since I was a young woman, and I was recruited to teach grade 4-5 Sunday school. We attended the Sunday

services. Occasionally in the songs we sang I felt an echo of God, a whisper that he was there. However, the sense left as soon as it came. I spoke with the minister one day and told him that I felt I would lose my mind if I did not find God. He promised to have coffee with me to talk about it, but that meeting never took place. I taught the Sunday school kids from the curriculum given to me. I usually skipped over the Bible portion of the lesson and focused on the crafts and the games. We had fun in our group, but God was not there.

Months rolled by. The summer and fall came and went, and I was not any closer to finding God. A deep sadness was growing in me. By now I was certain that God existed. I was certain that he was my meaning in life, but it seemed that he was too far, too busy running the universe to notice that I was desperately in need of him. I started to suspect that I would live the rest of my life knowing that I could not figure out the most important thing in life – how to find God.

One November morning, Sonya called my office phone. She was a hardworking woman from Jamaica and I had been her boss for several years now. She had asked a few times in the past weeks to meet with me. But when I asked what it was about, she was vague, so it seemed personal to me. I was not interested in her personal life, or in any personal comments she might have wanted to offer to me, so I kept dismissing her. This time she came straight to the point.

“What is it Sonya?” I asked with a tone that clearly conveyed I was not interested in wasting time talking with her. “I am really sorry to bother you Ingrid, but I feel that I have to tell you this, or God will hold it against me.” Her tone was

very hesitant, very apologetic. I was a tough boss, I put in 150% and I expected everyone else to do the same. But Sonya used the word “God” and my ears perked up and I stayed quiet.

“I have been having this dream about you, for months now. It is the same dream. I am sorry, but I am sure that God wants me to tell you. In my dream, I see you standing in front of people, they are young and old and they are black and white; and you are telling them about God and they are laughing and crying.” My thought was, “How can I tell anybody about God – I can’t even figure out how to find him!” What I said was, “Sonya, I have been looking for God for months.” Sonya said, “Really? Stay put, I will go home and bring you a Bible.” She hung up on me, left work without asking for my permission and half an hour later she handed me a black NKJ Bible. “Read it every day and come to my house on Wednesday night. There will be some people there to help you.”

As I took the book from her hands, a wave of relief washed over me. This was the first decent break in my search for God. I read from the Bible every day as she suggested. This Bible had some of the lettering in red. I thought that was odd, but I focused on the red letters, especially where there were lots of them together. Without knowing what it was, I started my Bible reading in the Sermon on the Mount. The words were piercing through to my soul. “Do not worry about tomorrow” Jesus said, I felt I wanted to comply. I read that Bible every chance I got until Wednesday came. I read it at night in bed, nudging my husband and saying, “Listen to this...” and I would read the red words to him.

I Believe

On Wednesday evening, I showed up at Sonya's house. There were another eight or ten Jamaicans there and they warmly welcomed me into their meeting. Sonya introduced me and handed me a red hymnal. Out of consideration for me, I was asked to choose the hymn. I told them that I did not know any hymns, but that I can read music so any song would do. They said, "Surely you know Amazing Grace," I did not know it, but I liked it when we sang it. "How about Great is Thy Faithfulness?" I did not know that one either, but I liked it too.

After we sang five or six hymns, Tom, whom I quickly gathered to be the leader of the group asked me why I was there. I told him that I was looking for God. He asked, "What do you think God is like?" I said, "Well, I am not sure, but I think that God is a great cosmic energy and we are all connected to him and we come from him and eventually return to him." The more I spoke, the more ridiculous my words sounded. I decided to end my attempts at describing God by saying, "Well, I don't really know what God is like, but one thing I do know, he is not some old man sitting on a throne in heaven." There. That was that.

Tom and the group were all nodding affirmingly. Then Tom said, "Turn to Isaiah 6 and read it for me." It took me a while to find Isaiah 6, the whole book and chapter thing was new to me. I did not remember books and chapters from my Bible reading in Austria. I finally found Isaiah 6 and this is what I read out loud:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His

glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged." (Isaiah 6:1-7)

As I read the words, I had the sense that they were absolutely true. Tears were rolling down my cheeks. I felt Isaiah's woe, but also I felt the majesty and holiness of God. When I finished reading, I said, "By Jove, I guess he is sitting on a throne in heaven!"

The group asked me then to turn to Genesis 1, Genesis 3, John 3, Romans, Ephesians, Revelation, and so I read the message of the gospel from God's book. I read about creation, the Fall, the effect of sin, the redemption promised by God and eventually realized in Jesus. I read that God is love and that I was a sinner for whom God's salvation was available simply if I believe. It took about two hours before we reached the end: one day Jesus will come and all who are his will live with him forever. I got to ask questions along the way, every question was answered by a Bible reference which I then looked up and read to the group.

The group was now quiet, looking at me, waiting for my response. I was utterly convinced. I was utterly sure that all this was true. I was all in. Somewhere along the way that evening I surrendered to the truth I was reading. I believed it. I gave myself to it. I did not know how to express this in words, so I said, "I believe it, all of it. Where do I sign, I am in."

The group asked me a great deal more questions to make sure I really believed. Then they declared me a believer, asked me to get on my knees, laid their hands on me and prayed that God's Spirit would seal me and empower me and grow me, that I would know the love and faithfulness God has for me and that I would live out the purpose he has ordained for me. When I got up from my knees I was a citizen of God's kingdom. I have never prayed the sinners' prayer or asked Jesus into my heart. This group of men and women simply accepted my word of faith and trusted that God accepted it too.

God saved me in the wisest way. First of all, I know that had I found God in four to six weeks, I would have felt that I had accomplished my salvation; and I would have no patience for anyone struggling on their journey for God. It was necessary and good for me to lose hope before God could save me. Secondly, God saved me into the most disorganized and casual group of believers ever. Everything was done "Jamaican style", as my friends would say; no rush, no worry. The flow of our church gatherings was rarely planned. Church started at 10 a.m. or 10:20 a.m. or whenever the person with the key arrived.

We sang, went through about an hour of Sunday School, right there in the pews, with kids running around, sang some more and then the pastor preached. He was a good preacher and I was moved by his very text-based messages. Then we sang some more, people just shouted out numbers of hymns and when no more numbers came up the pastor asked if anyone had something to share. Several people always had something to share, something they read in God's word, something that happened to them that week, some way in which God was working

in their lives. Often the sharing went longer than the sermon. At some point, we would break for lunch, eat some goat curry and such, and then we would continue sharing. Always, after sharing another request for a song would come, so we would sing some more. Church ended when all the sharing, praying and singing was done. Some days that was 2 p.m. other days it was 4 p.m. It did not matter; the day was the Lord's.

After a while, I let go of the need to know what was to happen next and whether “the program” was running on schedule. I accepted that this was the way church should be – not structured like the Catholic and United church services I had attended. On Wednesdays, we got together to study the Bible, to sing hymns and to pray. I soon learned to sing the hymns, although with a Jamaican flare. I was the only white person in the small congregation. They cared for me and nurtured me in the faith. The Wednesday Bible study was soon moved to our house since I was pregnant again and the late nights were easier on me in my own home. We studied often until midnight or later. The curriculum was entirely based around growing me up in the faith. What we studied was either in response to my questions, or based on what Tom thought I should know.

I grew in the faith rapidly and since the group recognized a teaching gift in me, they soon asked me to lead the Adult Sunday School. I prepared for eight to ten hours for the forty-five minute lesson, I was determined to teach this group of seasoned believers something they did not yet know, or perhaps forgot. This was the beginning of my teaching ministry.

Two years later the pastor returned to Jamaica, and the church closed. Those two years were my incubator. I was formed to believe that Christianity is about discipleship; about knowing God and living for him. I had no idea there were seeker driven churches in the world, or that there was such a thing as contemporary Christian music, or even that there were Christian book stores. I just knew that following Jesus was about the Bible, prayer, service, simple worship, and deeply caring fellowship. I have not grown like this in any church that we have been part of since. In other settings, I had to quickly learn to find my food elsewhere, as contemporary services and small groups offered little spiritual meat.

In His Hand

Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians speaks of a mystical experience, of being taken to the third heaven when he saw inexpressible things. I think that most mystical experiences are like that – inexpressible and therefore best left unspoken, experienced and kept to oneself. Such experiences are very personal, designed by God to touch that individual alone, in a way that particularly speaks to that individual. Attempts to describe such experiences tend to cheapen them somewhat. They take what is profoundly intimate and let others look and touch.

Nevertheless, I will here describe one such experience. I had been saved for about three months and was crazy in love with Jesus. I was walking on sunshine, basking in being loved and cherished. God was answering my prayers

those days with incredible speed and specificity. For instance, I was teaching some business seminars at our local college and I negotiated that I would be paid per student. On the Friday before the seminar, there were six people registered. I had to print off a large handbook and I asked God how many should I print off. I sensed him ask me, “How many students do you want?” I said, “Lord would you please send eighteen people to my class on Monday?” I went ahead and printed eighteen copies of the handbook. On Monday there were eighteen students, most of them unregistered and apologetic, hoping they could still join, even though they decided to take the class over the weekend. Such answers to prayer were a daily occurrence. I would share what I was praying for with my husband and eventually he came to base his decisions on how to proceed based on my request to God, rather than the seen reality. Ironic, perhaps, since he was not yet a believer himself. One of my love languages is gifts. I think God was simply assuring me of attentive love for me in ways that spoke to me—as he did with those shoes so long ago in Austria.

I was now working at Com Dev, a hi-tech satellite systems manufacturing company. The business situation was difficult. Many were getting laid off, as the government satellite work was drying up. Personally, I had the added difficulty of navigating who I now was in Christ with the expectations people had of the old me. In meetings my tone had softened, I was no longer interested in personally demolishing people who under-performed, or even those who openly opposed me. My peers and subordinates felt uncomfortable around the new, unpredictable me. I felt my time at Com Dev was inevitably drawing to an end, but I loved this place

and I loved my work there. As the weeks went by, the uneasiness of anticipating an unknown future was creeping into my heart.

One mid-morning at work I took the route that I had walked thousands of times before. My office was in the new, office section of the company, while most of the departments I managed were at the furthest end of the building, in the older area that housed receiving, stores and manufacturing. The two buildings were connected by a fairly narrow hallway that stretched at least one hundred yards. I had walked that hallway back and forth many times each day. Since it was the major connector between the two buildings, it was a major thoroughfare. Hence, in this hallway, news spread first, and here many impromptu meetings and key business decisions took place.

I was walking to the edge of the office space to the point where the main hallway started. I was carrying binders and files in my arms as usual. I reached the hallway in my usual brisk pace and turned the corner. I knew what I would see: a seemingly endless stretch of hallway, filled with people walking or standing in conversation, doors into the hallway opening and closing. I liked the feeling of active energy in this hall. This day, the hallway was different. As soon as I turned the corner, to my surprise, I saw that there was not one person in sight. I could see all the way to the far end, to the wall that marked the start of the manufacturing section. Simultaneously I felt what I can describe only as a hand, made of feathers holding my whole body. I stopped in my tracks focusing on the physical sensation. The grip felt firm and sure, but light and soft at the same time. It felt strong, yet not constricting. It was unmistakably a right hand, based on the

positioning of the thumb, palm and fingers. The pressure was most noticeable on my left shoulder where the thumb of the hand was pressing. I turned my head slowly to look at my shoulder but I saw nothing. I felt the feathers brush against my right cheek and hair. With my right hand, I slowly reached there to touch the unseen hand, but I felt nothing. Next, I slowly turned and looked down on my right calf where I felt the pressure of the little finger and where the end of the hand would be. Again, I saw nothing. I continued to stand still, absorbing the feel of that hand into my memory.

There was not a soul in the hall, everything was perfectly still, although I could hear the business of work elsewhere in the building. After a minute or two of standing still, relishing the sensation of being in this hand, I took a slow cautious step. I expected the grip to dissipate, but it held. I took another step, then another, all the while focusing on how the hand felt on my back, around my hips and how the feathery fingers brushed against my calves, face, and hair. I slowly walked all the way to the end of the hall, never losing the sense of that wonderful grip. I don't know how long I took to make it down that hall that day. I am guessing at least five minutes, maybe more. In all that time I was in the hallway alone, not one other person appeared, not one door opened. When I got to the end of the hallway, I turned left. In front of me was the cafeteria, another popular gathering spot, always filled with people and the noise of their conversations. As soon as I turned the corner and the cafeteria crowd came into view, the sensation of the hand slowly vanished. I stood for a moment waiting to see if it would come back but it didn't.

This experience is precious to me. All I can make of it is that God let me feel for a long moment the reality of how his children go through life – we move through life held in his hand. Nothing can come to us or at us unless it passes through his fingers, and he is perfect love and perfect wisdom. I believe with all my heart that whatever he lets through is ultimately meant for our good. Romans 8:28, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God”, is a truth that I know to be true deep in my soul.

Perhaps it is because of this experience that I live life with virtually no fear. I am not worried about my children, my family, my health, my ministry, my finances, my future or my death. I live with the sense of being carried through all the circumstances of life in God’s hand. Further, in his hand, the particular circumstances matter only so much. In his hand, life can be lived consciously as a gift, with all the good and all the bad it brings. However, all of it in his control, and all of it truly intended for good.

Letting Go

I would like to take the opportunity to delve deeply into the process of discerning God’s call (or will) for my life and the change that surrender to that will brings. I have cycled through this process many times in my life with God. This particular time God asked me to “Let go;” let go of my life as I knew it, of my corporate climb, of my need to control the future. Instead, give in to his call and take a step into the unknown.

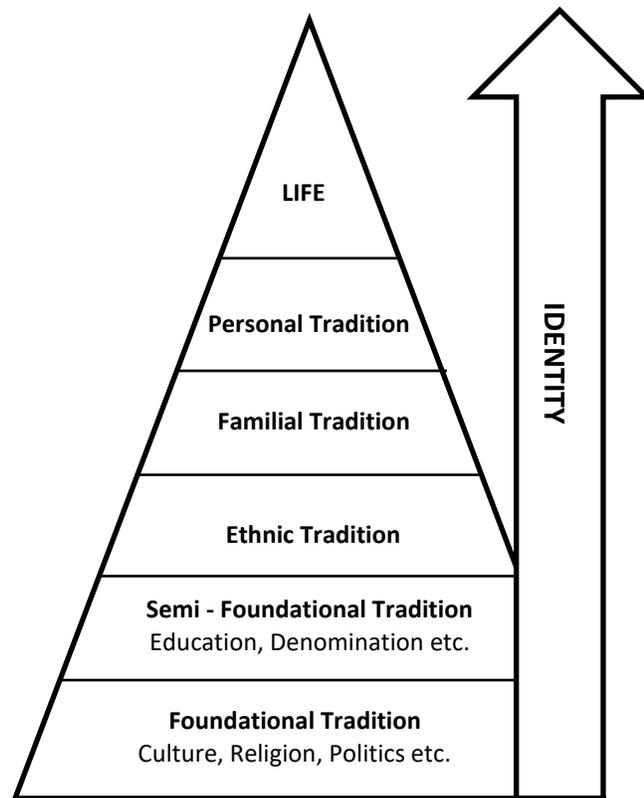


Figure 3 - The Tradition Pyramid, © Standish 2014. Used with permission

Each of us exists with pre-dispositions which are so deep, so integrally part of who we are that they, in fact, determine who we are and the life choices we make. The diagram below shows the Tradition Pyramid developed by Dr. Standish (Standish 2014, Lecture 9), based on Adrian van Kaam’s theories of spiritual formation. Life is lived on top, flowing out of the layers of the pyramid. At the base of the pyramid is the foundational tradition layer, which is comprised of the religion, the culture, the ideological climate in which a person grows up. The foundational tradition may be difficult to identify as it is tightly woven into the fabric of the individual. Yet the transformation that is integral to discernment calls for a deep knowing of self. Calvin opens his *Institutes of Christian Religion*

by claiming, “There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God” (Calvin 1995, 15). Thomas à Kempis likewise notes that “a humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning” (Kempis 1993, 20). The process of discernment is, at its core, a process of surrender of the self, a death to self-will for the sake of embracing the will of God. Discernment involves the revelation of anything other than Christ that forms the basis of one’s identity, and the subsequent supplanting of all that is within by Christ.

I grew up in a communist culture (late 60s Czechoslovakia). It was essentially a culture of hypocrisy. I learned very early on that there were (at least) two layers of truth in all things. The state “truth” was that we love our Russian brothers, that communism was the ideal social setup, that all were equal in rank, that all would share to ensure that no-one lacked, that everyone was content with their role in society, and that all this social contentment resulted in a virtual absence of crime. The reality I observed at a very young age, however was that we hated our Russian occupiers, that we were imprisoned in a dysfunctional social setup from which most desperately wanted to escape, that inequality abounded to the point that justice was the prerogative of the powerful, that everyone cheated and stole as much as they could to make up the lack, that people were miserable and had no scruples in advancing their position in society, and that corruption and crime were the fuel on which the society ran. As a result, though never explicitly stated, the “truth” that one must climb whatever ladder presents itself, that weakness meant exploitation, and that wealth and strength are essential

to security and happiness in life, was ingrained in me early and deeply. I suppose that a person growing up in a capitalist culture might acquire similar values; the difference was that in communism there were no dissenting voices, there were no hippies, no flower children, no Christians, no disestablishmentarianism proponents who might challenge the norm and offer an alternative point of view. Hence, *everyone* I knew secretly longed for more and better at any cost. Position, power, and possessions were *the* foundational values, the base of my Tradition Pyramid. For a person in such state, God's will is nearly impossible to discern. Since God's will inevitably threatens our position, power, and possessions, as long as we are attached to these, our hearts cannot be truly open to hearing from God. Nouwen shares his personal reflections on his own desire to be thought of as special and important and how that desire crowds out the possibility of God's presence be made known. Nouwen speaks of:

anxiously going to the mailbox in the hope that someone out there has thought about you...wondering if and what your friends are thinking of you...having hidden desires to be an...exceptional person in this community...looking for special attention. (Nouwen 1976, Kindle 742/2770)

God's grace would have to dislodge the very base of my Tradition Pyramid in order to move me to a new, transformed state of being.

The ethnic tradition of a hard work ethic further built on the need to achieve. Slovaks are northern people and mountain people. Those who don't work hard, die. In the summer, people pick and dry mushrooms, force feed geese, preserve virtually everything that grows so that in the winter they have food, duvets etc. Sitting still or relaxing is uncommon; most people are always

multitasking and laziness is the ultimate sin. If someone comes for a visit to chat, their hands will be put to whatever work the host is doing while the talking is going on; shelling nuts, embroidery, stripping goose feathers, making sausage, fixing the fence. There is always some work for every hand in the house.

Another layer in my Tradition Pyramid was my family context. Both my parents and maternal grandparents had university education and held high-level positions with above-average incomes. Money was a constant topic of conversation around the dinner table, while driving, and alongside other activities. The tenor of the conversation was either worry about the lack of money, or pride about the recent influx of money. Both my parents were also workaholics and ladder climbers, moving into higher levels of responsibility almost yearly. They often proudly reflected on their position and power. My maternal grandparents also had great influence on me and their values were similar. Hence growing up, I had virtually no role models who valued anything other than power, position, and possessions. My beloved aunt Janie was a notable exception, she valued relationships, books, fun, lingering conversations, the small and beautiful things in life. Though I loved her dearly, I would have been ashamed, perhaps afraid, to grow up like her. The family perceived her as weak and under-achieving and she was often openly put down by the more aggressive and “more valuable” family members. This of course, is a false value system; it is entirely based on the worldly concept of basing one’s value in production. Further, it is entirely contrary to the Godly concept of finding value in *being* rather than *doing*. My aunt was mocked and put-down openly and unapologetically. Such treatment

reinforced my determination to strive for achievement and therefore acceptance by others.

Next in the Tradition Pyramid is the personal tradition. Mine embodied the hard work ethic, high value on power, position and possessions, high dose of workaholic DNA, high disdain for idleness and low achievers. My personal make-up fit the environment well. I have a strong body, iron will, a quick mind and a tendency toward aggression. I performed with excellence academically, in sports, and in the many extracurricular activities in which I participated. By grade seven, I was the class president. By grade eight, I recited Russian poetry to visiting dignitaries. I competed in volleyball, chess, and was smart enough to pass the university entrance exams a year earlier than my peers.

Just as I turned fifteen, my immediate family escaped communism and we ended up as immigrants in Canada. To be at the bottom of the socio-economic scale was incredibly humiliating for my parents and for me. My father forbade the Slovak language in our home so that we could learn English faster and blend in better. He showed me the numbers in his bank account every week and we both noted how the balance went from three digits, to four and then to five digits. My father frequently reminded me that a real man earns at least twice what his wife earns, but that I should strive for a career worthy of a man's salary. I worked hard to equal and eventually beat my Canadian peers to reclaim my position near the top of the ladder.

Van Kaam's Tradition Pyramid thus explains the formation of one's identity. My identity was all wrapped up in achievement. My personal value was

derived from power, position and possessions. My work-ethic and smarts continued to serve me well and by the time I was twenty-eight I held a high-level corporate position with a salary twice that of my husband. I carried several business cards at a time (the titles were important to me), my expense account, the company car, and my jet-setter life-style were satisfying and affirming. My life made sense. It was comfortable and familiar. My future held more hard work, more ambition, more money, more pride. It was then that I had met Christ. The figure below, based on Van Kaam's thoughts on spiritual formation, captures the movement of formation through discernment. Discernment starts at the *From Stage*, a place of certainty and comfort. Discernment then moves to the *Through Stage* (Standish 2014, Lecture 9), where transformation begins to take place. Because this is where the change actually takes place, this stage is very challenging. At this stage, nothing "feels right" (Standish 2014, Lecture 9). Previous certainties begin to unravel and the very basis of one's existence seems threatened. Due to the extreme discomfort of this stage, there is a tendency to fall back to what used to be familiar and comfortable. The certainty of the past creates a polar pull to God's pull toward an unknown future. Those for whom the fear of going forward is too great will regress back to the *From Stage* and therefore will not experience a transformation. For these hesitant ones, the cost of the transformation (letting go of the past) is perceived as too great, not worth the forward movement in their spiritual life. In addition, the process within the *Through Stage* is often filled with confusion.

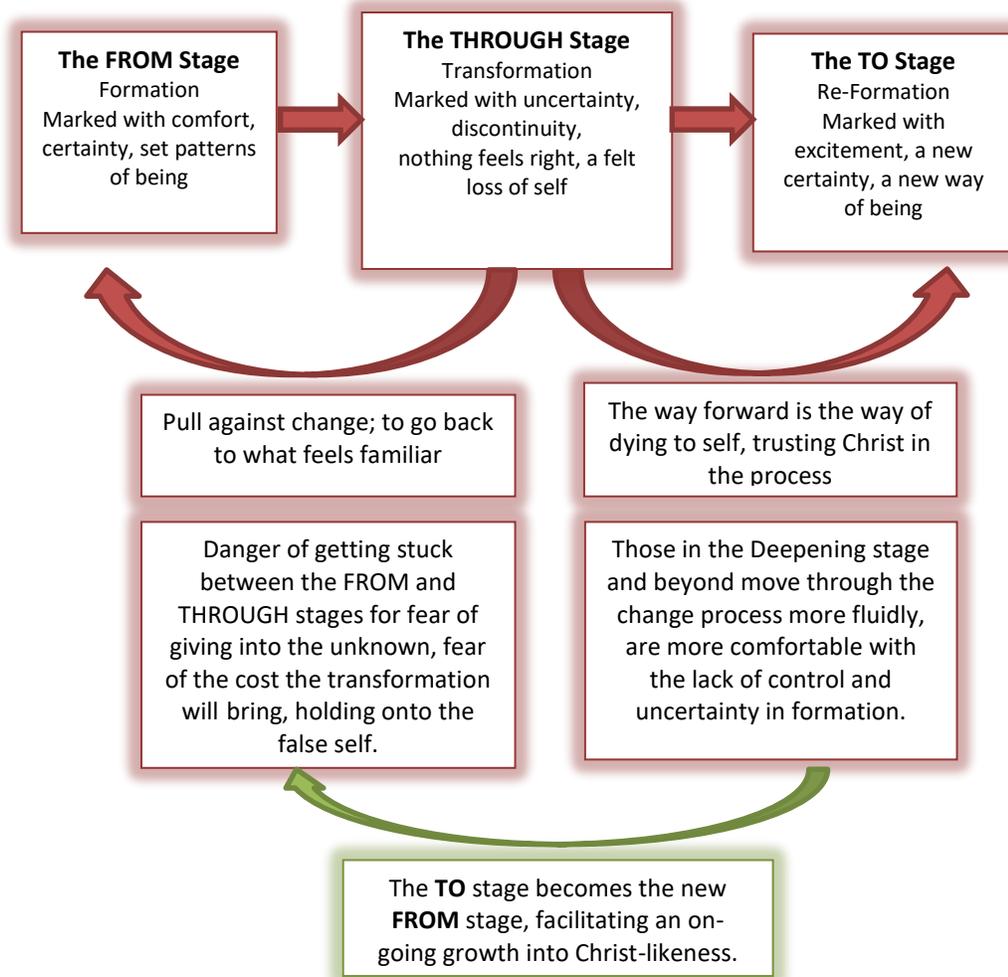


Figure 4 – The From-Through-To Stages of Discernment

There is a sense that a new future is coming, but that future is clouded in mystery. There are many competing voices vying for our attention. It is in this discomfort of the *Through Stage* that discernment actually takes place. Only those who are willing to live with the discomfort of uncertainty, willing to live in the unknowing of what the transformation will bring, willing to trust the nudging of the Spirit and pay the cost of a promise of an unknown future, will experience transformation and eventually move to a new stage of being, the *To Stage*.

The faith element that is most crucial in this stage is trust in God's goodness. Without the absolute certainty of God's good intentions toward us, the surrender that makes discernment possible could not take place. Barton in her discussion of the necessity of the soul's freedom to choose God's direction rightly asserts that, "the belief in the goodness of God...[is] critical for a right practice of discernment" (Barton 2006, Kindle 1256/2038). Of course, certainty of God's goodness comes only by grace and over time.

The on-going habit of discernment and the accompanying surrender continually prove God's will as good (Rom 12:2), resulting in an ever-increasing trust in God's goodness. Therefore, living comfortably *in* discernment, that is, in the uncertainty and *discomfort* of the *Through Stage* is the desired way for a follower of Christ to be. Kelly speaks of "the simplified man" (Kelly 1992, 46) and the "naiveté which is the yonder side of sophistication" (Kelly 1992, 45), both as marks of a mature faith, which bears the fruit of simple trust and simple obedience. Such simplicity knows in quiet humility that God by his grace always invites us to a more abundant life. In Jones' words, it is a confidence that God's way with us is never a "...search-and-destroy mission. It's a search-and-give life mission" (Jones 2005, Kindle 152/3637). Brother Lawrence is an example of life that enjoyed an absolute trust in God's goodness and that was singularly oriented to the desiring of God. This is how Brother Lawrence's ease of submitting to God's will is described:

Because he wanted to die and lose himself for the love of God, he had no apprehension or fear toward God. Complete abandonment to God is the safe path and is the way that enables us always to have light with which to

guide ourselves. In the beginning we have to make an effort to renounce ourselves, but after that there is no longer anything but unutterable contentment. (Edmonson 2010, 42-43)

My particular discernment issue deeply tested my trust in God, as it struck at the core of who I had been up till now. I had been a Christian for nearly two years now, living in an almost constant stage of the discomfort of rapid transformation. I was intentionally disciplined by a group of people who lived for Jesus radically and they would not settle for mediocre Christianity. Everything that was once certain became so uncertain that I hardly knew who I was anymore. I was married, with two small children, working a full time career, plus running my own management consulting business. Finding time to be with my two boys and my husband was increasingly difficult. I was starting to feel the external pressure and a vague sense that this lifestyle was not sustainable.

By God's grace, my husband and I decided to join a Bible study on marriage. God's word, always a key component of discernment, brought conviction to me about how little effort I put into our home life. A desire to get off the corporate merry-go-round started to creep into my heart. However, I quickly pulled away from the thoughts of throwing away all that I had accomplished. It was a frightening line of thinking to follow, as the cost seemed too great. In fact it felt like a death, and I rejected the possibility of this death over and over. However, God, the faithful initiator of all transformation persisted and the thought of abandoning my career kept coming back. Over time, I gained the courage to explore it deeper. The discernment of the Trappist Monks in the film *Of Gods and Men* (Sony Classics 2010), well demonstrates this giving in to the

possibility of death. The monks face the very real possibility that their decision to stay in their monastery will lead to their death. At first the possibility can hardly be spoken out loud; when the idea of death comes up, the monks reject it outright. Outbursts such as, “I didn’t come here to commit collective suicide,” or “I became a monk to live, not ...to have my throat slit” (Sony Classics 2010) dominate the decision making discussion. Yet, over time, as the monks worship, read Scripture, and go about their daily life, they begin to face the possibility that God is calling them to give their lives with ever increasing serenity and eventual surrender.

The death I was anticipating was not physical, it was nevertheless very real. As the discernment process went on, while my, now old values of power, position and possessions still held much influence on me, the pull of the Spirit to displace these values was steadily growing stronger. Small indicators in my daily life all seemed to have been aligning to point in the way of surrender. In our Bible study group it seemed that we only sang songs about surrender and giving all to Jesus. Our younger son started to have huge separation issues. It was becoming extremely hard for me to drop him off, so I asked my husband to take on this task. The external pressure was mounting. I felt like the Trappist monks who when they confess to the villagers that they are thinking of leaving the monastery in order to save their lives, hear from the villagers that they are key to the security and stability of the village life. The villagers express the conviction that the closure of the monastery would destabilize the village. The faces of the monks betray how much they feel this undesired pressure to stay (Sony Classics 2010).

Nouwen (2013, 41) suggests that anyone seeking God's direction needs to pay close attention to all details of one's daily life, as discernment may come from signs in nature, in our reading materials, or in our interactions with others. Due to my immature ability to discern, I was not particularly aware of it at the time, but in hind-sight it is clear that God was speaking to me through many such external factors.

I doubled my effort and threw myself into my work with even more fervor. I turned around a 50 million dollar project and was lauded by my company and given the choice of any project on the books. Strangely, this accomplishment felt insignificant and empty. I felt bewildered that such public success was not more fulfilling to me, not yet understanding that true satisfaction is found only in the will of God. As time went on and clarity was increasing, I came to understand that there were two primary reasons for the struggle to abandon my career.

The first was the money. I earned twice my husband's salary, we had a small debt, and I could not see how we could live on his income and pay that debt. The second, and more weighty, reason was that I would become a *nobody*. My journal entries from those days reveal how much I struggled with who I would be if I did not have a title to define me. I would become a home-maker, in other words, a nobody. Everything in my Tradition Pyramid was being challenged. The values of achievement, of position, and of hard work would have to be surrendered to Jesus' call to choose another path. However, God's Spirit was relentlessly transforming my thinking. A few months into the struggle, I was longing for the freedom to walk away, yet still in fear of living without money

and without a title. The grip of my attachment to money and status was rooted deeply in my being. Calhoun identifies the threat of attachments in the discernment process and offers this solution:

To discern...we also need the Spirit of Truth to open our eyes to our attachments to things that influence our decision making: things like prestige, personal agendas, comforts, productivity and so on. We need to confess our agendas and honestly ask the Lord what must die in us for God's will to come forth. (Calhoun 2005, Kindle 1196/3484)

My discernment process lasted about six months. During this time seemingly all the scriptures I read seemed to be nudging me toward surrender. Do not worry about tomorrow (Mat 6:34), whoever is ashamed of me (Mar 8:38), you are not your own, you were bought with a price (1Co 6:19), humble yourself and you shall be exalted (Jam 4:12), the last shall be first (Mar 10:31). I was slowly arriving at the deep conviction that God was asking me to let go. Near the end of the process, I went to a women's conference where the phrase "Let go" was repeatedly spoken from the stage, reverberating deeply through my soul. The conference ended with a powerful rendition of *Take My Life and Let it Be* (Havergal 1874). I sang with tears the lyrics that declared the relinquishing of control over my "silver and gold," over my "voice and intellect," and over my "moments and days," knowing full well what living by those words would mean to me.

The threat to true discernment is the tendency is to offer solutions that are based on reason rather than God's Spirit. Human beings, especially those steeped in the North American and European cultures, generally process problem solving in the Mental Dimension (Standish 2014, Lecture 1). This dimension thrives on

the tasks of planning, scheduling and organizing; it deals with questions of function, it thinks, it reasons, and it relies on logic.

I, too, had sifted through a number of possibilities: I considered reducing my work responsibilities, shutting down my business but staying employed, choosing less demanding employment, and so on. In order for discernment to be a spiritual process rather than a mental decision-making process however, this sifting through possibilities must feel more like “panning for gold” (Standish 2014, Lecture 7). When considering the options, one must look for the path that leads to more of living for God; a path that “seems right, not just what makes sense, discerning and re-discerning while continually asking God whether you are on the right path” (Standish 2014, Lecture 4).

The process of discernment thus becomes integral to living as a disciple of Christ. Discernment moves us from independence to dependence, in a counter-cultural and redeeming movement. To willingly discern, rather than to logically decide, indicates an attitude away from idolatry and toward a desire to do all things God’s way. It is an anti-pride attitude, indicating the recognition that God knows better than I do. The constant practice of discernment facilitates an attitude of attentive listening, and an ongoing orientation toward God, which then facilitates the ability to receive God’s direction more readily. Brown speaks of discernment as “less like a GPS system and more like a compass, setting our course in a God-ward direction” (Brown 2011, 81). Hence discernment is a process of constant adjustments toward God, and it facilitates transformation and

maturity into Christ-likeness. In fact, to live with unbroken attention to God's will is to live like Jesus (Laubach 1937, January 26, 1930 entry).

In my case, God looked after the first problematic piece. Out of nowhere, a colleague with whom I worked years ago at a high-tech firm called to let me know that our Com Dev shares spiked to an unprecedented high. He called me because he "felt" I should know that now was the time to sell. I did the math and sure enough, selling those shares would exactly take care of our small debt. Such "coincidences" are common in discernment and they act as affirmation that the present course is right. I sold the shares and decided to talk to my husband about my thoughts of becoming a housewife. I had not mentioned this to him before because I assumed he would reject the idea on the basis of the money issue. To my surprise, when I brought up the possibility of staying at home, instead of objecting, he breathed a sigh of relief. He shared that he had been thinking this way for months, but did not want to tell me since he knew how important my work was to me. Amazingly, God had been working in his heart at the same time as in mine. The experience of community arriving at the same conclusion is a sure mark of God's Spirit guiding our discernment. This experience is particularly well illustrated in *Of Gods and Men* (Sony Classics 2010). Each member of the Trappist community comes to the same difficult decision to stay in the monastery independently, through his own wrestling with the likelihood of death. One wrestles in agonizing prayer, another through walks in nature, another processes his thoughts of returning to his family in France with the Abbot (Sony Classics 2010). Community discernment involves the trust that God will move each

listening member of the community in a very personal way, yet all in the same direction.

The second piece was harder, it was hard for me to become a “nobody.” In essence, God had to dislodge the base of my Tradition Pyramid and place Christ’s claim on me in that place. The key moment came at work. I had some quiet time in my office. I looked out the wall-sized window, I looked over my mahogany furniture, and I said out loud, “I am scared to be a poor nobody.” An image of the cross came to my mind, with Jesus on it, bloody, naked, humiliated, a nobody. I stayed with the image for a moment. Then, without a struggle I said, “If you could die on the cross for me, I can be a poor nobody for you.” The decision was made, the cost was clear, my old life was going to a certain death. It would be painful and humiliating, but I was going there nevertheless. In the *Testament of Devotion*, Kelly (1992, 52) states, “There are plenty who follow our Lord half-way, but not the other half. They will give up possessions, friends and honors, but it touches them too closely to disown themselves.” It is this disowning of self that is key to the ability to hear from God and to move through discernment and experience true transformation. Though my “death” was not physical, it was a death nevertheless, death to self-will and death to that which falsely defined my identity.

I expressed one last, small regret to the Lord. I told him that I was sorry that since we were going to be poor, I would never travel anywhere for the rest of my life. Travel had been a huge family value growing up. We crossed borders every summer, vacationing on the Adriatic Sea or in the mountains skiing. Our vacations would now be camping for the rest of my life. I surrendered that also. I

was now ready for my future to die. I walked out of my office into my superior's office and said that I was going to have to give my notice. Naturally, the question was, "Where are you going? We will match whatever you were offered!" Not my boss and not one of my peers ever believed that I was actually quitting. They all thought I got a better offer and would not say where that was. The next question that my boss posed to me was, "But you are still taking the trip to Hawaii right?" I had no idea what he was talking about. It turned out that I had been selected to go on a trip to Hawaii as a reward for my contribution to the company. The selection happened months ago, but the manager who processed left before he could let me know that I was going. So, my husband and I went to Hawaii, stayed at the spectacular Ihilani Marriott resort. I kept a postcard from there, believing that this was my last time on a real vacation, that this was the Lord's parting gift to me.

