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Encountering God's Healing Through
Holistic Spiritual Formation

A Research Portfolio
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Doctor of Ministry
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by

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio begins by way of a spiritual autobiography to explore how the Lord has introduced me to different kinds of beauty, in an effort to bring about transformative beauty in my own life. These include the beauty of nature, as I grew up in New Zealand; the beauty of people that I worked or worshiped with in South Africa; but also, the unexpected beauty of pain and struggle, that I experienced in Chicago IL. In each of these places, I find the Lord forming and shaping me, but also bringing healing, for the fear and anxiety which I had experienced for much of my life.

The next chapter in the format of a spiritual formation manual, then explores five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing and is geared especially for believers who similarly struggle with anxiety. Paul identifies three of these dimensions in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where he refers to the “sanctification of body, soul and spirit.” The dimensions of community (or the social dimension) and further, nature or God’s creation are also explored.

My final chapter, by way of a field research report, then places further emphasis on the dimension of nature, through a spiritual practice called Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI). Following my research, I suggest that SNI can assist with the following: 1. redirecting participants thoughts from rumination of adverse situations to meditating on the Lord and his various divine attributes; 2. aiding participants in changing their negative emotions and moods into positive ones.

DEDICATION

This research portfolio is dedicated firstly to my God – God Immanuel, the One whose Presence is so sweet; and Jehovah Rapha, the One who heals our deepest wounds.

It is also dedicated to my family. Firstly, to my wife Janine – Janine you mean the world to me and I love you. Secondly, to our daughter Abigail – may you grow and prosper in the grace of God and be used in his kingdom in mighty ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I firstly wish to thank the Lord my God, for his great work of grace, healing and transformation, that continues in my life. I owe my all to him. Secondly, my love and heart-felt thanks goes especially to my wife Janine, who has journeyed, prayed and encouraged me, throughout the entirety of my doctoral education. You mean the world to me!

I am further grateful to all my professors, advisors and peers at Tyndale Seminary. You have become like an extended family to me, and I have relished our times together for fellowship, worship and sharing ideas about spiritual formation. Susanne and Tola I am especially grateful to you both. I came to this doctoral program not knowing whether I would even start it, and then, whether to continue, due to the death of our son Gabriel (which had just happened prior to this) – and then consequently, our loss of Abigail for a while. Both of you tangibly encouraged me and kept me hoping that Abigail would be returned to us, and indeed she was, and is now adopted into our family. Tola, how I wish you could have graduated with us, but instead you have now joined Gabriel in Heaven. This is incredibly bittersweet. I know you are both rejoicing, and one day I look forward to seeing you both again.

To my church, Gardiner Community Church, I also wish to express a heart-felt thank-you to each of you also! Wow the Lord has indeed been good to my family, and “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places” (Psalm 16:6a). I thank each of you for giving me the gift of your time, encouragement,

prayers and blessing throughout my studies. I pray that the Lord continues to prosper us all in ministry and fellowship together, by his great grace.

There are so many others who have been instrumental in helping me not only in the development of this portfolio, but also in the development and nurturing of my own life. Some of you I remember with fondness and gratitude in my autobiography. But to each of you, I also say a heart-felt thank-you! I love you all.

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BIBLE VERSIONS USED

- ESV *English Standard Version*. Rev. ed. Crossway Bibles. 2008, 2016.
- HCSB *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Holman Bible Publishers. 2009.
- MSG *The Message*. NavPress. 2002.
- NIV *New International Version*. Zondervan House.1984.
- NKJV *New King James Version*. Thomas Nelson. 1982.
- NLT *New Living Translation*. Tyndale House Publishers. 2015.
- NRSV *New Revised Standard Version*. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. 1989
- OJB *The Orthodox Jewish Bible*. Artists for Israel International. 2011.
- VOICE *The Voice*. Ecclesia Bible Society, Thomas Nelson. 2008.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The mountains are calling, and I must go” is a familiar saying in this neck of the woods, in Washington State, USA – where our family moved a year ago. This saying by Scottish-American naturalist John Muir, has become popularized locally, appearing on clothing, office stationery, and accompanying natural photography. And why not? After all, this beautiful state in America is enveloped by mountain ranges. As I write, I can personally see the Canadian mountains of Vancouver Island, and from other parts of our home, I can see Mt. Baker and parts of the Cascades. Then whenever we journey anywhere from our home, we are first greeted by the magnificent Olympic Mountain Ranges.

This call of Muir’s to the mountains, is a sentiment that I can identify with on many levels. During my pre-teen years, I grew up on the West Coast of New Zealand – a paradise framed by the beautiful Southern Alps. Many years later in my twenties, I would revisit this region of New Zealand with my South African girlfriend Janine (now my wife), and as I witnessed the awesomeness of the mountains again, I felt compelled to worship, “O Lord our Lord, how majestic is your Name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, ESV).

As I consider this sentiment of Muir’s however, I believe that the call of the mountains is not only a calling unto themselves, but also an invitation to

encounter the One who created them. In his book *Till We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis expresses a similar sentiment where one of the characters, Psyche, observes, “The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing—to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from... All my life the god of the Mountain has been wooing me” (Lewis 1984, 75-76). The Book of Isaiah prompts a similar invitation where it says, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths” (Isaiah 2:3, NIV). This calling is a calling that comes not only by way of the mountains, but by way of all of nature. All of nature hearkens us to encounter our Creator as many of the Psalmists declare (e.g., Psalm 19) and also by the apostle Paul, in Romans 1:19-20, which claims God’s power and divinity are visible to everyone in what he has made.

In some ways this portfolio is about my encounter with God through nature. In some respects I wish I could have spent more time unwrapping this theme further. After all, Scripture repeatedly records various theophanies that occur in nature, between various biblical characters and God. In these instances, nature functions as a backdrop, but also as the vehicle for encountering the Lord. Similarly, nature has also become both a backdrop and vehicle for many of my own encounters with God – encounters through prayer, worship and those of receiving his comfort and care.

My portfolio is split into three main parts. The first part is an exploration of what I identify as “beautiful.” The popular idiom notes that “beauty is in the

eye of the beholder” and how true that is. What I consider to be beautiful will no doubt be different to what others consider as beautiful. How then, can we possibly define beauty, when as Mark Galli notes, beauty is such an “elusive” quality (Galli 2008, 51). Still, some have made attempts to do so. Aquinas for example believed that beauty is “that which, when seen, pleases” (Smith 2017, 7). In some ways, this is surely the case. A glance or two cast at nature would affirm such a definition. Even as I reflect on this, I consider the transcendent nature of a forest that I might wander through; the majesty of a mountain; the glory of the sun peaking over the horizon, ready to embrace the whole earth with its generous glowing rays; the untameable roaring of the waves which envelop the seashore; those things of nature too, that delight our senses, such as the taste of a blueberry; the sound of water bubbling and burbling its way downstream, or the morning chorus of birds summoning the dawn; the crackling of a fire on cold winters night; the delightful aromas of a wild rose, as it scrambles across the woodlands. These and so much more, are truly beautiful.

Yet, as I consider all of this, and what beauty means to me, I ask myself the following types of questions: What truly is filled with the glory of God? Beauty is perhaps best seen in and through God’s glory after all. Further, what fills me with awe and wonder? What entices me to worship my Creator? Where do I see the celebration of goodness? What draws my heart to be lifted in ways which transcends even words? These things I consider to be truly beautiful.

And still, even as I ponder on all of the above, I think that beauty additionally overflows into other categories of life and living. Even in the unexpected. Even in pain, if such indeed is possible.

As I consider what beauty is, I present three types of beauty in my autobiography, which have called me to encounter my Creator in a variety of ways. The first setting in my quest for beauty, harkens back to New Zealand, when as a child, I found beauty in nature. I believe that God gave me the gift of beauty in this way, not only to find a place of escape and healing away from a dysfunctional childhood, but I also found that nature itself offered a sacred and contemplative space to encounter God.

God then lead me in the next chapter of my life, to South Africa. In this place, I also enjoyed the beauty of nature – albeit some very different nature to New Zealand. Yet in this setting, God also showed me another kind of beauty, and that was beauty through people. Prior to this, I had learned to distrust and even fear people. Yet in this setting of my life, particularly through the Baptist Church I attended, God showed me the beauty of his people – people who reached out to me with God’s goodness, love, care, affirmation and respect. My soul desperately needed this particular grace. It was then after building up my soul through beautiful people, that my soul could respond to the calling of God, that is, to enter into pastoral ministry. Had I not seen the beauty of the community of God, I doubt that I could have ever accepted such a calling. After wrestling with this calling, I eventually found the courage to relocate to America for seminary,

taking my beautiful bride Janine along with me, whom I had married six months earlier.