The successful navigation through the transformation of discernment leads to the *To Stage*, which becomes the new normal. There is new certainty, excitement, and contentment. In this stage we become acquainted to living with the inner transformation of values and beliefs, the renewed experience of surrender, and also the new external circumstances and new direction in life. However, since discernment is a process of constant shifting to answer God's call, the *To Stage* is never meant to be a permanent state. Soon, as God initiates a new adjustment and we respond, the *To Stage* becomes the new *From Stage*. Those who are open to transformation more readily embrace the flow of the process and spend more and more of their life in the uncertainty of discernment rather than in

the comfort of the *From Stage*. Thus they live in an on-going process of transformation, which is God's design for a disciple of Christ.

The outcome of my discernment concerning whether to abandon my corporate career led to a new normal for me. Internally, my transformation resulted in a new freedom to derive my identity from Jesus, in a new freedom to care less about what others thought of me, in a new ability to step out in faith into a scary future, a new level of trust in God's provision for my family, and in a deepened humility. Externally I was free to live through my days as they came, enjoying leisure time with my boys, not feeling the pressure to accomplish.

Living *in* discernment facilitates the on-going shedding of the scaffoldings of the false self, leading to a more genuine state of being, living out of the true self. The true self is oriented toward and rooted in God. The true self is revealed more and more as our transformation into Christ's image deepens (Benner 2004, 16). The false self is the mask, the learned or adapted persona we play. The false self is "a control freak" (Mulholland 2006, 24), is fearful, protective, possessive and self-promoting (Mulholland 2006, 30-39). The false self consistently gets in the way of discernment as discernment is about relinquishing control, about openness to letting go, and about stepping into unknown territory. Van Kaam refers to the false self as "the apparent form" (Standish 2014, Lecture 8). The more this apparent, false form holds sway, the greater the tension between the true and false self, and therefore the greater the likelihood of inconsistent behaviour from situation to situation. Transformation toward Christ-likeness leads to the

eventual disappearance of the false self, an integration of the person, and a more authentic living.

I have since surrendered many more times and have been transformed in these same areas many more times. This big surrender of letting go of my corporate career set the stage for future openness to respond to other potentially difficult invitations from God. I seem to have been called to take on several seemingly hopeless, low-profile assignments, which I would not have the freedom to answer if ladder-climbing, or power and position continued to be foundational values for me. I have answered the call to become a lead pastor of a tiny congregation, which many had declared beyond hope, and by God's grace led it to success. Then, after being a lead pastor for many years, I was able to answer the call to an associate role. I was able to accept very un-glamorous teaching assignments to develop church leaders in Malawi and Slovakia. I am certain that the reason each of these assignments proved to be deeply personally satisfying and fruit bearing endeavours was because I was not invested in anything other than responding to God's call. Nouwen (2013, 176) speaks of correct discernment as "ordering our steps with the saints... in the direction of downward mobility." He contends that the direction of God's call will consistently point toward a deepened simplicity and deepened humility. My discernment experience aligns with this philosophy. Yet this simplicity and humility does not preclude visible ministry roles. I continue to be called to serve in high profile roles in my denomination, but the humility of discernment allows me to hold it all with an open hand. In Kelly's words, "utter surrender and holy obedience open the way to

humility...nothing matters – everything matters” (Kelly 1992, 67). The fruit of the transformation of on-going discernment is the ability to have or not to have, and to let go whenever God asks to let go.

Kelly in his *Testament of Devotion* repeatedly refers to God using the term “the hound of heaven” (Kelly 1992, 51). This term is chosen to stress that the work of transformation is always initiated by God’s faithfulness toward his people. He turns every circumstance of life into a growth opportunity, inviting us to respond to his touch, as he carries on the work within us which he began with our salvation (Phi 1:6). Furthermore, Kelly assures his readers that God’s intentions toward us are always good. He leads us ever closer to him, where life is rich and abundant: “the hound of heaven ... will not be satisfied until we are sheep resting in His Shepherd arms” (Kelly 1992, 51). It is God’s good and persistent initiative that continually calls us to the ongoing process of transformation, to the realization of the true person, and the true purpose for our being. Testimonies to the fact that discernment always leads to a better, more satisfying life abound.

My family life and my ministry life are both rich and life-giving. Further, my family and I have actually travelled much more since I let go of my corporate life. Each time I get on the plane to fly to India or Africa on ministry assignments, or Europe or Hawaii on vacation I chuckle at the silly regret that formed part of my resistance to God’s call.

The Disciplined Life

Hagberg and Guelich in their work, *The Critical Journey*, attempt to describe the stages of Christian maturity (see Figure 5 - Stages of Spiritual Growth, 161). These are phases through which a follower of Christ will typically progress. The Disciplined Life is the stage that comes after recognizing and embracing the reality of Christ as God and Saviour. This stage is characterized by much learning, with which comes a sense of rightness and confidence in the structure of belief. Answers and influences come from leaders, causes and clearly set out belief systems (Hagberg and Guelich 2005,56). My energy and capacity for learning embraced this stage fully. By God's grace I had been taught by brother Tom and my faithful group of mentors to seek answers only in the Scriptures. I connected to a local branch of inductive Bible studies taught in the Kay Arthur style. I was a voracious student with excellent memory for Scripture. I made sure that I understood all the difficult passages and I had an answer to every objection raised against the Christian faith. I was armed with facts and reason.

I was now teaching Bible studies a minimum of 16 hours each week and studying at least that many hours in preparation or in personal study. The word of God was alive to me, it always rang with power. I have never found Scripture reading dry, though my approach was mostly informational. Since I did not have a good grasp on the whole Bible I was often surprised by what I read. I read to get the facts down. But God's Spirit was in me and led me to also expect to hear from God each time I opened His book. The mechanics of how the Spirit of God speaks to God's people through the word of God had not yet been explained to me. I just

knew that the words were powerful, that they intersected with my life, that they could arrest my heart, bring me joy, conviction, and sorrow, and could move me to love, repentance and action. So each time I opened the Bible I did so with expectancy and God always spoke. I accept this as his grace to me, perhaps I could not have lasted if God chose to withdraw for a time and let me languish in some dark night of the soul. I do not look down on those who go through times when God seems distant, I do not attribute his constant presence with me to any strength or deserving of my own, rather more likely a frailty in me which God protects by staying close to me.

Through all this learning, I became a bit inflexible about certain doctrines that I now consider peripheral (such as the exact timeline of Christ's Second Coming). This sort of insistence on a narrow view of scripture is typical for the Discipled Life stage...so I had a pat answer for every question, not realizing how packaged and predictable my answers really were.

The Discipled Life Intensified

After a few years of teaching Bible classes, the learning process started to feel stale. I could predict the questions and the cross-references in the Precept curriculum would offer next. My studying and teaching started to feel repetitive and spiritually unfulfilling. I didn't know in those days how to bring those feelings to God. I was and still am very much driven by my gut, a nebulous feeling that directs me though I cannot quite put my finger on it. I now capture and identify such feelings and process them with God in prayer, but then it was

just an elusive sense of uneasiness and restlessness, a sense that something was amiss and needed to be addressed. I now also know that these “gut” feelings were (and continue to be) the stirrings of the Spirit, initiating something new.

God not only caused the sense that something was missing, he also gave direction on what that might be. One day one of my Bible students came up to me and handed me a book.

“I am moving and need to get rid of a lot of my stuff and I thought you might be able to use this.” She handed me a Greek New Testament Lexicon.

“Thank you,” I replied, a bit puzzled. I couldn’t make out the Greek letters and had no idea how I might put it to use. The very next day, I went to a meeting at my church and one of the older women in the group handed me the exact same Lexicon I received the day before. “Here, this is for you. You will get more use of it than I will.” And that was all. I wanted to tell her that I have very recently come to own this very book; but I was so surprised by the coincidence and too polite to refuse a gift that I just replied with the expected “Thank you,” and a smile.

That afternoon I received a phone call from the Youth Pastor from our church who said that he was going over his Bible college books. When he got to his Greek textbook, he thought of me, and felt he ought to gift it to me. I had very little to do with our Youth Pastor and I was surprised that he even knew me. I asked him what made him think that I’d be interested in biblical Greek and he replied with: “I don’t really know. I just had a feeling that I should give it to you.” I accepted the book with gratitude. Three biblical Greek textbooks in two days. At

dinner that evening I told the story to my family concluding with, “I think God wants me to go to seminary.”

I dreaded the thought of seminary. In the circles I moved, seminaries were thought to be dens of heresy, deconstructing the very foundation of the Christian faith. However, God kept prodding me and the following September I started at Heritage Seminary, in Cambridge. I met with Dr. Smith, the Academic Dean, a large and very pompous-appearing man with a booming voice. It took me a few years to realize that many seminary professors are somehow socially awkward; back then, I wrongly interpreted Dr. Smith’s odd interaction with me as curtness bordering on rudeness. He asked me why I wanted to study at the seminary. I explained that I was a vocational Bible teacher and that my previous method of study was no longer bearing the fruit it used to.

With his booming voice he asked, “Do you want to be a pastor?” I heard his question as a prelude to a lecture about how un-biblical that would be for a woman, so I quickly replied, “No, not at all, I just want to be a better Bible student and teacher.”

“Well, then you don’t need an MDiv, you will probably find the MTS more helpful. Are you interested in studying the biblical languages?” Since I already owned three Greek textbooks, I felt that “Yes” was the reasonable answer.

I later found out that Dr. Smith was a brilliant, caring and kind man. He loved the Lord and he loved the Church. He was also a committed egalitarian who encouraged me greatly. My love and appreciation for the Church came largely out

of his class on ecclesiology. I still remember his eyes watering as he sang the praises of the Bride of Christ.

I stood in line to buy the textbooks for Hermeneutics, my first class. A woman in line behind me saw the books I picked up and commented, “Oh no, you are taking hermeneutics as your first course? I have been terrified of hermeneutics, it is my very last course after fifteen years at seminary. I am only taking it because I cannot graduate without it.”

“How hard can it be?” I replied. I had no idea what “hermeneutics” might be. The word reminded me of Greek mythology and air tight containers. I could not see how it related to the Bible, but it was a pre-requisite for all the courses in biblical studies that I really wanted to take. I went from the book store directly to my Hermeneutics class which was rather full. Without much ado the professor asked, “How many of you think that you need the Holy Spirit to interpret the Scriptures?” I thought it a stupid question (or a trick question), but I went along with it and confidently put up my hand. Only about half the class felt the same.

“As you will find out, we do not need the Holy Spirit to be good interpreter of the bible. We need good methodology. I know great Jewish scholars who interpret the Bible far better than many Spirit-filled Christians.” I couldn’t believe my ears and though I was in a seminary class all of five minutes, I spoke out “Yes, but they kind of miss the main point of the Bible, which is Jesus.” The prof turned red and said, “I don’t want a discussion on this.” To which I replied, “You can’t drop a bomb like that and not be willing to explain.”

I was now certain that this whole seminary thing was going to be a battle, and I was already on the wrong side. He bypassed the discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting scripture and went on to discuss some difficult Old Testament texts such as polygamy. He stated that all the patriarchs were polygamists. I raised my hand and simultaneously spoke out: “Isaac wasn’t. Isaac only had one wife.” The professor stopped to think about it while a student nearby (for whom this was the last course before graduation) said. “Oh yeah, Rachel right?”

“No,” I replied with growing contempt, “Isaac’s wife was Rebekah. Rachel was married to Jacob.” The discussion moved on as my horror mounted. My first impressions confirmed my worst fears. These people didn’t know the Bible and were surely teaching heresies.

I am glad to say that my first impression proved to be an anomaly. My seminary experience was absolutely wonderful. The ceiling I felt in my learning was blown away, never to be seen again. I relished all my courses, even church history, and, of course, all my biblical studies courses. As far as Greek went, I became so good at it that I became a sub for when our regular prof was away.

Heritage is a Fellowship Baptist seminary and does not affirm women in pastoral ministry roles. I was the first female Senior Pastoral student, with a few courses still to go to graduate. I graduated with high honours and was selected by my peers to be the seminary valedictorian. Due to my excellent academic performance, as well as the popularity and respect I enjoyed from the profs and fellow students, it was easy to see how to some I was the perfect poster child for

egalitarianism. To others at the seminary, I was a threat to their hard complementarian view. But by God's grace, I felt free not to accept either the mantle of the egalitarians, nor the muzzle of the complementarians. I was at this point just free to be me, doing what my loving Father was asking me to do, not caring much what others thought about it.

The Discipled Life is a stage in which we become grounded. After completing my degree at Heritage, I felt a desire to study the Old Testament with greater intensity and depth. I was drawn especially to the Hebrew narratives and how they cleverly, but in a hidden, not so obvious way revealed the greatness of God, the reality of the human existence. I enrolled in an MA in Old Testament Biblical Studies at McMaster Divinity College. I loved my time at McMaster. My Hebrew was nearly fluent, my ability to reason and write highly technical academic papers increased dramatically. I was interested in the ethics revealed in the Hebrew narratives and with all my course work done was embarking on a thesis work to analyze the pre-monarchy narratives, specifically the deception texts, which portray deception as a laudable trait. I was sure a PhD in Old Testament Biblical Studies would follow. I was very much encouraged in this direction by the great profs at Mac, who treated me as one of their future peers.

The Inward Journey

There are some who live the entirety of their Christian life in the learning and serving stages. Duty, desire to learn more, and attention to right doctrine mark these stages. I am certain that God's grace draws each of us beyond this, to what

The Critical Journey calls “The Inward Journey” (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 91). This stage unsettles us, it reveals that our foundations are less in God and more in a system of truths we have constructed about God. And if we allow God to take us further we come to “The Wall,” this is the stage that un.masks us (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 162).

Of course, the very nature of love and grace prevents it from demanding that we follow. Spiritual growth is more like a series of invitations (often into a scary unknown) which we choose to accept by faith in God’s good intentions for us. If, however, we don’t fully trust God’s good intentions for us, or we want to live in the illusion of control over life, we may choose to reject his invitations to go deeper with him. But God is with us and what matters is that he sees us. As long as we do not resist and do not give in to the fear of losing ourselves in him, his gracious gaze will be the path for us to him.

I had now been serving as a Senior Pastor for five years. The church has grown, we were able to add more staff, and offer more programs. The growth came from improved organization, systematic outreach plan, good preaching, better small groups and other entirely human-effort based reasons. I worked endless hours, feeling that the weight of keeping the church moving forward was entirely on me. The congregation looked to me for everything, and I delivered. They followed well and assumed that I was caring for my soul and my relationship with Jesus, although, in truth, I prayed less than ever before, and opened my Bible mostly only to prepare a sermon or to write the next paper. It was time for God to release me from this new prison.

Unexpectedly, the church where I served, faced a number of difficult blows; several key families in the church left, all for positive reasons – to follow a job opportunity, to move closer to family and so on. We also lost a few sources of funding and the youth pastor was facing debilitating depression. I re-doubled my effort, trusting that if you do A, B will follow. I did all the right things and pushed others to do the same, but the expected results did not come. 1 Corinthians 12:6 kept coming to mind, that it is God who causes growth, but I had forgotten how to let God do that, I only knew how to lead in my own strength. And then my back gave out. One day I was physically strong, the next I was in agony, unable to sit, stand, walk, or lie down. A series of visits to every kind of a health specialist ensued, but neither the sports medicine doctor, nor the chiropractor, massage therapist, physio therapist, nor the acupuncturist were able to improve my condition. All I could do was watch my toes twist in the severe cramps and bear the pain. For over six weeks I could not do any work at home or at the church. I slept at most an hour at a time, I could not read, respond to email, and I could not think. I had found an Amish devotional called *The Simple Life* (Brunstetter 2006) in my library. It offered a very short vignette from the Amish life, for example Ella Mae making apple pie, a verse and a very short, hardly theological, food for thought. This was about all my mind could grasp. Even in my weakened state, I wondered how such simplicity was possible, and why anyone would publish such a minimalistic devotional. Yet, as I read, I sensed that there was something in this simple life that eluded me and that I needed to understand. So I read the Amish devotions and thought about the apple pie cooling on the window sill.

During this time, my break-neck pace came to a complete halt. I, surely for the first time in my life, ceased all “doing” and even my “being” felt like barely existing. The imposed rest led me to experience and then to appreciate silence, peace, and rest. I moved at a snail pace – I walked slowly, I ate slowly, I made decisions slowly. Another book I opened during this time was Ann Vos Kamp’s *One Thousand Gifts* (Vos Kamp 2010). The call to deep gratitude for the small things of life was timed perfectly for me. I could now be grateful for falling asleep on the couch, for a meal that someone dropped off, for the first sound of bird-song at the end of a long, sleepless night. These two books led me to ponder small and simple things in life, and the pain led me to unceasing communication with God.

Long before the six weeks were up, I surrendered. First to my weakness, and to the pain for which there was no remedy. I surrendered also to my need to make my church into what I wanted it to be, and I accepted the fact that I could not make that happen even if I wanted to do so. I talked to God a lot during this time, and listened even more. The peace inside me grew in spite of my grim outlook for the future. I was facing an end to ministry and a life of pain. Yet, by God’s grace, all was well with my soul.

As Abraham surrenders Isaac and the hope bound up in him, God returns Isaac right back to him. He only wanted Abraham to be free to let go. My experience was much the same. As I let go of the expectations and hopes that were all bound up in my own abilities, God restored me, suddenly and completely. One day I could not walk ten steps without stopping to crouch down

in pain, the next I was standing and walking upright, my bulged discs and sciatic nerves back in their normal condition.

The Outer Journey

I was afraid my pace would quickly return to its previous speed. But something significant inside of me had shifted. I was at peace with things that were undone at the end of the day, I took longer to decide, wanting to hear from God on the decision, I kept the conversation with Jesus going all day, and I refused to hurry. My preaching took a noticeable turn, my tone was softer and I felt compelled to extend repeatedly God's invitation to rest to my congregation. "Cease striving" became my new motto.

Shortly after my recovery, my mentor and friend told me about his spiritual direction training at Tyndale. I listened with longing, I so wanted what he was describing. I confessed that I now had zero interest in pursuing PhD studies, and that I no longer cared about the deception texts in the pre-monarchy narratives, which were to form the basis for my thesis. And so the Lord redirected me to study spiritual formation, first to be trained as a spiritual director in a highly formative practicum, and then to enter a DMin program in the same field. My transformation through this time was as dramatic as at my time of salvation. I was a new person, beloved and accepted in Christ, with a new name, with nothing to prove, living out of a silent, contemplative center and accomplishing all I did before, but without stress, without hurry, and without using people to reach my desired ends. In my practice as spiritual director, I witnessed similar

transformation in my directees. One by one, each freed from earning to living in and by grace. Even those whom I judged too hard, too set in their works-oriented way, melted away before God's love. I can now imagine nothing better in life than to lead others to such freedom, to such an abundant life.

Sometime later, I was asked to write out the vision that drives my ministry. What is it that compels me? What kind of people break my heart? God showed me this vision:

I see a people languishing in the desert, sleeping, circling, subsiding on the same bland, made-to-survive diet; while around the bend and over the river is a land of promise – flowing with milk and honey, a land of shalom, protection, wholeness of the person, family and society, with care for all, purpose, meaning and joy.

Some are in the desert because they don't know there is another way to be, some because they don't know how to get across, some because they are content to subsist.

I see a Joshua calling them out & guiding them to the crossing over.

I am that Joshua.

This is my call, to live as one who is desired, who is loved and who is free in Christ, and to invite others into that kind of life with Jesus.

The Confessions

It seems necessary for me to go back and to paint a picture of my dark side. I have written thus far about my "sunny personality," my problem solving and leadership skills, and my ability to achieve and to get through. Though I have always enjoyed people and had many friends, there was a mean, even cruel undercurrent to my personality.

In all my school years (and to this day) I have been physically strong. Since my father taught me to how to hit the other children in pre-school to protect

myself, fighting came easy to me. I won all my physical fights, not because I was always physically superior, but because I was all in – I fought without holding anything back and with all out fury. If I were a Viking, the Berserkers would have welcomed me as one of their kind. Whenever I fought, I was driven by an all-consuming desire to annihilate my opponent.

I often picked fights, any reason would do. Once, my friend Kate decided to swing on “my” swing in our neighbourhood playground. This was the playground near the river on which we built Aurora. I arrived at the playground and asked her to get out of my swing. When she responded by saying that this was not my swing and that she had every right to use it, this killer instinct in me emerged and took over. Without any thought of being knocked over, I stepped into the path of the swing, grabbed her legs in mid-air, and as the swing went back from under her I pulled Kate to the ground. She got up just in time for the metal swing to hit her square across the back. She was screaming now, tears running down her cheeks. Without any feeling of care for her, I pushed her away hard and she fell again. I got onto “my swing” thinking the episode was over. But Kate got up and grabbed the swing from behind. I calmly got off the swing, grabbed the front of it and with full force rammed it into Kate. She was screaming at the top of her voice, her face was dirty from the tears, snot, and dirt smeared over it. I rammed her with the swing over and over again, each time ordering her to let go of my swing. I knew that eventually she would. I had her beat as soon as she fell and started crying the first time. She ran home humiliated. The whole incident was observed by many of our mutual friends, but none of them were willing to

stand up to me to defend her. I felt no remorse whatsoever. I got my swing back despite the inconvenience of having to beat up Kate for it. I thought Kate was stupid to stand up to me.

Later that evening Kate's mom came over to show my parents the bruises all over Kate's thighs, where I repeatedly hit her with the metal swing. My mom told me to say sorry, which I reluctantly voiced, but did not feel, and then she ceremonially slapped me in the back of the head in front of Kate and her mom. I felt the slap was unjustified, but that was the end of it. Once the front door closed, the incident was not mentioned again.

On another occasion, I beat up a boy that was somehow mistreating my younger brother. I don't remember what the boy did, but my brother ran over to me crying. So I pushed that boy down, sat on his chest and punched his face a few times. He was really crying hard, his mouth was wide open, and he was helpless under my weight and fury. I started ripping out grass by the fistfuls and was stuffing it in his mouth when I heard my father call my name. He was coming home from work, passing only feet away from the scene. I looked up with grass in both my fists, sitting on top of the screaming boy and said, "Hi Dad."

He said, "Hi", paused for only a second and kept on walking home. When I got bored with beating up the boy I stood up, told him he'd get it worse if he ever bothered my brother again. Then I went back to play with my friends. Later that evening, my father asked why I was beating up that boy. When I replied that he made my brother cry, my father gave an approving nod and that was the end of it.

There were many others who suffered the pounding of my fists. I always overpowered my opponent. In fact I don't remember ever feeling physically threatened in all my life, which I am sure is rare for a woman in any society today. I stopped physically fighting in grade 9. The last boy I beat up was Mark, a big, clunky boy, much taller than I, with brown owl eyes and timid ways. A wave of shame washed over me in the midst of pounding on Mark's back, as he stood hunched over, just taking the beating and quietly weeping. I resolved then to not fight again; I suspect more out of self-consciousness rather than compassion. I felt it was not lady-like to beat people up, so that was my last physical fight until I started studying martial arts many years later. Martial arts taught me never to start an altercation and to only to use my skills for self-defence. Fortunately this need never arose.

I have not given much thought to the long term effect of my violence against others. I wonder if Kate and Mark and the many others remember those moments; I am afraid that my actions were negatively formative moments for them all. I pray, Oh merciful God that you would bring healing where I brought wounding.

Words that Kill

Perhaps even more than the power of physical wounds, I learned early the destructive power of words. I mostly practiced on my brother. Just a few words said in the right tone would send him over the edge. I knew how to make him

weep, how to make him scream in rage, even how to make him physically attack me, although he had no hope of landing even one punch.

I felt shame for my words only once. I was still very young, perhaps seven or eight, and I was spending the weekend at Grandma Francesca's house. I slept in her bedroom as usual and in the morning, as she was getting dressed I saw that she was wearing very old fashioned bloomers-type underwear. I giggled wildly, pointed at her and mockingly said, "You are wearing bloomers!" She just calmly replied, "Yes, I am old so I wear bloomers."

I felt shame and I wanted to apologize and ask her forgiveness, but I did not know how to do that. So I stood there in my shame for mocking someone I loved and who loved me so fully. That incident never left me, and years later, after finding Christ's forgiveness and the words of a true and humble apology, I told Grandma Francesca that I always felt bad about those words. She laughed her easy laughter, said that she did not remember that incident, and she would have forgiven me in the moment anyway.

However, from that point on I was careful not to feel that shame again. I continue to strive to assess the impact of my words will have before I speak them. I confess that I still, at times though less and less, speak words that cut others, but such occasions are now rare and I quickly seek to make amends.

Those who know me today would say that my words consistently bless, heal, and encourage. One woman, an inmate in the women's prison where I volunteer, made me a gift once. It was a tiny box gift wrapped in shiny tin foil, with a silvery bow. She told me that my words of constant encouragement to the

women reminded her of Proverbs 25:11, “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”

I still easily sense the weaknesses in others, their insecurities, their anxiety, their lack of confidence, their anger and so on. And I still speak to that weakness. But the grace of Christ now moves me not to speak words that kill and destroy, rather to speak words into that weakness that give life and strength. God has shown me the enormous capacity of my words for harm or for good. He has given me the desire to be an agent of his healing and that is what I mostly have been for the past twenty years of walking with him.

Pilgrim, It's a Long Way to Find Out Who You Are

How does one who so much wants to be wanted, and at the same so much needs to be free, ever satisfy these desires in life? How does such a one ever find contentment? The answer is Jesus. We were made for Him, and when we are found in Him our souls come to rest, fully satisfied, fully content (Pusey 2006, 3).

How does one learn to be dependent on God when one had to rely only on self? How does one heal from the inevitable pain of life? How does one deal with the malformation that self-centeredness, cruelty, neglect, and conditional love inflict? The answer is Jesus. His love is the balm for all that ails the human race. His love is the trellis which can train even the most crooked vine to grow strong and upright. He turns what others intended for evil and makes it work for good to those who are His. I have lived through my share of pain, as all people have, but

in Christ that pain has not only lost its power to harm, it has been re-purposed for good.

On the Enneagram personality model, I am a 7/8 – the eternal optimist and the power driver. Each person’s Enneagram type seems to be partially determined from birth but also partially determined (or reinforced) through early life experiences. Pearce and Brees in their *Power of the Enneagram* (2007, 6) suggest that the “type is spiritually generated – a pre-chosen path of strengths and obstacles to learn from in this lifetime.” Rohr suggests that in their development, many Sevens ‘have had traumatic experiences to which they did not feel equal to’ (Rohr 2001, 146). They cope with this trauma by avoiding it and simply decide to be happy. Of course, for maturity to take place, Sevens must be willing to explore their pain and allow God’s Spirit to heal it.

Eights on the Enneagram have been controlled or manipulated and have learned early in life that “the world preys on the weak and so they chose hardness” (Rohr 2001, 162). Their maturity requires the acceptance of God’s mercy for themselves and for others around them. The ideal Eight pours their strength into the service of those who have no strength. The Eights also have an uncanny ability to see through any sort of “fakeness,” which makes them excellent therapists and spiritual guides (Rohr 2001, 111). I see how God has used the suffering in my life to make me a person of hope and strength, not hiding from the reality of life, but understanding it, not using the strength to bully others but to help them up.

I accept my life, all of it. I see God's wisdom in the path he has made for me. I can see how each event, each person, each loss and victory, each laugh and each tear, served as threads of the tapestry that God wove into the "I" that I now am. I also know that there is more to the pattern, more threads are being woven. Some I don't yet see. Others that were part of the pattern long ago, and have been hidden, may yet come to be seen on the face of the work. Either way, I am in God's hand and I trust Him, whatever he chooses to do with me.

Final Reflection

When I realized that one of my first year DMin assignments was to write a spiritual autobiography, I expected the project to be relatively easy. I have never written a spiritual autobiography, but hey, how hard could it be? I felt that I have led a reasonably interesting life with many interesting stories to share. However, through the assigned readings and discussions with my autobiography circle, I began to see that this was not meant to be an entertaining work, rather a work of deep self-understanding. As a reader, I trust that you can see that the writing of my story has brought me a depth of understanding which would not likely have happened by other means in such a short time. With understanding comes acceptance and with acceptance come freedom and peace.

This spiritual memoir was also to be a work that as objectively as possible sought to understand the particular path God, in his perfect love and wisdom, chose for me. A path that would lead me to him and that would eventually lead me to wholeness, grown up into the fullness of Christ. As a result there were

many interesting events, and interesting people who did not make it into the writing, as they did not have a significantly formative impact on my life. I expected to write more about my many business experiences, the fact that I started a successful software business and a business consulting practice, about my rich ministry experiences, but though these seemed to have mattered to me, they did not contribute much to my identity. I also did not write much about my husband and two sons, though I certainly have learned much about myself in the context of marriage and in the process of mothering.

I have also had to wrestle with the sense of irrelevance of the organized church to my spiritual formation. My growth in Christ and the freedom that comes with it, did not come from Sunday morning or small group gatherings. It was a work of the Spirit, largely facilitated by fringe groups or people who disciplined me outside of the church programming.

I realized how much of my childhood actually made me who I am today. My adolescence and adulthood were really years of finding my way out of the darkness, pain and confusion of my childhood. Before writing this autobiography, I would have said that I had a great childhood. I always thought of my childhood as those times spent with my grandparents, repressing the other large parts of my childhood spent in oppression and mistreatment. The writing of this work kept taking me to the dark moments as these were significantly formative for me. About three quarters of the way through the writing, I experienced severe pain between my shoulder blades. My osteopath assessed me and indicated that the pain was caused by a tension in my lungs, which pulled at the vertebrae between

my shoulder blades and misaligned them. He added that tension in the lungs is often caused by grief or a sense of loss, or a realization that we lost something we thought was ours. I told him that I was working through all the dark moments of my childhood, and he agreed that this might do it. The word “grief” kept showing up in many contexts. Although it is difficult for me to grieve, I conceded that I had some grieving to do.

I have also, however, realized through the writing that God provided an amazing balance of good and bad, cruelty and kindness, ugliness and beauty. I had an ugly, cruel grandmother and a beautiful, kind and strong grandmother. I had a home that was oppressive and mean, and I had a home that was full of kindness and love. There were always mitigating factors in my life. Things were never *all* dark. Hence there was always hope, always an escape, so that I might endure and get through the trial at hand (1Co 10:13). God was faithful and ensured that I was never crushed to the point of despair. This is not to say that others might not experience such crushing in their lives. Rather, I realize that God knew what would destroy me and what would strengthen me, and in my case, he only sent the latter. I was also amazed to realize that though I was very much on my own and dangerously exposed, God kept me from harm. I could write many stories of the young girl walking alone in deserted places in the dark, meeting gypsy gangs, drunks under bridges, dogs running wild...and nobody touched me, though sexual abuse and assault were common in Eastern Europe. For this care and protection, I am grateful.

Through the writing, I also realized my great yearning for freedom, a theme that has continually run through my life, to this day. I yearned to be free from the communist control, the lack of freedom of expression and life choices. My favourite movie while growing up in Slovakia was *Born Free* (Open Road Films 1966), the story of Elsa the lioness. At age eight, I even wrote to the TV station to ask for a re-run. For my 40th birthday, my husband found a copy of that movie and I watched it recently to see why the story of the noble lioness moved me as much as it did. Back then, I yearned to be free of my oppressive home situation where I felt controlled, unable to be me. I broke free from that in the worst possible way, only to end up with even less freedom. Hence, I think, I understand false expressions of freedom, which have to do simply with doing what *I* want.

I saw again how much salvation by faith in Christ brought me to many levels of freedom: freedom to be the true me, and freedom from all kinds of bondage. I realized that in my preaching, and in my spiritual direction I am always urging, praying, encouraging people toward their own freedom. In fact, I hate any kind of manipulation or bondage, be it self-imposed or externally imposed. I have also realized how amazingly free I am today. I am free from the pain inflicted on me by others, it does not define me, nor does it direct my behaviour. I am free from the need to be valued, desired and loved, that need is so fully satisfied in Christ, that I am free to simply enjoy people rather than need them. I am also free from the need to measure up, success and failure are irrelevant to me. I have nothing to prove to myself or others.

The writing process has led me to look deeply into the Enneagram personality types where the Seven's drive for need for freedom is also a factor.

I have also noticed a theme of high-achievement and ability in my life. I wrote many times how easily things came to me: academics, success in the business world, languages, leading others, and winning at chess. I spent considerable time analyzing why those sentences kept appearing; was achievement that important to me, and if so why? After much prayer, thought and discussion with friends and spiritual advisors, it seems that achievement is simply part of my make up (again, a mark of the Enneagram 7/8). I consider it a gift from God, in light of the many struggles in my life, achieving was not one of them. The fact that things came easily to me likely kept my self-esteem high, even when life circumstances could have brought me low. In this light, my ability to achieve is simply another mitigating factor. I am sure that I sought approval through achievement in my life, but not recently. My standards are still high, but I do not confuse who I am with what I produce.

My Confession chapter was extremely painful to write. The submitted version is much shorter than the original, where I detail various cruel attacks, manipulations, mind-games and terrorizing on my part, both physical and verbal. I remembered many more friends, family members, waitresses, sales people, subordinates and others, whom I brought to tears with a calculated, cold and cutting remark. In my writing, I offer one all-encompassing prayer for them all, but in reality I have been praying for each such individual that God brought to mind. I could use a few days of silence and solitude focusing just on such

confessions and prayer for my victims. I also recognize that such cruelty was a product of my own cruel treatment, so it does not crush me or condemn me, but I do feel deep remorse.

Next, I have realized the importance of desire in human spirituality.

Benner describes the role of desire in our spiritual journey as follows:

Spirituality is first and foremost, our response to these deep aches of the soul. Although it may be frightening to trust our desires, they are always fundamentally spiritual. In fact they are often the most direct access we have to the subtle movement of the Spirit within our own spirits. No matter how mistakenly we interpret these longings, no matter how many times we displace them onto inappropriate objects of desire, they can be trusted because they call us beyond ourselves...The human journey – particularly our spiritual journey – is profoundly shaped by our longings...one way or another, our desires form our spirits and direct our lives. (Benner 2011, 17)

I have recognized how much my desire to be wanted and to be free directed my life and how these yearnings could ultimately find fulfillment and satisfaction only in Christ.

As I was nearing the end of the writing of my spiritual memoir, I attended a prayer workshop during which the worship team introduced a song new to me. The lyrics and the melody resonated in my heart so deeply that I could not sing, I went to sit in the back of the room, marveling at how God was speaking to me, in regards to the purpose of this assignment. The song was Broken Vessels by

Hillsong:

All these pieces
Broken and scattered
In mercy gathered
Mended and whole
Empty handed
But not forsaken

I've been set free
I've been set free

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind but now I see

Oh I can see it now
Oh I can see the love in Your eyes
Laying yourself down
Raising up the broken to life

You take our failure
You take our weakness
You set Your treasure
In jars of clay
So take this heart, Lord
I'll be Your vessel
The world to see
Your love in me

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind but now I see

Oh I can see it now
Oh I can see the love in Your eyes
Laying yourself down
Raising up the broken to life
(Houston and Myrin 2014, Newton 1779).

These words summarize the process of writing my spiritual autobiography. The metaphor of broken Greek pottery comes to mind: when the beautifully decorated Greek vase breaks, it is not discarded. Rather all the pieces are carefully gathered, and the vase is put back together. Gold is used as the solder to hold the pieces

together. A broken and re-gathered piece of pottery is therefore a truly unique and a much more beautiful work of art than the perfect original.

This is what I sense has happened in the process of writing the story of my formation. Many pieces of me that were broken off, hidden or rejected, have been put into place in a way of beauty and wholeness. Since God has consistently called me to lead others into a deeper life with Christ, it follows that I should desire to share such means to personal wholeness and growth in Christ with others. Hence the spiritual formation model which follows in the next chapter incorporates such an experience in the context of the local church.

CHAPTER III:
SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODEL AND
CURRICULUM FOR MATURE
BELIEVERS IN THE
LOCAL CHURCH

As evidenced in the previous chapter, the writing of my spiritual autobiography led to a new freedom and a new awareness of God's grace and faithfulness in my life. I anticipated that the discipleship journey of others would likewise be deepened by having their eyes opened to God's presence in their own life narratives. Further, I desired to share with others the increased self-understanding, self-acceptance, and the peaceful "settling" into myself that writing a spiritual autobiography offered me. This chapter presents a curriculum for spiritual formation which, therefore, features the writing of a spiritual memoir. The model and supporting curriculum is designed for application in the local church and with the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Churches, in Canada, in mind. The MB family in Canada, and around the world, has a rich heritage of radical faith and radical obedience to Christ. Our spiritual ancestors counted the cost and embarked on the journey of being followers of Jesus, willing to endure whatever was necessary for the love and glory of God.

In this chapter I hope to:

- a) remind the leaders of the MB churches of Canada of the primary biblical call to make more and better disciples (Matt 28:19-20),
- b) call us back to our roots of deep spirituality that produced missional fruit,
- c) offer a way to deepen the followers of Christ in the local church by means of the spiritual formation model and curriculum developed herein.

The thought in this chapter is outlined as follows:

- a) Discussion of the problem: the discipleship crisis in North America,
- b) discussion of the MB heritage as motivation to a deeper walk with Christ,
- c) discussion of the theory of spiritual formation as the process by which God's people grow in Christ-likeness,
- d) presentation of the *Three Years with Jesus* church-based curriculum to facilitate spiritual growth.

The Discipleship Crisis

The Church in Western society has historically deeply influenced culture. Beginning with the Early Church in the Roman Empire, and continuing through the Reformation and the settling of the New World, Christians influenced the

society around them to take care of its poor, to protect the vulnerable, to limit exploitation of children, women, the poor and the foreigner, to provide health-care, to encourage education at all levels, to work for peace and reconciliation in personal, national and international relationships, to promote values such as humility, generosity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice and love of all, to strengthen the family unit, to rehabilitate those living in crime or immorality, and more (Stark 2011). Today the state churches in Europe claim only single percentages of population among its attendants (European Social Survey 2004) and North American churches of all types have been in acute decline over the past several decades. Books such as *unChristian* (Kinnaman and Lyons 2011), *You Lost Me* (Kinnaman 2011) and *Hemorrhaging Faith* (Penner and Associates 2011) among others, sound the alarm of the young adults leaving their local churches in droves. A number of studies and theories offer reasons behind the current decline. Though one could debate the various factors that contribute to the current problem of decline, research conducted by groups such as the Barna Research Institute and Willow Creek Church indicate that the decline in church participation is essentially a discipleship problem. George Barna reports that in his extensive study which formed the basis for *Growing True Disciples*, (Barna 2001) out of the thousands of adults interviewed not one said that their “goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ” (Barna 2001, 6). Other priorities usurp God’s claim on the lives of his redeemed people and eventually crowd out even minimal signs of a relationship with Christ, including regular church attendance. Soon, the radical cruciform faith to which Christ calls all his disciples devolves into not

much more than “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” (Smith and Denton 2005) which operates in the background of life, is largely unnoticeable to self or others, and is virtually devoid of the elements common to a Spirit-led and Spirit-transformed life (Smith and Denton 2005, 8). Smith, however, in his *Evangelical Identity and Influence Project* (Smith 1998, 21-22) points out that his findings show that those churches and denominations which continue to thrive are those who are strong along the areas of salience of faith, robustness of faith, and commitment to mission, the very aspects of faith which the spiritual formation model presented herein aims to strengthen.

Hence at an age when the Church has lost its place at the table of cultural influence, the Church must move beyond the counting of attendance on Sunday mornings and the reporting of new converts. The Church, for the sake of her health, her depth and therefore her mission must invest in those who believe in Jesus to ensure they are spiritually healthy and thriving followers of Christ. The Church must learn to *weigh* the disciples, perhaps more so than to *count* the disciples, facilitating their formation into Christ’s image for the sake of God’s glory and ultimately to increase their effectiveness for mission. The enormous investment into facilities and programs that bring new people into the Church, must be matched by an equal, if not greater, investment into the formation of those already in the Kingdom. An increased emphasis on discipleship is, therefore, necessary for the sake of Christ and his reconciling mission.

The Flawed Assumption

The current and still popular model for the local church structure in North America consists of the Sunday morning worship service, typically marked by energetic music and relevant-sounding preaching, and by some form of small group ministry which augments the Sunday gathering. In addition, the local church generally offers various service opportunities to help the congregation to function and to thrive and to help the needy near and far. The underlying assumption behind this model is the belief that: “increased participation in church activities – small groups, weekend worship services and volunteering - increases a person’s love for God and others. Said another way: Church Activity=Spiritual Growth” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 16).

Though Christ-followers in such a church may regularly experience emotionally and spiritually moving worship, challenging Bible teaching, intimate sharing of life with one another, and giving of one’s time and money toward worthy causes, spiritual growth does *not* necessarily follow. In fact the startling 2007 Willow Creek study *Reveal* and the ensuing 2011 book *Move*, provide overwhelming statistical evidence that even high levels of participation in excellent worship, meaningful preaching, and well-run small groups are not in themselves adequate to lead to ever-increasing intimacy with Christ and the on-going experience of formation into his image. This study of over one thousand diverse congregations, representing over two hundred and fifty thousand congregants, found that:

Increased participation in church activities by themselves *barely*

moved...people to love God and other more...[and that] church activities do not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth...[especially] for people who are in the more advanced stages of spiritual development. (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 18-19)

Furthermore, the study revealed that among the surveyed congregations, 25-50% of the congregants described themselves as “spiritually stalled and/or dissatisfied with how the church is helping them grow” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 19). These findings are corroborated by the 2015 Barna study on the state of discipleship in North America. This study identified that only 52% of those who have attended church in the past six months would say that their church “definitely does a good job helping people grow spiritually” (Barna 2015, 35). The study, however, found that the leaders in the church have an even bleaker assessment of the spiritual growth opportunities in their churches:

Church leaders, by stark contrast, tend not to believe churches are effective in this area [growing people spiritually]. Only 1 percent say “today’s churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers.”...Looking at their own church, only 8 percent say they are doing “very well” and 56 percent “somewhat well” at discipling new and young believers. (Barna 2015, 35)

Christian spiritual maturity therefore requires intentionality, a plan and a path for all, not just new or young believers. The adage “fail to plan-plan to fail” holds true in spiritual growth. Without a plan and a clear path, the local church leadership cannot expect maturity of the congregation to come about simply through participation. The destination of spiritual growth must be made clear and the “spiritual jump-start” made non-negotiable (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 212).

In my experience at the various leadership levels of the MB denomination, the MB churches of Canada experience this crisis in discipleship primarily as a crisis in leadership. Specifically, the MBs find it increasingly more difficult to find church planters, missionaries, and local church pastors who are suitable for ministry placements, largely due to their underdeveloped walk with Christ, which inevitably exhibits itself in character deficiencies. The all too frequent leadership failures in the church which stem from such character deficiencies also inevitably point to a deficiency in spiritual maturity. Krallmann in his analysis of Christ's leadership and his training methods of the Twelve makes this sobering observation: "In the final analysis, every shortcoming in Christian leadership can be traced back to failure in following Christ's example" (Krallmann 2002, Kindle 106/3819).

In summary, the assumption that participation (in worship, in small group, in service) automatically leads to Christ-like character development is more folklore than fact. To form disciples who effectively bear Christ's image, the Church must deploy intentional means other than Sunday attendance and mid-week participation. The model presented herein is based on the principle that intentional spiritual formation of Christ-followers is necessary to turn the tide of the discipleship crisis.

However, before the discussion turns to the agents and contexts for such formation, let us first consider the specific DNA of the Mennonite Brethren, and then turn to a discussion focused on the goal and the means of spiritual formation.

The Mennonite Brethren

The Mennonite Brethren (MB) came about as a result of two distinct genesis points. The first took place in Zurich, Switzerland on January 21, 1525, during a home-based prayer meeting, where those present were powerfully moved by the Holy Spirit and “every person present was baptized and pledged to live a life of separation from the world” (Jolst and Faber 2002, 6) .This act brought to existence Anabaptism (to be baptized again), though the term was not coined by the Anabaptists, rather it was a derogatory reference used by those who persecuted them.

The Anabaptist movement grew rapidly and became known as the Radical Reformation. The adherents were severely persecuted by the Roman church, as well as by the Reformers. Many were put to death by drowning, an execution directly related to their offence of believer’s baptism. In February 1527, the Brethren (as they called themselves) agreed to the basic theology tenets that would guide their lives. Among these were the following:

- a) Only believers who give evidence of transformed lives shall be baptized.
- b) Baptism is a pre-requisite for belonging to the Brethren community and for taking the Lord’s Supper.
- c) The Brethren Christians must live a holy life separated from the surrounding sinful society.
- d) The Brethren will take on the attitude of the suffering Christ and renounce force, violence and warfare.
- d) The Brethren will follow the teachings of Christ as set out in the Sermon on the Mount, to the point of even refusing to take oaths. (Jolst and Faber 2002, 6-7)

The Brethren’s beliefs about matters of faith and life were eventually written down in a systematic way by a Dutch Anabaptist leader and New

Testament theologian, Menno Simons. Menno Simons was ordained as the leader of the Anabaptist movement; for this he was a hunted man, and many of those he baptized were killed. While on the run, he managed to write about a dozen books and pamphlets which held together the scattered and heavily persecuted Anabaptist. Soon they were known as the Mennonites, not because they were founded by Menno Simons, but because he crystalized the beliefs that would guide their faith and life, and because he exemplified the deep conviction and fearless courage of a fully devoted follower of Christ.

In 1763, Catherine the Great desired to settle her new territories north of the Black Sea. She promised freedom of faith, non-participation in the military, land-ownership and self-government to any who would settle her lands (Jolst and Faber 2002, 11). Such offer was perceived as a provision of God by the Mennonites who immigrated to Russia in droves. However, it took less than one hundred years of peace and prosperity before the once vibrant Mennonite community de-formed into a legalistic group that was exploited by its leaders, and living a far from holy lifestyle. A group of eighteen men wrote a letter to the leaders, listing their concerns regarding the “abuses they saw in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, pastoral leadership and lifestyle” (Jolst and Faber 2002, 14). The essence of the concern was the impression that the Church affirmed members and leaders who gave no evidence of a redeemed and disciplined lifestyle. This concerned group was excommunicated for the writing of the letter and for recruiting others to their point of view. This group met for worship for the first time on March 11, 1862 under the name of Mennonite

Brethren. The MB community was marked by a spiritual awakening, personal conversion based on the grace of God, meaningful Bible study, personal spiritual experience, loving action, evangelism and mission to distant lands such as India (Jolst and Faber 2002, 14-17).

The peaceful existence of the MB's in Russia came to an end with World War I, when they were attacked by both the German and the Allied armies. To save their lives, as many as five thousand Mennonite Brethren hastily immigrated to Canada in the early 1920s, more to the US and South America.

Today, the Mennonite Brethren of Canada continue to evidence the two genesis moments, one in Switzerland, the other in Russia. Both center around a radical following of Christ, a lifestyle distinct from the surrounding society, a refusal of violence, and a life oriented to community, to social action and evangelistic mission. It is these key qualities of the MBs that give hope to a renewed call to a radical life for Jesus, to a deep life with Jesus – for the sake of his love and glory, and for the sake of the mission he entrusts to his church. In addition, the Mennonite Brethren over the years freely appropriated spiritual practices from other faith traditions (such as Pietists, Charismatics etc.), while managing to maintain their essential DNA, hence the MBs are open to even unfamiliar spiritual practices. The *Three Years with Jesus* model and curriculum, therefore, confidently apply spiritual practices and disciplines which may not otherwise be readily associated with spiritual formation in other evangelical denominations.

Portrait of a Christ-like Disciple

The result of the North American discipleship crisis described in chapter II of this paper is the sad reality that for the most part, Christ-followers in our midst don't look much different than the wider society (Barna 2001, 11). A Christ-follower who has not experienced significant personal formation is an unlikely agent of change in his/her cultural context. The questions that beg to be answered next are: What then are the distinguishing marks of a Christ follower who is effectively formed for mission? How can we weigh a disciple to judge her maturity? How can we identify those areas of spiritual frailty which may threaten mission so that the disciple and her support group are fully aware and actively inviting God's Spirit to re-form these areas of danger? If the Church cannot consider her job done "when people confess their sins and say a prayer inviting Jesus to be their Redeemer" (Barna 2001, 2), when then is the job of growing a disciple complete?

While the degree of maturity, that is, the degree of Christ-likeness formed in the disciple is notoriously difficult to measure (Pettit 2008, 18), there are a number of approaches available to assess spiritual maturity. The existing tools usually offer qualitative rather than quantitative assessments that are based on various character virtues, or fruits of the Spirit, or other such indicators of Christ-likeness. For the purposes of this model, the question of what exactly Christ-likeness looks like is answered in two parts: first, by looking to the Sermon on the Mount as the definitive text for the fully Christ-like believer, and second, by

considering the already existing description of a “growing disciple,” which was developed by the MBs of Canada over the past few decades.

Sermon on the Mount as the Measure of Christ-Likeness

For the Mennonite Brethren, the definitive text for Christ-likeness has historically been the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon well resonates with the MB radical spiritual roots formed in the Radical Reformation.

As the Radicals of the Reformation, the Mennonites very obviously stood apart from even the Christian culture of the Reformation. They willingly accepted punishment from the State for their convictions regarding believer’s baptism, the taking up of arms, the meaning of communion, and other convictions which did not align with neither the Roman Church, nor the general Reformation. The Mennonite Brethren accepted life in exile (in Russia and various South and North American countries afterwards) in order to live radically for Christ. Their willingness to speak out and go against the norm was evident even in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren, in Russia, in 1860, when their insistence on personal conversion and ongoing sanctification (spiritual formation) resulted in their excommunication from the wider Mennonite body. Images of Dirk Willems, who was burned at the stake in 1569, after rescuing his pursuing prison guard from drowning in icy waters instead of running away to save his life, adorn the walls of many MB homes to this day. This image serves as an illustration and an inspiration of what it means to follow Christ with absolute conviction, no matter

the cost. Hence, to answer the question of the measure of mission-ready disciple, the MB mind would naturally turn to the Sermon on the Mount for answers.

Appendix A contains a fairly lengthy self-assessment tool that I created based on Matthew 5:1-7:28. The interpretation of the text falls in line with the MB theology and hermeneutic. The tool consists of self-assessment statements based on the commands *to*, or descriptives *of*, the one who is effectively in the Kingdom, and hence a mission-ready disciple. These statements are intended for use primarily in the second year of the *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum presented herein. However, the statements may simply be considered contemplatively as an opportunity for greater self-knowledge, and an opportunity to invite God's Spirit into the areas needing his formative work. The statements may also be used in a mentoring, accountability, or spiritual direction relationship. The statements could also be grouped to focus on a particular aspect of spiritual formation, such as relationships with others, freedom from immoral impulses, active engagement in social issues, holiness of inner thought life, degree of contentment and joy in life etc. The statements are not scientifically formulated or tested; they are simply intended to portray a radically transformed follower of Christ, who is fit for effective mission in the post-Christian society of our day.

It seems readily apparent that turning to these statements as a measure of maturity offers on-going challenge and direction for the spiritual formation of any disciple of Christ. Disciples such as these would be clearly distinguishable from the surrounding culture and well prepared to affect change around them. Then their Christian spiritual formation would be expressed in the concrete realities of

life. Their faith and relationship with Christ would not be some ethereal reality stored deep in the interior recesses of their life, rather such transformation would produce “tangible changes in the lives of the individual [disciple] and [their] communities” (Howard 2008, 270).

Mennonite Brethren Portrait of a Growing Disciple

Over the years, the MBs in Canada sought to describe the fully formed follower of Christ in ways that would be inspiring and helpful in establishing a target for growth. Various workers in the denomination studied the whole of the New Testament in search for a list of qualities that would offer guidance as to the goal of the desired transformation (Wiebe 2015). Including the above mentioned Sermon on the Mount, over six hundred such qualities were found. A more manageable list was needed, and was eventually produced by focusing on the key inner qualities, as well as those external behavioural indicators that point to spiritual maturity. These six indicators continue to be communicated to the MB churches of Canada in various ways, including a current brochure on the topic that is displayed in the MB churches (see Appendix B). The following is a narrative description of these six qualities of a growing follower of Christ are as follows.

In Love with Jesus

In line with Deuteronomy 6:4-6, John 21:15-17, and Matthew 22:36-40, this person’s identity is fully in Christ. S/he not only believes in Jesus but loves him with all heart, soul, mind and strength, which includes passion, orthodox belief and life choices that align with that faith. This person consistently

demonstrates emotions of love for God, which would be similar to emotions expressed in human relationships. This person understands how to offer all of life to God as worship and how to refer all of life to Christ. Obedience is motivated by love, rather than legalism or fear. This person has a personal understanding of salvation as deliverance from the power of sin in his/her life, and lives life truly centered on Christ. Therefore serving and talking about the things of God with others comes easily and is shared with a light touch.

This first quality, to be in love with Jesus, is primary. It is a measure of the reality that love for God, with which always comes a love for others, is the ultimate measure of maturity and the ultimate destination of the Christian spiritual formation. The importance of love in the journey to becoming like Christ cannot be overstated. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13 describes love as patient, kind, free of jealousy and arrogance, as not rude or self-seeking, not easily angered, keeping not record of wrongs, taking no joy in things that are wrong, but instead in what is true. Love always protects, always accepts, always hopes, endures everything, and it never quits (1 Cor 13:48). Paul is *not* telling Christ-followers to be patient and kind, rather he tells them to “pursue love” (1 Cor 13:1). That is, as human beings become possessed by love they are ready to live as fully functioning human beings, ones who can be trusted to rule, to have dominion (Gen 1:26). Therefore, in Christian spiritual formation the quality of love is primary. It is more than being “in love with Jesus,” it is *being love*, which brings with it freedom from fear (1 Joh 4:18), and the freedom to love God and others fully (Willard 1997, 182-183).

The remaining five qualities speak more to the observable characteristics of a growing follower of Christ and therefore serve more as tools for the maturing in love.

Exercises Spiritual Self-Care and Nurture

In line with 2 Peter 1:5-11, Deuteronomy 5:33, and John 15:1-8, this person is abiding, thirsting, and thriving in her life in Christ, and takes intentional steps to keep her personal faith vibrant. Tools regularly used for spiritual self-nurture include inductive and devotional intake of God's word, regular and frequent engagement in spiritual disciplines such as journaling, personal retreats for refreshment, fasting, meditation, silence, and reflection. This person is known to be devoted to prayer and to exercise Spirit-guided self-leadership in the conduct of all of life.

Committed to a Local Church

In line with Acts 2:42-47 and Hebrews 10:25, and all the 'one another' texts, this person lives out the faith in the context of a local church, in small group and large context, committed to the health, effectiveness, and mission of the specific church to which she belongs. This person understands the value of the local church, loves the body of Christ and is committed to accountable belonging. This person understands gifts and his/her particular contribution to the health of the body, and also values the support of community in his/her own life. Faithful serving, leading, giving are all part of this quality.

Committed to God's Reconciling Mission

In line with Matthew 28:19-20 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-20, this person understands that the mission of God is the mission of the church and, therefore, her personal mission; that is, the reconciliation of all to God by faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore this person lives with a missional impulse, enthusiastically influencing all toward a relationship with Christ. This person knows not only how to articulate the gospel, but is able to nuance the message to the person or situation at hand. This person understands that time with non-Christians and acts of practical, loving service to all are part of living for Christ in this world.

Discerns Trends in Culture and Society

In line with Acts 4:18-20, 5:27-42, this person practices critique of the society, able to discern larger shifts in the surrounding and world-wide culture. This follower of Christ relates to culture and society discerningly, giving primary allegiance to God's Kingdom, able to "be in the world but not of it." Love of God and love for the world are not in conflict. This believer respects civil authorities yet understands the nature of biblical civil disobedience and when to "obey God rather than human authority." Further, this disciple knows how to prioritize the interests of God's kingdom over regional or national issues. As a change agent, this person actively promotes peace where conflict and oppression hold power; and participates in addressing justice and care of the marginalized.

Journey Is Conscious

In line with Philippians 2:12-13; 3:12-16 and Colossians 3:5-17, the spiritually growing follower of Christ is journey conscious, aware that spiritual maturity is a continual growth process. This person is purposeful and persevering about moving along a path toward Christ-likeness, having Christ fully formed within as the target and vision for the journey. This person is always able to articulate the aspect of self that God's Spirit is currently molding. This disciple's life is marked by regular assessment of progress and continuation despite times of discouragement or failure. This disciple actively utilizes the community in order to stay on the path to maturity and is dedicated to finishing well.

This above discussion painted a portrait of a Christ-like and hence a mission-ready follower of Christ. It should be apparent that the vision for spiritual maturity in the MB context is clear. What tends to be missing, as is true in many other evangelical denominations in North America, is a clear means, a practical how-to list of steps that would facilitate movement toward this vision of a mature disciple. The *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum offered in this chapter provides the means toward this vision of a growing follower of Christ.

What is Spiritual Formation?

Let us now turn the discussion to the very process which brings about progressive, inner change, making the Christ-follower more and more like Jesus.

Definition of Terms

A number of terms refer to the process of the Christian spiritual growth. Words such as discipleship, journey, spiritual growth or spiritual maturity, sanctification, becoming like Jesus, spiritual depth or spiritual health, transformation, character development, and spiritual formation all attempt to express the reality that the gospel of Christ is about far more than a change of status which allows one to enter heaven after death. Gordon Smith (Howard 2008, 268) suggests rather that the point at which we come to Christ in faith “is a beginning and a means to an end.” While each term carries with it specific nuances, here we will give preference to the term spiritual formation to describe the process by which a follower of Christ is transformed to be more and more Christ-like. *Spiritual* refers to the fact that the process is a) the work of the Spirit and b) that it affects the spirit, or the inner part of the person. *Formation* refers to the fact that this is a process of change, of forming. Therefore, the natural expectation for every believer is to be able to regularly point to a notable difference in his or her progression to Christ-likeness.

A number of definitions further explain spiritual formation. For example, Pettit defines spiritual formation as “the process by which God in Christ through the Spirit forms his effective presence and character within our spirit” (Pettit 2008, 112). This definition places spiritual formation largely into the private sphere of the individual, emphasizing the work of the Spirit within the Christian. The expected result is the effective presence of God and godly character. Mulholland in his slightly expanded definition of spiritual formation states that

“Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Mulholland 1993, 12). Mulholland, thus, includes the *purpose* of spiritual formation in his definition: the conformity to the image of Christ has to do with the needs of others. Zscheile likewise expands on Wilhoit’s definition of spiritual formation as “the intentional communal process of growing up in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” by adding the phrase “for the sake of the world” (Zscheile 2012, 7). This definition understands spiritual formation to be primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, and though it is a process which takes place in a uniquely individual way for each Christian, it always happens in a communal setting, and its purpose is not for the sake of the formed individual, nor for the sake of his personal communion with God, nor for her personal holiness, though each of these are important. The purpose of spiritual formation is for the sake of the world – for the sake of God’s reconciling mission.

Barton, furthermore, defines spiritual formation as “the process by which Christ is formed in us for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and for the sake of others” (Barton 2012, 240), highlighting three distinct reasons, or benefits, of formation as well as contrasting the more passive role of the believer with the more active role of God in the process.

Each of the above attempts to describe the mystery of the work of God in collaboration with the person to bring about deep and lasting inner change has merit. The definition preferred in this work is based on that of Paul Pettit (Pettit 2008, 19), as it carefully incorporates the various key elements of the definitions

given above, considering thoughtfully the what, how and why of spiritual formation. First, *spiritual formation is the ongoing and holistic work of the Triune God in a believer's life, whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the character and actions of Jesus Christ*. Secondly, *this change happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others* (Pettit 2008, 19). The *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum considers the elements of this definition carefully, facilitating space for God to render the change, forming Christian community as a supportive environment for this change, and orienting the believer to service to God and others, in and outside of the church.

An Expectation of Growth

The call to grow into the full measure of Christ is clearly set out in Ephesians 4:11-16, where the Apostle Paul, asserts that the purpose of the leaders in the church is, in fact, the maturing of the saints, until they are fully like Christ. The effects of such maturity include the unity of the body, stability of faith, wisdom, ability to speak truth in love, and a perfect functioning of the body with each member doing its part, contributing to the growth and strength of the community. It is important to note that the New Testament witness indicates that such maturity is actually achievable in this life, contrary to the view that Christians make *some* progress to perfection in this life, but perfect Christ-likeness can only be realized after death. Colossians 1:28 for example expects that through the mysterious inner work of Christ every one of the believers can expect

to be “*teleios* (complete, perfect, mature) in Christ.” Likewise, 1 Peter 1:15 expects all believers to be as holy as God is holy in all their conduct.

What Spiritual Formation is Not

Borrowing from the *via negativa* methodology, in an attempt to understand what spiritual formation is, it is helpful to clarify what it is not. Colossians 2:16-23 is perhaps the definitive text to help clarify the wrong means and outcome to Christ-likeness.

According to this text, first, Christian spiritual formation does *not* focus on the imposition or management of observable behaviour, including policies, ways of worship, ways of being and relating. Jesus refers to this type of behaviour control as the white-washing of tombs (Matt 23:27) and strongly condemns it as being in opposition to the work of God and destructive to others (Luke 11:52). The core problem with this kind of change is the focus on external management of the person which relies on human will, rather than the inner transformative work that is dependent on the work of God. Jesus (and Paul) rejects the wrong motive behind such external change as one of wanting to appear better than one really is (for example in Matthew 6:2).

Finally, the problem with focus on behaviour management is the control of individuals and eventually institutions over others who impose “regulations” and “human commands” (Col 2:20-22) and often begin to oppress those who do not live up to the expectations.

The result is that the believers who focus on particulars of behaviours, rules and regulations end up majoring on the minors and actually drifting away from intimacy with Christ (“not holding fast to the head” Col 2:19). Rather, the instruction in Galatians 5:16 is to “walk in the Spirit” as the means for gaining mastery over any desires contrary to the will and nature of God.

How Spiritual Formation Takes Place

The earlier discussion already developed the concept of spiritual formation as the process by which God forms God’s people into the image of Christ, in the context of community, for his glory, for the sake of others, and as the realization of Christ’s promise of the abundant life (Rom 8:29, 12:102, Gal 4:19, Joh 10:10). The fact that the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16) is central to the witness of the church in this world as a redeemed community which carries the invitation to reconciliation with God for all people. This salvation is not only a means to eternal life in the here-after, but it is a means to deliverance to wholeness and purposeful, Spirit-conscious life, marked by love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in the here and now. In fact, when Peter and John preach salvation in no other name under heaven (Acts 4:12), the context makes clear that they are referring to a salvation (*soteria*) from the brokenness in this life.

First, this formation is a function of the renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2), that is, an effective change in one’s worldview, opinions, and basis for reasoning. In this way the Greek *nous* (mind) in Romans 12:2 includes the intellect, but it

also points to power of perception that is beyond the cognitive, such as patterns of emotion and response, ability to discern and judge and so on (Barton 2012, Kindle 3883/4357). Therefore, this transformation is not simply a matter of *choosing* to do the right thing in the moment, or in general choosing to behave in line with a new code of ethics. This transformation is a matter of *becoming* the kind of person who consistently exists in line with this new code of ethics. Therefore spiritual formation, that is, Christ formed in the one who surrenders her life to him, is not about *doing* the right thing, rather it is about *becoming* the kind of person who does the right thing, and does so easily and naturally, because she is supernaturally enabled to do so.

Secondly, though the gospel carries with it the expectation that people can indeed be transformed to such an extent that they are like Christ. The Bible also clearly states that such a transformation, however, is not possible by any human effort. The commands issued to believers in the Scriptures with respect to their transformation are tellingly given in the passive tense. There is not one command that reads: “Transform yourself into Christ’s image,” rather the command is to *be* transformed. Any efforts to self-transform are seen in Scripture as futile or even sheer madness (Gal 3:3). The kind of transformation that goes beyond behaviour modification and changes the essence of the person can only be wrought in the person by the virtue of the Holy Spirit’s activity *with* and *in* the person. This activity cannot be controlled (the Spirit moves as he wishes, John 3:8), or even directed by the person. Barton puts it this way:

The journey of transformation requires willingness to relinquish control

and give ourselves over to a process that we cannot fully understand or of which we can predict the outcomes. We know we will be more like Christ, but we cannot predict exactly what this will look like or where it will take us.” (Barton 2012, Kindle 243/248)

The Christ follower, however, *does* have agency in the degree to which Christ is formed in her. This agency extends to the choice to *hinder* or to *embrace* the transforming work of the Spirit. Attentiveness and cooperation lead to growth, while apathy and ignorance hinder the inner work of God. The model for spiritual formation in the local church, presented herein, offers means by which the local church can encourage her members to embrace transformation, to create the space necessary for the Holy Spirit to bring about the expected transformation.

Finally, the process of “formation...is a slow, deep work” (Reese and Loane 2012, 45). In a culture of instant information, instant food, and instant results, instant transformation may be expected. The model presented herein offers the opportunity to shake free of the instant gratification monster and to embrace the slow and deep work of God by carving out ample time and space for the process.

Grace and Effort

The Mennonite Brethren, not in isolation from other Christian traditions, strongly emphasize that salvation and the formation into Christ-likeness takes place only as a result of God’s grace. That is, the process of becoming like Christ cannot be accomplished by human striving. It is the work of God’s Spirit, who by the means of grace brings about transformation which cannot come about by any other means. In an effort to alleviate any concern that efforts expended toward

one's spiritual deepening contradict the doctrine of grace, the following discussion addresses the question of grace and effort.

To say that we grow into Christ-likeness by grace is to say that we do not grow in Christ-likeness by human effort. Yet 2 Peter 3:18 commands Christ's followers to "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Therefore, God's transforming grace seems to expect human effort. A lack of effort in one's spiritual growth results in passivity, expecting grace and the work of the Holy Spirit alone, without any effort on the part of the person to bring about a change. However passivity will not result in change. Therefore again, human effort is required to transformation, while it remains true that Christ-likeness cannot be accomplished by such effort.

Dallas Willard offers a solution to the conundrum of how grace and effort work together in spiritual formation. In his words: "Grace is not opposed to effort but to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action" (Omission 2016). Hence the believer does her very best but does not *trust* in her very best, rather trusts in God's grace which is forming her character. The disciple expends effort not into behaviour management, but indirectly into the practice of disciplines, which create space for God's grace and his Spirit to work the transformation. It is this indirect effort to "grow in grace" which creates the very conditions for God's grace to work the transformation.

Such grace is defined by Willard as "God acting in our lives to bring about what we cannot on our own" (Willard 2016). Such grace affects more than the popular definition of grace as unmerited favour, which focuses on the one-time

salvific work of grace. Rather than thinking of grace as *what it is*, we consider transforming grace by *what it does*. It brings about something that we cannot bring about apart from its influence. Hence it eliminates boasting, pride, and self-sufficiency, while it encourages indirectly focused effort.

Therefore, as the believer expends effort by engaging in various disciplines which aid in centering the mind and heart on Christ, God applies grace through the events of ordinary life coupled with the grace work of the Holy Spirit, to over time, produce in the believer character which habitually acts like Christ.

Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Mission

A second concern that is worth addressing, particularly with an evangelical Anabaptist denomination in mind, is that of a perception of a cloistered faith. Specifically, that such intense focus on one's spiritual growth can lead the believer to be so heavenly minded that s/he becomes no earthly good. Since the MBs are about mission and about impacting the world for the Kingdom, could spiritual formation be taken too far, perhaps even to the point where our focus on Christ-likeness might displace the missional impetus of the church? Therefore, let us now consider the purpose of the Church *as* mission and the critical role Christ-likeness plays in the success of this mission.

The traditional paradigm of mission operates on the principle that the Church *has* a mission, or that the Church *does* mission on behalf of God. This paradigm by default places mission among other church activity, it is just one more thing for the church to do, often on the periphery and by a select few. The

missional paradigm on the other hand speaks of God's mission *having* the Church. Mission is what God does: the Father sent the Son, the Son sent the Spirit and the Trinity sends the Church whose very *raison d'être* is *Missio Dei* (Bossch 1981, 289). In this paradigm *all* the activities of the Church fall under the rubric of God's reconciling mission: mission to children, mission to the homeless, mission to proclaim the saving gospel to the lost, and mission to train up the new disciples into effective mission-minded Christ-followers. Formation then becomes about the effectiveness and suitability for mission. As Israel's formation was not about holiness for the sake of holiness, but to be a light to the nations, so the formation of God's people today-the Church-is for the sake of being a light to the nations. The early Church was spiritually formed in the crucible of mission. The following offers a glimpse into the missional way of being for the early church, as well as the spiritual formation means which supported such a way of life:

...mission and spiritual formation unfolded in the context of costly public witness within a hostile Roman society: the spirituality of the martyrs. Martyrdom (literally, "witness") was a way of life for the small but growing Christian communities who face misunderstanding, resistance, and persecution. They attracted notoriety for their compassion, their egalitarianism, and the high standards of their moral conduct...entry into the Christian community involved a long and intensive catechetical process that shaped new believers into a baptismal identity that stood in contrast to the norms and values of the surrounding pagan empire. (Zscheile 2012, 9)

With Christianity's move to center stage of society under the rule of Constantine, a shift from missional living to institutional maintenance took place. Spiritual formation of members of local parishes received less and less rigor and intentionality. Mission became less about living *among* the unbelieving and more

about sending armies (or evangelists or humanitarian relief) *to* the unbelieving. The Reformation recaptured some of the missional impulse of the early church. The Pietists and the Anabaptists among other reformers understood the connection between personal transformation and effectiveness for mission. However, it was not until Karl Barth's work in Trinitarian theology in the early 20th century that missional theology began to develop, and the Church began to wake up to the reality of Church *as Missio Dei* rather than Church *on Missio Dei*.

Since the Church exists *because of* God's mission to the world and *for* God's mission to the world, it follows that the aim of Christian spiritual formation is to form mission-ready and mission-effective disciples of Christ. If we further accept that the purpose of spiritual formation is Christ-likeness for the sake of mission-readiness, then we also understand that the formed disciple (as in the pre-Constantine church) must be formed to stand in decidedly obvious contrast to the surrounding society.

The Model and Curriculum for *Three Years with Jesus*

This section contains the rationale and the description of a model and supporting curriculum for intentional spiritual formation in the local church. The model assumes that certain foundational principles and spiritual practices are already present in the local church. These assumptions serve as foundational principles and they undergird the model as a whole. If these values and practices are not present in the church, then additional effort needs to be expended to establish these before the implementation of the specific elements of this model.

The foundational values and practices that are assumed to be in place are as follows:

1. The leadership is personally invested, is exemplar, and is leading the spiritual formation process,
2. Daily time with God over the pages of the Bible is a frequently communicated, and faithfully practiced value,
3. The preaching is intentionally transformational rather than information or works oriented, application based preaching,
4. The congregation welcomes the role of community in personal growth, including the participation in small groups.

These foundational principles are further developed in the Foundational Principles section (page 183) of this chapter. The model builds on these foundational principles by introducing additional spiritual disciplines, by offering mentoring, spiritual direction, devotional readings, retreats and other means of indirect effort to created space for God's grace to work the transformation.

The Target Group

As already described in Chapter 2, Hagberg and Guelich (2005) in their work, *The Critical Journey*, describe six distinct stages of Christian maturity (see Figure 5 below). The Willow Creek Move study offers a simplified four-stage model (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 21). The Willow Creek terms are shown along the bottom of the figure. The Converted Life is the stage that begins when a person recognizes and embraces the reality of Christ as God and Saviour

(Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 33). The Converted Life normally flows often very naturally into the second stage, labeled by Hagberg and Guelich as the Discipled Life. The learning curve at this stage tends to be very steep as the believer hungrily absorbs all the information about his new faith s/he can find, exemplified the newborn babe appetite described in 1 Peter 2:2.

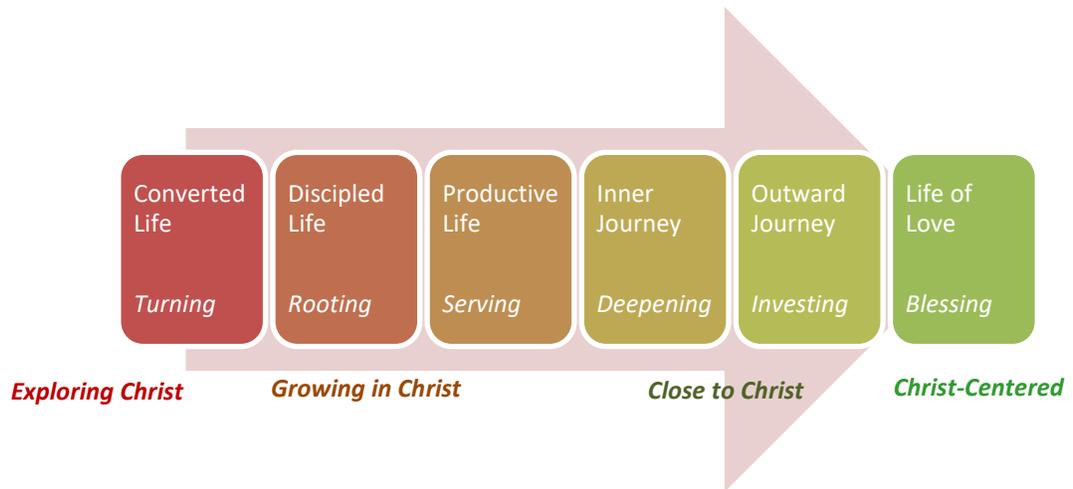


Figure 5 - Stages of Spiritual Growth

As the follower of Christ grows in the knowledge about Jesus, the Productive Life stage also quite naturally unfolds. This is the “doing stage” (Hagberb-and Guelich 2005, 73) marked with a desire to contribute to one’s faith community, and to the world, to become more and more involved in the work of the local church, and to take on ever-increasing responsibilities in service to God and others. Hagberg and Guelich (2005), the VantagePoint³ ministry (Ree and Loane 2012), which chooses the terms Turning, Rooting, and Serving to refer to these stages, and the findings of Willow Creek *Reveal* study (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007) all agree that providing this new believer is imbedded in a

church community which provides even a minimal amount of spiritual care and nurture, s/he will experience exponential growth and noticeable change in worldview, character, and habits of life.