At this point in my life however, my soul had become built up with unhealthy character traits. The well-intentioned affirmations of a beautiful people in South Africa had unwittingly caused me to develop something that was truly ugly, which was a prideful and self-centered focus. Thus, I believe that God used the next setting in my life, Chicago, for the transformative purposes of refining me. Perhaps the blizzard that we flew into upon arrival, was to be analogous of what we would experience in this next setting.

Struggle, pain and great personal loss defined this next setting of our lives in a myriad of ways. Yet in all of this, God continued to give us himself. As I further reflect on those days of immense struggle and pain, I also consider God's transformative work in my own life. Was the pain and the darkness beautiful in themselves? I don't think so, but certainly the transformative products of such in my own life have been beautiful.

After a season of struggle and pain however, the Lord has graciously brought Janine and I to a new place, Washington State. One of my former pastor's calls this our "Psalm 16 calling," in reference to what the Psalmist says, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance" (Psalm 16:7, NIV). Indeed, this seems so true, compared to the struggles of our previous setting. The nature surrounding us is without a doubt exquisitely beautiful, and I remain thankful to the Lord for bringing us to such a

beautiful place. But here we also experience a beautiful community of God's again. A community that is passionately seeking the Lord and his will. This too, is beautiful.

In this setting, Janine and I eventually long to grow our wellness business into a Retreat Center. Certainly, the pristine natural beauty of this area lends itself to such an endeavor. Our dream is for such a center to provide accommodation in a natural setting, that can nurture rest and revitalization, along with providing holistic therapies that minister to the "whole person," – body, soul and spirit.

This holistic focus is the inspiration behind the third chapter of my portfolio, which is a manual, and further a curriculum, that seeks to aid healing and spiritual transformation for Christians who experience anxiety. It is to be noted, that the term "anxiety" is intended to be applied in a generic sense throughout this portfolio and relates to the pastoral-care needs of any person(s), as per their personal worries, cares, concerns and/or stress. It is not being used to describe any person(s), who have been diagnosed with any psychological condition(s). Any readers of this portfolio who find their anxiety overwhelming or unmanageable are advised to consult with a licensed Christian counselor or psychologist.

Several broad themes are addressed in Chapter Three, including five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. These dimensions include the body, soul and spirit of a person as referenced by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, in addition to two other dimensions, by which we are formed, the dimensions of

community (social) and nature. It is important to recognize that we are not only positively (or negatively) formed in our bodies, souls and spirits, but also through these other two dimensions. For example, my fears and anxieties have been somewhat due to negative social formation from my childhood years. Yet, while I lived in South Africa, I realized that a positive faith community could powerfully instill a sense of trust and confidence, while aiding my receptivity to God's calling for my life. Similarly, my time in nature (throughout my life) has been an incredibly positive and healing experience, especially as I have encountered the Lord in this way. Hence, I believe it is important to add this somewhat neglected dimension to my model of formation and healing.

In relation to the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing, the curriculum attempts to explore practices whereby participants can encounter the Lord in and through these dimensions. That is, intentional spiritual practices that can nurture formation and healing in the body, soul and spirit, but also practices that can nurture formation and healing in and through the dimensions of community and nature. The title of this chapter is called, "*The Shalom Program: An Integrative Approach Towards Finding Peace and Wholeness in God.*" "Shalom" is a Hebrew word meaning both wholeness and peace, and the aim of this curriculum is to nurture such in each person who engages with the manual.

After a broad introduction to the manual, the curriculum then covers some key spiritual practices that participants can regularly engage in throughout the program – and I would add, after completion of the program. These include an

exploration of the grace-filled blessings of Spiritual Direction, Resting Prayer and Sabbath. The curriculum then concludes with another key spiritual practice, which is retreating with God in nature. Group participants are encouraged to experience this session, and conclude the program, as part of a group weekend retreat in nature itself. While the curriculum material for this session highlights how participants can receive an array of blessings from encountering the Lord through nature (see also Chapter Three), it is still optimal for each group member to experience nature for themselves.

The remainder of the curriculum explores other spiritual practices and research related to the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. This includes the following: renewing the mind; engaging with our emotions in a positive way; restoring harmony to the body; engaging with both the body and nature through the five senses; the formational and healing role of community through worship, fellowship and group-support through sharing life-narratives.

In an effort to provide focus to this curriculum, related to the five dimensions, several sections were removed. These include an exploration of our relationship with God the Father; the BREATHE section from the session on emotions (some of this has been integrated into other sections); and a session on suffering, which explores spiritual desolation, spiritual warfare, and physical and emotional suffering. Each of these sections are available upon request.

Perhaps the spiritual practice that has become most meaningful to me from this curriculum however is the final session, titled, “Retreating with God in

Nature.” This spiritual practice has become interwoven throughout my life-story in a number of ways, including the following: receiving healing from God through nature, receiving guidance from God through nature, giving worship to God through nature, and, enjoying God’s presence through nature.

As a result, Chapter Three is a research project that explores the spiritual and emotional benefits of encountering God through Nature and Scripture, for believers who experience anxiety. Originally, I intended for this project to include a weekend retreat in nature, as outlined in the final session of my manual. Yet after some robust dialogue with my peers, I decided to go in a different direction with this. That is, to create a project that would nurture encounters with God in nature, but at the same time, be affordable, accessible and reproducible.

I then opted to research the effects of two spiritual practices brought together. Scripture meditation, through the practice of *Lectio Divina*, and retreating with God in nature. I called this dual spiritual practice, Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI). In Articles two and three, the Belgic Confession refers to Scripture and nature as being “the two books” by which God reveals himself to us.” Thomas Merton poetically points to their connection in another way, when he writes, “By reading the scriptures I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green. The whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music under my feet” (Merton 1981, 215).

As research in Chapter Three illustrates, immersion in both Scripture and Nature can bring about positive spiritual formation – especially through encountering God; and, positive mood formation – as negative emotions change into positive ones.

Of course, it is to be recognized that so-called “negative emotions” can also be positive in various circumstances. For example, fear necessarily prompts preventative or remedial action in the face of danger. Grief is an appropriate response to death – as one of my participants experienced during my research. At the same time however, negative emotions that continue for extended periods of time, due to an ongoing rumination on adverse circumstances or events, can cause adverse behaviors and health – at spiritual, emotional, cognitive and relational levels. I have discovered this to be true in my own life when I have allowed chronic fears and anxiety to rule my life. These in turn, have often prevented me from social interactions, and even ministry itself. As I have spoken to others who have experienced similar negative emotions over time, they have testified to the same. That is, that negative emotions experienced over a prolonged period of time can be harmful and even debilitating in various ways. Rather than allowing anxiety and fear to rule our lives however, Paul instructs us to “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” (Col. 3:15a, NIV). Thus, we are called as disciples of Christ to allow his qualities, including a peaceful mindset to “rule” in our lives, rather than anxiety or fear. Based on my own experience and also research provided in Chapters Two

and Three, I wanted to test whether the practice of SNI could reorient my participant's negative emotions into positive ones, such as peace, as they encountered God.

Unfortunately, my sample size ended up being small with just four participants – though this was still big enough for a pilot study. Even with a limited sample size however, my results from this study did show several things. Firstly, it affirmed my hypothesis that SNI can provide a vehicle for encountering God, and reorienting negative moods or emotions into positive ones, especially by prompting a sense of calmness. Secondly, the SNI process nurtured the participants awareness about various attributes of God, and in particular, his care for them. Finally, my research showed that the SNI process inspired each of the participants to express various favorable responses to the Lord, especially in the form of trust, followed by a sense of awe.

It is to be noted that the forms of nature utilized over the four studies were what could be considered “peaceable” forms of nature. One was in a suburban park, with water, trees and birdlife, and the other portrayed these same elements of nature, but via virtual-nature on a screen. Barton and Pretty (2010, 3947) propose that nature scenes providing views to trees and water, along with the sound of water and birds, are some of the most conducive towards promoting a sense of calmness. This helped to inform the types of nature setting utilized.

In acknowledging the peaceable forms of nature promoted throughout this study, I also acknowledge that my tendency throughout this portfolio has been to

idealize, or to “romanticize” nature. This tendency, at least in part because of my great love for nature, and my encounters with the Lord in this environment. Yet I must also recognize that this tendency is somewhat of a limitation. Nature in its beauty, also includes harsher elements, whether such be an extreme Chicago winter, or the danger that a wild animal might impose, or the devastating effects of a fire. Nature is not always safe, and peaceful and tame, even though I have promoted these elements of nature in my writing.