However, all the above quoted sources agree that many followers settle into a cycle of learning and serving, which soon plateaus and the spiritual growth of the person stalls. Christianity becomes about dogmas and duties, and while a Christian may continue to be involved in church activities s/he will sense that the initial growth has stalled. Guilt, disenchantment with the less-than abundant life may lead to discouragement and event abandonment of participation in the body. Many believers never move beyond this stage of the spiritual life.

Others move into the Inner Journey (or Deepening) stage. This move from the Productive Life to the Inner Journey may come about by a traumatic event, an inner sense of need, or by less dramatic means, such as the deepening of one's spiritual practices. This stage is marked by much uncertainty and discomfort; the false self (Mulholland 2006) is unmasked and invited to die, the foundations of identity and faith are often shaken. In this deepening stage the believer is often faced with "The Wall" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 114-129) in which the ego, intellect, and doctrine face the challenge of Christ's call to surrender all to him. Due to the disconcerting nature of this stage many resist passing through it and choose to return to a life of learning and service, never moving past this critical point and toward deep maturing in Christ. In addition, experienced guides to help Christ-followers navigate the deep waters of the Inner Journey may be difficult to find. Hagberg and Guelich make the following observation:

It would be great to think that most priests, ministers, and other spiritual leaders could be our guides through stage 4 and the Wall. The sad truth is that many of these leaders have not been led through this stage themselves and have not allowed themselves to question deeply or to become whole. So many of those to whom we often look most naturally for help are inadequate guides for this part of the journey. Those who have been through this stage themselves and may be specially trained in spiritual direction, spiritual formation, or pastoral counseling are unique people and are to be sought out. (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 93-94)

Those who successfully navigate the Deepening stage of the Inner Journey emerge to a life lived for others with a renewed strength, freedom and confidence.

The model presented in this paper focuses on leading Christ-followers into and through the Inner Journey stage, into a deepening of their life with God, and to the maturity of the Investing and Blessing stages. This is the group which is of interest to this model and is referred to herein as mature believers. Mature believers therefore are those who are already living close to Christ, are ready to move beyond the Productive Life stage and are likely at or beyond middle age, though it is possible for a spiritually mature believer to be young in years. The local church ought to greatly desire people in these latter stages of Christian maturity as these are the best volunteers, the most generous givers, and the most enthusiastic evangelists. Hawkins and Parkinson in *Move*, the result of the Willow Creek study of over one thousand churches, describe such believers as: “Christ-Centered...Christ’s greatest workforce, over the heels in love with God, tithing, serving and evangelizing more than anyone else” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98). The authors, however, also note that this group is “under-challenged by the church” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98), and looking for opportunities for on-going spiritual nurture outside their local congregation.

The Target Group Spirituality

As stated in the discussion on The Mennonite Brethren above, the MB DNA naturally leans to spirituality, which is strong in the rational knowledge of the revealed God and equally strong in social justice and action to alleviate the suffering of the underprivileged in the world. According to the broad types of Christian Spirituality, as developed by Urban Holmes and depicted by Boa in the diagrams of Types of Christian Spirituality (Boa 2001, 469), there are four general spiritualities, or in other words, four general pathways by which God's people live out the reality of God in their life. The table below summarizes these four ways of engaging God. MB's hard work ethic and compassionate involvement in social justice issues along with the high value the MB's placed on scripture (exegetical preaching is preferred and Bible knowledge by all is valued and pursued, though the MBs are not immune from the general decline in biblical literacy that is experienced in the North American Evangelical milieu), places them in them into the in the Apophatic-Mind and Kataphatic-Mind spirituality. That is, a spirituality that is based on knowing the revealed God, with a comfort of relating to God as mystery. In fact, the excesses of moralism and rationalism associated with these two quadrants of spirituality can be readily identified as a weakness of the MB spirituality.

Table 1 – Types of Christian Spirituality

	Apophatic Spirituality Approaching God as Mystery	Kataphatic Spirituality Approaching God as Revealed
Mind Spirituality <i>To Know God</i>	Focus: Societal Regeneration Social Action, Justice, Peace <i>Excess: Moralism</i>	Focus: Theological Renewal Reason, systematic doctrine <i>Excess: Rationalism</i>
Heart Spirituality <i>To Sense God</i>	Focus: The Inner Life Contemplation, simplicity, inner peace <i>Excess: Quietism</i>	Focus: Personal Renewal Holiness, emotive worship <i>Excess: Pietism</i>

Adapted from Alan Sager (Sager 1990, 34) based on Urban Holmes (Holmes 1980, 4).

Therefore, the *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum seeks to strengthen the bottom two quadrants by focusing on heart spirituality, bringing a new vitality to the inner life and personal renewal, marked by the sense of God and by quieter, less action oriented spiritual practices. It is encouraging to note that heart spirituality is not foreign to the MB DNA Rather it has fallen out of use in the past few decades, in the North American context, and hence these practices do not seek to inject an entirely foreign spirituality into the denomination.

Curriculum Overview - Three Years with Jesus

The *Three Years with Jesus* spiritual formation curriculum is structured around a model of a three year commitment, fitted into the nine-month (September to May) church cycle. The model first encourages thorough self-examination and understanding, then moves to intentional surrender to the Spirit's forming, and finally releases the believer to a purposeful life of mission. The

Year 1 Life Review

- The writing of a spiritual autobiography
- Two retreats focused on an aspect of spiritual formation
- Beginning of spiritual direction experience
- Beginning of structured spiritual disciplines

Year 2 Life Change

- Participation in a group focused on inner change
- Two retreats focused on an aspect of spiritual formation
- One solo retreat focused on extended time of silence and solitude
- Continuation of spiritual direction
- Intensified practice of spiritual disciplines

Year 3 Life Mission

- Oversees mission trip to a global partner location
- Two retreats focused on an aspect of spiritual formation
- One solo retreat focused on extended silence and solitude
- Continuation of spiritual direction
- Continuation of spiritual disciplines
- Focus on intercessory prayer

Figure 6 - *Three Years with Jesus* - Overview

applied Celtic monastic principles of formation, namely regularly withdrawing to be alone with God, then joining the community to process and incorporate those solitary encounters with God (Bradley 2000). The formation that takes place in these places of aloneness and community facilitates the eventual going out into the world to serve God and others. The curriculum also strategically incorporates elements of indirect effort so as to create space for the Spirit's transforming work. This model assumes that certain foundational principles and practices as described

in section Foundational Principles, on page 183, are already in place in order to facilitate an environment conducive to spiritual growth.

The Expected Outcomes

At the end of the three years it is anticipated that the participants will:

1. Have heard the voice of God on a consistent basis,
2. have increased in self-awareness, integration of self, and self-acceptance,
3. have had significant experience in the practice of a number of spiritual disciplines such as silence and solitude, confession, retreat, fasting, various forms of prayer,
4. know how to discern the voice of God in scripture, community, and every day events,
5. know how to recognize conviction regarding an aspect of self the God desire to transform,
6. know how to distinguish behaviour control from Spirit-wrought inner change,
7. know how to “die to self,” to stop protecting false aspects of self and to invite God’s Spirit into those places with trust and confidence in God’s goodness,
8. have experienced real healing, letting go, transformation of an aspect of self,
9. have a deeper love relationship with Jesus,

10. know how to pray for others and how to guide others in the formation process,
11. know how to formulate a rule of life to maximize cooperation with the work of God's Spirit, and
12. understand that growing up into the fullness of Christ is the expectation for all believers and it is quite possible and doable in this life.

Year 1 - Life Review

The curriculum rationale and content for each of the *Three Years with Jesus* is discussed below. The curriculum components, be they reading material, spiritual practices, or experiences such as a day retreat, were carefully selected for their capacity to create space for God's Spirit to move, to create meaningful and sustainable personal habits, to facilitate formation in community, and to encourage life given to God's mission.

Rationale

The value of taking stock of one's life is not new. Various secular and spiritual leadership development programs incorporate elements of a life review in order to increase self-awareness and self-acceptance and to bring about a sharper focus to the next steps in life. Ministries such as the Navigators offer a guide to writing one's spiritual autobiography in order to "examine your life in order to understand the ways in which God has been active there" (Peace 1998, 7). The Navigators curriculum names two other key outcomes of this process:

learn...how to notice the activity of God in your life and in the lives of those around you (the spiritual discipline of noticing), and how to share with others what God has been doing in your life and your responses to God's activity – the good, the bad, and the ugly! (Peace 1998, 7)

The Vantage Point³ ministry likewise devotes considerable time and effort in the understanding of the “life story” (Reese and Loane 2012, 51) as part of their leadership training model, which also focuses on the Deepening stage of the spiritual journey (see Figure 5 - Stages of Spiritual Growth). To invite adults to write their life story invites them into a learning process that honours the experience and maturity of the student. Similarly, the Canadian MB Conference offers a three-day APEX workshop (CCMBC 2016) based on J. Robert Clinton's leadership model, in which the participants reflect on their life story in order to clarify their role and calling in life.

The *Life Review* in year one of the model is the writing of a specific sub-genre of autobiography, referred to as spiritual autobiography. This is not a collection of interesting life events, nor is it simply a testimony of one's path to salvation. Rather it is a sifting though and interpretation of events of life with an eye toward revealing the connective thread, the “inner myth,” (Dillon 2011, 138) that lies behind and integrates the details of the writers' life. It is a process that looks for God's sovereign hand in the weaving of this connective thread.

Dillon conducted research with 122 participants, examining the effects of writing a spiritual autobiography (Dillon 2011). He summarizes the results as follows:

From this sample, 105 students (86%) said that writing a spiritual autobiography induced growth or positive change in their lives. Of those

105 students, 38 (36%) said that the changes were among the most profound in their lives. The average Likert rating for profundity of change was 7.2 on a scale from 1 to 10. When these 105 students were asked to discuss why they thought these positive changes were brought about by writing their spiritual life-story, students were almost unanimously agreed (82%) that writing their story put them in touch with a dynamic and resonant force behind and within their lives that helped give their lives new meaning, coherence, and direction. Other students (7%) noted the cathartic effects of life-writing and the fact that their autobiography helped them to gain perspective on things or see things in a different light (11%). (Dillon 2011, 147)

Dillon goes on to argue that the process of writing a spiritual autobiography can be understood as a person's attempt to bring a greater degree of consciousness to a "story that has been struggling to realize itself in one's life over time" (Dillon 2011, 149).

The first year of the *Three Years with Jesus* model seeks to capitalize on the spiritual benefit of writing one's spiritual life story. In addition, however, the model augments the writing process with assigned devotional readings, community, spiritual direction, retreats and other spiritual practices so as to create space for God's transforming work in the lives of the participants. The goal is that by end of the first year, the participants will cease to see life as "a collection of pieces and parts that don't seem to fit together" (Reese and Loane 2012, 54). Rather, the participants will make the discovery that one's life has been purposefully moving in a discernable direction, guided so by God.

Year 1 Overview

The overview of the curriculum for the first year of the model is shown in the table below. The participants will be formed into groups of four to six, in

order to allow time for adequate participant and the development of intimate community

Each participant is be asked to agree to the following commitment:

1. Duration of nine months (September to May),
2. Participation in about one meeting per month, led by an experienced facilitator,
3. Two day-long retreats focused on listening to God and an aspect of spiritual formation, and
4. Spiritual Direction every four to six weeks.

The costs associated with participating in the *Three Years with Jesus* model as negotiated between the local church and the participant.

The monthly meetings will last about two hours and will take on the following structure:

1. Connecting,
2. Sharing a selection from own autobiographical writing,
3. Structured discussion of assigned readings,
4. Teaching on a new aspect of spiritual formation or writing of a spiritual memoir,
5. Reflection on what the writing process is revealing about self and God,
6. Assignment for the next month.

Table 2 – Year 1 – Life Review - Overview

Month	Reading	Activity
1	Dillon, <i>Psychology of Writing</i> Clark, <i>Confession Literature</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 1-2	Begin Daily Examen
2	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 3 Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>	Begin Lectio with journaling Begin spiritual direction
3	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 4 Lewis, <i>Surprised by Joy</i>	Retreat – Listening to God Reading to each other Writing time
4	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 5-6 Bunyan, <i>Grace Abounding</i>	Begin Daily Office using the Psalms
5	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 7-8 Selected sample spiritual autobiography	Writing
6	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 9	Retreat - Spiritual Formation Reading to each other Writing time
7	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> – Chapter 10	Writing
8	Selected sample spiritual autobiography	Writing
9	Reflection on the process	Reading to each other

Year 2 - Life Change

Chapter 4 contains results of a study observing the effects of writing a spiritual memoir along the lines outlined above. The self-knowledge and the community that result from this nine-month experience are both powerfully

facilitate intentional surrender to God's forming of the person. Hence reflection leads to formation, a further spiritual deepening in the Life Change Group.

Rationale

Christians from the New Testament times down through the ages have utilized the dynamics of a small group in living out their faith. Arguably small groups are indispensable to a healthy Christian life and to a healthy ministry of a local congregation. Small groups, due to their intimate make-up, offer the opportunity to know and to be known deeply by a few others. Small groups offer a place to ask questions, to be held accountable, to observe how others live out the faith, to share joys and sorrows, to give and to receive comfort, care and love. The relational connection that small groups offer can hardly be overstated. In addition, some denominations, for example the Methodists, see small groups as the primary means of ministry and the primary means to spiritual growth.

However, while not doubting the above-stated value of small groups, the reality, as supported by the Willow Creek study already mentioned, the friendship, care and support experienced in the small group setting does not necessarily lead to a deepening relationship with Christ and to an increased love for God. The gifting of life group leaders tends to be primarily in the area of teaching and shepherding. The leader determines the focus of the group. Therefore, most groups place a high value on either learning the Bible or on being highly caring and relational – both of which are laudable. However, without intention, even excellent small groups will not necessarily be transformational. In

order for spiritual formation to take place, the small group must be aware that this *is* the purpose of this group and must be constantly led into the difficult place of dying to the false self (see Figure 4) in order to come alive to a new freedom in Christ. Hence, groups that facilitate spiritual formation require specialized leadership and highly focused intentionality.

The second year of the *Three Years with Jesus* model offers participation in exactly his kind of a group. The Life Change Group is a group which people join with the understanding that they will be learning how to create space for God for genuine inner transformation.

Philosophy

Much of the philosophy behind the Life Change Group is based on Neil Cole's *Cultivating a Life for God* (Cole 1999), in which he describes a model for Life Transformation Groups and on the One Thing group model developed at Oak Hills Church in California and described in *Renovation of the Church* (Carlson and Lueken 2011). Material drawn from the unpublished guidelines for the One Thing group model is being used with the permission of Mike Lueken from Oak Hills.

The Life Change Group operates under the philosophy that God is always inviting his people to new life, to a deeper way of living our life, as Christ would live it if he were them. Spiritual formation, however, is not only a lengthy process, but also its scope can be depressingly overwhelming since the need for growth is apparent in so many areas of life and character. The Life Change Group

addresses these two realities by setting aside a period of nine months for change in just *one* area, teaching God's people that spiritual transformation cannot be microwaved. In addition, the participants in this group will be led to look for just *one thing* that God may desire to grow or to transform in them. This one thing focus is based on the principle of teaching people how to fish. In other words, if the church shows people how to allow God to transform one thing in their life, those participants will discover the process that will enable them to seek further growth on their own.

The Life Change Group also addresses the fact that spiritual growth seems like the task of climbing an enormous mountain. Most Christians simply don't know where to start, so they settle for keeping busy in the base camp, commenting on how big the mountain is and how great it would be to actually climb it. Without knowing where to start, which route to take, and what tools to use, they get stuck in an endless cycle of expressing the desire to grow followed by bemoaning the fact they don't. Typical life groups can even reinforce the expectation of the Christian life as continually living at the base camp, by reading scripture together, expressing conviction and the desire for change, but giving open permission (by way of expressing sympathy to the cycle of sin) *not* to act on that conviction and desire for change. The Life Change Group seeks to break this cycle by proving a clear route and tools to climb in just one area of life. This gives the participants the experiences of transformation and the tools to keep going to the next level. Once the participants experience this process in one area of life,

they will be able to apply it to other areas of their own life and ideally also lead others through it.

The leader of the Life Change Group must be someone who has moved through the Deepening stage (see Figure 5), is active in the practice of disciplines with the aim to cooperate with God's Spirit in his/her own transformation. The principle that you cannot take people where you yourself have not been applies, therefore the leader cannot be a theoretical expert on the matter. The leader, in fact, functions more like a spiritual director to the group rather than a conversation and care facilitator. Finally, the leader is expected to fully participate in the change process, modeling how to share openly what hearing from God looks like and how to sustain the effort in the struggle of transformation. The leader must be aware of the fact that people (and therefore small groups) have a tendency to revert to shallow sharing and to behaviour modification. The purpose of the Life Change Group is spiritual formation, hence the leader must be very sensitive to the fact that the group members will be uncomfortable with real change and will tend to pull the group to the comfort zone of the "from stage" where no real change can take place (see Figure 4 for the From-Through-To diagram of the formation process).

Year 2 Overview

Logistics: The Life Change Group will meet every two weeks for a period of nine months. Early in the life of the group each participant will formulate a

formation plan akin to a rule of life that will create space for God for the duration of the nine months.

Participants: The Life Change Group is for motivated individuals who desire more of Christ and have counted the cost of commitment this group expects. They are prepared for transformation that calls to a death to self for the sake of the abundant life in Christ. Each group will consist of 3-5, ideally same gender participants plus the leader. The leader is expected to take part in the formation process, not only to guide it in others.

Meeting format: the meeting format is meant to be flexible; hence the following are guidelines which the leader may adjust based on the need of the group.

- a. Opening prayer time,
- b. Discussion of assigned reading,
- c. Bible reading in the *lectio divina*, gospel imagination, or similar format,
- d. Discussion on how the passage speaks to each participant's "one thing,"
- e. Specific discussion on how God has spoken to each individual re their "one thing" over the past two weeks, especially in their practice of spiritual disciplines,
- f. Accountability regarding the degree to which the formation plan was adhered,

- g. Teaching and/or practice of the new spiritual discipline to be practiced in the coming two weeks,
- h. Bible reading/memorization for the next two weeks,
- i. Closing prayer.

Table 3 - Year 2 - Life Change Group - Overview

Month	Focus
1-2	Raising awareness of the Spirit’s activity in the believer’s life, learning to listen to God, moving to the identification of the “one thing” God may be putting his finger on to change. Focus will be the Sermon on the Mount along with the passages that speak to the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. Times of silence, listening to God, new discipline introduced each month to be practiced for the next month. Reflection and journaling of scripture, examen, practicing Sabbath, spiritual direction, retreat, devotional reading of Willard, <i>Divine Conspiracy</i> .
2	Paying attention to the character trait that the participants sense God desires to transform. Monitoring the circumstances, exact appearance, and underlying causes of the “one thing”, paying attention to inner feelings before, during and after the expression of the behaviour.
3	Reflecting on desires that stand in the way of transformation. During this time, the participants will decide whether they are truly ready to die to self in this area and whether they want Jesus more than the status quo.
4-5	Formation plan (temporary rule of life) that can be worked into the participants’ life schedule and which they commit to follow in order to give the Spirit space to transform the “one thing”.
6-7	Implementation phase – during this time the focus is on paying attention to the implementation of the formation plan. The plan may be re-evaluated and adjusted to ensure effectiveness and likelihood of implementation. The key attitudes are diligence and flexibility. Scripture readings, daily prayer times, and reading other spiritual writings continues during this stage.

Month	Focus
8-9	<p>Transformation monitoring – after months of paying attention and intent listening to God, there will be signs of transformation in the area of the one thing, and likely in other character traits as well. Some signs that genuine inner transformation, not just behaviour modification, is taking place are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Humility as lessened arrogance, self-confidence, quickness of speech, trust in self, having answers to life issues etc. b. Ease of obedience to Christ – a sign that one is growing in Christ-likeness is that they will find it less and less difficult to obey God in their “one thing” area. Choosing the path of holiness and Christ-likeness is easier, even feels “natural”. <p>Transformation is apparent when one does not have to try not be angry, rather one is simply not angry at the things that used to stir up anger; grace and patience are the more common response now. Sin and its destructive potential is seen clearly and quickly. The right path is accepted as the best path.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Compassion for others increases. Spiritual growth brings with it love and a desire to serve the unlovely. The heart easily breaks for those Jesus loves and continues to reach out to. d. Evangelism increases. A person alive in the kingdom of God, aware of the transforming and saving/delivering power of the Spirit will invite others to share in this life with confidence and certitude. The gospel will be real and powerful, and shared with others with passion.

Year 3 – Life on Mission

The definition of spiritual formation on page 149 states that God’s people are formed into the image of Christ so as to live in a posture of service to God and others. As pointed out in The Discipleship Crisis section on page 132, the early Church deeply influenced the culture of the day by serving the society around her. The third year of the *Three Years with Jesus* moves the Christ-follower from inner reflection and inner change in an outward orientation, toward a life devoted to the

reconciling work of God in the world. The third year curriculum creates various opportunities to make missional life an on-going way of life.

Rationale

The discussion in the section Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Mission above, already established that spiritual maturity is never for the sake of the maturing itself, but for the sake of God's mission. It has also been stated that disciples that move through the Deepening stage (Figure 5) are passionate servers, givers, and evangelists (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98). The third year of the model features preparation, participation, and follow-up spiritual care in a short-term mission experience away from home, in line with Jesus' model of discipleship which included a variety of short-term mission assignments for his followers. The aim of this final year of the model is to encourage the Investing and Blessing stage (Figure 5) by giving Christ's followers concrete opportunities for serving in the larger Kingdom of God.

Short-term mission experiences are fraught with controversy. Anecdotal accounts of positive impact of the experience on the participants are as plentiful as the critical arguments which point out the excessive cost, the self-serving nature, and ethnocentrism of short-term mission endeavours. Randy Friesen, the current Executive Director of MB Mission, the mission agency of Canadian and U.S. Mennonite Brethren, conducted an extensive study on the impact of short term missions as part of his PhD studies. The findings have been consolidated into an unpublished article owned by MB Mission which governs the short-term

mission philosophy for the MBs (Friesen 2016). Excerpts from the article are used herein by permission. In short, the question that the article answers is whether the short-term mission experience has a significant and lasting impact on the participants faith, attitudes, and behaviours, in other words, does it result in true inner change. Friesen's study based on 116 participants found that the short-term mission experience results in a notable increase in 20 out of 24 concepts measured (see Appendix C Effect of Short-Term Mission for a sample of the data). However, 20 out of 24 of the concepts measured in this study, also regressed to the pre-mission level or even below one year after the short-term mission experience, revealing a negative spiritual "crash." In Friesen's words "the level of regression in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours a year following the short-term mission experience was stunning" (Friesen 2016, 6). The study further showed that in order for the short-term mission experience to have a lasting, therefore true transformational effect, the following factors must be in place:

1. Support and engagement from the local church,
2. Intentional pre-trip training and preparation,
3. Intentional post-trip debrief and on-going discipling care and follow-up.

The third year of the *Three Years with Jesus* model incorporates, as its focus, a short-term mission trip in order to benefit from the gains such experience offers, while protecting against the negative effects by creating an intentional pre and post trip spiritual growth environment. The disciple will gain awareness of

belonging to a body, participating in a community that is larger than the small group and the congregation; forming relationships beyond one’s denomination or even one’s country, and having the opportunity to adopt a Kingdom perspective on life. Augmenting the mission experience will be a mentoring relationship offering accountability and spiritual companionship, along with deepened intercessory prayer training, training in praying the scriptures, and on-going practice of the spiritual disciplines acquired in the first two years of the model, as well as the assigned spiritual reading and journaling. The experience of withdrawal from one’s culture and comfort zone, along with the necessity of dependence of God and others, in an unfamiliar setting in close collaboration with others offer formation in the crucible of ministry akin to the experience of the first century church. Though the curriculum focus is on the growth impact to the goer, it is given that the mission experience will be designed to holistically benefit those on the receiving end.

Year 3 Overview

The table below outlines the curriculum resources and activities applied in the third year of the *3 Years with Jesus*.

Table 4 - Year 3 - Life on Mission - Overview

Month	Reading	Activity
1	Krallmann, <i>Mentoring for Mission</i>	Connect with a personal mentor
2	Mulholland, <i>The Deeper Journey</i>	Continue disciplines from Yr 2
3	Study of Biblical Models for Intercession	Day Retreat-Intercessory Prayer

Month	Reading	Activity
4	---	Short-term mission experience
5	Benner, <i>Surrender to Love</i>	Mission Debrief Plan to include mission in life on an on-going basis
6	As determined by personal need	Day Retreat – Intercessory Prayer On-going meeting with mentor
7	Benner, <i>The Joy of Being Yourself</i>	On-going meeting with mentor
8	As determined by personal need	Solo Silence & Solitude retreat Refine personal mission plan
9	As determined by personal need	Reflection on year 3 Prepare to lead Yr 1 of the model Other next steps

Foundational Principles

This section touches on foundational principles that are pre-requisites for the *Three Years with Jesus* model. Though these principles may seem as givens in any evangelical congregation, they are stated here, nevertheless, so as to avoid assumptions and to provide clarity on the kind of environment that is pre-requisite to spiritual formation in a congregation. The two principles discussed here are the need for leaders to actively engage in their own spiritual formation first. The leaders' formation then spills into formational rather than behaviour modification preaching, as well as facilitates a shift into a role that prioritizes spiritual guidance over management.

Leaders First

The old adage “you cannot take someone to where you haven’t been yourself” is particularly true of the path of spiritual formation. It is true that some aspects of the Christian faith and life can be taught theoretically. For instance, a

preacher may exegete scripture to speak about forgiveness, about generous giving, and about the need to trust in Christ, without fully living out these aspects of Christian living. Of course, the *more* theoretical the teaching, the *less* effective it will be regardless of the topic. However, teaching about the supernatural and somewhat mysterious process of inner transformation without having a first hand, ongoing and growing experience of it is akin to teaching someone how to downhill ski using a PowerPoint, in a classroom. The skill in the student will be as theoretical as it is in the teacher. Only when one experiences the icy wind on one's face and the burn in one's thigh as the skill and strength of the skier fights the force of gravity does one really know what it is to go down a hill on skis. Likewise, until one successfully experiences the powerful, yet gracious transforming work of the Holy Spirit which works against the human tendency to resist God, does one know what it is to be transformed in the inner person.

The teaching of spiritual disciplines and the understanding of their purpose, their power, and their appropriate application, likewise requires first hand and significant experience by the teacher. It has already been noted that most pastors/spiritual leaders have not made it far enough in the maturing process to qualify as guides to others in this process (see section title The Target Group, on page 160). Therefore, for those leaders who wish to contribute to the discipling of the church, their own "pursuit of Christlikeness is still the most intelligent most responsible and most effective use of one's leadership capacity" (Krallmann 2002, Kindle 106/3819).

Secondly, only leaders are able to create a climate in their church that fosters the spiritual formation of its members. Churches, including the MB churches of Canada, employ varying leadership structures and styles. Some function with a staff-led model, others prefer an elder led governance style. Some are more congregational in their decision making than others. Regardless of the governance structure, those who are functionally in the leadership role set the tone and create a climate that is either conducive or obstructive to spiritual formation. Only as the leaders are active in their personal growth can they expect growth in those they lead.

Otherwise, no matter what spiritual formation programs the church develops, or how much the leadership speaks words of encouragement regarding growth, spiritual formation will not become part of the DNA, part of the normal life of the church. Therefore, the leaders must visibly lead in the following areas:

a) Personal spiritual practices – as part of their role and performance appraisal have the expectation with built-in accountability for regular Bible reading, journaling, meeting with a spiritual director, pursuing times of silence, and intentional Sabbath keeping.

b) Participation in Spiritual Retreats – planned retreats several times each year consisting of teaching on an aspect of spiritual formation and a practice of a discipline, such as *lectio divina*, gospel imagination, centering prayer, praying the scriptures etc.

c) Devotional Readings – on-going readings of books regarding the deeper life with Christ.

d) Discernment as basis for direction – conducting all decision-making, whether personal or in meetings by the practice of spiritual discernment.

Transformational Preaching

Preaching forms a significant part of the formation climate in the local congregation. The preaching moment holds enormous capacity to, over time, influence the congregant's views of self, others and the world. Preaching, furthermore, slowly forms the image of God in the minds of the listeners along with the image of self. Finally, preaching paints a picture of the relationship between God and his people; it describes the basis for this relationship, the roles God and people hold in this relationship and the dynamics by which this relationship functions. In my personal experience and observation, the preacher's personal convictions, personal brokenness and dysfunction in his/her relationship with God inevitably seep into the messages. A preacher who deep down believes s/he is still earning God's approval will reveal this belief in the sermons, though s/he might not outright affirm it in plain words. Likewise a preacher who is dry in his relationship with God or whose own spiritual formation practices are not regular, varied, and life-giving will not be able to lead the congregation to the next steps in their own spiritual formation. A preacher who, on the other hand, enjoys a vibrant relationship with God and who is secure in God's love will likewise undergird his/her preaching with this security. Hence, the preacher's relationship with and image of God will shape the congregation's relationship and image of God. This is not to say that the preacher must be perfect, rather, that the

preacher's personal orientation to God, vibrancy of relationship, and personal experience of on-going formation will always come through in the preaching. While much could be (and has been) written on preaching styles, what follows is a brief distinction between preaching that is counter to spiritual formation and that which fosters inner change to Christ-likeness.

Behaviour Modification Preaching

Behaviour modification preaching focuses on the resolve and will of the individual to obey Christ. The emphasis is placed on the hearer to do the right thing. This style of preaching reminds the believer that grace does not assume inaction, that Christ-followers are called to action. The danger in this style of preaching is a subtext message of self-sufficiency and of works-righteousness, that is, a focus on outward appearance of godliness without inner reformation into Christ-likeness. Jesus terms people with such focus as white-washed tombs. Pressures of life in the form of even a small crisis easily reveal that Christ-likeness is not part of the inner nature. Behaviour modification preaching leads to the danger of hypocrisy, lack of authenticity, and legalism, which further leads to the inability to accept the authenticity of others.

Behaviour modification preaching urges that effort be applied directly to the offending behaviour, directing the believer to stop the wrong behaviour and start the right behaviour. For example, stop angry outbursts, start forgiving those who hurt you, stop greed, start generous giving, stop gossip, and start serving. Prayer, accountability and other disciplines may be offered as tools to help

accomplish change. The problem, however, is precisely with the fact that it is the congregants who are encouraged to accomplish the change. As was previously stated, spiritual formation cannot be accomplished by human effort. Behaviour modification preaching may actually lead to training Christians to be hearers, but not doers, of the word since they will learn what being Christ-like should look like for them, but not have the necessary resources to stop the wrong and start the right behaviour.

Formational Preaching

Formational preaching, on the other hand, assumes the struggle with sin, the hold of the false-self, and the human tendency to move away from God. Formational preaching affirms rather than hides or condemns these realities. Instead of suggesting application as steps to take to change, formational preaching offers application as steps toward confession and surrender, to the realization of the need for a Saviour, it guides the hearer to know *how* to invite Christ into the struggle and be empowered by his grace. In this way, formational preaching offers hope in the midst of reality that may appear hopeless. Richard Cox points out:

With scientific accuracy, technologies such as MRIs have shown how the brain responds favorably to information that offers hope, peace and tranquility...The human brain is constantly looking for integration, synthesis, pleasure and hope...Hope and healing are inseparable; where there is hope there is healing, and where there is healing, there is hope. (Cox 2012, 61, 129)

Hence, transformational preaching offers healing that is *received* and *embraced* by the hearer, rather than good standing with God that is *accomplished* by the hearer. Furthermore, though formational preaching constantly points out the

expectation for inner change, it makes clear the fact that this change is beyond the human ability to accomplish. Rather it encourages the hearer to apply effort indirectly, in areas of appropriate disciplines which create the environment in which God's grace can bring about the change which human effort cannot. Greg Ogden, in his spiritual formation model suggests that the role of preaching in spiritual formation is to "contribute significantly to the disciple-making environment in the life of a church" (Ogen 2016, 189). He goes on to argue that unless preaching is intentionally transformational it will not contribute to the maturing of the saints. This is largely due to the fact that listening to a sermon is often a passive experience, with rarely an opportunity to process how God spoke to the listener during the sermon, thus requiring little response from the listener (Ogden 2016, 187). Formational preaching therefore intentionally creates space for God to speak to the human condition of the hearers by means of asking questions throughout the sermon and leaving enough silence for the hearers to formulate an inner answer or to simply relish and savour God's presence. Formational preaching may also build in space for people to respond in the moment, either by allowing time of quiet reflection, or by offering prayer support afterwards.

In summary, the leaders' own formation facilitates the formation of the congregation through formational preaching, and the shift to a role that prioritizes spiritual shepherding over management. The spiritual disciplines of the leader become known and influential on the congregation. Practices such as daily interaction with God's Spirit over the pages of the Bible and authentic

participation in a Christian community further contribute to an environment conducive for Christian spiritual formation.

Conclusion

The Church was in the mind of Christ, the establishment of a new covenant people was his desire and intention (Matt 16:18). The Church is a mystery (Eph 5:32), it is Christ's body (Eph 5:23), and it is his bride (Rev 19:7). Christ loves the church, he is present with her and he empowers her for the great *Missio Dei*. The curriculum offered herein is offered with humility and love for God's people, in the hope of providing tools and means to enable the local church to be a place for growth and strength of the saints. The goal is create an environment where Christ's followers are intentionally guided into a deeper, more vibrant relationship with their Lord.

The world needs the light of Christ in these days perhaps more than ever. The more Christ-like God's people are, the brighter they shine, the more effectively they serve, and the more passionately they go into the broken world with the hope of the gospel. May all God's people be bright lights in the present darkness. May they all be filled with love, joy and peace, may they be confident and free witnesses of the abundant life that is in Christ.

This model reflects my own spiritual journey in that it honours my propensity to create teams to set out on an adventure together. The model offers a loose cohort style, with the same group of people journeying together for three years, which suits the MB setting by placing a high value on authentic and

supportive relationships. The three years, according to Jesus' example, provide adequate time to instill lasting change. The model honours the Great Commission, seeking both to make new disciples through mission and to deepen the existing disciples through modeling how to surrender to God to let him bring about the transformation into Christ-likeness. The model also reflects my own experience of discipleship – early in my conversion and also later as I navigated the Deepening stage of spiritual growth. I have intentionally located this work of formation inside the local church, where many mature believers find few opportunities for spiritual deepening. Finally, the model is strong on the clarification of one's identity, another key theme in my own spiritual development.

Some might perceive the curriculum as too intense, too much to ask of the average church goer. I do agree that it calls for a high level of commitment. In my experience, you get what you ask for. A path that is too easy not only yields minimal results, it is also easily abandoned. The next chapter explores the implementation of the first year's curriculum in my local church, where twenty individuals committed to the expectations outlined above. The results demonstrate the remarkable spiritual growth that can be realized with the careful application of this curriculum.

CHAPTER IV:
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH REPORT:
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A
FORMATION TOOL FOR MATURE
BELIEVERS IN THE
LOCAL CHURCH

This in-ministry action research report describes the positive impact of the process of writing a spiritual autobiography on the spiritual formation of mature believers, specifically on their improved relationship with self, others and God. This report also describes how to create an environment that is conducive to spiritual growth.

Existing, already discussed evidence and my personal experience indicate that church-based discipleship programs are often designed for new or growing believers and that mature believers are often spiritually under-challenged in their local church, having to find opportunities for spiritual deepening elsewhere.

Twenty adults participated in a nine-month guided process of writing a spiritual autobiography in a small group setting, sharing their written life stories with one another. Throughout the process, the participants were exposed to teachings on various aspects of spiritual growth and to experiences of new

spiritual disciplines such as retreat and spiritual direction. The gathered research data presented herein consists of my participant-observer notes over the course of the project, participant feedback throughout the process, an intake questionnaire, and results from a group interview at the conclusion of the process.

Background

This section begins with the identification of the problem which this research sought to address, along with a brief discussion of the devised solution. Definitions of key terms and matters of permission, and access to the research participants follow.

The Problem

As discussed in the spiritual formation model presented in Chapter III, in The Target Group section on page 160, Christ-followers progress through distinct stages of spiritual maturity. Figure 5 on page 161, lists the six spiritual growth stages identified by Hagberg and Guelich (2005). Spiritual growth for the new and growing Christ-follower is relatively simple to facilitate, and curricula and growth models for this group are plentiful. The challenge addressed by the model that supports this research, resides partly in the fact that many of Christ's followers never make it past the Growing or Productive Life stage, thus reducing the Gospel into a life of service and of trying harder to be good. The challenge addressed herein also resides in the fact that those Christ-followers who move through the Deepening stage into the Christ-centered life are often spiritually "under-challenged by the church" (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98), and must

often look for opportunities for on-going spiritual nurture outside their local congregation.

Yet, those who successfully navigate the Deepening stage to a life centered in Christ make for the most dedicated volunteers, the most generous givers, and the most enthusiastic evangelists. Hawkins and Parkinson in *Move*, the result of the Willow Creek study of over one thousand churches, describe such believers as: “Christ-Centered...Christ’s greatest workforce, over the heels in love with God, tithing, serving and evangelizing more than anyone else” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98). As such, this group is highly desirable and necessary for the on-going success of the work of the local church. Ministry to this group of Christ-followers enhances the health and capacity of the church.