My portfolio was written over a period of four years and has consequently developed and changed over this time. I first began by writing a spiritual autobiography. At this point in time, I thought that the focus of my life was largely a “quest for beauty.” Hence the title of this chapter. In some ways this is still true. I do aspire towards finding those things in life that are beautiful, and further, I have discovered that some things, such as pain and struggle can also lead to beautiful outcomes. However, if I were to rewrite this chapter, my focus may have been geared more specifically to exploring nature in more detail, which I believe has influenced my life, more than beauty itself.

This emphasis on nature would then have more greatly influenced the following chapter. While I am pleased with the holistic focus that this chapter provides, I would also like to have provided a more comprehensive model of how God can use nature to form us. Calvin for example, has famously likened nature to God’s cathedral, while Isaiah refers to the “Mountain of the Lord” as God’s temple (Isaiah 2:3). Jonathan Edwards’s typology of nature also compares various

forms of nature to divine realities (see for example McDermott 2018, 17-62). All this would be of interest in exploring, and I believe such would add greatly to a spiritual formation model.

Another limitation of my portfolio is the format of my third chapter. While the curriculum format will no doubt be helpful in the future, particularly as I use it in future support groups, I now wish that I had spent more time developing a more comprehensive model based on the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing, that I first identify. The curriculum provides breadth of subject matter for the five different dimensions, but a model with greater depth would be helpful.

All in all, this portfolio has several aims. Firstly, I hope that my spiritual autobiography will inspire others to look to God and his great grace, especially in the midst of fear, anxiety or even in pain and struggle. I also hope that the spiritual formation manual will inspire Christians experiencing anxiety to search for holistic ways to encounter God and thus find his peace and joy. Lastly, I hope that the SNI practice which I introduce in my field research report can find its way into books, churches, retreat and wellness centers in various forms, to encourage believers (and perhaps even unbelievers) to encounter God in his beautiful creation. Like David in Psalm 23, God has led me through some dark valleys – valleys of fear, anxiety, struggle and pain. But at the same time, his comforting presence has always been with me, and through the vehicle of nature, he continues to provide restoration for my soul. Soli Deo Gloria!

CHAPTER TWO:
A QUEST FOR BEAUTY

God has a sense of humor! The United States of America was not a place I aspired to travel to, let alone live. Yet here I am. Now this might seem somewhat negative, but intriguingly, I now call America home, and really do enjoy living here. I love the dramatic flair of the seasons, and the “over-the-top” way in which the different holidays are celebrated. I love how St. Patrick’s Day is celebrated with great gusto in Chicago, and how the Chicago River is dyed green (assuming of course that all fish-life remain reasonably happy with this arrangement!). I love the Thanksgiving holiday – an intentional reminder for us all to be truly thankful. And of course, this season is accompanied by brilliant crimson, orange, rust-red and golden leaf hues and harvest-produce. God is good! I remind myself of this repeatedly throughout the American fall. I also love, the over-the-top use of lights and Christmas decorations at Christmas-time. As my wife Janine, and I drive (sometimes deliberately) past the many homes of our suburb which are beautifully arranged with festive lights and accompanied by plentiful pillows of snow, we feast on the visual delights that are generously provided by our neighbors. The festive Christmas beauty that surrounds me points to the real beauty of Christmas

– of the One True Light who promises to penetrate the shroud of darkness that threatens to overwhelm our world.

I do tease Janine however, that we ended up in the United States because of a wish that she had made on a birthday-cake when she was a child. When Janine was younger, she had spent a few years living here, while her dad worked in an exchange program between South Africa and America. Janine loved America so much that she later wished that she would return here one day while she was blowing out her birthday candles. With her wish being granted in such fashion, I sometimes wonder why she didn't simply wish for a million dollars – but ahem, then I remember I am a Pastor, and am not supposed to think such thoughts!

How did we come to live in America? I understand my own stubborn nature all too well, thus I could have easily refused to relocate to a place that I had no desire for. But while I joke about Janine being the perpetrator who brought us to this good land, I do think that our relocation is mostly a combination of God's will, and my desire to study at seminary and perhaps just a smidgen of Janine's wish upon a birthday cake, as she blew out the candles! Reflection is a good thing to do though, and I ask myself, "just how did we get to this place in our lives? Just how did a country boy from a small (and I mean really really small) village in New Zealand, and a girl from South Africa come to meet, and then emigrate to the United States of America?" I like to think that all of this is God's doing. It has

been his providential hand, which has guided us to this very place in our lives, and where he intends to take us in the future.

The following three sections identify my quest for beauty, which I increasingly discover as I journey with the Lord through three different countries. I first explore my growing encounters with the Lord in the beautiful nature of New Zealand. Following college, I move to South Africa, and it's there that God reveals to me the beauty of people. Then in response to God's calling into pastoral ministry, I move to Chicago, IL and discover an unexpected beauty in pain and suffering. I elaborate on each in the following story of my life.

New Zealand – Beauty in Nature

I was born on the West Coast of New Zealand, which (without even my bias) really is one of the most beautiful parts of the world. About seventy percent of this region is designated as national conservation land, and a good proportion of this is also designated with World Heritage status. The magical landscape that permeates many of the scenes from the Lord of the Rings, really is *the* place that was home to me – of which I am very proud to have grown up in. The beautiful Southern Alps form the backbone of the South Island of New Zealand. From there, the Western region that I grew up in, is composed of rain-forest, lacy ferns, rivers and rugged coastline. Some parts of the Coast are even sub-tropical, being formed from a warm Australian sea-current, which clothes the overall natural tapestry, with lush jade-green Nikau Palms.

As I continue to live out my life, one strand – of who I am and what I seek – is very clear to me. My quest is to seek beauty, especially in the exquisite nature of God’s creation. Much of my childhood was spent hiking along coastlines, on mountains and in forests, and this has become one of my favorite pastimes. The solitude of the wilderness has also become a place to find rest and restoration. When I am overwhelmed with the dysfunctions of life, or simply need direction, I try to escape to a quiet and beautiful place of solitude. I identify with David the Psalmist who writes, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove; then I would fly away and rest! I would fly far away to the quiet of the wilderness” (Psalm 55:6-7, NLT). This I found on our family-farm in the village of Ahaura – there were pockets of quiet to be found and embraced. My favorite place was on a hill in a forest that overlooked a cascading river. This river gurgled and channeled its way into a water-wheel that my dad had made for the purposes of generating water to our home. As functional as this space was, it was also a space to which my soul was drawn to. As a child, I did not really understand why this was so, but in retrospect, it was simply a quiet beautiful space for healing, and a sacred space where I would learn to connect with God.

As I continue to think about my childhood and how it shaped and impacted me, and as I sift through the good and not-so-good experiences, I must say that I did love the simplicity of our life on the family-farm. I loved the wide-open spaces, the lush green pastures and even milking the family cow before breakfast. I loved the large “organic” vegetable garden that my dad grew –

probably the size of a tennis-court – to feed our large family. I also loved the array of berries and fruit that we would pick over the summer, that my mum would miraculously turn into preserves to get us through the winter. Good clean-air, good food and good simple living – these are the kinds of things that I still strive to find.

My parents were also very concerned about each one of us becoming “saved.” My initial “salvation” experience though, came as a result of my eldest brother Stephen informing me that I would go to hell, if I didn’t confess my sins and ask Jesus into my heart. At the delicate age of seven, this was indeed a terrifying thought and somehow, I instinctively knew that I could no longer hide behind child-like innocence any longer. Hence, I prayed a version of the “sinner’s prayer” that day, though I am still uncertain as to whether I was truly saved from that moment. I do remember for example, telling one of my brothers within an hour or two of that experience that “I hated him.” Perhaps this experience did attune my spiritual senses however, as it wasn’t too long after this that I became increasingly concerned about my eternal security. Hence every so often, I would rededicate my life back to God, just to make sure – and just in case I had not done it properly the first time!

Despite all my spiritual insecurities however, God was working in my life. When I became thirteen years of age, I received a silver New King James Bible from my parents. It really was the most beautiful Bible that I had ever seen, and I

truly prized it. I delved into reading this new Bible and I surprised myself about just how much I enjoyed reading it. God's Word was becoming alive in my soul.

The gift of Scripture is something that I will be eternally grateful for – both to my parents, and their denomination, the Open Brethren. We breathed Scripture every day. Every night without fail, we would sit around the family table reading Scripture, and then pray for those in need, including *The Brethren* missionaries for that day. During most of my childhood years, this spiritual practice did not mean much to me, yet God was slowly forming a desire for his Word into my heart, through the faithfulness of my parents in this regard. How true the following words are from Psalm 1:2-3 (VOICE):

For you, the Eternal's Word is your happiness.
It is your focus—from dusk to dawn.
You are like a tree,
planted by flowing, cool streams of water that never run dry.
Your fruit ripens in its time;
your leaves never fade or curl in the summer sun.
No matter what you do, you prosper.