Response

This research project therefore focused on the mature believers in the local church, by testing an aspect of a church-based spiritual formation curriculum which aims to invite mature Christ-followers into and through the Inner Journey stage, into a deepening of their life with God, and to the maturity of the Investing and Blessing stages. By means of a prolonged time (9 months) in intimate community (groups of no more than 7), and by means of carefully selected reading material, spiritual disciplines, and the writing and sharing of one’s life story, the research results, discussed in detail below, indicate that such deepening took place, resulting in formational shifts benefiting the participants and the church community to which they belong.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

This research project was carried out in the context of Glencairn Mennonite Brethren church, as part of the existing Life Tracks (discipleship) program. Permission to run this research at Glencairn was obtained from the board of elders. Supervision and accountability were to the Senior Pastor who took part in the research as one of the participants, and also to the elders' board by means of regular reporting and report of final summary of findings. The Tyndale Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved this project in accordance to its policies on August 31, 2016.

Access to participants was by means of said permission and an open invitation to the congregation in the Sunday bulletin and announcements.

Definition of Key Terms

The terminology used in this report relates to the progressive maturing of the Christ-follower, as it takes place through the process of inner transformation of the person toward and ever increasing similarity to the character of Christ. While various terms exist to refer to the Christian growth, the following terms are used herein as defined below.

Discipleship – the life-long process of being a student and an imitator of the life of Christ, as well as the process of leading others into following Christ.

Spiritual Autobiography – the story of one's life focused on formative circumstances, events, or people, which answer the question: "How did I become who I am," and which seeks to understand God's presence and purpose in the

formation process. Herein, also referred to as a spiritual memoir, life story, and life review.

Spiritual Formation – the ongoing and holistic work of the Triune God in a believer’s life, whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the character and actions of Jesus Christ. This change happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others (Pettit 2008, 19). See further discussion on spiritual formation in the section titled What is Spiritual Formation, starting on page 148 above.

Spiritual Maturity – the degree of formation into Christ-likeness.

Context

As one of the pastors of Glencairn church, I led this research project in the context of Glencairn’s church spiritual formation ministry. Glencairn Mennonite Brethren Church in Kitchener, Ontario is an active church and well connected to its Mennonite Brethren (MB) roots. The nature of MB spirituality is defined by a radical Christ-centeredness (see section titled The Mennonite Brethren, starting on page 138). It is a spirituality which is comfortable with being noticeably distinct from the surrounding society, strongly oriented to community, to social action, and to evangelistic mission. A call to a radical life for Jesus is typically welcomed and appreciated. In addition, the MB congregations have over the years, freely appropriated spiritual practices from other faith traditions (such as Pietists, Charismatics, etc.), while managing to maintain their essential Anabaptist DNA. My experience in the MB denomination indicates that the MBs are generally open

to even unfamiliar spiritual practices. The research project curriculum, therefore, confidently applied spiritual practices and disciplines which may not otherwise be readily associated with spiritual formation in an evangelical denomination.

My pastoral experience in this church has further shown an undercurrent of desire to go deeper in the Christian faith. Readiness to receive spiritual direction, to be trained in prayer, to adopt spiritual disciplines hitherto unknown, and the general interest to live vibrantly connected to God, were but few indicators that this context was suitable for this research project.

In addition, the mandate from the elders of the church to design a systematic means to spiritual growth of Glencairn's people aligned this project with the direction of the organization. Finally, Glencairn church has in 2012-2013 completed an extensive refocusing process which highlighted several developmental desires for the church community, one of which was a desire to be a church which encourages deep life with Christ.

My role as Pastor of Development at Glencairn includes the responsibility for spiritual nurture and growth of the congregants, thus this research fit into my normal ministry duties. My personal passion and experience in discipling others, including my training in spiritual direction and current studies in DMin in spiritual formation, fit well with the thrust of this research.

In the first two years of my DMin work, I completed my own spiritual autobiography as well as a spiritual formation model and curriculum developed with my local church and broader denomination in mind. This model, titled *Three Years with Jesus*, was embraced by Glencairn's leadership with the authorization

to go ahead and begin implementing the model. This implementation began early in 2016 with a plan to assess the effectiveness of the spiritual autobiography component by means of an Action Research Project.

Models and Other Course Material

This research project was born out of my previous work in the field of spiritual formation. As part of the DMin requirements, I studied the concept of a spiritual autobiography and constructed a curriculum for spiritual formation which incorporates the writing of a spiritual memoir as a key element. This section reviews the spiritual formation model detailed in Chapter III, as well as points to some background literature that was consulted in the formulation of this research project.

The Foundational Model

This research project was based on the spiritual formation model presented in Chapter III above. The model and its supporting curriculum focuses on mature followers of Christ, defined as those already close to Christ and ready to move beyond the Productive Life stage, likely at middle age or beyond (see section The Target Group on page 160). The model offers a three year intensive guidance through experiences and curriculum designed to encourage spiritual growth in mature believers. See Figure 6, for an overview of the model. The research focused on the testing out the first year of the model which is structured around the writing of a spiritual memoir. Section Year 1 – Life Overview Rationale, on page 168, offers a discussion of the existing work in the field of spiritual

autobiography and the anticipated value this process brings to one's spiritual formation.

In addition, I found my own experience of writing a spiritual autobiography as part of the DMin requirements profoundly valuable to my spiritual growth, self-understanding and emotional wholeness. My interest to lead others in the process of writing a spiritual autobiography stems out of this personal experience and conviction, supported by the available existing research and writing.

The first year of the *Three Years with Jesus* model on which this research project centered sought to capitalize on the apparent spiritual benefit of writing one's spiritual life story. In addition however, the model augments the memoir writing process with a wide variety of devotional readings, community experience, spiritual direction experience, retreats, and other spiritual practices so as to create ample space for God's transforming work in the lives of the participants. The anticipated result was that at the completion of the first year of the model, the participants would cease to see life as "a collection of pieces and parts that don't seem to fit together" (Reese and Loane 2012, 54) and rather would discover their own as well as the lives of others purposefully moved in a discernable direction, guided so by God.

Other Literature

The research material consulted for this research project falls into four categories. The largest category comprises of works that offer instruction on how

to write a spiritual autobiography and sources that offer instruction on how to guide others in this process. These works served primarily as resources for curriculum development. The curriculum guided the participants in the process of writing. As well, it delivered teaching elements designed to deepen their self-understanding and their spiritual life practices. Additional relevant resources which are not listed herein are various autobiographical works, such as Augustine's *Confessions*, which were part of the required reading for the research participants. Appendix D contains the curriculum along with all the resources that were utilized in the process.

The second category of resources consists of works which discuss the value of writing a spiritual autobiography and research already conducted in this field. These works serve as research background information and as material which helped synthesize the research findings. These works also offer some comparison data between other research and the findings of this project. These first two categories overlap in places as many authors speak to both the benefit of writing as well as to the methodology of writing.

The third and smaller category consists of works related to the topic of spiritual formation. However, the only ones listed are those that touch on elements of the curriculum that this research project employs. For example, this research project curriculum addresses early childhood development and attachment patterns, understanding of the role of memory in one's formation, understanding of false self and true self, as well as understanding of spiritual disciplines deemed helpful to the writing of a spiritual memoir. Therefore only texts which address

elements of spiritual formation relevant to this research project, and which were used in its planning are listed in Appendix E

Bibliography of Resources Utilized in the Planning of the Research Project.

The final and smallest category consists of works which explain research methodology, research practices, and research ethics. These were consulted to ensure a scientific approach to the research, the use of methods and terminology appropriate to the project, and to ensure the highest standard of ethics for research in a ministry setting.

While there were many other works consulted for increased proficiency in the field of writing a spiritual memoir and in the area of conducting research in ministry, the bibliography contained in Appendix E consists of works that bear directly on this research project. The noted works are arranged in the appendix according to the above listed categories.

Methodology and Methods

This section describes the participants who took part in the research, the exact time-frame of the research, and the scope to which this research aimed to limit itself. Details of data collection and the data analysis process also follow.

Field

As already stated in the Context section above, the context of the research was Glencairn MB Church in Kitchener, an evangelical church with a Sunday morning attendance, at the time of the study, of about 170 adults and about 80

children. The participant group was limited to adults over the age 45, who are confessed followers of Christ, connected in some way (members, adherents, occasional attenders) to the Glencairn church congregation. The age restriction was due to the fact that this study focused on mature believers with adequate life experience, who would be able to assess their life story over a longer period of time. Since the project involved considerable amounts of reading and writing, the participants also needed to be adequately literate (about a grade 10 reading and writing ability) in order to be capable of completing the assigned tasks. As the Glencairn congregation consists primarily of the middle class, this requirement was not seen as resulting in undue exclusion. It ought to be noted, however, that two potential participants who registered for the research did not actually begin the process. Hence they are not included in the results discussed herein. Both of these potential participants indicated the reason for dropping out as the busyness of life. For both of them, English was a second language, and it is likely that they would have struggled with the amount of reading and writing that was expected.

There were no other restrictions; both male and female participants of any ethnic or racial background were invited to participate. A total of 20 participants joined the study, which represents about 34% of the total adult church population and nearly 60% of the eligible adult population. Only 5 out of the 20 participants (25%) were male. All the male participants were married, three joined the research along with their spouses. Three of the female participants were single. Table 5 below shows a summary of the participants' age profile.

Table 5 – Participant Age Profile

Age	Number of Participants
45-55	7
56-65	3
66-75	8
Over 75	2
Total:	20

The youngest participant was 48 at the start of the study and the oldest was 79 at the start, and celebrated her eightieth birthday during the study. The average age of the participants was 62. Eight of the 20 participants were employed full or part time while part of the research. The participants joined the research project in response to an open invitation to the congregation, communicated through the normal communication channels of the church such as the bulletin and Sunday morning in-service announcements, and word of mouth encouragement from others. Four of the participants were not part of the Glencairn church community. They have been connected to me in the past through Bible studies and spiritual formation events, and heard about the research through personal communication with me. Since the Glencairn community at the time of the research had over 100 people who have been in the church less than two years, none of the participants expected to know everyone in the group. Hence these four participants nicely fit into their group and quickly formed close relationships with others.

The twenty participants who embarked on the process, all gave their verbal consent and understanding that they were participants in a research project (see Appendix F for content of the informed verbal consent). The informed verbal consent process was more appropriate than a formal written consent due to the

nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the conversational tone of the group gatherings. The verbal style of the consent also allowed for immediate response to questions and comments. My relationship to the participants was that of pastor and congregants, perhaps better stated as a relationship of trust in one with whom the participants have experienced spiritual guidance in the past, and whom they accepted as their spiritual authority from the outset of the process, and under whose guidance they were willing to commit to the duration and the rigor of the process. While the participants were fully aware of the fact that their participation in this group was part of a research project, they related to me primarily as their pastor and spiritual guide. Only rarely over the course of the 9 months did questions regarding the research come up. The influence of this relationship of trust on the outcomes of this research was one of the key factors contributing to the positive results reported by the participants. The details of the impact of this dynamic are discussed in the Interpretation section, starting on page 228.

Due to the large number of respondents, it became apparent in the first meeting that equal participation and intimate community would be difficult to realize in a group of 20. Therefore, at my request, the participants were divided into three smaller groups so as to facilitate a more intimate community. These smaller groups formed themselves based on scheduling convenience. The groups met on Wednesday afternoon, Wednesday evening, and Thursday evening, over two consecutive days. Each participant attended only one group meeting, though the groups were open to letting people switch groups in case of scheduling

conflicts. Therefore, on occasion, someone from the Wednesday afternoon group might have attended the Thursday evening group and so on. Such moving around between groups happened only occasionally during the summer months, because, for the most part, the participants preferred to attend their normal group. In addition, due to the challenges of a summer schedule, I offered a makeup group for anyone who was on vacation during the scheduled session week. This group met on a Wednesday evening the week following the normally scheduled sessions. The data showed no evidence that this movement negatively impacted the study. In fact, it provided further research data on the community dynamic, which is discussed in section titled Others on page 220, and it offered data comparison across groups shown in Appendix H. The scheduling flexibility likely also contributed to an usually high attendance record – average 95% attendance, only 8 absences out of a total possible 208 over the course of nine months.

I initially intended to limit the findings of this research to only one of the three groups, the Wednesday afternoon group, which consisted of seven participants and had the most consistent group makeup and attendance. However, each group desired to offer input and considered the opportunity to reflect on the experience in the exit interview to be a valuable part of the whole process. Hence, three group exit interviews were conducted and the data analyzed herein is based on all three interviews.

The research project spanned a period of 9 months, with meetings at the Glencairn church facility taking place about once per month, lasting about two hours each. In addition, the project included two day-long retreats at retreat

centers, one about one half-way through the project (July 2016) and the other toward the end of the project (October 2016). Appendix L lists the exact meeting dates and locations. One of the participants in the Wednesday afternoon group offered her home as a meeting place for reasons of comfort and transportation challenges, the group agreed and met at this participant's home for the remainder of the sessions.

Three participants dropped out of the study about half way through the process. One due to a flare up of cancer, the other due to personal matters, which necessitated sick leave from work. The third participant was a spouse to one of these. He withdrew from the study in order to provide adequate care for his spouse. These participants were not part of the exit interview process, though their feedback while part of the study and discussion regarding the reasons for dropping out are part of the field notes data.

Scope

While the existing literature and the researcher's personal experience indicate a long potential list of benefits to writing a spiritual autobiography, this research chose to restrict the scope of inquiry, to the below listed anticipated benefits. This list was included in the research proposal as:

1. Increased sense of *integration of life experience*, indicated by terms such as connecting the dots, making sense of the life journey, coherence, etc.;

2. Increased level of *self-acceptance*, indicated by terms which point to the acceptance of the whole of the life experience, such as coming to terms, forgiving self, understanding one's choices, etc.;
3. Perception of increased *sense of God's presence* over the course of the writer's life, indicated by terms which speak to a sense of understanding of the purpose of the various formative factors, and the contribution each made to the overall formation of the person, new perspective, seeing the course of one's life in a new light, increased sense of consciousness, discerning God's presence or providence in the events of life, etc.;
4. *General usefulness* the participants ascribe to this process as a tool in Glencairn's spiritual formation program as perceived in the assessment of the participants' own growth.

The collected data however revealed additional benefits as well as some risks. The results of the findings are discussed in section Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes starting on page 215.

Methodology

This project was a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, based on the principles of action research as defined by the Tyndale DMin program guidelines. The first defining feature of PAR relevant to this project is that the researcher also acts as a change agent, introducing intentional change into the ministry environment while observing the effects of the change. A second key

feature of a PAR relevant to this project is that the participants themselves contribute to the shaping of the details of the process which is being observed. Details of the characteristics of Participatory Action Research are contained in the Research Methods lectures (Chapman 2016, Aug 18, 2016 Lecture).

This project conformed to the design of a case study, defined by Saldana as “focused in-depth study and analysis of a unit of one – one person, one group, one organization, one event” (Saldana 2013, 269). Creswell, in addition, suggests that the case study can be viewed as “a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research...as well as a product of the inquiry” (Creswell 2007, 73). This project aligned with these definitions as it explored a bounded system (one group) over time. The case study design lends itself to in-depth data collection which involves multiple sources of information such as field observation records, interview transcripts, as well as document or other artifacts (Creswell 2007, 75). Appendix J contains a summary of the detailed phases and timetables of the research project.

Data Collection

The data collected as part of this research project aligned with the data collection practices suitable for the case study method referenced in the Methodology section above. The data collected in this research project consisted of the following:

1. Intake survey – this survey sought to understand various aspects of the participants’ spiritual practices, view of God, view of self,

perception of emotional wholeness etc. This data also captured the gender and age of the participants.

2. Researcher Field Notes – the researcher made observations of the behavior and responses of the participants throughout the research project, with the aim to assess appropriateness of process, level of enthusiasm, emotional responses, group dynamic, the understanding and value the participants ascribe to the various elements of the process, etc.
3. Participant feedback – the researcher invited periodic informal reflection on the process from the participants, which addressed their comfort level with the process, the quality of their experience, the effect of the experience thus far, suggestions for going forward, etc. In addition, the participants at times provided unsolicited feedback to the researcher either verbally or via email. This feedback is included under the Field Notes category of data.
4. Exit interview – the researcher interviewed each of the three groups to more formally assess the value the participants placed on the factors listed in the Scope section above. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours and each was audiotaped in order to create a conversational atmosphere with which note-taking would interfere. The exit interviews make up 75% of the gathered data used for analysis for the anticipated outcomes of this study. Appendix I Thematic Proportionality of Data by Source shows the distribution

and proportionality of the data as collected from the four major sources. Appendix G

Concluding Interview Process and Questions contains the details of the exit interview process along with the planned questions. Sensing suggests that “open-ended and informal questions” (Sensing 2011, 86) are best suited to qualitative research. Hence the exit interview questions allowed for free-form, conversational reflection on the process in a way that did not lead the participants toward a pre-determined conclusion. The interview, therefore, opened with a “Grand Tour Question” (Sensing 2011, 86). To facilitate the desire to address the specific research question as identified in the Scope section above, the interview also posed a few “guided tour questions”, interpretive questions and opinion questions (Sensing 2011, 88) again with as little leading of the participants as possible.

All research data was kept electronically on the researcher’s password protected laptop, which is always in the researcher’s possession (i.e., it is not left in the church office). Any paper research materials will continue to be kept in a secure, locked location in the church facility. In addition, a few of the participants gave the researcher permission to make their sample spiritual autobiography excerpts public, by request from the researches, in order to demonstrate the quality of reflection and self-analysis by the participants, as well as evidence of the understanding of the formational effect of the described life event and God’s role in it. These samples of writing do not contribute to the collected data.

Data Analysis

Creswell suggests that the case study approach for Participation Action Research may utilize “a holistic analysis of the entire case or an embedded analysis of a specific aspect of the case” (Creswell 2007, 75). In addition, the methodology allows for the data analysis to be deductive, that is, looking for evidence of the anticipated effect, or inductive, that is allowing the themes to emerge out of the data. Though the goal of this project was to assess the usefulness of integrating the writing of a spiritual autobiography into a local church setting, the data was not analyzed deductively with this goal in mind. The coding of the data was entirely inductive. Only after the data was coded did I look for evidence for the elements noted in section the Scope section above. The coding process involved reading the Field Note and Exit Interview data repeatedly, looking for key words and themes. For example, any statement containing the word “affirmed” as referring to self, or the idea of being affirmed, for example “permission to be me” would be labeled by the code “affirmation of self.” There were initially 31 codes, or groupings of data. These groupings were then analyzed for common factors and were further grouped into five larger categories. After further analysis, some of the codes were found to be unnecessarily distinct for the purpose of this study. For example, I initially separated references to an “awareness” of God from references to an “experience” of God as reported by the participants during the course of the research project. However, as all experiences led to an awareness of God, and each instance of awareness of God was in fact an experience of God, the distinction became

unnecessary. For the purposes of this research, capturing a sense of God's presence, whether termed as awareness or experience, was sufficient. Therefore the data in these codes was collapsed into one grouping. Table 6 below lists the final data codes and categories as discussed in this report. The code number was assigned arbitrarily and therefore is not meant to imply any significance.

The project proposal indicated that I intended to invite some of the research participants to assist with the coding and interpretation of the data. The sheer amount of data, the challenge the data coding process presented, along with the time-line restrictions of this project proved to make such participation impossible. While it is likely that such analysis would facilitate further reflection and thus would have provided further benefit to those involved, in the end the data was coded and analyzed solely by the researcher. Data summary charts were, however, shared with the participants via email along with an invitation for questions and feedback which was received and addressed.

Table 6 – Data Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Key Words and Concepts
Self	S1. Increased self-awareness	Realized (about self), aha moments (about self), motives etc. Acceptance, authentic, coming to terms
	S2. Increased self-acceptance	Sense of closure, healing, painful events have less power
	S3. Sense of healing	Permission to be me
	S4. Sense of affirmation	
Others	O1. Community bonding	Desire to hear others' stories, increased trust
	O2. Acceptance of others	Non-judgmental, accepting
	O3. Honouring of others	Expressions of grace, careful treatment of others, patience
	O4. Influence of the group	Expression of encouragement, triggers to remember, positive peer pressure, encouragement to reflect deeper
	O5. Gratitude to those in the past	Expressions of gratitude, newly realized appreciation
God	G1. Increased Trust in God	God can be trusted God is good, expression of changed understanding of God
	G2. Shift in God image	Awareness of God or experience of God during the research process
	G3. Experience of God	New realization of God's presence in past events, God was there, God had a purpose
	G4. God's presence	
Life	L1. Integration	Connecting the dots, seeing a cohesive whole, all belongs, understanding how A led to B, embracing all of life
	L2. Purposefulness	Seeing purpose in life events, purposefulness in the progression of life events

Category	Code	Key Words and Concepts
Process	P1. Phenomenon	References to what happened in the process of writing or sharing
	P2. Setting	The role that the setting played in the process
	P3. Intimidating	References to intimidating moments or expectations
	P4. Struggle	Challenge with how to write, how to process difficult past event
	P5. Growth	Perceived movement in one's formation, perceived growth, acquiring new practice, new skill
	P6. Curriculum Challenge	Expressions on difficulty with keeping up with the assignments
	P7. Curriculum Content	Positive references to material offered as part of the curriculum
	P8. Suitability	Assessment of who is likely to benefit from writing an SA

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

This project involved minimal risk to the participants in the area of potentially harmful power dynamics and lack of anonymity. Though my role brings a formal power relationship between me and the participants, this risk was mitigated by the fact that all activities of this research project were conducted in groups. Based on my experience with the culture of Glencairn, it is likely that any inappropriate exertion of power would be recognized and immediately challenged by the rest of the group. The consent text clearly stated that participation in any elements of the study was voluntary, and I continually communicated the option to not participate in any element of the program that may feel uncomfortable to the participants. In addition, the participants were aware of the fact they were able

to appeal to either the Lead Pastor of the church or to a representative of the Tyndale Ethical Review Board in case of concerns with the conduct of the research. Finally, it was, in fact, the already established relationship of trust and the expectation that the researcher would offer spiritual guidance and enrichment to the participants, that was fundamental to the willingness of the participants to embark on a process of this length of time and this depth of commitment.

The risk associated with a lack of anonymity was likewise minimal, as the participants were familiar with the experience of a small group in which learning and personal sharing takes place. Glencairn's culture continually communicates confidentiality of the sharing and happenings in a small group. In addition, as the groups met and personal sharing took place I repeated the request to keep personal information confidential.

Finally, this research project contained an element of risk due to the fact that the participants would be encouraged to explore past, at times undoubtedly painful, life events. This risk potential was highlighted to the participants at the outset with the offer of one-on-one follow-up with the researcher or the Lead Pastor. In addition, all participants were encouraged to meet with a spiritual director for the duration of the project. As earlier stated, the research project was reviewed and approved by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board.

Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

This section of the research report contains first the details of the gathered data, followed by an in-depth discussion of the interpretation of meaning. The

discussion will follow the data categories as outlined in Table 6 above, that is, impact on a relationship with self, others, God, and an impact on the sense of life integration. The Process data category which describes the participants' experience of being part of the memoir writing process is also discussed herein. Each of these data categories is comprised of several elements (sub-categories) which will be discussed in order; however, particular attention is paid to impact on the elements listed in the Scope section above, which were:

1. an increased level of self-acceptance,
2. an increased sense of perception of God's presence in past life events, and
3. an increased sense of integration of life experience.

In addition, since the gathered data revealed notable findings in areas outside the original scope, these findings will also be explored in the discussion below. These findings are organized under the following sub-categories:

1. a perceived sense of healing,
2. the personal experience of God in the process,
3. a shift in the understanding of God,
4. the role of community in writing a spiritual autobiography, and
5. the contribution of the setting to the effectiveness of the process.

The findings section will conclude with my own reflection on the experience of being the conductor as well as an active participant in this research project along with a summary of outcome.

Findings

The first four categories of data as shown in Table 6 above (Self, Others, God, and Life Integration) all represent reports of impact on the participants' perception of and relationship with self, others, God, and a perception of the cohesiveness and purposefulness of their life experiences. The fourth category of Process differs from these three as it is a category of reflection on being part of this research process. This data captured the participants' description of the experience itself, that is, what it was like to be part of a group that wrote and shared spiritual memoirs, experienced community around this activity, worked through the prepared curriculum, experienced change and challenge as a result. The findings in the first four categories of impact will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the data in the Process category.

Figure 7 below, shows the relative volume of data collected in each of these five data categories. This information is shown for reference purposes only. The importance of the data is not necessarily reflected by the volume. Therefore, the discussion in the Interpretation section below considers the qualitative factors more so than the data volume. The Interpretations section also addresses the possible reasons for the volume of data collected in the Process category to be considerably larger than in the four impact categories.

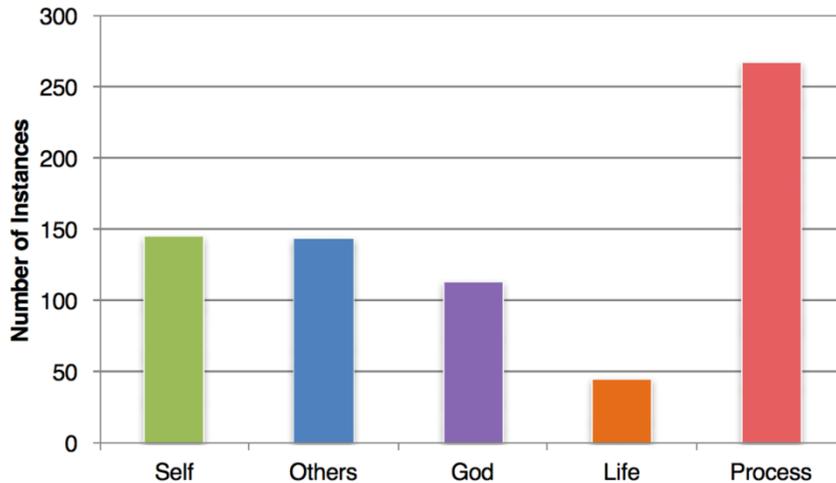


Figure 7 - Data Volume by Code Category

Self

The research observed the effects of writing a spiritual autobiography in a community setting on the participants’ sense of self-acceptance. Any references to shifts in self-perception or relationship to self by the participants were grouped into the Self category. These references, while all relating to a perception of or a relationship with self, were divided into four sub-categories (S1 through S4) as shown in Table 7. The data shows that in the Self category the perception of increased self-awareness (S1) received the most mention by the participants. This data consists of new realizations about the self, about personal motivation, realizations about deeply imbedded beliefs or fears, “aha moments,” and other references to a new self-understanding.

Table 7 – Data in the Self Category

Category	Sub-Category	No. of Occurrences
Self	S1. Increased self-awareness	49
	S2. Increased self-acceptance	31
	S3. Sense of healing	34
	S4. Sense of affirmation	<u>31</u>
	Total:	145 out of 776

Sub-categories S3 and S4 (sense of healing and sense of affirmation) evidence a desired positive outcome in a spiritual formation model. The sense of healing data group contains the second highest number of occurrences in the Self category, surpassed only by an increased sense of self-awareness. Data in the healing category consists of reports of closure, or a release from negative past experiences, for example: “Writing about rejection was therapeutic, there was releasing of guilt and releasing of that rejection...it is not with me anymore.” The sense of affirmation sub-category equals in data volume to the self-acceptance category. It is comprised of data that speaks to a sense of being affirmed as a person either by the group or as a result of writing a spiritual autobiography. Increased sense of self-acceptance (S2) received equal mention to affirmation (S4). The data in the S2 sub-category speaks of a new way of being authentic, accepting and embracing all of self, especially aspects of self that were previously hidden or rejected.

Figure 8 below, shows the data gathered in the category of Self along with a comparison to the God, Others, and Life Integration categories.

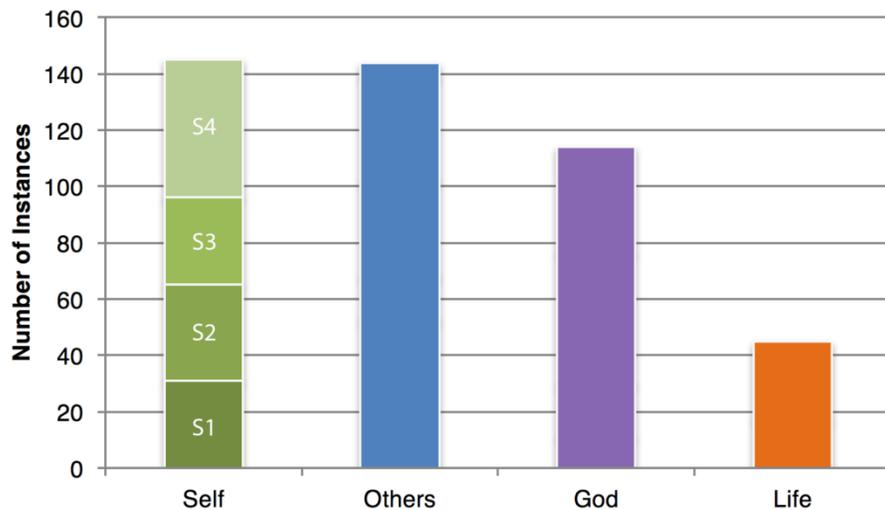


Figure 8 - Data in the Self Category

This data comparison shows that out of the four categories of impact, the participants referred most frequently to an impact on their perception of and relationship with self.

Others

Figure 9 below, shows that the second highest category of impact was the category of data which pointed to an effect on the relationship with others. This data category was an unexpected finding in the study, unanticipated in the research proposal. This data almost exclusively points to the relationships within the research groups, which for many of the participants offered an unprecedented and positive experience of community.

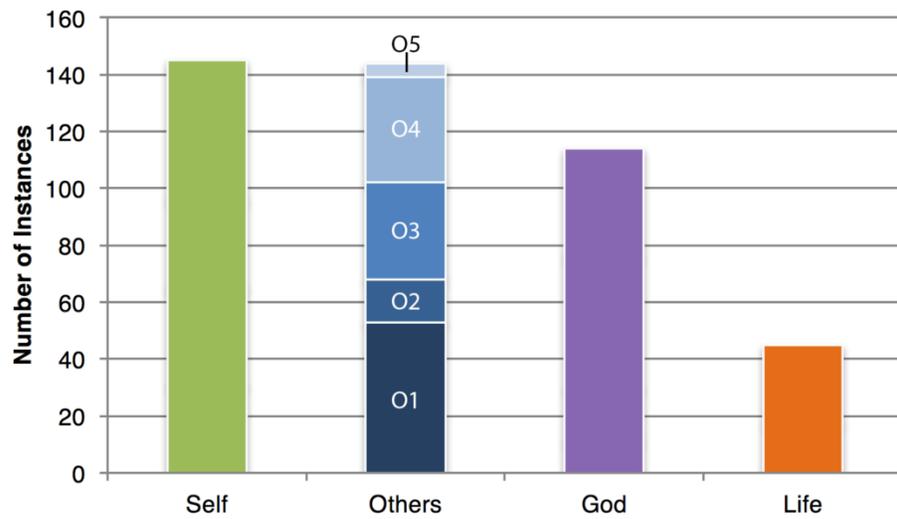


Figure 9 - Data in the Others Category

Table 8 below summarized the sub-categories which make up the Others category, along with the volume of data referring to each.

Table 8 – Data in the Others Category

Category	Sub-Category	No. of Occurrences
Others	O1. Community bonding	53
	O2. Acceptance of others	15
	O3. Honouring of others	34
	O4. Influence of the group	37
	O5. Gratitude to those in the past	<u>5</u>
	Total:	144 out of 776

The largest data sub-category (O1) speaks to the love and appreciation the participants quickly developed for one another. 100% of the participants reported, as a highlight of the process, the community experience, hearing the life stories of others in the group, as well as the support and bonding they felt in the group. Sub-category O2 contains references to the freedom to accept others in the group, but also a newly found willingness to accept others in general. This data speaks of an

acceptance of individual struggles, shortcomings and the particularities of the personal journey. Sub-category O3 is partly descriptive of the experience in which the participants felt honoured by others, often simply due to the time and attentiveness they received as others listened to their own readings. Sub-category O4 speaks to positive peer pressure, direct encouragement, at times a challenge by the group members to reflect deeper, or simply the perception of group expectation which led to deeper participation.

Gratitude to others in the past perhaps surprisingly received a negligible mention. I considered whether it would be more appropriate to absorb this sub-category into another grouping, however these mentions of gratitude were very specific in wording therefore though the sub-category is very small, it is nevertheless a distinct part of the data. The interpretation of these findings is discussed in section Relationship with Others below.

God

The research proposal anticipated that the process of writing one's spiritual memoir, augmented with practices designed to deepen one's awareness of God, would facilitate the participants' ability to perceive God's active presence in the past events of their life. Indeed, as Figure 10 shows, the category which captured data pertaining to the relationship between the participants and God comprises 114 occurrences, which is 25% of total occurrences in the four impact categories.

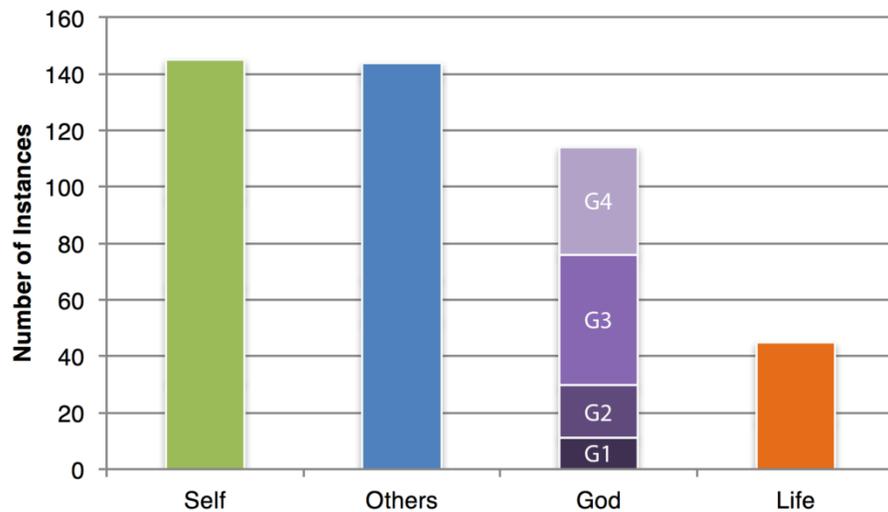


Figure 10 - Data in the God Category

The God category consists of four sub-categories shown in the following table.

Table 9 – Data in the God Category

Category	Sub-Category	No. of Occurrences
God	G1. Increased Trust in God	11
	G2. Shift in God image	19
	G3. Experience of God in the process	46
	G4. God’s presence in the past	<u>38</u>
	Total:	114 out of 776

Of the four sub-categories, the participants referred the most to the one that speaks to an experience of God or an awareness of God’s presence or guidance during the course of the research (G3). This data represents references to a sense of God’s leading, God “speaking,” an experience of God in prayer or gospel imagination exercises, etc. The second most mentioned sub-category (G4) is the one which speaks to expressions of new realizations, new understanding,

increased perception, or a deeper appreciation of God's presence in the past life events. The participants frequently and quite naturally expressed this newly acquired sense that God was not only present, but actively involved in the decisions, changes in life direction, and in the provision as perceived in hindsight. Perhaps the most profound of these realizations were those connected to God's sovereign and purposeful presence in the experience of suffering.

Sub-category G3, shift in God image, speaks to a change in the participants' understanding of the character of God or ways of God, shifts in perception of how God relates to his creation, and an increased love for God. The shifts in God image uniformly speak of a more positive view of God, a more generous view of God, and a resulting increased desire for intimacy with God. The specific data grouping which reports an increase in trust in God (G1) is closely related to the God-image data.

Life Integration

The research proposal anticipated an increased sense of integration of life experiences (see Scope). Figure 11 shows the data volume for this category was the lowest of the four impact categories. However, the impact in this category was unmistakable. See discussion in the section titled Life Integration, starting on page 253.

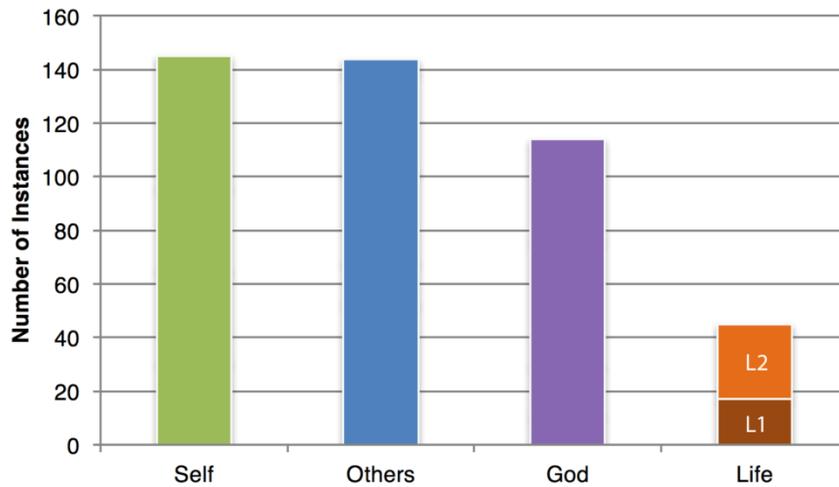


Figure 11 - Data in the Life Integration Category

The Life Integration category is made up of two distinct sets of data as show in the table below.