Even today, whether I want to celebrate, or if I am going through a dark valley – Scripture is a close and holy companion. It is one that comforts, nourishes, rebukes, guides and grows me, where I need it most.

As I consider my mostly simple life in the West Coast of New Zealand, little did I realize just how much this was going to change. It first started out with whispers – whispers that I wasn't privy to – but eventually the secret was out, we were moving. We were leaving everything that we knew in the South Island of New Zealand and relocating to the North Island. I was in shock, and I didn't know

how to respond appropriately to this information. What would it be like? The North Island seemed like another country to me. I was thirteen years of age and my world was changing. Not only was I going to start high school and would need to get used to that experience – but then I would be changing High Schools, part way through my first year. It seemed like social suicide.

One might wonder why we were investing in such a move, which to my mind back then, constituted a massive upheaval. I think my dad saw it in much the same light, given that we were leaving a third-generation farm – this was all that he knew. But why move to the North Island? Very simply, this was Mum's territory. Mum had grown up in a region called Taranaki and she badly wanted to move back to the North Island. I think she had always wanted to go back there – ever since she had married my dad and moved to the South Island – some nineteen years before this. The South Island was Dad's turf but not Mum's, and Mum struggled to fit into Dad's family's dynamics. Though she was loved and accepted, she did not always feel this. Thus, she vowed to my dad that she would go back to the North Island, where she had spent her childhood, should anything happen to Dad. Well, one day it did.

One hot summer day, we heard a rocket-like explosion by the sheds – which were not far away from our home. Dad had been working on a tractor wheel which had exploded, and it threw him to the ground, causing his lung to collapse. Thankfully he survived this experience, but his hospital visit caused him to do some introspection. He realized that if he had died, then Mum would have

returned to the North Island, lugging in tow, his five sons – this was a reality check for Dad. He did not want Mum to have the tremendous burden of relocating, all on her own. Hence it was decided – we were moving!

That dreaded day of moving loomed large in my mind – producing hundreds of butterflies that fluttered continuously in my stomach. But after Mum and Dad had packed for weeks on end, the day finally came. Mum bundled most of us into our large red Ford Station-wagon, while Dad and my eldest brother Stephen drove a large truck with the rest of our belongings in it. Saying goodbye to everything that I knew was awful and unsettling. Though I had some unhappy memories on the West Coast, it was still my home, and I would miss the natural beauty terribly – especially the forests and the mountains.

After a two-day journey, we eventually arrived at our new home. I felt as disoriented as our poor cat seemed to, who would meowl for minutes on end, while walking in circles. Yet I tried as best as I could to make the most of what I considered to be a very bad situation. For one, all of us got a new bike out of the deal, as well as new beds and dressers. After living with a hand-me-down bed, dresser and bike all my life, I tried to find solace in these newly acquired material goods. I did not however appreciate the bike ride several miles *uphill* every bitterly cold and frosty morning, simply to catch a school bus. Coming home at night though was a breeze, as we gleefully whizzed down the expansive terrain. In some ways this daily experience now seems prophetically metaphorical of my

spiritual reality to date – disorientation and an uphill struggle, accompanied by gleeful fast rides of divine adventure.

The first Sunday we arrived at our new church though was entirely a new experience. I tried to smile through my anxious façade, but I was used to being rejected, since our family was a little eccentric. As we came through the door of the new church though, my anxiety only increased. This new church was HUGE! At least compared to what I was used to. Our tiny little church in the South Island had about 20 people (our family and extended family amounted to 9 of these), and it was all that I knew. It was terribly boring, but it was safe. In contrast, this new church had somewhere between 300-400 people. It was still Open Brethren, but it was big, it was bold, and it was defiantly charismatic.

The service started out with guitars and drums and people wildly waving their hands into the air. The “charismatic chaos” of this new church eventually took its toll on my parents however, and they decided to start visiting “tamer” Open Brethren churches in the area, though these were much further away from our new farm. As time went on though, I became weary of visiting all the different churches – I was feeling that I did not belong anywhere. I was thus relieved when in the end, my parents decided to stay at the charismatic church. Although I did not feel at home in this church, I absolutely loved the worship-music, which ended up becoming a huge inspiration in my life. I began to teach myself how to play the piano, simply so that I could play in the church band. Eventually this resolve was rewarded.

Meanwhile, my interest in Bible study was also continuing to grow, and I began to do my own personal exposition of different chapters of the Bible. On one occasion I was very excited when my brothers and I were invited to share something about how God was working in our lives, at my parent's Bible-study group. While my brothers did not respond too enthusiastically to this invitation, I began to share an exposition of Psalm 23. As a fourteen-year-old I was then delighted when one lady began taking notes from my sermonette!

Outside of church life, I also enjoyed Mum and Dad's new farm, which was very beautiful in many respects, with lakes, waterfalls, rivers, and large rocky outcrops. The latter over time became a favorite haunt of rock-climbers – some of whom would drive three hours to visit our farm. The overall beauty consumed my thoughts however. I dreamed of building a home that was etched into one of the grand rock formations and looked out onto some stunning views. I also found a beautiful space beside one of our rivers, to spend time with God. This space was sheltered by arching umbrellas of tree-ferns and willow-trees, and it featured an adjacent waterfall which spilled its life-giving wares into the river. This became a favorite but secret locale, where I could connect with God through Scripture and prayer, while enjoying being in his creation.

One time at youth-group we were given a model for praying an hour each day. I took this seriously for a while, and I would head off to this place of solitude on the farm and try to spend an hour with God. It was difficult to do, as I still had a teenager's short attention span. I think however, that I was increasingly

becoming a contemplative – or perhaps I had always been one and was now simply realizing it.

I hid this contemplative part of my soul from the world and I also began to hide my increasing charismatic yearnings, though the latter was more difficult to do, especially as time went on. I wanted to express myself more visibly in worship but felt I couldn't do this in the presence of others around me, who condemned anything remotely charismatic. I also received a charismatic blessing by one of the church's charismatic elders, and then sought to be baptized. Fear prevented me from doing this at that time however.

Yet the Spirit continued to work in unexpected and sometimes unwanted ways in my life. One time my parents took us to a three-day Easter Camp. Generally, I hated these camps, where I seldom knew people beforehand, and as an introvert, I felt awkward about making new friends. Such only heightened any feelings of rejection that I already had. But while we were at this particular Easter Camp, I felt incredibly challenged by one of the speakers. Then to my horror, I found myself physically shaking in response to his message. This was not a response of fear, but in retrospect I believe it was an impulse to the resurrecting work of the Spirit in my life that evening. Regardless, I desperately tried to hide this phenomenon from others who I was sitting beside. People, especially teenagers, simply did not shake in church! At least I had never seen anything like this before, even in our own charismatic church. It was only later when I would

head to university that I would notice others doing the same thing in a very charismatic church – whatever I had was catchy!

Eventually that time did come in my life, when I would begin university. The school I chose was Lincoln University, in the South Island. As a prelude to this Southern trek however, I was first baptized alongside my younger brother Michael. I was glad that Michael and I were being baptized together, as we generally got on very well. I also hoped that being baptized with someone else might somewhat curb my nervousness, with regards to this experience. For starters, I was not looking forward to sharing my testimony with about 300 people at our church, which was a prerequisite to getting baptized. When the time came though, for me to share my testimony, I was pleasantly surprised to experience a quiet, yet strong surge of confidence rise up within me. Yet what a relief to be finally baptized. I had felt convicted to obey the Lord in this regard for several years, but fear and awkwardness had previously prevented me from doing so.

When this church service (including our baptisms) was over, my mum and I then began our journey back to the South Island. I had only acquired my driver's license for a few weeks prior to this, so long-distance driving was also a new experience. It also seemed weird driving back to the South Island again, though I was very glad that my mum was joining me for this part of the venture.

Overall, I liked my new school. In some respects, Lincoln University is different to other universities in New Zealand, in that it offers a number of specialty degrees, mine included – the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture. I had

taken considerable time to decide that this was the program that I wanted to study in. As far as I was concerned, my life-goal was set. I was going to become rich designing nice gardens for rich people!

One problem with my goal however, was that I soon realized that my artistic ambitions did not materialize so well into artistic work – the kind that I needed to present renderings to prospective future clients. I could visualize in my mind what I wanted to design quite easily, but I could not articulate this so easily onto paper. I would then look at the beautiful artistic works of my peers in dismay, and sometimes even with jealousy. Why couldn't I draw like that? To add to my humiliation, one of my professors said to me, "Don't worry, when you find out what you want to do in life, you'll be ok." How true that advice was, but at the time it only made me feel more disillusioned.

The unfortunate thing about the New Zealand university system though, is that once a particular degree program is chosen, it is then difficult to change to another program of study, unless a person is prepared to add a year or more to their study. Because of this, I decided to stick it out with the Landscape Architecture degree, as best as I could. Wherever possible, I tried to add classes involving landscape planning, landscape ecology, and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) instead of design. Little did I know at the time, that God would use the latter focus to steer me into the next chapter of my life, but more on that later.

While I was at Lincoln University, I began to attend Hornby Christian Center (HCC), the church that Gordon and Marjorie (my step-uncle and aunt) went to. I stayed with Gordon and Marjorie during the first two years of university. Although I felt some sense of obligation to attend their church while living with them, I did mostly enjoy this experience. In some respects, I even felt that God had planted me in this church.

By the time I had arrived at HCC, my self-esteem was at an all-time low and it is here that I am glad for the people at Hornby Christian Centre. These folks became like a family to me and nurtured my life on many different levels. Gordon and Marjorie also became like second parents to me. I began to discover that people actually did want to talk with me. My persona was so fragile, that I had mostly assumed that people did not. Through ongoing affirmation however, this began to change. One time I received an anonymous letter in the mail from someone at the church. The person writing this letter, encouraged me to simply accept and believe the affirmations that others gave to me, and not to negate such (which I was good at doing). The letter was filled with many compliments and encouragement. As I think about that letter, even now, I realize what a gift that letter truly was. The person who wrote that letter will probably never know just how much they spoke into my starved soul that day. It is one of the most beautiful things that anyone has ever done for me.

Affirmation and encouragement are so crucial in forming a person's soul, and yet I felt that I had missed out on these. With no encouragement or

affirmation being built into my soul I grew up to see no value at all in myself, or in any of my family for that matter. I also began to think that my family and I had nothing to offer anyone. Yet how badly I wanted to have something to offer to others, and to minister to others, but I did not have the foresight to see how this was possible. God was beginning to rebuild me from the inside out however, and he was using the folk at HCC to help in that regard.

As time went on, I began to take on more and more responsibility at Hornby. In addition to playing the piano, I began to lead worship on occasion and even speak in the services. My confidence was growing, which allowed me to minister with the graces that God was giving to me. In contrast though, I noticed that the elders at HCC were beginning to experience low morale. Our church was losing members as university students graduated and certain families were leaving to join a larger contemporary Baptist church in the area.

It was about this time that I wondered about the idea of playing *The Jesus Film*, over Easter one year and inviting our community to join us. This idea might not work in today's postmodern context, but at that point in time, data-projectors were still very much a novelty, especially to watch a movie with. I had access to one because of my job as an Audio-Visual technician at Lincoln University. The elders agreed that the idea had merit and so we decided to run the film on the Easter-Sunday evening at HCC. Our church members then banded together to drop invitations (that looked like movie-theatre tickets) into all the letterboxes of our neighborhood. It was a great time of church collaboration and unity.

A few of us also met to pray every Wednesday evening and Sunday mornings (before the church-service) for a month before the movie was set to screen. During this time, we prayed very specifically for this event only, as we did not want to become distracted about other matters in prayer, as worthy as these might be. On one of the Wednesday evenings however, I became rather despondent when only three of us made it to the church to pray. I changed my mind after a short while however, as we began to sense the fire of the Spirit touching us in our prayers. “Where two or three are gathered,” God was certainly present!

The Sunday finally came when we would run *The Jesus Film* outreach. We had a guest preacher speaking at our morning service, who also happened to be a friend of our family’s. Even though he was a family friend, I still wished that he had not preached that morning. When he heard about what we planned to do that evening with *The Jesus Film*, he quipped, “oh we tried that at our church, and it didn’t work!” It is amazing how one negative commentary can immediately deflate a month’s worth of work. The bubble of excitement that had grown in our church community, quickly burst. People then began to talk about what a waste of time this film would be. I tried my hardest not to be discouraged, but this wasn’t easy. I had put a lot of work into the preparation of this event, including spiritual preparation. In some ways, I also thought of it as “my baby.” Of course, it was not my own but God’s work. However, all the negativity that circulated through HCC at that point, then played into my own sense of worthlessness. But God was still

working, and he began to whisper encouragement into my soul, thus a new sense of determination began to seep through me. I knew that we should continue to pray and continue to run the event regardless of how many people came.

Finally, the evening was upon us. At first no-one came, and I began to wonder if our guest preacher was right and so did everyone else. But then eventually, one new car pulled into the church parking-lot. This was followed by another. Then another. It was not long before our church was packed full. I had never seen anything like it. Nor had any of our folk. God was faithful, despite our fragile faith. In my case, God was faithful despite my fragile ego also. Following this, I made a point of telling the guest preacher what had happened, when I saw him next. God still had plenty of work to do in me!

Although I was incredibly loyal to my congregation at Hornby, I was noticing that my theology was becoming more charismatic, and overall Hornby was not a charismatic congregation. My inclinations towards the charismatic thus prompted me to begin visiting other churches on Sunday evenings. At this point I was a senior in my studies, and no longer staying with Gordon and Marjorie. Though I had enjoyed my time with them, I was beginning to cherish my relative independence as a young adult by this time and was renting a house with several other (mostly) Christian students. We did a lot of things together, such as sleeping on the beach on a freezing winter's night or cycling thirty kilometers together (and then not being able to stand or sit the next day!). This was a very happy time

in my life. On Sunday evenings, several of us would also visit charismatic churches, with some other friends.

I began to wonder what it was that was drawing me to the charismatic movement and think that perhaps it was my quest to experience God. By this time, I had plenty of head-knowledge about God, as the Brethren churches are good at cramming as much Scripture into one's head as possible (for which I am grateful). Yet, I felt that there must be more to God than simply knowing Bible verses about him and having a "quiet-time" in the mornings (which was also about acquiring more Bible knowledge). God was drawing me to himself in other ways, through experience.

Because of this, I felt the need to look for this experience of God outside of my regular church services at HCC. As much as I loved this dear congregation, I did not feel safe enough to express myself in worship there. I remember one woman being labeled as "showing off," simply for lifting her hands in worship. I did not want to be seen as a show-off, but yet I wanted to be more expressionistic in my worship to God. I could take hold of such freedom, as I attended charismatic churches on Sunday evenings.

As I visited different charismatic churches though, I did not know what to think of the "slaying in the Spirit" phenomenon, which seemed to be a regular part of some services. On one Sunday evening, I visited a large charismatic church in the city with my Australian cousin, Brendan, who happened to be in town at the time. As the worship continued, I felt like I was in heaven. But then

after a while, one of the church ministers tried to “slay” several individuals in the Spirit. The first two popped over instantly, like flies being swatted. Then in my own brash way, I decided to test this phenomenon with God. Quite simply, I wanted to determine whether this whole “slaying in the Spirit thing” was legit or not. So, I prayed that the last of the three people would *not* fall over like the others, if this movement was not a movement of the Spirit. It worked! No matter how much the “slaying-minister” tried, the third guy simply would not topple over. This I think embarrassed the minister greatly, so he tried different approaches to cause the man to fall down. Yet nothing would work. I did not know what to think following this, but that experience caused me to distrust the slaying-in-the-Spirit ministry for quite some time, though I still wanted to be immersed in the charismatic movement overall. As I consider that experience now, I do want to believe that there are legitimate slaying-in-the-Spirit encounters, but discernment is certainly required to flush out the excesses.

As I neared the end of my studies at university, I also became passionately concerned for the poor and became increasingly anti-materialistic. In some ways, I fancied myself as a Christian hippie – somewhat vegetarian, passionate about the environment and the poor. I was also incredibly self-righteous however and looked down upon anyone who was frivolous with unnecessary spending. Having said this, the pursuit for simplifying my life was very real. I sold my car to my brother Stephen and I began to make use of public transportation. I planned to use the proceeds from the sale of my car to go towards buying a bike and paying for

my tuition fees. It was my intention to have minimal student debt when I graduated.

As I was preparing to use this money to pay for my tuition fees though, an uneasy thought came into my mind. I sensed that God was instructing me to give this money instead, towards funding Bibles for the persecuted Church. I tried to dismiss this thought as quickly as it had come, but it continued to prevail. At that point I began to apply logic to my situation. I told myself that I wasn't being selfish with the money, by paying for my school tuition. But the thoughts continued to persist. Eventually I began to pray. After some time, I kept some of the money to buy a bike, so I could get around, and then gave the rest of the money to a mission's organization, that supports the persecuted Church. I later received a voice-message from the mission's organization, to say thanks. After hearing this, I swallowed. Now how would I pay for my school-year tuition?