Table 10 – Data in the Life Integration Category

Category	Code	No. of Occurrences
Life	L1. Integration	17
	L2. Purposefulness	<u>28</u>
	Total:	45 out of 776

The L1 data set speaks of increased sense of life cohesiveness, the new realization of logical connections, and a new clarity of how A led to B. The L2 sub-category speaks of a new realization of purposefulness to all past life events, along with an increased sense of purpose to previous considered insignificant or negative events, along with a new ability to accept or embrace of all of life.

The Process

The sheer amount of data collected in the Process category (Figure 12) speaks to the structure of the exit interview structure, which began with a general invitation to reflect on the experience of writing a spiritual autobiography. However, the themes that emerged in this data are very helpful in understanding the reasons behind the positive impact of the experience. See section titled Experience of the Process below, for a detailed discussion of the implications of these findings.

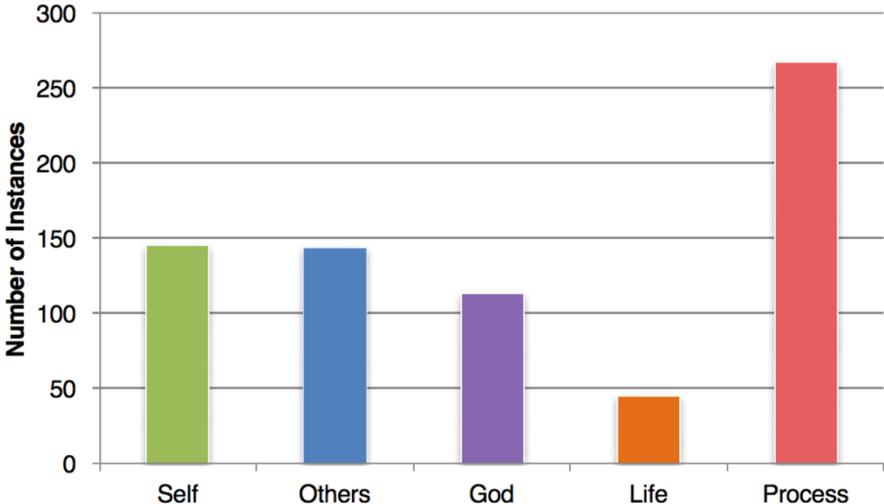


Figure 12 – Data Volume by Code Category

The data in this category, though varied, all describes the way the participants perceived the experience of being part of this research project. Table 11 below, shows the eight sub-categories and their respective contribution to the overall Process data volume.

Table 11 – Data in the Process Category

Category	Code	No. of Occurrences
Process	P1. Phenomenon	40
	P2. Setting	40
	P3. Intimidating	3
	P4. Struggle	7
	P5. Growth	77
	P6. Curriculum Challenge	22
	P7. Curriculum Content	51
	P8. Suitability	<u>28</u>
	Total:	268 out of 776

The Growth sub-category (P5) contains the greatest volume of data. This data group speaks to perceived personal growth as a result of being part of the study or while being part of the study. This growth included a sense of increased inner strength, stronger faith, a movement toward God, a transformation of an aspect of the self, and the acquisition of a new spiritual practice, or skill, such as a new way to pray. The P7 grouping which contains the second most data speaks to the participant’s comments on the content of the curriculum. This data contains positive references of appreciation and value. Participants expressed that the new material brought important content that enriched the groups’ understanding of spiritual formation, and facilitated deeper reflection. The comments regarding the curriculum difficulty, or challenge, were captured by the P6 data grouping. These comments primarily speak to the high demand on time necessary to accomplish the assigned readings and writings, along with a few mentions of reading that was too difficult (such as Augustine’s *Confessions*), or needed more time to grasp (such as the role of desires in spiritual formation). There were four data instances

in the P4 category which captured instances of struggle with knowing how to proceed (lacking the necessary skill), or an inner struggle with the willingness to write about difficult memories. This difficulty was not related to the curriculum, rather it represented a challenge with the skill or willingness to write reflectively about one's life.

Additional three data instances in the P3 grouping speak of aspects of the process feeling intimidating, due to a risk of vulnerability or personal exposure. The sub-category of P1 and P2 are of particular interest as they point to two unexpected findings. The first was the experienced phenomenon in the writing process. That is the phenomenon the participants experienced as they put pen to paper and started to write, or as they read their story out loud to the group. The second (P2) contains an equal volume of data regarding the importance of the setting, or the contribution of the environment to the overall experience. The Setting data contains references to the tone of the group gatherings, to the pace, the modeling of interactions, the style of listening, the structure of the time together, and the safety. All of these created an atmosphere consistently noticed and mentioned by the participants. Finally, sub category P8 captures descriptions of the kinds of people the participants deemed would be most suited or would most benefit from this kind of a process.

Interpretation

What follows is a discussion of the data, with a focus on the meaning and importance of the findings. While it is my intent to consider the collected data

objectively, as a participant observer I approach this section with a bias that comes out of my close relationship with the research participants, out of my desire for their on-going spiritual formation, and out of the background data that I acquired as part of the experience of this research. As this research project delved into such intensely personal matters, much of the interpretation necessitates the use of direct quotes from the participants in order to more precisely convey the answer to the research question: “What impact does writing a spiritual autobiography in a community context have on the spiritual formation of mature believers?” The discussion will follow the five data categories of relationship with self, others, and God, impact on the perception of life integration, and experience of the process.

Relationship with Self

As Figure 8 above points out, of the four impact categories, the participants mentioned impact on their relationship with, and their perception of, self the most. The spiritual formation model which forms a basis for this research acknowledges that self-awareness and self-acceptance are key indicators of spiritual maturity. Scazzero (2015, 25) identifies the lack of self-awareness as a key trait of emotionally unhealthy Christians, which is especially damaging when present in Christian leaders. The lack of self-awareness extends to “their feelings, their weaknesses and limits, how their past impacts their present, and how others experience them” (Scazzero 2015, 25). Michael Scanlan (1974, 51-52) speaks of six manifestations of deeply ingrained, attitudinal broken-heartedness. That is, the

sense that very center of love within is shattered, which makes the receiving of love and the giving of love impossible. These six symptoms are:

1. a judgmental spirit that is harsh and demanding on self and others,
2. a strong perfectionist attitude demanding the impossible from self and others,
3. a strong pattern of fearing future events,
4. a sense of aloneness and abandonment especially in times of decision,
5. a preoccupation with one's own guilt, and
6. a compulsive reaction to compete for position or success.

(Scanlan 1974, 51-52)

Payne suggests that the overarching issue behind each of these patterns is the inability to accept oneself and that every one of these symptoms points to the lack of self-acceptance in one's life (Payne 1991, 27). Payne adds that the inability to accept oneself prevents us from moving on "to emotional and psychological freedom" (Payne 1991, 27). Furthermore, the lack of self-acceptance is, in fact, a barrier which hinders the believer's ability to respond in obedience to Christ's commands. Romans 15:7 commands Christ followers to "accept one another as Christ also accepted us." Trobisch suggests that the ability to accept others as they are, depends on our own self-acceptance. The less I, as a Christ-follower, am able to say yes to my gifts, my limits, my family and financial situation, to my past and to the whole of who I am, the less I will be able to say yes to the whole of anyone else (Trobisch 1986, 48). Quoting the psychologist Groeger, he adds:

...there is in man no inborn self-love. Self-love is either acquired or it is non-existent. The one who does not acquire it or who acquires it insufficiently either is not able to love others at all or is able to love them only insufficiently. The same would be true for such a person also in his relationship with God. (Groeger in Trobisch 1986, 49)

Therefore, in order to love one's neighbour (Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39), one must first acquire adequate self-love and self-acceptance; and to truly love God, one must first receive his transforming love for the self.

The research data indicates that, in this particular group, the process of writing a spiritual autobiography, especially in a community setting, resulted in a notable experience of healing, along with a notable impact on one's self knowledge, self-acceptance, and one's sense of affirmation. The data sub-categories contained in the Self category are all closely interrelated. While an experience of affirmation does not necessarily lead to greater self-acceptance, the connection between the two is intuitively expected and psychologically argued (Payne 1991, 38-48). Self-awareness, the sub-category with the highest data points, is in fact a pre-requisite for self-acceptance. A sense of affirmation further contributes to self-acceptance. Healing of past wounds, guilt or shame likewise facilitates self-acceptance. Hence, the sub-categories point to factors that are interlinked, because as a person increases in self-knowledge and with it the willingness to live out of the true self.

The expectation that exploring one's life, as this research encouraged, *always* necessitates such results is not however in order. The totality of the data indicates that the increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, the sense of healing and affirmation resulted from the process as a whole, which included a certain setting (see section on Experience of the Process below), a caring community involvement, an intentional curriculum, and spiritual resources to direct the reflection. One participant commented that this process led to more self-

understanding, self-acceptance and healing than many years of therapy. I attribute the difference to the fact that this process modelled and expected a very purposeful approach to reflecting on one's life. The point was not simply to write about all that happened in the past. Rather, the assignment was to look for formative influences and reflect on these in such a way, so as to understand their influence at the time, as well as their on-going effect on the person. At times, such understanding was brought into consciousness for the first time. Another participant reflected on the purposeful approach to exploring one's life story as follows:

I have often been challenged by people to write about my life and it just...it just looks black to me and overwhelming and just not something... I did try once [writing a life story] and...I just couldn't do it... I needed it to be more than just rehearsing the past and running my fingers through all the baggage. And this is the first time I haven't felt that in my writing.

The impact on self also included data that spoke to a perception of healing from past wounds or shame. My observations lead me to conclude that this sense of healing was partly realized through the experience of the setting (discussed below) and partly due to the fact that painful or shameful episodes in life were opened up, analyzed through the process of writing, and relived in the presence of a sympathetic community. Plass and Cofield assert that this is precisely the way one can reprogram the effect of painful memories:

The act of telling our story to someone who listens well is one of the ways by which our relational blueprint becomes more enduring and available to us. In sharing our story our implicit memory is recalibrated and changed. An empathic listener helps us access and expand our understanding of our emotions and thus our conscious identity. The relationship with a listener becomes a new way of connecting and understanding old patterns. The

listener gives us a healthy emotional response that we will unconsciously begin to mimic. (Plass and Cofield 2014, 52)

Though in this instance the process yielded largely positive results, the data also revealed a potential risk of emotional or mental trauma brought on by sifting through painful life experiences. There were two out of a total of 776 data instances that pointed to this risk. Such possibility was identified in the research proposal, highlighted to the participants at the outset along with instructions to begin meeting with a spiritual director for the duration of the process, and to access the Glencairn pastoral team for help if the risk is realized. None of the participants reported experiencing trauma during the process. To the contrary, the data contains 34 references to healing. One participant observed: “this group was very important to me, it brought about much healing, courage to open up painful moments and to find peace that I didn’t have before.” Another likewise expressed the opportunity to explore the painful past as welcomed and helpful:

For me, it was a healing process for me...I just couldn't go back to my past because, I have been struggling with so much adversity and I just... I needed this...in order to open up and share my past and deal with it.

One participant even experienced a positive physical benefit, which was expressed as follows: “Since I started writing my life story my blood pressure has decreased. As a therapist I know the cause and effect.” Birren and Deutchman (1991, 3) point out the therapeutic role of a guided autobiography group, not as formal therapy, but as having therapeutic value nevertheless. Just as exercise, friendships, gardening, and playing a musical instrument have “healing powers” so writing an autobiography in a group has “healing powers” (Birren and

Deutchman 1991, 3). Their work in leading guided autobiography groups for older adults report healing benefits such as:

...sense of increased personal power and importance, recognition of past adaptive strategies and application to current needs and problems, reconciliation with the past and resolution of past resentments and negative feelings, resurgence of interest in past activities or hobbies, development of friendships with other group members. (Birren and Deutchman 1991, 4)

Another key factor to self-acceptance is the experience of being affirmed as a person. 31 data instances speak to the participants' sense of affirmation which was offered, not for what they accomplished or productively contributed to the society, but simply for who they are. In the first three sessions, the participants read and analyzed the spiritual autobiographies of Augustine, C.S. Lewis, Bunyan and other more contemporary writers (see Appendix D for curriculum details). In preparation for the fourth session, the participants were given the template shown in Appendix K to aid them in the writing of the first story from their own life. In the fourth session, the participants were invited to read an excerpt from their own autobiographical writing. About one hour of each subsequent group meeting was dedicated to listening and responding to the newly written life stories. This exercise was reported as a highlight by 100% of the participants. The community experience this kind of reading created is discussed in section titled Relationship with Others below but it was this practice that also contributed to the sense of affirmation. Each reading was followed by a moment of silence during which all were instructed to reflect on what they heard, to focus on the person who just shared a piece of their life with them and then to respond either with a follow-up

question or a word of affirmation without turning the conversation to someone or something else. One participant, who is a deep introvert, enthusiastically reflected on the value of being heard in this way:

...space to be heard and honoured - that's true ...you don't really get that captive audience and there's something very, something really special about of having that captive audience like nobody's in a hurry, no one's on their phone, no one is watching TV...I was humbled, like there's still a word that is escaping me ...honor? Yes I'm honored that someone would let me spend these minutes talking about myself and these small details, ...little incidents that you know who else would care about that? ...and I don't have to pay anyone ... a counselor who is watching the clock ...so yes...that's very novel...for me as a quieter person who in a chaotic situation I probably wouldn't bother even starting my story, knowing nobody would probably...hear it out and I would be cut off anyway...so it was an opportunity, a safe place to just talk about myself, which is not my natural way to be in public or even just like socially, culturally.

Secondly, the sense of affirmation came simply out of the opportunity to participate in a spiritual formation program designed for mature adults. This comment was made by a participant in the oldest age category:

I think the way we ignore this older generation, and my church has made it clear we are about seekers, so some of us older people had to be very graceful and loving to even stay in our church and find a niche to serve. Writing this really helped me to get a new handle on growing old, seeing that I could. ...Writing all this and seeing the Lord's hand in my life gave me that encouragement and confidence that I'm still of some value.

Finally, the sense of value of each person came out of the many readings which comprised the curriculum. One participant reflected on a reading which led to a new appreciation for the value of all people due to the subtle influence we have on one another, of which we are usually unaware: "I never thought of it that way but we all have influence on each other."

In summary, the data offers strong evidence to support the claim that the process successfully facilitated a positive shift in the participants' view of self and relationship to self. There was a notable exception in the group, however. One participant, I will refer to her as Kathy (not her real name), reported minimal impact in the relationship with Self category and in the relationship with God category. Kathy explained that she had no need to process life in this way, since that has been her habit all along. In addition, she habitually responds to God in obedience in the moment, that is, as soon as she feels conviction for sin she repents and if necessary makes reparations. Kathy felt that these two factors facilitated living a life which did not leave anything buried and in need of later reflection. The group patiently attempted to explain the difference between obedience and healing that comes from purposeful reflection, but without success. Kathy was also experiencing unusual life circumstances, which kept her from completing most of the assigned readings and writing. She did not begin writing her spiritual autobiography until late in the process and her writing style did not follow the given guidelines, in that it contained minimal reflection on the formative impact of the events about which she chose to write. Kathy reported an impact in the Others category, in that she felt a new appreciation and patience for others. Likewise she reported an impact in the Life Integration category, as she expressed a value in seeing a new connectedness of her life events. However, she was not able to report a shift in her self-acceptance, self-awareness, affirmation, or healing. Although there were others, who, on occasion, confessed that they had not completed all the readings, or that they only wrote a little between sessions,

all other participants expended at least some effort in applying the curriculum. My assessment is that Kathy gained the benefit related to the community experience (discussed in Relationship with Others below), but not in the area of increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance, since the process of writing and reflection is a necessary component toward this benefit.

As mentioned earlier, all four sub-categories within the impact on Self data category are closely related. This data category is made up of 145 data occurrences (32% of total impact categories). Each is represented with statements such as those quoted above, which reveal the perception of transformative impact on self-understanding and self-acceptance. The final combined effect resulted in a more gracious view of self, more love and appreciation for the self, which led to a new freedom to be authentic. One participant expressed this reality with these words: “I guess I feel I have a bit more permission to be who I am, which is big. I have been kind of apologizing all my life [for who I am].” Hence, many of the previously cited benefits of writing a spiritual autobiography, as they impact the self, that have been observed in the referenced literature, have been realized by this group.

Relationship with Others

The second largest volume of data comprised of references which spoke to the authentic and supportive community experienced in the groups. This category contains 141 references (31% of total impact categories) to the bonding experienced in the groups, the vulnerability and trust evidenced in the deeply

personal sharing, the value the participants placed on being able to share their stories with others and to hear others read, the grace and honour the community offered each participant, and the positive peer pressure experienced in the groups. The appreciation for the community experience was so overwhelming in the data and so readily observable in the groups that it is worth considering the key ingredients that contributed to the formation of such authentic and caring community. These key factors are: a shared desire for Christian spiritual formation, life maturity, the modeling of authentic sharing by the leader, clearly stated rules of engagement in the group, and a common quest. Following is a discussion of each of these factors.

The participants joined the research group with the anticipation of being spiritually challenged to growth in Christ-likeness. The in-take questionnaire data indicates that the participants already enjoyed a vibrant prayer life, daily Bible reading habits, and enjoyed active participation and service in church life. Hence, this was a group of Christ-followers who were already intentional and conscientious about maintaining an intimate relationship with God. My introductory comments to the group, as well as on-going conduct in the group, clearly communicated that we were here to grow together and that Christ was at the center of our reading, writing, and all other group activities. Having Christ-likeness as the common goal and desire, contributed to the quick respect and comradery demonstrated in the group. Secondly, each participant brought to the group considerable life-experience, and it was soon apparent that each of us experienced our own version of loss, betrayal, failure, joy, success and sorrow.

Birren and Deutchman speak of the “Oh, that’s nothing” phenomenon (Birren & Deutchman 1991, 51) when sharing life stories with other mature adults. This phenomenon describes a moment of confession of shame or guilt, with the expectation of judgment, or at least shock on the part of the listeners. Among mature adults however, there are few life experiences that illicit shock. While the group members often wept when listening to stories of abuse, deep loss, or painful rejection, there were never any expressions of condemnation. Early in the process, I clearly stated what kinds of responses to the readings of personal accounts were appropriate. I modelled these responses until the groups demonstrated the capacity to respond in a thoughtful and affirming way. Each reading was followed by a moment of silence during which the others were encouraged to listen to God’s heart for the person who read and to share out of that listening rather than share a personal opinion or a similar personal experience. Hence, the group practiced sustained focus on the reader offering a word of encouragement or scripture, expressing how the reading impacted them, asking a follow-up question or commenting on the writing style of the reader. The silence after the reading was expressly appreciated by the participants and comments to that effect were captured under the Process/Setting data category. The silence created a sort of holy space, a moment to honour the life story that was just shared, to honour the courage to share, and to give God space to work in the hearts of everyone in the group. One participant commented: “The sharing has purpose. Talking about our past has purpose...and then you share it, it's like, it's like that sacred moment...you're sharing with another person - your life.”

In addition, I contribute the success in having authentic sharing to the early modeling by the leader. In the very first session, I read a short story from my own spiritual autobiography about having to walk all alone to the doctor's office, fevered with mumps at the age five. I invited questions and comments, along with guesses on how that experience might have formed a little girl. I then read my own reflection on that account and invited further analysis. The participants were able to observe how the sharing of a painful, and potentially shameful, part of my life could be opened up to others without any threat of diminishing me as a person, without any threat to the good opinion that others have of me, and without causing me emotional harm. Rather, I demonstrated how the understanding of the formational impact of that account helps me, today, to understand who I am, to understand the source of my strengths and weaknesses, and to be able to more intentionally invite Christ's redeeming love into these places. The community experience was true not only within the small groups, but also when all three groups gathered on the retreat days, where the participants were teamed up with those from other groups. One participant expressed amazement at the "openness that was in my [retreat] group, how freely and intimately and vulnerably people shared at the retreat...how different this experience is from the normal Life Group experience!"

The final ingredient was the sense of a common quest among the group. Unlike a typical small group which meets week after week mostly for the purpose of getting together, the participants in this study were true sojourners. They together embarked to try something new, something that was at times demanding,

at times difficult, at times exhilarating, and at other times frustrating. Without realizing it, they were on a mission together and they encouraged each other to keep going, sharing tips along the way on what was working for them, expressing confidence in those who felt discouraged, praising those who demonstrated commitment. This common quest formed a community that may be described by Turner's description of *communitas*, that is, a group formed around a rite of passage, often sacred in nature, which brings about a change in the members of the *communitas*, who while part of the process experience temporary separation and liminality from the wider community, but who eventually integrate back into normal society, always for the society's benefit (Turner 1969, 94-97). Such an experience of a common bond is often shared by those who experience significant victory or loss together, those who go on mission together, etc. As an observer, I did not realize this concept of a common quest until later in the process, as I observed the group members appreciate the depth of others, as I observed them pat each other on the back, pick up those who were straggling and arm-in-arm keep moving forward on the quest to understand how we each came to be who we are. As the writing journey went on, they interacted more as a band of brothers, than members of a typical small group.

In summary, the factors of a shared desire for Christian spiritual formation, life maturity, the modeling of authentic sharing by the leader, clearly stated rules of engagement in the groups, and a common quest contributed to an exceptionally positive community experience.

There was a slight exception to this sense of community in the Wednesday evening group. This group had the most inconsistent attendance, in that members from this group most often attended other groups. This was also the group from which two participants dropped out. One of the members of this group was not a regular attender of Glencairn. The other group members also felt the transient nature of their group, but they nevertheless felt a bond with one another. In fact, after the conclusion of the research project, chose to be in the same small group together to continue the newly forged friendship. The non-Glencairn person did not feel as great a sense of bonding with the group, yet it was this person who most strongly expressed an observed value of community building that this process would bring to a local church.

...you who attend the same church...for you hearing each other's stories...you get this insight into what God is doing in other people that are part of your church family, and so I think that really not only does it bring that church family together and strengthens it, but I think it teaches-upon you seeing God working through other people's lives...you are more apt to extend grace, you know. So it is it is a vehicle that I would imagine would really strengthen your church body. I feel like an outsider because I don't go here...but I know you did some story sharing in church and that's great idea, because I think that's a benefit that can definitely come out of this process that would not happen otherwise. When I think of, you know, people in my church - I don't know their inside stories, I just don't know. So there is a benefit to that.

In contrast to this one exception, each group had at least one non-regular Glencairn attender and each of those formed close bonds within their groups. One of the non-Glencairn participants, in fact, chose to make Glencairn her home church toward the end of the research project. Hence, the experience of this one person was not typical of the rest of the participants and could be attributed to

several personal factors such as unusual trauma in that person's life during the research process which made genuine bonding with others difficult, a more private personality type, and a less ideal group dynamic than was true in the other groups.

The second sub-category in the impact on Others is the increase of acceptance of others. While much of this is evident in the discussion above, this acceptance of others extended to those outside the group as well. One participant expressed this acceptance as increased patience for the seeming slow growth in others:

When I listen to others' stories it makes me realize that even in little things that happened that God is in it [tears]. And so when we are encouraging new believers and you know they falter, and you think, "Oh, I wish they would do more of this or whatever" then you think, "No, that's God's business, you know, I gotta release them, and they'll have a story, you know", and he brings people into our lives just like he's done in all of our lives to continue to grow us. So this has helped me see that.

As discussed in section on Relationship with Self on page 229, self-acceptance is a pre-requisite for the acceptance of others, both a necessary and desired quality in the body of Christ.

The fourth sub-category in the impact on relationship with others speaks to the positive peer pressure within the group. I have already touched on this observation above, under the discussion of the common quest phenomenon. There were 37 data instances which spoke to this positive peer pressure and three instances which expressed it as negative peer pressure described as discomfort with being exposed around a vulnerable issue, while feeling the expectation of the group for transparency:

I found this exercise intimidating actually; there are things that I have [pause] buried...is the right word, but I didn't want to go there again and I certainly didn't want to share that with anyone...you know to be in this group means that you're committing to be transparent and I didn't know how to balance that.

The same participant however also commented: “I enjoyed the stories, I didn't particularly want to read my stories but you know, it's the price of admission...” and later stated: “all through my life I've always wanted you to see me with a mask that [looked] good, but here you have to...if you want to be real, you have to share it all and that's the value of the group - is to be open.”

Though participation was always explained as voluntary, it is evident that this is not how, at least at times, the participants felt. The above quote also indicates that the peer pressure, although not always perceived as positive, contributed to greater openness and to deeper reflection, and could be viewed as contributing to the overall impact of the group. The vast majority however perceived the peer pressure as positive and encouraging:

I think listening to each one's stories as we've gone through these sessions has given, I know for me, it has given me the courage to look back and given me the courage to write and to speak the stories. So I think we give each other - I don't know - courage and permission - I think it is, yeah we give each other courage to speak about things that are hard.

There were two other benefit factors that came out of the community sharing process. One was a periodic “aha moment” which happened as part of the reading. That is, as a person read their story out loud, a new realization or a new understanding came. At times, this realization came out of the comments of the group, and at times immediately after the reading. For example, one participant read a story describing how she felt, when at age four, her brother told her she

was too small to carry a stool, and ordered her to set it down. As soon as she finished reading, with eyes wide open, she exclaimed: “I just had an insight! That stool incident started an on-going adversarial relationship with men in positions of authority – doctors [she was a nurse], pastors, my husband...all of them!” There are 40 data instances which speak to such phenomenon of realization in the process of writing or sharing. This data is captured under the Process/Phenomenon category P1 and is with further discussed in the Experience of the Process section below.

Gratitude to others in the past, perhaps surprisingly, received a negligible mention. Since the research data was primarily gathered in the exit interviews which reflected on the impact and the experience of being part of the research project, it is understandable that specific mention of others in the past would be in the minority. Such expressions of gratitude were, however, frequently present in the autobiographical writings where the participants processed life events and described the people who were part of these events. It is in these writings that the relationships with others from their past would be explored, and where further acceptance of others, expression of grace and forgiveness, as well as appreciation for the impact of others would be found. One of the participants decided to spend the months following the completion of his memoir to connect with the many people who had been instrumental in his formation.

Birren and Deutchman (1991, 54) identify a final benefit gained from writing a spiritual memoir in a group as the antidote to isolation which is a common experience for older adults. As children move out of the home, as

parents, friends or spouse dies, loss of intimate relationships becomes a frequent experience for mature adults. Writing and sharing one's life story in community fosters new "late-life relationships and confidant relationships" (Birren and Deutchman 1991, 54). Such formation of friendship was evident in the groups that were part of this research, as the group members began connecting outside of the group meetings, sharing health tips, recipes, and simply spending time together.

One participant wanted to join the research group but not participate in the community experience. She wanted to work through the curriculum on her own. I explained that I would be happy to give her curriculum, but that that the research included the experience of the whole process to which the community was key. She chose not to join. I suspect that in writing a spiritual memoir in isolation this person might have gained some benefit in the impact on Self category in increased self-awareness, but gain minimally in the increased sense of affirmation and not at all in the benefits that impact the relationship with others. Kathy demonstrated that one can realize a benefit in being part of this kind of a group even without much reflection and writing, but not without the community experience.

Finally, the impact on community as a result of this research is evident in two spin-off groups that started as the research groups were disbanded. One is a "reading group," that is, a group which is continuing to write their life story, meeting together once per month just to listen and to respond to what others have written. This is a group open to all who were in the research group. Second is a men's discipleship group, led by one of the men in the research group and

attended by the other men from the research group who have become quite close through the process. This group is open to other men from the wider church community.

In summary, the experience of writing a spiritual autobiography in a group experience such as was designed in this research project, led to a valuable community experience which benefited not only the group members for the duration of the group, but also others in their circles of influence on longer term basis.

Relationship with God

The third largest volume of data contained references relating to a perceived change in the participants' relationship with or understanding of God. 114 data instances (25% of the four total impact categories) make up this category. Of the four sub-categories in this data set, the largest is the one that speaks to an experience of God or an awareness of God's presence or guidance during the course of the research (see Table 9 above). This finding is understandable as the participants were exposed to various spiritual practices together (for example on retreat) and individually (for example meeting with a spiritual director). The retreats were particularly designed to facilitate an experience of God by means of silence, guided reflection, imaginative prayer, gospel imagination exercises, and more. The experience of, and movement toward, God was reported by majority of the participants, and none expressly reported a lack of such experience or movement. One illustration of this

experience is a gospel imagination exercise using Mark chapter 10, which the groups experienced together on retreat day. The text used in this exercise describes Jesus blessing the children. A number of the participants reported profound experiences with Jesus during this exercise. One previously underwent a similar exercise using this text. At that time she had seen herself as a rock in the field where Jesus held the children on his lap. She reported with amazement that this time she saw herself as a little girl on Jesus' lap and was able to whisper, "scared" into his ear. In the exit interview, all but one participant affirmed the value of the retreats in the overall curriculum. The one participant who did not, however, stated that the retreats provided a meaningful experience of connecting with God and others, but he felt this experience was not directly related to the skill of writing a spiritual autobiography. Others, however, considered the insights about self and God which they gained on the retreat day as key to further self-understanding and reflection. The same participant who felt the retreats were not a necessary component of the process expressed his new insight into his relationship with God in these words:

I think there's lots of other people like me who in the church community are doing great things in their own strength and not aware of the lack of their connection with God...and when you come here you have to figure that out.

Since the intent of the spiritual formation model, on which this research project was based, is to employ the writing of a spiritual memoir as a tool for the Christian spiritual formation to which an experience of God is essential, I would

continue employing the various spiritual practices, including the retreats, in future such groups.

The research proposal also anticipated a perception of increased sense of God's presence and insight into how God worked in the past events of the writer's life (see the Scope section). 38 data instances captured the participants' expressions of this newly acquired sense that God was not only present over the course of their life, but was actively involved in the decisions, changes of life direction, and in the provision as perceived in hind-sight. Perhaps the most profound kinds of these realizations were those connected to God's sovereign presence in the experience of suffering, even deep and prolonged type of suffering. The new awareness of the formative importance of the suffering resulted in a new found acceptance of the pain, perhaps even its necessity. The following comment illustrates the realization and the acceptance, even appreciation for the suffering: "I realize that I had to go through it, without this suffering I would have been a spoiled child, no good to anybody. I'm a better person for it." Dillon's research found that those who wrote a spiritual autobiography were "almost unanimously agreed (82%) that writing their story put them in touch with a dynamic and resonant force behind and within their lives that helped give their lives new meaning, coherence, and direction" (Dillon 2011, 147). In the case of this research, the participants identified this "dynamic and resonant force" in their lives as the gracious will and merciful providence of God. When listing benefits of being part of this group, one participant explained that "it is a method to do some unlocking and discovery of where God is working and has

been working in one's life." Another expressed with depth of emotion the fact that writing about her life not only helped her to see God's mercy and faithfulness in her own life, but also in the lives of others in the group who shared their stories:

You know, you can read scripture like in Lamentations, you know, you remember the bitterness and gall, and the wanderings and then it says, you know, I have hope, because of the Lord's mercy [tears]. You read that in the Bible but when you listen to the stories, then, that comes to life, you know, his faithfulness and his unfailing love that brings that to life, and then, you know, when it says in Corinthians about looking at the unseen not seen, I mean we lived it! And we didn't even see it back there. So this [process of writing and meeting together] helps us to see the unseen.

This increased sense of God's presence and insight into how God had worked in the writer's life is also expected by , ministries such as the Navigators, who offer a guide to writing one's spiritual autobiography in order to "examine your life in order to understand the ways in which God has been active there" (Peace 1998,

7). They claim the following two key outcomes of this process:

learn...how to notice the activity of God in your life and in the lives of those around you (the spiritual discipline of noticing), and how to share with others what God has been doing in your life and your responses to God's activity – the good, the bad, and the ugly! (Peace 1998, 7)

The findings make evident that participants in this research project also realized these benefits.

The new experiences of God during the research process, along with the new realization of God's presence over the course of the writer's life, naturally lead to a shift in how the participants understand and relate to God. Two sub-categories shown in Table 9 above, G2 (shift in God-image) and G1 (increased trust in God) capture the data pertaining to these shifts. Some of the participants who have not previously processed past suffering in the light of God's love

seemed to have felt uneasiness about reconciling suffering with a good, caring, powerful God. The reflection, however, led to an understanding of the valuable formative impact of the suffering along with God's mitigating or redeeming presence. One participant reflected that in writing she realized "how he [God] protected me from the rat poison, from all the things that happened in my life and how he protected me over and over and over again. To me that was like monumental to see how much God loves us that he saves us and protects us." Another participant realized that the credit for the fact that her life had "not gone off the rails" was not hers to claim. Rather she explained: "I thought I was making good choices, but really in hindsight I could have gone off the rails all kinds of times. God was the one who kept me on the [unseen] rails all along." Others expressed a sense of being "overwhelmed by God's generosity" toward them, or that God was indeed good despite the suffering in life: "I didn't have objections to the existence [of God] but merely to the caring, to being a loving God; that I think has changed." The data also revealed that the participants' view of God affected their view of themselves. One participant shared that she: "felt the joy of the Lord and the delight he feels over her, and is beginning to like herself."

Birren and Deutchman (1991, 1) speak of the value of a new perspective gained by the writers of spiritual autobiographies. The reality of a new perspective gained by looking at life from the perspective of the present and looking at life from the perspective of God was evident among the participants in this research. The following quote expresses the value of writing one's life story

from a new perspective – God’s perspective and retelling of the story to a caring community in this new light:

I liked reading my own story [to the group] because I felt actually like I was reading God's version of my life. I think that's what was one of the highlights for me...I really felt like I was seeing and hearing my own life in God's eyes ... So that's why I liked [reading] because it was comforting for me to hear it spoken in God's eyes... because it's another perspective that's different from my own, which is often not always healthy and positive and it's just one perspective... So each time I had this need to read it - not, not for other people but for myself. There is a real healing in reading my story out loud to someone and it felt like a safe place to do it.

This participant experienced perhaps the most profound shift in God-image which she explained to the group by means of a sketch reproduced in the figure below.

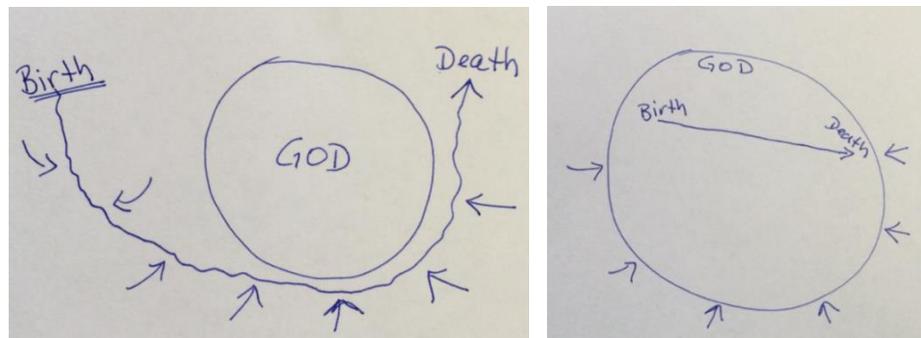


Figure 13 - God and My Life Before & After

The first image shows how she saw her life before writing her spiritual autobiography. Her life was the line that attempted to stay as close to God as possible as God was supposed to be the center of her life. The arrows represented the suffering that barraged her life and with each arrow she sought to find a way closer to God, for comfort, protection, understanding and healing.

The second image is how she sees God relative to her life now. She now sees God as encompassing all of life – she truly lives and breathes and has her

being within God. The arrows still come, but they are filtered by God and since she lives all of her life in him, they have less power and lesser, if any, negative consequence.

Such new perceptions of God contributed to an increased sense of being loved by God, an increased trust in God, which contributed to an increased desire for a vibrant relationship with God. One participant affirmed: “Writing has helped me resolve the trust issue. I know what I know - God is trustworthy.”

In summary, the data indicates a positive shift in the participant’s understanding of God, a heightened sensitivity to God’s Spirit, an improved image of God, an increased desire for God, and an increased trust in God. As the process of writing a spiritual memoir in this instance is part of a larger model of spiritual formation designed to stimulate spiritual growth in mature adults, the findings in this data category validate that the model is suitable for this purpose. As the experience was similar across the groups, it is likely that groups in other local church settings would experience the same benefits in the area of relationship to God. However, additional research is required to study cross-contextual application.

Life Integration

The research proposal anticipated an increased sense of integration of life experiences (see Scope section). In fact, based on previous research in this area, primarily the research conducted by Dillon (2011) as described in Chapter III, points to this sense of life integration as the greatest potential benefit of the

writing of a spiritual memoir. Figure 14 - Data in the Life Integration Category below, indicates that the participants in this research mentioned impact in this area, pointing to a new perspective, a new sense of purposefulness to their life direction, and a new sense of the whole, however, considerably less frequently than in the areas of relationship with self, others and God.

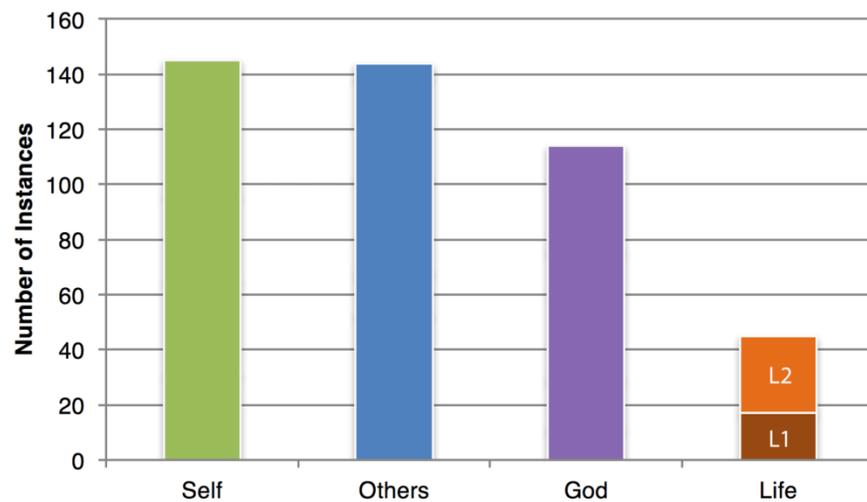


Figure 14 - Data in the Life Integration Category

Yet comments expressing new realizations of how pieces of life, previously thought to be insignificant or needlessly negative, formed crucial links in the chain were expressed throughout the duration of the research. Comments such as, “I did not see before how that was such an important experience in my life” were common but not always captured in the field notes. I attribute the reason for the relatively low frequency of mentions of impact on life integration to two reasons. The first is the fact that only one participant completed his spiritual autobiography by the last session. Since the participants wrote through their life in chronological order and much of the writing revolved around

childhood years, by the end of the research project most participants were writing about experiences in their 30s and 40s. Since most of the participants were in the late 50-70 age range, many have therefore reflected on only about half of their life at the time the final data was collected. It is understandable then that the sense of seeing all of life as an integrated whole could not have yet happened to the full extent possible. Certainly pieces were falling into place, but the whole of life had not been examined by the time the research ended. In fact, 100% of the participants reported an increased sense of life integration or purposefulness, a “belonging” of all the pieces of their life, though the participants referred to this outcome to a lesser degree relative to the impact on the relationship with self, others and God.

The second reason why the data volume in this category is considerably lower than the others, is that the concept of life integration is far more elusive, more difficult to grasp and to express than one’s perceived understating and relationship with self, others, and God. As was discussed in the section reporting the findings on the Self category, the high occurrence of data relating to self-acceptance is closely related to a sense of self-understanding and affirmation. However understanding of the self and acceptance of it comes as a result of understanding and accepting the shaping influences of life, the purpose for which God brought people, events and circumstances which formed the person and guided the direction of his/her life. It is possible therefore that the *effect* of increased life integration is actually captured in the data relating to self-

acceptance. The following quote is illustrative of this very close connection between life-integration and self-acceptance:

For me the value is that it's connected to a lot of dots...I could start to see the picture and it made sense, and it helped me understand that, you know, in my times of suffering I developed compassion, I developed strength, I developed my sense of who I am, and the gift that I have of being with people as a nurturer, and so it kind of all fit together in that, like, the really exciting thing for me is that God was there through it all so it just feels so much better. It's like God was making this puzzle and all the pieces fit together, affirmed of who I am and it all fits - that's a big value.

This comment shows that as the person “connected the dots”, understood the positive formative effect of her suffering, perceived God’s presence and purpose in it, she experienced healing “it just feels so much better,” and the end result was an affirmation of the big-hearted, passionate person she is. At the start of the research project, this participant saw her big-heartedness and depth of feeling as not always a desired character quality, leading to inner turmoil, at times conflict, at other times plunging her into despair. Coming to terms with the formational effect of her ethnic heritage and her life circumstances led to an acceptance of these qualities. Hence the above quote, though speaking more to the effect on the self, demonstrates that this effect was actually the result of increased life integration. Dillon argues that the process of writing a spiritual autobiography can be understood as a person’s attempt to bring a greater degree of consciousness to a “story that has been struggling to realize itself in one’s life over time” (Dillon 2011, 149). Though this research did not demonstrate this reality as the primary outcome, the experience of this increased ability to understand and accept the whole of one’s life was nevertheless profoundly present.

...before this I've looked back and looked at my life in pieces or sections, that weren't related and this has help me see a bigger picture the overall picture and connect the dots together to understand the purpose of my life till today and I feel like it's helped me, I understand myself.

Kathy, whose writing contained very little reflection on the formative effect of her life events, nevertheless illustrates that even without such reflection, the sheer process of putting the story together leads to a renewed appreciation of one's life as a whole, and as a *spiritual* whole:

I found it virtually impossible to look back and see this [an event in life] was a spiritual thing – I just didn't see anything in spiritual terms before I was converted. I saw my life in terms of promotions...But when you start looking back...you see what was really going on. Before I would say a story here and there, but I did not see the connecting flow. So I found it really helpful to for the first time in a lifetime to sit down, catalog and to take the random story here and there, but I didn't see...the way the pieces were fitting together....So what I have enjoyed and I'm still enjoying is that once you start getting into a theme it's sort of like layers of your brain open up and then you remember other things, you know what I mean, you remember the big thing you wrote and you go oh yeah, now that's the same as I that thing and I never saw that before.

Wakefield refers to this effort of making sense of *all* of one's life as highly valuable, suggesting that perhaps the spiritual autobiography is actually a "holistic autobiography":

...such autobiographical writings come from the deepest part of oneself, that attempts to see and make sense of one's life and experiences in the most complete and meaningful context. Such an endeavor tries to view life not in the separate compartments into which we so often separate our experience, like romantic, economic, professional, physical, mental, or emotional, but as a whole, and in relation to the whole of creation. Perhaps this manner of writing might also appropriately be called "holistic autobiography." (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 395/2821)

In summary, though the volume of data in the life-integration category is lower than in the other categories, the impact was nevertheless noteworthy and

reported by 100% of the participants. For some, the life-integration realization was profound, for others less so, but each experienced a positive change in this area. If the research sought to study only this benefit of writing a spiritual memoir, then the field observation and exit interview questions might be constructed in such a way as to gather data pertaining to this factor more intentionally.

Experience of the Process

The largest volume of data relates to responses offering descriptions of the experience of being part of this research group. 268 (35% of total) data instances touch on the eight topics grouped under the Process category (Figure 15). It is likely that the large amount of data related to the description of the experience was generated due to the style of the exit interview which opened with a general invitation to reflect on the experience of being of this research group (see Appendix G). It is also easier to describe an experience, than to assess its specific impact on the relationship with self, others, God and on one's sense of life integration. In addition, since the research took place over the course of nine months, the participants had the opportunity to incorporate the shifts in the four impact categories, hence by the time of the exit interview, the incremental changes that occurred in the inner person months ago would be more challenging to detect.

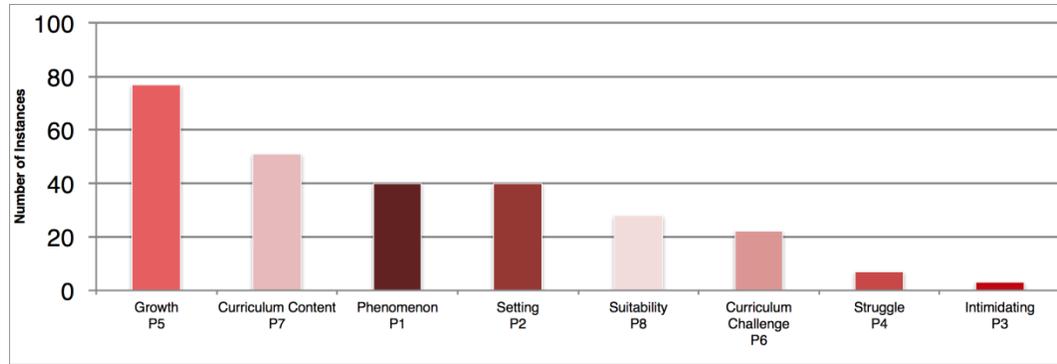


Figure 15 - Data Composition in the Process Category

The following discussion will address sub-category P1 (the phenomenon of writing and sharing), P6 & 7 (curriculum), and P5 (perceived growth). Sub-category P2 (setting) was already addressed above, as part of the discussion of the significance of impact on the Relationship with Others.

The Phenomenon of Writing and Sharing

As part of the startup kit, each participant was given a lined notebook for keeping meeting notes and for composing their life stories. The participants were instructed to write their spiritual memoirs first using pen and paper and then transcribe what they wrote into an electronic format. The benefits of writing with pen and paper, versus typing on a keyboard, are known to educators and therapists who employ them to increase the learner’s focus, for better information retention, as therapy for certain learning disabilities and for other benefits (Bounds 2010 and Gayomali 2015). It was the benefit of greater focus and better quality of writing that was important in this research, hence the instruction to begin with pen and paper. In addition, the participants were instructed to ask God to help them see

their past and to give them courage to be explorers of themselves each time they set out to write. Several of the participants reported a phenomenon which happened as part of the writing. The writing seemed to have created a focused meeting space with God, it was a time of something like written praying focused on the self. One participant expressed this phenomenon in this way:

I think it is also a kind of visitation almost, you know, the presence of God that takes place when you are writing those deep hurtful things, you know God meets you in it, that's, that's how I felt, the presence of God just kind of dropped down into it and you just began to write and...that sound so simplistic but, but I really do think that's what happens.

Another expressed the therapeutic effect experienced in the act of writing in God's presence in this way:

I was able to have breakthrough after breakthrough while writing my history and God visited me with revelation after revelation of the issues that had been part of my formative years that I was hiding from.

Hence the act of writing assisted by the Holy Spirit and focused by the use of pen and paper, not unlike reflective journaling, created a holy ground on which the writer and God could meet and sift through the writer's life together. The writer offered memory, emotion, and at times confession. God offered a new perspective, often a new memory, comfort and assurance. The writer and God therefore re-wrote the life event together. They were co-authors of the new story, offering a new narrative to the writer. Wakefield comments on his own observation of this phenomenon as follows:

What I saw now was that the past can actually change. By remembering and writing down our past from a spiritual perspective (that is, taking into account its meaning in the context of our life's journey) and then reading it aloud to others, we can sometimes see and understanding it in a way that makes it different. Since our past experience only exists now in the our

own mind, it only “lives” in our recreation of it – our changed experience of it becomes the reality, and it that sense we really do have the power to change our own past. (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 570/2821)

One participant habitually asked God to give her his opinion of an account as she completed writing about it. For example, she talked about a time her dog was lost for a few days and then found in the woods. At the end of the story, she would write what God had told her about this incident in her life. Each time, the response from God was lengthy, written from God’s point of view to her, fully affirming, at times offering interpretation of the formative impact, at other times assuring her of God’s presence in the incident. There was no formula to this response, and each time the participant read it, the group was deeply affected. The significance of the event often became apparent to the participant in this response from God, not from her own analysis of the effect. Spiritual formation works with the assumption that the presence of God brings healing and abundance of life. The data supports this assumption. I believe that the use of pen and paper and the invitation to God to join the writing process are key ingredients in realizing this benefit. Wakefield observes: “Writing is itself a form of medication, which we all know is good for the body and mind and soul” (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 193/2821). The phenomenon extended to the process of reading the written story to the group. The impact of such sharing was already discussed in the Relationship with Self and Relationship with Others sections above. Here I’d like to only add that this sharing provided yet another such space with God and with sympathetic community, both healing influences on the reader.

The Curriculum

Data related to the content of the curriculum contained 51 data instances of appreciation and positive feedback, plus an additional 22 instances which pointed to the challenge the curriculum offered. Appendix D

Curriculum Summary list the resources brought in to support education and reflection to each of the group meetings. A glance at the list in this appendix reveals that the participants were given a rich diet (one participant chose the words: “such a rich banquet of materials”) of classical Christian writings, extensive thought on spiritual formation, and some psychological understanding of the make-up and functioning of a person. The material was chosen to supplement reflection in particular stages of life. For example, when writing about childhood and family dynamics, the participants were introduced to attachment theories, the forming of memories, family systems, and the Enneagram personality assessment. The topic of the role of suffering in spiritual formation was introduced when writing about later life. Though the outline of the curriculum was completed before the groups started to meet, on occasion I introduced material in response to the apparent group need. The following comment reflects that the intentional structure of the curriculum was noticed by at least some of the participants: “I have never experienced anything that has brought me to the inward workings of ‘me’ than this. Every last detail has been an extraordinary strategic exercise to take us inward and upward.” Selections of works were read out loud during the group meetings and discussed along the way. When the material was difficult to understand due to specialized vocabulary or

new concepts, I simply translated the meaning and simplified the thought as we went along. One participant in the oldest age group commented:

I didn't understand really what I was getting into and the more I read and the more I prayed and the more I kept meeting with the rest of you folks, the more I got excited and I thought – this is neat! ... this went beneath the layers and ... it challenged you! When we started writing and reading I thought this is way over my head... but it ended up being very good, thank you very much.

Another commented: “The readings were challenging, but helpful and interesting.” Since this research project was designed in response to the problem of mature believers being under-challenged in their spiritual growth in the local church, I intentionally introduced the participants to challenging concepts. The robust discussion of each new topic showed that the participants were engaged and capable of grasping the, at times challenging, concepts. It is possible that the very fact that this group of participants signed up for this research project might indicate that they are representative of the more keen, more dedicated, more courageous type of Christ follower. It might be these characteristics which helped them overcome the curriculum challenges.

Twenty-two data instances spoke to the difficulty in incorporating the required reading and writing into the participants' life rhythm. This was particularly true of the eight employed participants. In the future, I would seek to reduce the amount of reading, for example, by choosing select chapters of Augustine or C.S. Lewis rather than the whole work.

Furthermore, the curriculum directed the writers to write about life events that seemed meaningful to them. Only a few exercises early in the process sought

to stimulate memory. Other spiritual autobiography programs tend to direct the writers to a specific topic. Birren and Deutchman for example, suggest writing along the following pre-set themes:

1. The major branching points in your life
2. Your family
3. Your major life work or career
4. The role of money in your life
5. Your health and body image
6. Your sexual identity, sex roles and sexual experiences
7. Your experiences with death and your ideas about death
8. Your loves and hates
9. The meaning of your life, your aspirations and life goals
10. The role of music, art, or literature in your life
11. Your experiences with stress

(Birren and Deutchman 1991, 67-79)

Birren and Deutchman offer a series of interview style questions to help the participants recall and write along these themes. Atkinson likewise suggests series of interviews as a tool in writing a spiritual memoir (Atkinson 1998). The approach in this research was to invite the participants to, along with God, scan their life for formative moments, people, or circumstances and write about those. The primary workbook, *The Arc of the Arrow* (Erickson 1998), offered some guidance on what to consider in writing. The additional curriculum materials served as resources for understanding and deeper reflection. As a result of the freedom to write about what was meaningful and to identify one's own theme, some participants chose personally meaningful themes around which to organize their story. One who had served in the Navy chose the sailing analogy for his life story: smooth seas, storms on the horizon, doldrums and shipwrecks identified parts of his life. Another chose a landscape analogy: springs of refreshment,

mountains of hope, bridges of rescue, and sinking sands served as thematic descriptions of her life events. I conclude that though the guided themes would serve for an easier start to the writing, the less structured approach creates space for greater creativity and greater freedom for God's Spirit to lead the writer. The participants offered a number of suggestions on how to improve the curriculum, these have been noted and many will be implemented next time this program is offered.

The Perception of Growth

The next data set in the Experience of the Process category refers to the reported perception of personal growth. Growth, in this case, is defined as instances of observed or reported sense of increased inner strength, stronger faith, a movement toward God, a transformation of an aspect of the self, and the acquisition of a new spiritual practice or skill. This data set contained the most reported instances across all data categories, consisting of 77 mentions. It would indeed be a surprise and a disappointment if an experience designed to be this robust resulted in reports of low growth quotients. Since this case study aimed to assess whether writing a spiritual autobiography forms a useful component in a church's spiritual formation program, this data set is very helpful in formulating the answer to the research question.

The most easily observed area of growth was in the acquisition of new spiritual disciplines and skills. The curriculum introduced the participants to new spiritual disciplines such as a form of the Ignatian examen, gospel imagination,

spiritual direction, silence and solitude and others. Though many of these disciplines are not commonly practiced in the Mennonite Brethren context, all participants embraced them without hesitation. One reported difficulty with one of the imagination exercises as it involved swimming. This participant cannot swim and his imagination could not transcend this reality. On the whole, the participants reported benefits from exposure to the disciplines. There was evidence to indicate that these skills were incorporated into the participants' lives. For example, at least one participant went on her own silent day retreat, another reported a new habit of daily Bible reading using the gospel imagination technique, and many reported benefits of the practice of meeting with a spiritual director. One participant reported:

I was a little bit skeptical about meeting with a spiritual director, but those sessions were quite helpful. I was dealing with a longstanding issue and I was able to sort of find a solution with her and in part of what we were learning about - was sort of was a catalyst.

Another was able to share the recently acquired examen practice with a family member: "I was telling my one Daughter-in-law [about being in the spiritual autobiography group], she wanted to know about that Jesuit thing [Ignatian examen]. I showed it to her, she took a picture of it with her smartphone and now she is doing too." Such acquisition and incorporation of a new spiritual discipline illustrates a new way to create space for God in one's life and an increase in the repertoire of tools with which to disciple others.

A second key type of skill was the new knowledge of how to purposefully and effectively invite God into one's ongoing reflection on life. This skill has life-

long application and is useful in helping others process current or past life events. Though most of the participants had not completed their memoirs by the end of the research project, they all, apart from Kathy perhaps, understood the process and knew how to carry on. The comment below is illustrative of such development of a new skill and habit:

I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to finish this [writing due to illness in the family]...but I know what I'm doing, and you know, I am way behind from where I would like to be in my writing, but I know how to proceed. And so it's not an issue that I'm not done and to check it off like I like to do, because I know that will come.

Another perception of growth reported by the participants spoke directly to a positive movement in their spiritual formation, which has been defined in the Definition of Terms section on page 149 as the ongoing process which the Triune God, in the context of a biblical community, transforms the life and character of the believer to be more and more like the life and character of Jesus. It is this movement toward the life and character of Christ that is the heart of the Great Commission, therefore, at the heart of every Christian life. This transformation becomes evident through a variety of indicators just two of these are: a movement from bondage to freedom, and an increased passion and desire for God.

The data indicates that these growth indicators were evident in at least some of the participants. One participant reported the following positive movement in personal holiness which he referred to as a “significant breakthrough.” In writing he considered a sin that has been with him always, gained understanding of it along with a new ability to say no. “I'm further than I would have been [in this area of personal holiness] without this group.” The

discussion in section Relationship with Self, regarding healing, self-acceptance and affirmation contains evidence of increased personal freedom, a movement away from bitterness, false-perceptions of self, or fears which constitute bondage in the Christian life. Hence, an increase in the sense of freedom to live out of the true self is an indication of movement toward Christ-likeness.

A number of the participants reported that the experience of writing their spiritual memoir has set them off on an on-going path of growth. One participant observed: “I realize after I shared my reflection, specifically the one on suffering that I still have much more to explore, so I am seeing that perhaps all our insights are a work in progress.” Another expressed a new understanding about self along with an expectation that God will continue to press into that area: “I could already see there's a pattern in my life where I do focus on the hard stuff. And so I see God revealing that and challenging me with that. So I don't know where that's all going to go.” Another stated: “I believe that God is inviting me toward vulnerability” with the intention to respond to that invitation. For others, the growth was difficult to pinpoint, rather it was a vague sense that God was opening up a way to a new significant way of being: “I am grasping something really significant is happening here, and I sense that it is deep and I'm barely grasping it at the concept level, I hope to follow all these concepts deeper.”

Finally, the data referring to personal growth contains references to an increased passion and desire for God. It is likely that this data set represents an outcome of the findings in the God category, where the data focused on references to a shift in God-image, an increased trust in God, and other aspects of the

participants' relationship with God. One couple expressed the increased love for God as an answer to previous prayer: "We were praying...for God to take us back to that first love – when we were just crazy God followers...and I just about got there." Another, very clearly felt the difference in her spiritual vibrancy resulting from this process: "I was really in the place of dryness and I feel much less dry now, so I think it's very been very worthwhile." Others were less able to articulate the before and after, but nevertheless, sensed a spiritual value to the process: "In, in terms of my own growth...it's hard to evaluate when you're still in it. I find I do better in hindsight but it has been a really been positive thing." The spiritual formation model on which this research was founded argues that long-term believers are at risk of settling into a spiritual plateau, where following Jesus becomes comfortable. As the participants listed the types of people for whom writing a spiritual memoir would be beneficial, they mentioned, among others, "people for whom the church has become a very safe place...lost the fire, and the fire went out... Does this process shake them out of the plateau? Yes, if they went into it [with that intent]." Hence, the participants perceived their experience as useful for stimulating movement in their spiritual life. The goal of a spiritual formation program for mature believers is to stimulate renewed growth. The data collected in this research indicates that in this case that objective was achieved.

It would be unproductive to attempt to ascribe the cause for the growth described above to any particular factor of this research. This growth is a result of the sum total of the participants' life experience over the duration of the research project. Some of the personal insights and breakthroughs might have occurred in

while writing or reading, in the spiritual direction sessions that accompanied the program, in personal devotional times, or in Sunday morning worship experiences that would have happened regardless of this research project. However, the participation in this research group provided space, intention, and fuel for the work of God's Spirit in all spheres of the participants' lives.

Finally, the process honoured the adult learning style. The facilitator was one of the group, seated in a circle with the other participants. Information download was limited and delivered in a conversational style, allowing for questions, comments, and discussion. The participants were not put in the role of a student; rather they were treated as experienced fellow sojourners to the facilitator/researcher. Even though, as discussed earlier, the curriculum was rich and varied, the point of the meetings and the readings was never to simply equip the participants with more information. It was to offer information for the sake of transformation. Unlike some Bible study groups or other church adult education programs, the discussion always came back to the goal of the Christian life which is to become like Christ. One of the oldest participants, who periodically expressed the challenge of the curriculum, grasped this goal as follows: "the last thing I need is more head knowledge – and this is not about head knowledge, it is about meeting God and transformation."

In summary, the Experience of the Process data indicates that the process of writing and sharing, the robust curriculum, the adult-style interaction, along with the other ingredients mentioned above created an environment that was conducive for spiritual growth of mature believers.

Personal Reflection

My facilitation of the groups writing their spiritual memoirs was an experience accompanied with a depth of blessing. As a co-learner in the group, I benefited from all the factors described above: from the rich curriculum which I first had the pleasure of researching, selecting and processing with each of the groups, from the love and support of the community which was especially meaningful due to the constant flow of gratitude, appreciation, and reports of growth by the participants, from the experience of my own writing and sharing (though the sharing ceased as the other participants started to bring their own stories to share), and from the transforming presence of God's Spirit with us. To lead such a group created space for God to work in my own life. As a practicing spiritual director, I have the privilege of observing God's transforming power in the lives of those who open themselves up to him. The facilitation of these groups felt very similar. I served, in part, as a spiritual director, with the front row seat to the powerful interaction between people and God's Spirit. The importance of the setting was already discussed above. The data and my experience leads me to conclude that to duplicate these results the facilitator of the group would have to approach the group leadership with the same philosophy and bear the same objective of creating space for God as primary. The leadership of this group requires skillful facilitation focused less on the delivery of new knowledge and more on reflection on already acquired knowledge and on the synthesis of this knowledge. Secondly, my close relationship with the participants offered an ideal foundation which may not be possible to duplicate in other settings. All but few

participants came into the research with previous personal experience of me as a positive spiritual influence in their lives. I would like to offer this curriculum to a group in a local church where I'm not a known entity to see whether the setting of trust and open sharing would be as quickly realized as it was in this case.

However, it is likely that trusted spiritual leaders could apply this curriculum with the expectation of the same outcomes in their own context. During this process, I looked for potential leaders from among the participants who could facilitate this kind of a group at Glencairn in the future. I considered those necessary qualities described above first and the ability to deliver the content secondly. There were several in the group who qualify.

Secondly, I was deeply moved by the constant faithfulness of God in his response to the desire of this group of people to draw closer to him. God showed up in every session, he was present in the community dynamic, he was present with the participants in their reading and their writing, and he spoke in intensely personal ways during the retreat times. My assessment is that God spared no effort in responding to his people, in loving them, in healing them, and in inviting them further and higher in their relationship with him. More so, God was present even when I was not. The second all-day retreat was reported by most participants as a powerful experience of meeting with God. My memory of that retreat is rather bleak. I was well prepared, but came in with very low expectations. We were not able to get the date or the space I planned for. I was disappointed with our meeting room, it was a gray, cold, basement space, with no art on the walls. The chairs were uncomfortable, and there was no space for privacy on the

grounds. To start the retreat, I invited everyone to write out and to speak out our desires for the day, we then posted them on the wall. My desire was for a compassionate and loving heart (as I have been feeling overworked and irritable in the days leading up to the retreat), sensitivity to the Spirit (so I could move the retreat according to God's agenda), and the presence of Christ without which I knew this day would be a disappointment. During the whole retreat day, I paid attention to the conversation and to the leading of the Spirit, but for the most part felt much of the time as just going through the motions. I was coming down with something as by the end of the retreat day I was down with flu-like symptoms. Due to a busy schedule, I had not prayed enough in preparation for the retreat, and I had even forgotten to ask our church intercessors to pray for us while we were there. It was almost to my amazement that I observed the powerful movement of the Spirit, the enthusiastic responses of everyone in the groups. I was humbled and grateful that the Spirit worked in spite of my deficiencies for the sake of the people who made themselves available to God. Of course, it is God's presence that accomplishes any growth or transformation. This research experience assured me again, that God will be found by all who diligently seek him.

Thirdly, I was encouraged by the genuine desire of the participants to keep growing in the Christian faith. The questions they asked, the commitment they showed through the consistent attendance, and the effort they put into the assigned work was evidence that they are willing to invest much into their relationship with God. As considered above, this group may not be representative of all who are in the church, but is certainly illustrative of many mature believers

who are spiritually under-challenged in their local church context. One participant in this group expressed her sorrow that not all believers invest this much in their relationship with God in these words:

I believe the tragedy in the evangelical church in general is that there's a lot of people that don't want to go deep with God, they're quite satisfied with going to church and maybe I'll go to a small group...there is no hunger there for pursuing God (I agree)...They haven't hit the wall yet...[or]...they're not willing to work it through, so they go back and they stay on a plateau.

While it may be true that there are many in the church who are on a plateau, tools such as this curriculum are invitations to keep growing.

Finally, I was blessed with the precious and rare experience of authentic and affirming community. Though I belong to a small group and have a number of good friends in my church and elsewhere, I only experience community that offers this kind of spiritual support and genuine love in my spiritual direction support group, which consists of spiritual directors who were trained together and who continue to meet for group spiritual direction. I attribute the similarity between these two groups to the fact that both have Christ and personal formation into his image as a commonly stated goal and that all the activities of the group center around that goal. Community and friendships and practical support are outcomes rather than the explicit goals of these groups. My plan is to continue with these participants in the second year of the spiritual formation model which is focused around a spiritual formation group. I trust that the same community experience will be realized in those groups, as Christ and a commitment to personal formation will be at the center of those groups.

Summary of Outcomes

This research project revolved around a case study which observed the spiritual formation benefits to writing a spiritual autobiography in a community setting, augmented by teaching and spiritual practices. The figure below captures the process elements which created a setting, or an environment conducive to spiritual growth.

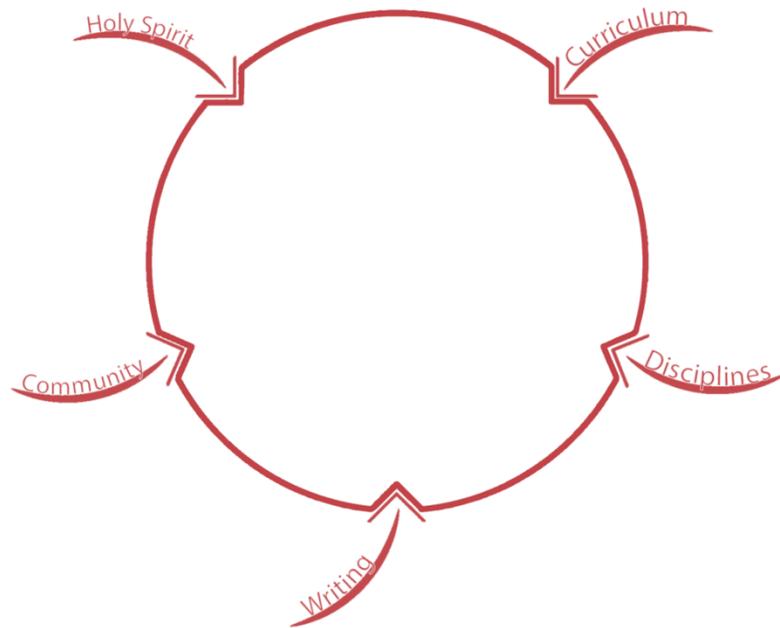


Figure 16 - The Formation Environment

The first element is a rich curriculum presented in a conversational style which honours the experience mature adults bring to the learning environment. The second element is the practice of varied corporate and individual spiritual disciplines which orient the participants to God and attune them to the constant work of the Holy Spirit. The third element is the process of purposeful, reflective writing about the formative influence in one's life, carried out in the presence of

God. The fourth element is an authentic community of those on the same quest to the understanding of self for the sake of becoming like Christ. The final component is the influence of the Holy Spirit, whose desire for our spiritual formation is greater than our own, and who faithfully and often powerfully moves in those who invite him to mold them into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. The result is an environment that is safe and fertile for spiritual formation. Figure 16 shows the impact of this kind of a setting on the group of participants involved in this research. The arrows pointing up, in, and out signify improvement in the areas of relationship with God, self, and others.

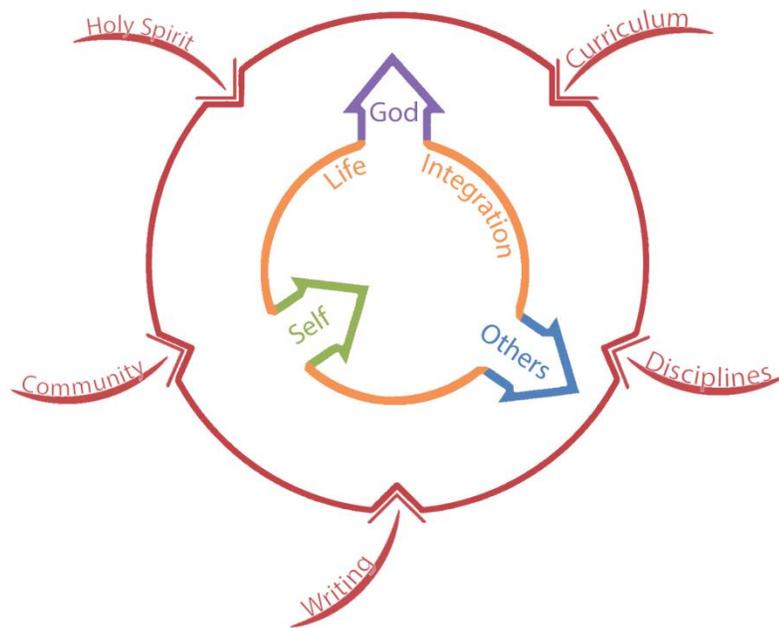


Figure 17 - The Formation Environment and its Effect

The participants felt positive impact in an increased sense of life integration, a new perspective which gives meaning and purpose to all of life, especially past suffering and loss. Out of this new sense of a purposeful whole

came a new sense of affirmation and self-acceptance, which makes possible the genuine affirmation and acceptance of others. Finally, the combination of the setting which opened many ways of connecting with God and the new perspective of life and God's presence led to an increased trust in God, increased love for God and an increased desire for God.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on the existing literature and research already conducted in this field as detailed above, I expected to find that the process of writing a spiritual autobiography in the context of a supportive local church community would result in a positive movement in the participant's spiritual formation. The evangelical church in Canada and specifically the Mennonite Brethren denomination experiences an ongoing need of fresh and innovative ways to implement Christ's command to make more and better disciples (Matt 28:19-20). The data gathered in this study supports the claim that writing a spiritual memoir, in the manner outlined in this report, is an effective means to spiritual formation for mature believers in the context of a local church.

The research revealed a number of adjustments that would make the curriculum even more effective. For example, I would reduce the amount of reading to essential chapters rather than entire volumes and I would begin the writing process sooner so that the participants are closer to the completion of their memoir at the end of the nine-month period. I would also want to observe whether

a previous positive relationship with the facilitator is necessary to achieving similar results.

Dan Allender aptly expresses the value of writing and sharing one's spiritual memoir. His words echo my experience and the experience of those in the research group:

First, God is not merely the Creator of our life. He is also the Author of our life, and he writes each person's life to reveal his divine story....Second, neither your life nor mine is a series of random scenes that pile up like shoes in a closet. Both your story and mine have unique characters, surprising plot twists, central themes, tension and suspense, and deep significance...third...when I study and understand my life story, I can then join God as coauthor....And fourth, there is the necessity and blessing of telling our story to others. To the degree that we know God and then join him in writing our story, we are honored to join others in the calling of storytelling. God is of course, the Master Storyteller. Your Story has power in your own life, and it has power and meaning to bring to others. I want your story to stir me, to draw me to tears, compel me to ask hard questions. I want to enter your heartache and join you in the hope of redemption. But your story can't do these things if you can't tell it. You can't tell your story until you know it. And you can't truly know it without owning your part in writing it. And you won't write a really glorious story until you've wrestled with the Author who has already written long chapters of your life, many of them not to your liking. (Allender 2005, 3-6)

It is not possible, at this stage, to assess the long-term effect of this experience. However, since this group of participants intends to meet for another year around the quest for spiritual formation experienced and shared with others, I anticipate that the growth realized in writing the spiritual memoir will be well integrated and built upon in the next stage of the *Three Years with Jesus* model.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUDING WORDS

My opening words spoke of my burden and call which motivates my ministry: to guide Christ's followers into the abundant life he offers to all. My DMin work has offered new resources to facilitate personal growth and ministry in line with this calling. My spiritual journey and the curriculum designed to deepen mature believers, contained in Chapters 2 and 3, both speak to a personal experience of deepening spirituality, as well as the conviction that such deepening can be encouraged and successfully facilitated for others. The research project, detailed in Chapter 4, offers evidence that among God's people there are those who are eager to invest considerable time and effort into the life-giving relationship they have with Christ. Furthermore, the research results in Chapter 4 powerfully demonstrate that such investment can result in profound, and at times dramatic, positive shifts in the relationship with self, relationship with others, and relationship with God, which further benefits all the circles of influence of these dedicated believers – within and beyond their local church context.

I would like to highlight five key spiritual formation insights gained by my DMin studies, the work on this portfolio, and the nine-month long research project detailed in Chapter 4. First is the fundamental formational dynamic of

alone-with community-on mission. This dynamic is evident in my own spiritual formation experience described in Chapter 2 and it is imbedded in the *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum developed in Chapter 3. It is a dynamic of time alone with God, which is then fruitfully processed in community, and which is then turned outwards in mission-minded living. Bradley describes this dynamic as it was applied in the Celtic monastic model (Bradley 2000), which consisted of solitary monastic cells organized around a central community hub. This arrangement allowed for a balance between solitude with God and community, contemplation and activity, worship and care for those in need (Bradley 2000, 18). The *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum is based on the belief that spiritual work has to be first done in the “cell”, that is, alone with God. This work, however, must be processed with community in order for it to be of maximum value to the individual *and* to the community. The research project demonstrates the effectiveness of this dynamic with those who wrote their life stories alone and then shared them in community. This community processing often led to further insights, greater clarity, and a settling of sorts, that is, a deeper appropriation of the solitary experience on the part of the individual. In addition, the community was enriched by the solitary experience and provided further food for thought for the individual to take back to his/her “cell,” for more solitary work with God. This alone – with community cycle was modelled in the life of Christ and ought to become a habit of life for the believer being formed into the image of Christ. The cycle however is not an end to itself. The Celtic believers would at some point send a portion of the community out to spread the gospel, and to establish new

community hubs around which spiritual formation of the new converts would take place. Hence, the *Three Years with Jesus* builds an intentional missional orientation in its design. One can well imagine the power of a community that vibrantly connects to the life of Christ in solitude and in authentic community. Church practitioners can easily facilitate the alone-in community-on mission dynamic within their context, with a supporting curriculum suited to those they lead. After all, even a community shared practice of *lectio divina*, is a micro representation of this dynamic.