Since this time, I have come to believe that all the resources I have, including money, are God's, and not mine to start with. I am simply the steward that God has entrusted these resources to. This attitude makes it easier (though still not always easy) to part with anything, when I now feel similar promptings from God. At that time however, I believe that God wanted to test my faith and my heart, even if the latter was fraught with tainted motives. From there, God generously provided for me, when Lincoln University offered me a job to assist a Ph.D. student with his work in GIS modelling. This took care of a summer job for me, and it was the most enjoyable summer that I had ever had to that point. It

certainly beat working in searing hot temperatures to thin apples, which I had done previously to work my way through college.

Once I had finished this GIS work, I was then offered a research grant of my own, which was to undertake GIS research in examining tourist behavior patterns around New Zealand. This grant required that I undertake a second post-graduate degree, which I agreed to do. Thus, my studies were extended by a year and I graduated with a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Resource Studies (I majored in Eco-Tourism in the latter).

As this chapter was ending, I began to pray about where the Lord would lead me next. I hoped to find a job on the West Coast of New Zealand where I had grown up. This region was only three hours away from where I lived in Lincoln. Often, I would drive through the beautiful Southern Alps to visit Grandad and Aunty Shirley (my dad's family). I so badly wanted to come back to this part of New Zealand, and work for the Department of Conservation, or find a local-government position in GIS. Yet this was not to be.

Back at Lincoln, I was one day surprised to find a newspaper on our kitchen table. Typically, as students we didn't bother to waste money on buying newspapers, but presumably one of my flatmates had bought it. Curiously, I looked in the classified section under employment. I wanted to get an idea of what was "out there" for someone like me. Then it hit me.

I believe that God drew my eyes to one job advertisement on that page only, which was for a volunteer position in South Africa, using GIS. Sold! The

position however asked for someone who was 25 years or older. At that time, I was 22. The organization also sought someone who had ten years of GIS experience. At that time, I had about two years, part-time in tutoring and research work. Still, I figured, “never venture, never win,” and so I applied for the position regardless. I didn’t have to wait very long, before I received a letter in the mail from Volunteer Services Abroad (VSA), the non-profit organization concerned. My eyes couldn’t read the letter fast enough, but needless to say, they were flying me up to Wellington from Christchurch for an interview. My heart pounded with both fear and excitement as I stared at this letter in disbelief. My insecurities were quick to inform me though, that there was someone else out there, who was better for the position.

This was in a sense verified once I flew to Wellington for the two-day interview experience. This process was long and intensive and included both working in groups (with VSA staff observing) and individual interviews. Different people were applying for different positions and we were all being interviewed by VSA at the same time. The successful candidates would be representing both VSA and New Zealand, in different positions involving poverty alleviation. These different assignments would also be replete with many challenges. Hence, VSA wanted to make sure that they were selecting the right candidates for each position available.

It was during this process that I met Bob. My competition. Bob was significantly older, and he easily had ten years of experience working with GIS. I

tried my hardest to be polite to him, that is, until Bob asked to borrow my laptop to show the interview panel his experience with GIS. “He should have thought to bring his own laptop,” I bitterly thought to myself, all the while nodding that he could use it. It just so happened however, that I never got to see him again before his interview, so I never got to loan the laptop to him. I was relieved. He was the one person who stood in the way of me going to South Africa. If only I could have simply trusted God at that point though. If God wanted me in South Africa, then nobody would get in the way of that. There was no need to inwardly judge or compete with another human-being. God was in charge of this process.

Finally, it was my turn to be interviewed by the panel, which included an expert in GIS. Knowing this, made me feel more nervous and intimidated. Yet this GIS specialist seemed impressed that one of my references was from my postgraduate research supervisor, Dr. Chris Kissling. In fact, this seemed to make a big difference overall and changed the tone of my whole interview. I had no idea that Chris my professor, was so respected in the GIS community and yet such is indicative of Chris’s nature. He is well known nationally and internationally in certain communities, but most people know him simply as “Chris,” because of his down-to-earth nature.

Overall, the interview process went very well, and I enjoyed my two days in Wellington that weekend. Part of me thought that the job was mine, but there was also an annoying internal niggle that told me that I didn’t have what it would take, and that Bob was much more qualified for the position. In some ways, the

latter was very true. Yet Monday evening came and along with it was a phone-call from VSA. "Congratulations!" the VSA recruitment-advisor said, "you are on your way to South Africa!" I almost dropped the phone after hearing this and my heart pounded all the more, as I tried to absorb what this would mean for my life. I also realized that I needed to phone my parents to tell them that I was moving countries! Surprisingly, they seemed excited.

Not everything was smooth sailing from this point however. I applied for a work-permit in South Africa and my application was declined. This was due mostly to the fact that I applied while I was still in university, and the South African government wanted access to my complete academic transcript. Hence after completing my schooling, I applied again. This time, my application happened to be lost somewhere in Pretoria.

While all of this was happening, I was overseeing a landscape design project at Aunty Shirley's place on the West Coast. She had faithfully saved up and waited five years for me to finish my two degrees, so that I could then design her garden. This was mostly a fun project and I enjoyed living on the West Coast for a short while. Yet I did not know what to do about the position waiting for me in South Africa. With so much hassle in securing my South African work-permit, I began to wonder if the Lord really did want me to move there. While I was praying and pondering this over, I received a card from a friend with a verse from Isaiah 58:11 (NIV), which reads as follows:

The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

This was such a strange verse to send to me, and I felt that the Lord was using it to tell me that he still wanted me to go to that “sun-scorched land” in South Africa. After all, there was nothing “sun-scorched” about New Zealand. Green yes, but definitely not sun-scorched!

Still, my working visa was not coming through. Eventually I left Aunty-Shirley’s place and moved back to Mum and Dad’s in the North Island. My main job back on the farm was putting up new fences on Dad’s property. Every nail that I drove into every fence seemed to be accompanied with a prayer driven towards heaven, that I would indeed still go to South Africa.

Sometime after this though, an old high-school buddy Marcus organized for me to teach GIS at a postgraduate Maori university in the area. Relieved, and tired of farm labor, I accepted this short-term position which ending up paying remarkably well. It paid so well in fact, that within a few months I had managed to pay off most of my initial university loan. This had been a concern of mine, with going over to South Africa as a volunteer. Thus, this temporary position teaching GIS was a God-send. Still, eventually that work came to an end and I was back working on Dad’s farm again.

At some point, the original date in which I was due to fly out to South Africa came and went, as did the consecutive dates that I was supposed to fly. I did not understand why God would allow me to end up back on the farm, with no seeming hope of going anywhere. I felt that if God wasn't going to make anything happen, then I would. Desperately I began to search for GIS jobs elsewhere, and even applied for one in San Francisco.

Around this time though, my Grandma Reeve passed away. I was close to my Grandmother and would miss her, though it was strange seeing her at the funeral home with no life. This was the first time that I had ever seen a dead person, and overwhelmed, I began to weep publicly. I think this was also the first time that I had ever wept in front of others. I tended to avoid showing my emotions to others (and still somewhat do). Yet I admired my grandmother. She had suffered a hard life, but still she persevered to the end, with mostly a positive attitude. In retrospect, I am glad that there was a delay in my work-visa. The day of my grandmother's funeral was one of the dates that VSA had set for me to fly to South Africa, and instead, I played the keyboard at my Grandma's funeral. It would have been terrible for my mum to say goodbye to both her mum, and her son on the same day.

It was just after this, that my work-visa finally came through, which happened to be some ten months after originally applying for it. Thanks be to God! Suddenly though, this filled me with panic. Finally, everything seemed to be so much more real. Within just two weeks I would be living in a different country.

I had never even left New Zealand before that. Suddenly the prospect of hammering nails into Dad's fence posts and milking cows seemed more attractive. It was boring, but it was safe. Yet my destiny was now sealed.

South Africa – Beauty in People

What an incredible array of mixed emotions I carried on board with me, as I stepped onto that Cathay Pacific flight bound for South Africa on July 7th, 2000. My life as I knew it, would never be the same again. So much excitement was mingled with a pounding heart. What was I doing? Taking that step onto the plane seemed like a huge step of faith for me. In some ways, I even felt like I was signing a life-sentence for something that I had no clue about.

After stopping in transit via Hong Kong, we finally landed in Johannesburg, which is known as the City of Gold. Personally though, I have always found Johannesburg to be big, violent and full of dust. Thankfully though, this was not to be my final-destination. Eventually I would board another flight to East London, which was to be my home for the next seven years.

In contrast to big, bold and defiant Johannesburg, East London is a smaller, pretty coastal city in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. My new apartment was framed by pink bougainvillea vines and I was greeted to the smell of jasmine flowers. The view that this apartment looked out onto, was also most exquisite, with views to an estuary and river. This was laden with all kinds of coastal birds, and even fish-eagles from time to time. It was also a great place for

kayaking. Wherever I looked though, I saw vibrant color and bold shapes and forms. Over time, I would learn to appreciate the dramatic foliage of succulents, air-plants, bromeliads, and various types of palms. Although I am currently a non-landscape-architect with a landscape architecture degree, I still have much appreciation for beautiful foliage, and South Africa presented a grand stage for such beauty.

I also came to appreciate a diverse range of spectacular animals. Frequent guests to my home included translucent gecko's (that glowed if they happened to walk over a light) and vervet monkeys. Though I was generally fascinated with the monkeys, they could also become quite bothersome, especially when they would clamor into my outside trash can and empty its contents all over the patio. The grand variety of bird-species included the rather abrasive sounding guinea-fowls and hadeda's. Neither of these were among my favorite guests that frequented my abode, especially at 5 o'clock in the morning! In general, though, I was in love with the people, the plants and the animals in South Africa, and I felt incredibly blessed to be in such beautiful surrounds.

I found my work scene though to be incredibly casual and disorganized. With so little to do at first, I wondered why I was even there. Yet, I was told not to worry, as eventually I would find my way. My job description though was beginning to look quite different to that which I had anticipated. In fact, it would be quite some time before GIS training could occur, as first we would need to source computers and software, followed with basic computer training. I felt a

little cheated by this at first, but over time I learned to relax. After all, I had not come to South Africa just to train others in GIS. I had come to experience a new country and a new way of life. I had also come to test out the notion of being a missionary. Could I survive and adapt and engage in God's work in another culture? The idea excited me, and I believed that South Africa was a great place to put this notion to the test.

After driving around my new surrounds, I found a Baptist Church located quite close to where I lived. "Great!" I thought to myself, "This is a great place to start my search for a church home." As I drove into the church parking-lot though, a sense of fear gripped me. Visiting a new church required me to be more extraverted than I really am. As I entered the church, I was greeted by an elderly man who seemed very pleased to see me and asked for my contact details. From there I sat down in one of the pews. No one else greeted me or made eye-contact with me though, not even the man who I sat beside. I didn't know what to think. Although I was somewhat shy and introverted, I did want to become part of a church community. This was going to be very difficult, if no-one cared to welcome me. The church service overall was a nice one. Yet, I was still bothered that no-one made an effort to greet me, except for the nice elderly man at the door. I discovered that this man was the church's Visitation Pastor and so I reasoned that it was his job to be nice. I decided to continue looking around for another church.

For about a month after this, I continued to visit other churches. None really felt like “home” to me, and on top of that, I had a continual nagging feeling that I should give Beacon Baptist Church another try. I mostly rejected these thoughts when they arose, as I did not want to be part of an unfriendly community – even if their theology and culture was similar to my own. The nagging thoughts about this persisted however, so I began to pray about it. I also put a “fleece” out with God. I told God that I needed something concrete from this Baptist Church, so I could know if this indeed was the church that he was leading me to. I didn’t have to wait long. The next day in fact, I received a letter in the mail from Beacon Baptist Church. In that letter, the Pastor thanked me for joining them in worship (which by this time, had been six weeks prior). The Pastor then invited me to become part of Beacon’s faith-community, if I had not already found another community of faith. Well I hadn’t, and I couldn’t argue with God any longer!

The following Sunday, I headed somewhat reluctantly back to Beacon Baptist Church. Just like the first time I had visited, no one spoke to me or welcomed me in any way. “Well this is great Lord!” I inwardly grumbled. However, by the end of the service, I had determined that if no one was going to speak to me, then I was going to speak to them. I made my way to the front of the church and spoke to some of the Praise Band. I offered my services to play the piano, in case they needed another piano player. Karen, the lady who I initially spoke to, was speechless. She said to me and to others, “We have been praying for a pianist! Little did we know that God would send one to us from New Zealand!”

This personal initiative seemed to change my entire experience at Beacon Baptist. People suddenly became very friendly. I was invited repeatedly to different homes for meals and to play cricket on the beach. I also became friends with a guy named Steve, who invited me to stay at his family's beach cottage. The contrast between my initial experience, and what was beginning to unfold was incredible.

Soon I found myself reasonably integrated into this church community. I became part of a small-group, which was studying the gifts of the Spirit. After attending this group for a while, and then a consequent one-day seminar on spiritual-gifts, I was fascinated to learn that I had spiritual gifts in prophecy, faith, and as a missionary. I was still a little skeptical about the methodology of the assessments leading to these conclusions, but I still found the results to be of great interest.

Some months after joining this church, I began to feel that God was convicting and calling me to lead the Praise Team. Inwardly I revolted at this. I had no leadership experience and I was still very much a newbie to the church. Also, I wasn't even a church member at this time. Yet the former worship leader had left (not under the best of circumstances), and the team was floundering a little. Like previous times when I have felt God calling me to do something, I continued to experience nagging thoughts about this. As I did earlier, I put out another "fleece" to the Lord (though I do not endorse this methodology of discernment). I prayed that if God wanted me to be in this position, then the Pastor himself would have to ask me.

Shortly after this, the Praise-team decided not to have their usual Thursday night practice for some reason, but I had forgotten about this and turned up at the church anyway. While there, I decided to practice on the piano before heading home. As I was practicing though, I heard some footsteps slowly coming up behind me, and it was the Pastor. It didn't take him long to get to the point and ask me, "Would you be willing to lead the Praise Team? We need someone like you to lead it." I was a little shocked, that God had answered my second fleece in such a way at this church. A little dumbstruck, I told him that I would think and pray about it. At this point, it seemed like the spiritual thing to say. Yet I knew that God was leading me into this position. From that time on, leading the Praise Team at Beacon Baptist became a prominent part of my life. I was determined that I would do everything that I could, to be an effective leader, even if this was a voluntary position (as many leadership positions in South African churches are).

I began to really love ministering and being a part of Beacon Baptist Church. Again, like at Hornby Christian Center, I received plenty of encouragement and affirmation, but much more so than previously. Many of the women at the church wanted to marry me off to their daughters and I was beginning to experience plenty of attention from several of the girls in the church also. All of this was new to me. I had never experienced attention like this before and I didn't really know what to do with it.

In some respects, the affirmation that Beacon Baptist (and even my workplace) heaped on me, was just what I needed, at least at first. I lapped it all

up like a dog greedily gulping down its breakfast. My soul was still hungry and terribly insecure. But how does one go about receiving a lot of affirmation in an appropriate way, after never really receiving any? Perhaps it is best not to interrogate such thoughts too much, but just to let such happen at the time, and when it does happen generously, not to fault it. This I did at Beacon Baptist, as I had done previously somewhat at Hornby. While I still did not really understand affirmation, nor know what to do with it, it still felt very good. I was beginning to feel loved and wanted, and I finally felt like I belonged somewhere.

Of course, not all of this was good for me. As affirmation was generously heaped on me, my ego began to grow in an unhealthy way. I also began to orient my actions on doing what I knew would please others around me, and what would cause favorable attention in my direction. This was easy to do. After all, I could speak “evangelical-ese.” I had grown up with this language, and I had also learned how to present myself well to others. Nobody really knew though just how terribly insecure I was inside. Yet God was incredibly gracious to me in spite of my easily inflatable, but also easily deflatable ego. During this time, God allowed for my soul to be built up, and he provided for this through the love and encouragement given by the South African people. There would later come a time when all the false layers would be peeled away, one by one. But for now, I was beginning to discover a new kind of beauty. I was finding that people could be beautiful and kind and good.

This human beauty extended well beyond my church context. I loved hanging out with my Xhosa workmates. The Xhosa tribe is the predominant African tribe in the Eastern Cape where I was living. These people are known particularly, because their language has three unique “clicks” in it, which are sounded when a “q,” “x” or “c” are used in verbalization. I became fascinated with the language and did all that I could to learn a street version of Xhosa. This was a helpful tool in many respects, especially to gain respect from the Xhosa people. Most white South Africans cannot speak Xhosa, and so the Xhosa people take notice when someone of Caucasian descent makes the effort to address them in their own language.