Secondly, the design of the *Three Years with Jesus* intentionally applies the spiritual formation process that first involves an honest look at the self, then engages the Holy Spirit in transformation, and then sends this changed person out to others. Hence, the curriculum in Chapter 3 is designed for the believer to first undertake an honest encounter with the self, then be guided to do something about it, and finally be encouraged to carry out God's mission out of the new person. My experience has shown that people are more ready to entertain deep internal change only after they have adequately reflected and understand who they are. The reflection facilitates the unmasking and begins the dismantling of the false self. The inner change continues the demolition project, but also serves to rebuild the person more into the image of Christ. This person is then more ready and able to encounter others in a genuine, non-judgmental way and to invite them into a relationship with Jesus that is truly life changing. A community that has been formed into Christ-likeness around honest self-reflection and intentional formation is well equipped to be known as Christians by their love, bringing truth

and grace to the world as powerful and gracious ambassadors of Christ. Again, church practitioners can be aware of and apply this model in various ministry settings, such as preaching, pastoral spiritual counseling, and small group discussions to name a few.

Thirdly, the findings around the effect of the formational environment on the formation process as described in Chapter 4, offer educational resources for those who seek to facilitate formation in others. Figure 16 depicts the elements that any pastor or spiritual leader can introduce into the ecology of their context: honouring community, appropriate spiritual disciplines, focused self-reflection, curriculum to stimulate thinking and to inspire a desire for more, and the acknowledged and practiced presence of the Holy Spirit, the change-agent himself. Of course, the key element in this ecology is the leader himself/herself, as one cannot lead others beyond where one has personally been. The profound effect of such an environment on the relationship with self, with God, and with others is detailed in Chapter 4.

Fourthly, as many who have gone before have found, deep inner change takes time. We are shaped by what we do and how we live, and it takes some time for the shaping to be noticeable. I chose to suggest a three-year investment, considering that is how long Jesus invested into those he called to be his apostles. I believe there is a reason why seminary (and other) degrees are designed to last about three years, as it takes about that long for a person to be shaped. The three years does not imply that the process ends at that point, merely that it takes three years to enact a lasting change. Hence, spiritual formation cannot be microwaved.

Those who design personal or church-wide paths for spiritual growth ought to be encouraged not to hurry through a process that is not likely to be successful if a high value is placed on the speed of completion.

Finally, a key insight into spiritual formation came through the research experience. I collected dozens of single-spaced typed pages of data. I sat with these pages for over two months, reading over them, circling words, colour-coding phrases. Several times I walked away from the work in frustration caused by the thick fog that seemed to have settled over the data. In a day or two, I returned to read over the data again, to circle and colour-code and to think some more. It was this process of persisting in the fog that resulted in the model depicted in Figure 16 - The Formation Environment. Had I resorted to eisegesis and forced the conclusions into the data, this formational model would not have come to light. Hence the insight: sitting with the fog is a general learning model. Whenever we are introduced to new, complex concepts, it takes a while for the fog to clear and for the concept to become ours so to speak. This is also true in the process of spiritual formation. Concepts, God's invitations, glimpses into who we are versus what Christ wants us to become are often unclear and fleeting. It takes some sitting with the unknown, but then the fog lifts and clarity sets in. I observed this in the study group as they, one by one, grasped the skill of writing their life story with God in a reflective way. I also observed this in the study group as one by one clarity set in around identity, purposefulness of their life path, and God's presence in their past. This learning model is useful to all who teach and all who learn.

I look forward to what God's Spirit has in store for those who intentionally make themselves available to his transforming presence. The second year of the model (The Life Change Group) is already on the Glencairn church calendar for September 2017. The commitment of those who participated in the study demonstrates that spiritual leaders may set appropriately high expectations on those they lead. Expectations that are set too low lead to minimal engagement, and therefore, to minimal results.

It is my hope that others whose life task is the spiritual development of others will also benefit from this work and explore the application of the curriculum and the models it contains in other local church contexts. The research has pointed to the fact that competency of leadership is key to the success of this model. Therefore, my desire is first, to lead other leaders through this process, with the aim to facilitate their formation, as well as to transfer the necessary competencies in order to enable them to lead effectively in their own contexts.

The discipleship drought discussed earlier calls for intentional guidance of those who are new in Christ, as well as those who have known him for decades. The mission of the church depends on disciples who are able to effectively engage the Holy Spirit in the process of their own transformation into Christ-likeness and in the process of reaching others for Christ. The aim of this portfolio is to challenge and equip those who minister in the local church to deepen Christ's followers for the glory of God, for the abundant life of his people, and for the sake of the Great Commission. I entrust the means by which this may take place to God.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A Christ-likeness in the Sermon on the Mount

Qualities of a follower of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount

	Matthew 5
5:3	I am deeply aware of my capacity to do what is evil in God's sight.
5:4	I am deeply concerned about my capacity to do what is evil in God's sight.
5:5	I consistently deal with all in gentleness.
5:5	I rarely feel the need to control or suppress agitation or anger.
5:6	I deeply desire and intentionally pursue God for the purpose of formation.
5:7	I consistently respond with mercy and compassion to all people, including those in need and those who have caused me harm in the past.
5:8	I rarely experience the need to battle thoughts of any kind of wrong doing.
5:9	I deeply value harmony in the body and intentionally work to bring about genuine peace.
5:10	I can readily point to a recent incident which might be coined as persecution due to my devotion to Christ.
5:13	I can readily point to a recent example of my influence for good in my context.
5:14	I can readily identify non-Christians who think better of Christ and Christianity as a result of their encounter or relationship with me.
5:19	I passionately pursue deeper knowledge of the bible.
	My life consistently fulfills the command to love God with my all and to love others.
	I frequently teach the Bible to others.
5:20	I am deeply aware of the fact that my actions however noble do not

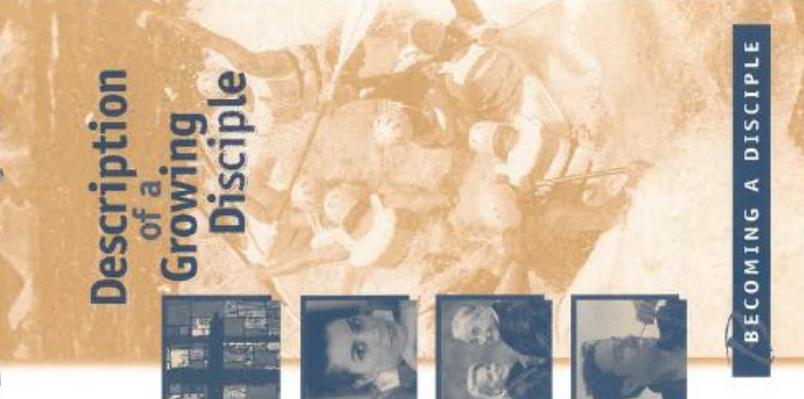
	contribute to my good standing with God.
5:22	I rarely feel the surge of anger toward others in my community.
	I never resort to name-calling or put-downs of others, even in jest.
5:23ff	I consistently make the first move to reconcile with those who may have something against me.
5:27	I rarely struggle with sexual impulses for anyone other than my spouse (if married).
	I am aware of my weak areas – my tendencies to sin and I have taken all possible precautions to ensure I will not succumb to my “usual” temptation when it comes.
5:32	I live in absolute mental, emotional and physical fidelity to my spouse (if married).
5:33ff	I never speak an intentional lie.
	I never deliberately conceal the truth.
	I never knowingly speak partial truth to manipulate the hearer.
	My words and promises are consistently reliable.
5:39	I rarely struggle with thoughts of pay-back for personal injustice.
	I never act on the impulse to get even.
5:41	As a consistent habit of life I do not resist the violence of others with violence.
5:42	I consistently and generously give of what I have to help those in need.
5:43	I do not hate, dislike, or hold prejudice toward any individual or people group.
	I consistently and intentionally pray for those who consider me or my people group as their enemy.
	I consistently show genuine and active love to those who consider me or my people group as their enemy.
Matthew 6	
6:1	I am certain that any good that I do is never to earn the good opinion of others.
6:2	I am certain that any monetary giving is not motivated by obligation or by a desire for the good opinion of others.
6:5	I am certain that in the performance of any religious activities (such as prayer, ministry etc.) I am never even on a subconscious level hoping to make a good impression on others.
6:6	My prayer life is one on-going communion with God.
6:7	My prayer life is marked by on-going listening and hearing from

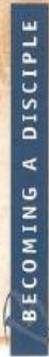
	God.
6:8	I constantly live in the confidence that my Heavenly Father is looking after all my needs.
6:9	I consistently offer all of my life as worship to a holy God.
6:11	I bring my daily needs before God moment-by-moment.
6:12	I understand how to forgive as Christ forgave me and I let go of the sins committed against me quickly and easily.
6:16	I regularly practice the spiritual discipline of fasting with joy and without fan-fare.
6:18	To the best of my self-knowledge and awareness, in all my religious practices I am an authentic and transparent person, free from any form of hypocrisy.
6:19	I am completely free from consumeristic impulses to acquire more and more possessions.
	I am content with my socio-economic circumstances and if so called could easily live with less.
6:21	I continually orient my heart to desire more and more of God.
6:24	I am confident that my devotion to Christ and his calling on my life is not diluted or divided by devotion or love for any other thing or person.
6:25	I rarely or never experience anxiety about any aspect of my future.
6:33	I continually devote time and space in my life for God in order to experience his transforming work in me.
Matthew 7	
7:1-5	I rarely or never experience feelings of superiority over others.
7:1-5	I am far more concerned about my own shortcomings than the shortcomings of others.
7:7-8	As a daily habit of life I present my needs to God as the first recourse.
7:9-11	I live with the absolute certainty of God's unconditional love for me and trust his wise care completely.
7:12	I am careful to treat others in need or in failure then way I would like to be treated were I in their place.
7:13-20	I consistently show discernment in determining the spiritual health of those around me.
7:21-27	I live by the understanding that following Christ in all his ways is the most secure way of living.

Appendix B Description of a Growing Disciple



Description of a Growing Disciple










QUALITY 4: INVITING AND INFLUENCING

Scriptures:
Matthew 28:19-20, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Luke 19:1-9

God's Initiative:
"No one can come to me unless the Father...draws him."
John 6:44

Description:
A person who develops an invitational lifestyle in every day relationships, contagiously attracting others toward Christ.

Evidence:

- Knows the importance of sharing faith and how to introduce a person to Christ.
- Learns to pray for and relate redemptively to non-Christian peers.
- Becomes a compassionate witness, demonstrating Christ's love by meeting practical needs and enthusiastically participating in group efforts to draw others to Christ.

QUALITY 5: DISCERNING AND DISARMING

Scriptures:
Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-42; John 17:6-19; Philippians 3:17-21

God's Initiative:
"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." John 16:13
"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." John 1:14

Description:
A person who is being transformed into the spirit and character of Christ, able to interact with religious, political and societal systems with increasing discernment, giving primary allegiance to God's kingdom by being "in the world, but not of it."

Evidence:

- Knows and orients life according to God's values.
- Increasingly portrays Christ's spirit of humility and meekness.
- Gains confidence in evaluating and relating to the surrounding culture, "obeying God rather than others."
- Pursues a grace-dispensing, peacemaking lifestyle, which addresses conflict, oppression, injustice and the needs of the poor.
- Endeavourous to prioritize the concerns of God's kingdom over national concerns.

QUALITY 6: PURPOSEFUL AND PERSISTING

Scriptures:
Philippians 3:7-16; Colossians 3:5-17; Hebrews 12:1-13

God's Initiative:
"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6

Description:
A person who knows that discipleship is a lifelong journey of increasing responsiveness to God, embracing the perspective that we are on a path toward maturity, that having a relationship with Jesus is our greatest treasure, and that heaven is our real home.

Evidence:

- Knows assurance of salvation, but presses on to greater growth in each of the qualities of a growing Disciple.
- Regularly assesses growth in being transformed into the image of Christ, being content, but not complacent with progress.
- Learns to live all of life in partnership with God.
- Celebrates the high points and joyfully carries on despite discouragement and failure.
- Seeks assistance from God and fellow travellers.
- Is dedicated to "finishing well."

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BECOMING A DISCIPLE

Once you have made a commitment to be a Christ-follower, have you arrived? Or is it somewhat like signing up for the "cruise of a lifetime"? Or perhaps, a meticulously planned canoe expedition? While these are helpful metaphors to the extent that they describe a journey, they are inadequate portrayals of the new life Christ offers us.

Following Jesus is more like white-water rafting. He is the capable, committed guide, essential for our survival. Other rafters are critically important. Everyone must learn to navigate and to remain safely in the raft. There are moments of terror, exhilaration, tranquility, discouragement and achievement, all of which describe the incredible adventure of entrusting oneself to our Guide for the journey.

Jesus approached his first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James and John—with the invitation, "Come with me...I will make you...I will show you how" (Mark 1:17). Words cannot adequately express all that transpires when the Creator of heaven and earth comes to dwell within, empowering us to "want to do and be able to do what pleases him" (Philippians 2:13). Jesus continues to extend this invitation to join him in this life-changing, revolutionary adventure called discipleship. Our lives and our world will never be the same.

OUR NEED FOR A PURPOSE

What is our aim? If gaining knowledge is our primary purpose, we could easily test our success—simply take a Bible knowledge test at key intervals: Grade 6, Grade 12 and several times throughout adulthood.

Discipleship is more than gaining knowledge. It is the process of transformation of the heart. It is choosing to be with Jesus in order to learn to be like him, in the power that he gives. Discipleship is responding to God's work in our lives, with his initiative making our transformation possible.

This *Description of a Growing Disciple (DGD)* is an attempt to describe who our inner person is becoming

as a devoted follower of Jesus, evidenced by changing behaviour. "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind to reward all according to their ways" (Jeremiah 17:10).

In the DGD, each quality is characterized by two adjectives that are similar, yet inadequate on their own. They complete the sentence, "A growing disciple is someone who is...." Like two sides of a coin, both attributes need to be considered to give a true picture of this quality in a disciple's life. "Evidences" are provided as clues, or fruit bearing signs that we are indeed responding to God's initiative in this particular area.

The DGD is not exhaustive. The New Testament alone alludes to over six hundred behaviours and attitudes that describe a maturing Christian. The *Memorife Brethren Confession of Faith* has more than a dozen items describing our version of ideal behaviours and attitudes. The aim of this particular description is to keep the question "Am I becoming a more devoted disciple?" in the forefront.

"A Growing Disciple is someone who is ..."

QUALITY 1: CAPTIVATED AND COMMITTED

Scriptures: Matthew 22:36-40; John 21:15-17; Revelation 2:1-7; Luke 7:36-48

God's Initiative: "We love, because he first loved us." 1 John 4:19

Descriptions: A person who believes in Jesus increasingly loves him with "heart, soul, mind and strength" and is committed to growing as a disciple, regardless of the cost.

- Evidences:**
- Understands the scriptural basis for, and is confident of, a personal saving relationship with Christ.
 - Feels a growing love for God, which motivates increasing obedience.
 - Expresses faith and is keen to talk about life in Christ.

QUALITY 2: THRIVING AND THIRSTING

Scriptures: 2 Peter 1:3-11; Deuteronomy 5:33; John 15:1-8

God's Initiative: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness." 2 Peter 1:3

Descriptions: A person who determines to abide in Christ and is committed to cultivating a growing relationship with God, even in adverse circumstances, so that faith is progressively more vibrant.

- Evidences:**
- Learns to study Scripture, inductively and devotionally, and prayer.
 - Becomes devoted to knowing God through the Bible and prayer.
 - Chooses to practice a variety of spiritual disciplines for training in godly character.
 - Prioritizes time to nurture a deepening relationship with God.

QUALITY 3: BONDED AND BUILDING

Scriptures: Acts 2:38-47; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Corinthians 12:7-27

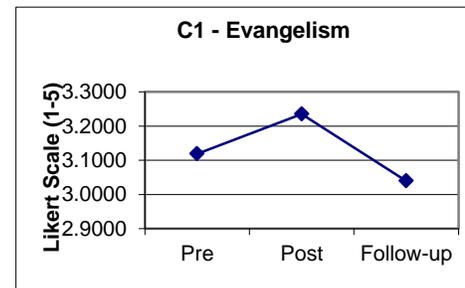
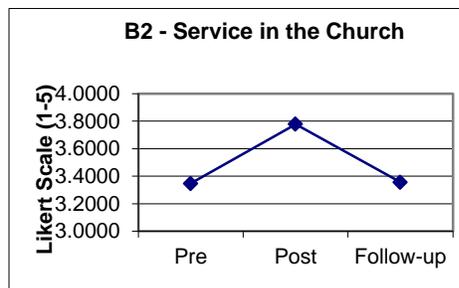
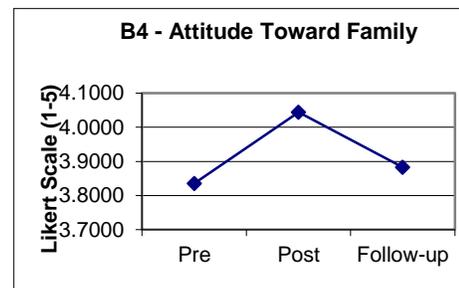
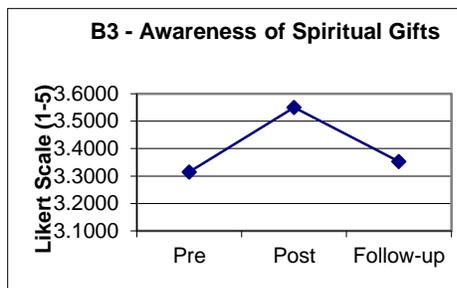
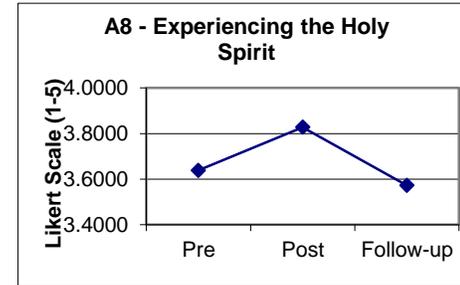
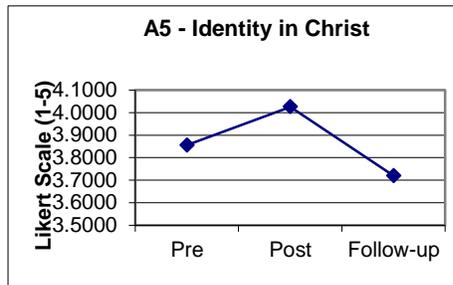
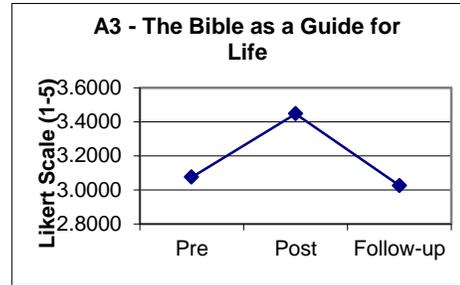
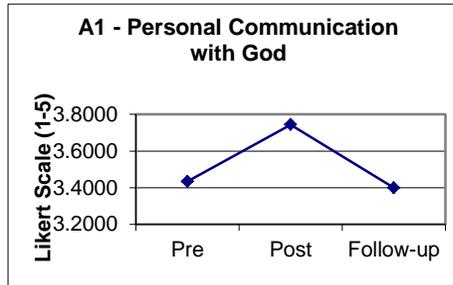
God's Initiative: "And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple...who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:5

Descriptions: A person who engages with a community of faith, in small group and larger contexts, and develops as a contributor to the health and effectiveness of a local congregation.

- Evidences:**
- Learns to live the Christian life in community with other believers, giving and receiving a maturing level of discipline, accountability and support.
 - Displays an unfolding awareness of a unique identity in Christ and joyfully uses spiritual gifts to serve.
 - Practices generosity with time and resources.

Appendix C Effect of Short-Term Mission

Below is a graphical summary of average means scores for 8 out of 24 concepts measured pre, post, and a year after a short-term mission trip (Friesen 2016, 31-33), used with permission.



Appendix D
Curriculum Summary

Session & Theme	Session Content with Reference Sources
1 Introduction to writing a spiritual memoir	Dillon, <i>Psychology and Spiritual Life Writing</i> , 2011 Reichard, <i>A Case of Mumps</i> (sample autobiography excerpt) Introduction to Spiritual Direction
2 Approaches to writing	Clark, <i>Confessional Literature</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch. 1 & 2) Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> Introduction to Daily Examen
3 Spiritual memoir as a quest story	Bunyan, <i>Grace Abounding</i> Davis, <i>Modern Girl Trying to Find the Holy</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch. 3) Willard, <i>Renovation of the Heart</i>
4 Understanding Self How to start writing	Daniels, <i>The Essential Enneagram</i> Pearce and Brees, <i>The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Power of the Enneagram</i> Baron and Wagele, <i>The Enneagram made Easy</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch. 4) Outline for the first story
5 Attachment and Memory Self-Acceptance	C.S. Lewis, <i>Surprised by Joy</i> Leanne Payne, <i>Restoring the Christian Soul</i> Plass and Cofield, <i>The Relational Soul</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch.5)
6 Silence & Solitude Inviting God into your life story	Accepting others as they are – Enneagram readings Dan Wakefield, <i>The Story of Your Life</i> Jennifer Hoffman, <i>Our Stories</i> Structured time of silence & solitude Group Sharing time Communion
7 Role of Desire in Spirituality	Sue Monk Kidd, <i>When the Heart Waits</i> Benner, <i>Soulful Spirituality</i> Sheldrake, <i>Befriending our Desires</i>
8 Soul, Desire and God	Benner, <i>Surrender to Love</i> Leanne Payne, <i>Restoring the Christian Soul</i> Introduction to Gospel Imagination Ignatian thought on desire

Session & Theme	Session Content with Reference Sources
	Introduction to imaginative prayer
9 True & False Self	Mulholland, <i>The Deeper Journey</i> Benner, <i>The Joy of Being Yourself</i>
10 Role of Suffering	Keller, <i>Walking with God through Pain and Suffering</i> Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch.6)
11 Looking ahead	Erickson, <i>Arc of the Arrow</i> (Ch.7&8) Steps to complete and publish the spiritual memoir Final interview

Appendix E
Bibliography of Resources Utilized in the
Planning of the Research Project

Category 1 & 2 – Spiritual Autobiography: What, Why and How

Atkinson, Robert. 1998. *The Life Story Interview Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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Barbre, Joy Webster and Personal Narratives Group. 1989. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Birren, James E. and Donna E. Deutchman. 1991. *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life*. The Johns Hopkins Series in Contemporary Medicine and Public Health. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Murdock, Maureen. 2003. *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*. New York, NY: Seal Press.

Peace, Richard. 1998. *Spiritual Autobiography, Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Reese, Randy D., Robert Loane, Y D. Reese, and Eugene H. Peterson. 2012. *Deep Mentoring: Guiding Others on Their Leadership Journey*. Downer's Gove, IL: InterVarsity.

Ruffing, Janet K. RSM. 2011. *To Tell the Sacred Tale; Spiritual Direction and Narrative*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Seidel, Gail. 2008. "Life Story and Spiritual Formation." In *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, edited by Paul Pettit, 217-244. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.

Wakefield, Dan. 2012. *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*. Center Ossipee, NH: Beech River Books.

Category 3 – Spiritual Formation Resources

Hagberg, Janet O. and Guelich, Robert A. 2005. *The Critical Journey, Stages in the Life of Faith*. Salem, WI: Sheffield.

McAdams, Dan P., Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich. 2006. *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. 1st ed. The Narrative Study of Lives. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Mulholland, Robert M. Jr. 2006. *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Payne, Leanne. 1991. *Restoring the Christian Soul Through Healing Prayer; Overcoming the Three Great Barriers to Personal and Spiritual Completion in Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers.

Plass, Richard and Cofield James. 2014. *The Relational Soul; Moving from False Self to Deep Connection*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Category 4 – Research Methodology Resources

Creswell, John W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Saldana, Johnny. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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

Booth, Wayne C., Colomb, Gregory G., Williams, Joseph M. 2008. *The Craft of Research, 3rd Ed.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Appendix F

Verbal Informed Consent Text

As the participants and the researcher have an established trust relationship, a written consent form seemed incompatible with the relationship and the tone of the participant group gatherings. The researcher, however, offered the following verbal information to the participants as part of their inquiries into joining this study, at the first meeting of the group, as well as along the way as questions from the participants warranted restating of the terms of participation in the project:

As you know, I am working on my DMin in Spiritual Formation at Tyndale. As part of my studies I'm required to complete a research project related to the work in my church and related to encouraging Christ-followers into a deeper relationship with him.

I'm hoping to use the process and outcomes of this group for this research. My project however is not yet approved by the Tyndale Board of Ethics, which is a body that makes sure that I do not cause any harm to people choosing to participate in this project. I am in the process of completing the required forms and applications to secure this approval. I will let you know as soon as it is granted or if it is rejected.

This research will observe the impact the writing of your spiritual autobiography has on your self-acceptance and understanding, your self-image, your sense of integration of your life experiences, your God-image and your general reflection on the value of the process to you. Studies have shown that writing a spiritual autobiography has these and other potential benefits, our task will be to see if this is really so in our context as ordinary people in our church.

I will ask you to fill out this survey at the start and again when we end the process. If you get started on it and find that you don't want to answer certain questions or that you don't want to complete this survey at all, that's perfectly ok. You don't need to do that to be part of this group. If you choose to complete the survey, I will ask you to pull a code out of this hat. This is your code, use that instead of your name on the survey. That way the information will not be tied directly to you. I will keep these completed surveys locked up in my office and the data that will be entered electronically will be stored only on my personal laptop

which is password protected and always in my possession. I don't keep it at the church overnight or when I'm not here.

We will be together for nine months – ending at the end of this year, in December, meeting roughly once each month. In addition we will go away to a retreat center for two 1-day retreats, one in July and one in October, to practice silence and solitude, to have some teaching, writing and sharing time. Come to as many group meetings and the retreats as you can, during the summer-time when schedules are complicated I will schedule a make-up group session a week later for those on vacation who wish to catch up. If you simply cannot make it to a groups session that's fine, I will give you whatever materials are handed out after the fact.

I will be asking you to complete various assignments between meetings, some will involve reading and writing, others will be spiritual disciplines such as meeting with a spiritual director or praying in certain ways. I would like you to feel free to do as much or as little of these assignments as you wish or as you can. Think of this group as primarily for your benefit and not for my benefit. Take part in what you deem is beneficial to you. If at some point life happens and you for whatever reason are not able to continue in the process you are free to pull out and not feel bad about it.

For the first few months we will be mostly reading samples of spiritual autobiographies to get our heads around what this kind of genre looks like. After that we will start writing our own life stories. We will have opportunities to share what we write with others in the group, but again, this is entirely voluntary; don't feel that you have to share.

At the end of the 9 months I will ask you to meet with me to let me know your thoughts on the process, whether you found it beneficial and why, and how it could be improved. I will give you the questions I will be asking you well ahead of the time. Again, this meeting is not mandatory and you are free to decline.

There is a small risk involved in being part of this study, and that is the possibility of recall of painful memories. We will not be hunting for memories that you are not already well aware of, but perhaps in the writing about these incidences you might feel distress or grief or other negative feelings. Please don't hesitate to come to me or any of our pastoral staff, or your spiritual director to address these.

This group has been approved by our elders; they understand what we are attempting here and that it fits with the direction our leadership desires to go. Pastor Richard has joined the group as a participant. If you have any concerns about any material or what we are doing you can contact the elders or Pastor Richard. In addition, my supervisor for this project at Tyndale is Dr. Mark

Chapman, you can also contact him, just ask for Mark Chapman at Tyndale, or you can find his email on the Tyndale website, in the listing of the professors.

If at any point you forget some of what I said here, please don't hesitate to ask for a repeat or clarification. I know that this is a lot of information. I'm really looking forward to being together with you for the next 9 months working on understanding our life story better.

Any questions that you'd like to raise right now?

Is everyone clear on what we will be doing together and why?

Finally, I will ask you to please respect the confidentiality of what is shared in this group. Let's agree to keep each other's privacy and to not repeat what happens here outside the group.

Appendix G
Concluding Interview Process and Questions

- A. Give the interview questions in writing to participants a minimum one week prior to the scheduled interview time.
- B. Obtain verbal consent to audio tape the interview a minimum one week prior to the scheduled interview time.
- C. At the start of the interview explain the process and the purpose of the interview, give participants the freedom to not answer, to ask for clarifications, to take time to think of answers, to refer to notes.
- D. Questions:
 - 1. In a few sentences, how would you summarize your experience of being part of this spiritual autobiography group?
 - 2. Were there any highlights of this experience that you'd like to share?
 - 3. What were some of the challenges you experienced in this process?
 - 4. How would you assess the value of being part of this process?
 - i. to you
 - ii. to others in the group
 - 5. Would you recommend this way of writing a spiritual memoir to others?
If so to whom and why?
 - 6. Any other comments you'd like to add?

Appendix H
Distribution and Proportionality of
Collected Data by Source

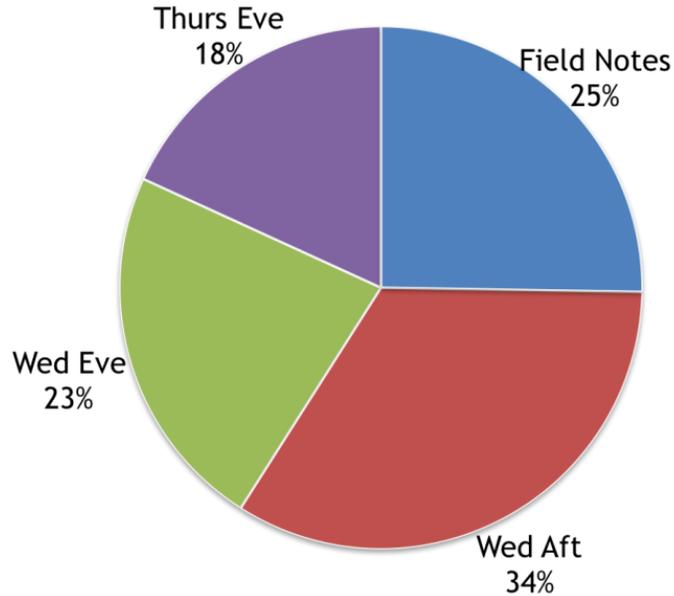


Figure 18 - Volume of Data by Source

This figure shows that the Thursday evening group contributed somewhat less data in the exit interview in comparison to the other two groups. This is due to the particular group dynamic which demonstrated a greater propensity to stray off topic and discuss side church issues, personal anecdotes and philosophies on discipleship etc. While such comments illustrate the comfortable group dynamic, they do not bear directly on the research in question and hence were excluded from the data coding process.

Appendix I
Thematic Proportionality of Data by Source

Though the data came from four major sources, as shown in Appendix H, the chart in the figure below indicates a consistency of thematic proportionality in the data collected from the three exit interviews and the field notes.

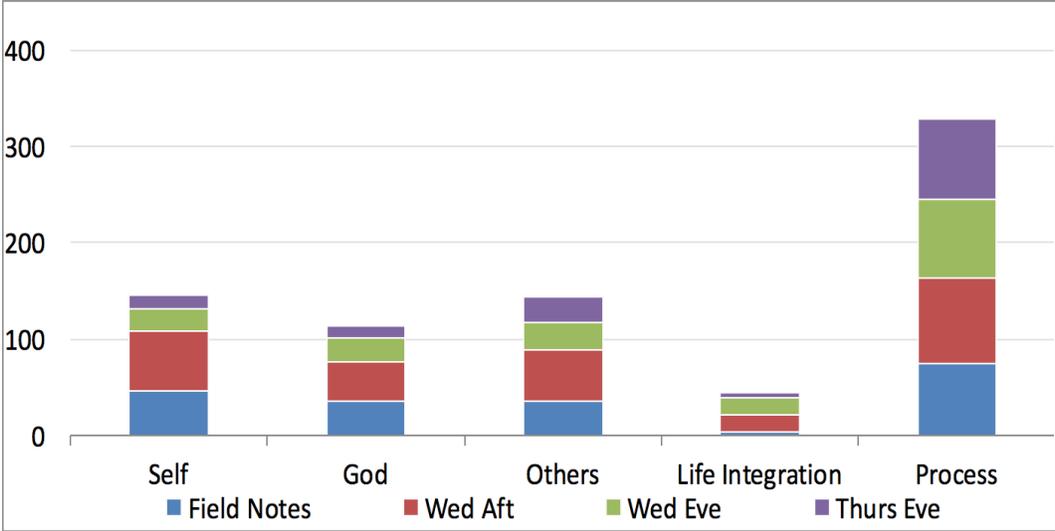


Figure 19 - Data Theme and Proportion by Source

Appendix J
Research Project Phases and Timetable

Date	Action
Feb 20-Mar 20, 2-16	Project Plan-dates and curriculum development, Project approval in context, Supervision plan
Mar 09 ,2016	TCPS2 Core Certificate
Mar 20-Apr 17, 2016	Participant Recruitment
Apr 27 & 28, 2016	Session 1
Apr 27-May 03, 2016	Intake Survey Data Collection
May 18 & 19, 2016	Session 2
Jun 01 & Jun 2, 2016	Session 3
Jun 22 & 23, 2016	Session 4
Jul 13 & 14, 2016	Session 5
July 23, 2016	Session 6 - Retreat Day
Aug 09, 2016	REB submission
Aug 24, 2016	Proposal submission
Aug 31, 2016	Proposal approval from Tyndale REB
Sep 14 & 15, 2016	Session 7
Oct 12 & 13, 2016	Session 8
Oct 15, 2016	Session 9 - Retreat Day
Oct 29, 2016	Mid-way check in with supervisor
Nov 23 & 24, 2016	Session 10
Dec 06 & 07, 2016	Session 11 - Final session
Dec 15-Jan 05, 2017	Final Interviews

Appendix K Life Story Writing Template

Choose an event that was somehow formational, that is, it affected how you understood life, yourself, God, it caused a shift in your direction or illustrated something about you.

Aim for 3-4 hand-written pages (about 1.5-2 double-spaced typed pages). You know this story well, it should take you less than 1 hr to write up. You can edit and fix up words later. If writing is a barrier for you try telling it and recording your voice and using that as your first draft.

Suggested Outline for Writing

- a. Ask God to help you find the words and to help you remember fully and thoughtfully.
- b. State when this happened - E.g. *When I was in grade 1*
- c. State if this time was significant - *It was just after we moved and I had no friends in my school*
- d. Where did this happen-be specific – *I was sitting in the last row in my class*
- e. Was this place significant? – *I was hoping not to attract any attention.*
- f. Describe the people involved – what were they like and your relationship to them – *My Grade 1 teacher was Mrs. Jones, a large woman with pitch black hair and black eye-liner. Her booming voice sent shivers down my spine. OR My uncle was a kind and gentle man, always ready with an affirming word; I looked forward to his visits.*
- g. Describe in detail what happened, aim for about 6-7 sentences or so, about ½ typed page – focus on the important part in the story – the part that matters, that affected you – *Mrs. Jones handed out blank journals to each of us and asked us to draw our house. Since we had just moved, I didn't really know what our new house looked like. But I knew that every house has a front door, some windows and a peaked roof....*
- h. Your immediate reaction to the event, 1 or 2 sentences – *My face turned hot red and I wished I could fall through the floor and disappear. I felt humiliated...etc. etc. OR I remember being deeply moved by my uncle's affirming words. I believe it was in that moment that the desire to be the kind of man he saw in me took hold in my heart.*
- i. The formative effect this event had on you – *I was further convinced that there is something wrong with me, that I lack what it takes to be acceptable to others OR I lived through much hardship always having my eye on that vision of being a man that matters.*

- j. The long-term effect this had on you – *I was afraid of water ever since and avoided any activities that involved paddles, boats and the like. I missed out on not only water fun, but the bonding and friendship that happens when kids play in or on water.*
- k. How does this continue to play out in your life to date?
Has God spoken into this along the way?
- l. Finally, how has this affected your God-image, the way you think about God?
- m. When you are done choose a title and perhaps (totally optional) an introductory question, sentence, scripture or quotation – *How can one who believes he is flawed come to believe he is fully loved?*
- n. Let the hand-written story sit for a few days, then type it up and edit it as you type. As you edit reflect whether you fully captured the event as it happened, and whether you have given enough time to reflect on its formative impact on you. Ask God if there is more to this event that you put on paper, if so, expand and clarify until you feel it is done.

Appendix L
Group Meeting Dates and Locations

Session	Date & Time	Location
1	April 27 – 7pm April 28 – 7pm	Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
2	May 18 – 1pm May 18 – 7pm May 19 – 7pm	Glencairn Church Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
3	June 1 – 1pm June 1 – 7pm June 2 – 7pm June 8 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
4	June 22 – 1pm June 22 – 7pm June 23 – 7pm June 28 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
5	July 13 – 1 pm July 13 – 7pm July 14 – 7pm July 20 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
6	July 23 – 9am-4pm	Crieff Hills Retreat Center Crieff, Ontario
7	Sep 14 – 1pm Sep 14 – 7pm Sep 15 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
8	Oct 12 – 1pm Oct 12 – 7pm Oct 13 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
9	Oct 15 – 9am-4pm	Guelph Bible Conference Grounds Guelph, Ontario
10	Nov 23 – 1pm Nov 23 – 7pm Nov 24 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church
11	Dec 7 – 1pm Dec 7 – 7pm Dec 8 – 7pm	Participant's home Glencairn Church Glencairn Church

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