I was not only fascinated with the Xhosa language, but also with the Xhosa people themselves. I began to regularly hang out with my workmates in the weekends. One weekend I joined some of them and went to a rural Xhosa Village for an excursion. We happened to come at a time when a cow-slaughtering ceremony was taking place. A cow may be slaughtered for various reasons. One of these is when a family member dreams about his or her grandparent ancestors asking for food or water. The rest of the family must then be informed about this. The village elders will then tell the person who had the dream to make a traditional beer if the ancestors asked for water, or slaughter one or more cows if the ancestors have asked for food. The whole family and village then must be informed of the date of the function.

I admit that I did not enjoy this ceremony, even though the villagers were incredibly hospitable. The ceremony began with the men of the village dancing in circles in one of the rondavels (round mud huts). Following the dance, the men then proceeded outside and made speeches to their ancestors. On this occasion two cows were slaughtered. Essentially, they were speared to death. With such treatment, the two cows bellowed, which was followed by the villagers vigorously cheering. The villagers believed that this was a sign of their ancestors approving, and that they would become more prosperous and have more cows. Following this, one of the village-men had his eye on my workmate Nokwanele and asked her to marry him. She promptly informed him, that she was already married to me!

While I laughed at Nokwanele's words, such sentiments were not uncommon. I cannot begin to count the number of times that my Xhosa-women-workmates informed others that they were married to me. Sometimes this was funny, and other times it proved to be a social experiment, as I generally did not correct them. One of my other Xhosa workmates Ayanda loved to go to the movies, and so I would sometimes go with her. When other Xhosa people saw her and I together, they would excitedly ask her in Xhosa whether we were married. Generally, she said "yes!" The Xhosa response however, was very different to that of the white South Africans. When white people saw me at the movies with a black girl, I would often attract dirty looks, as if they were saying, "How could you betray the white race?"

Unfortunately, racism was still very much a part of the South African fabric at this time. Apartheid had only ceased to be legal in 1995, and I arrived in the year 2000. I was initially shocked to discover that even the churches were still mostly “white churches” or “black churches,” except for some charismatic churches. I was further shocked to see just how racist some white Christians could be. On one occasion, some Christian friends laughed hysterically when Nelson Mandela was referred to in detail as an ape. Racism could go both ways, however. Most people think of racism as being directed towards black people. But I would also hear racist commentary from my black workmates and others who were quite happy to do this in front of me, as they generally didn’t regard me as a white person, at least in the same way as they saw other white people.

Still, even though South Africa has a number of challenges ahead – positive changes are happening, even with regards to race relations, and I am encouraged to see a New South Africa emerging. While I was still in South Africa, some black people (albeit mostly rich) began attending Beacon Baptist. But I also witnessed other, even beautiful things taking place, such as young black and white kids holding hands on their way to school. South Africa is slowly becoming the Rainbow Nation that it is striving to identify itself as.

When it comes to race-relations, missions (both short-term and long-term) can be a wonderful vehicle to achieve such. I enjoyed a number of short-term mission trips which brought blacks and whites together, through Jesus Christ. On one occasion, I went with some others from our church on a weekend mission’s

trip to a rural village, about three hours inland from East London. What an experience! The daytime was spent sharing the Gospel and singing, with Xhosa interpretation.

That night however, the heavens opened with torrential rain, lightning and thunder. This was all happening while we huddled and participated in a church service in a large rondavel. Because there was no electricity in this village, the villagers would melt the wax of candles into the round mud walls, and the candles would then be glued into the walls by the supporting wax. What an ingenious way to have light.

As the church-service continued, my senses became fully alive to everything that was happening. Xhosa singing inside the rondavel competed with the violent claps of thunder outside, or perhaps the heavens themselves were joining the throng to shout glory unto God. Candles flickered around the circular mud-hut, as news about *The Light of the World* was shared. And of course, I would be remiss if I did not tell of the smell, of the cow-dung floors! The locals had especially “re-dunged” the rondavel floors with fresh cow-dung to honor our arrival. How thoughtful! After the service, we then hopped back into our church’s VW Kombi (van) and prayed fervently that we would not get stuck in the incredible mud-bath that had developed, as we drove back to our rondavel. That night I slept in a freshly-dunged mud-hut with a bunch of other guys, along with mosquitos and a hen which was sitting on eggs. It was a treat to be in rural Africa.

Church life was interesting in other ways also. I was increasingly finding the charismatic culture of local Christians to be contagious, not that I needed much encouragement in this area. Although Beacon Baptist would not consider itself to be charismatic, there were still some “closet-charismatics” within the church. Some of these would speak quietly about their experience of speaking in tongues (in a private capacity). Completely fascinated, I began to read widely about this spiritual gift, among other spiritual gifts.

On one occasion I was reading a book about spiritual gifts by the late South African Pastor, Ed Roebert. I found myself being incredibly drawn to this book, as the author described how the different spiritual gifts, including the miraculous ones, were being discerningly manifested in his congregation in Hatfield, Pretoria. Pastor Ed also spoke about the gift of tongues. As I was reading this book one evening, I suddenly began to feel a prompting to speak in tongues myself. I was afraid to do so though, as I really didn’t know what to do. While feeling this way, I then became a little taken aback as I continued reading and the author issued an invitation to speak in tongues. “Can anyone just ‘do’ this?” I wondered to myself. “Isn’t this just a gift for only some in the church – and yet, doesn’t Paul say that he would like for all to speak in tongues in 1st Corinthians 14:5?” I wasn’t quite sure what to do at this point, but I decided to try out this practice. Nothing happened, though I did feel like something was trying to stop me. Perhaps it was my own rationalizing. At this point I became somewhat discouraged, and I decided to get up and make myself a cup of Milo.

Still, I was fascinated with the book and so I settled down to read it again. As I did that though, I sensed the Spirit prompting me to simply open my mouth, and the tongues would come. Rather hesitantly, I did so. What happened next is very hard to explain, and I am not even sure that it is wise to do so, yet I feel I must. As I opened my mouth and began to speak, I felt like a river of pure joy was flowing out of my soul and through my mouth. I did not know that it was possible to even experience so much joy. At this point, I did not really know what I was doing, or what was happening to me, but I didn't want it to stop. I then grabbed my Bible and began to read various Psalms in tongues.

I write about this experience here, albeit briefly, because I wish I could have read more about other people's experiences in this regard. What is the purpose of this private and devotional tongue? I can understand its use in a corporate time of worship, but my assumption is that a "private tongue" (in comparison to a "corporate tongue") is simply for personal edification, or perhaps to engage in intercessory prayer. On occasion when I have prayed intensely in tongues, I have wondered if I am interceding for someone or something, or perhaps even engaging in spiritual warfare. All of this is a mystery, but perhaps it is best that way.

During my time in South Africa, I also became exposed to other supernatural gifts, mostly with regards to healing and prophecy. On one occasion, my workmate Nokwanele became seriously ill and was dying. Some suspected that she had HIV/Aids, which affects between 20-60% of the population in

different parts of South Africa, but the reason was unknown. I visited her in hospital on several occasions and prayed for her, though I felt hopeless as I wished that God would heal her. Eventually, her condition deteriorated to such a degree, that it seemed like her death was imminent. When our workplace became aware of this, we were all encouraged to visit Nokwanele, while she was still alive. This was a little awkward under the circumstances, especially not knowing if this would be the last time that we would see her. However, unbeknownst to us, Nokwanele's dad had also desperately prayed for her, at her bedside. His prayer is one of the best that I have ever heard about. It went something like this. "Lord, I don't know his name, but I know that you healed some man beside a pool of water in the Bible. And Lord if you can heal him, then heal my daughter!" Following this, the Lord was gracious, and Nokwanele was wonderfully restored back to health and was back at work in no time. I smile as I think about that prayer. Surely these are the kind that the Lord likes the most. Simple, unpretentious, and sincere.

Following Nokwanele's healing however, she continued her life as though nothing had happened, and she began to re-embrace a lifestyle that was not pleasing to God. I began to strongly sense that the Lord wanted me to talk to her about this. I was afraid however and did not want to be God's spokesperson, so I procrastinated.

Evidently, God did want Nokwanele to hear this message, but because I was delaying in telling her, the Lord then sent someone else to her. I heard all

about this one morning at work, as my workmates excitedly jabbered to each other and then to me, “Did you hear what happened to Nokwanele?” Well it didn’t take long before the whole story came out. My former workmate Siphon, had been travelling about 40 miles away in the opposite direction, when he received a vision from God. He knew that God was asking him to speak to Nokwanele, to tell her that she needed to change her lifestyle. God had been gracious in healing her, and now she needed to live a life that honored him. This was the same message that I had felt God impacting on me, only I failed to be his spokesman. Siphon however did not fail in this regard. He turned around, and proceeded to our office, and then told Nokwanele about the vision God that had given to him.

When I heard about what had happened the next morning, I felt ashamed of myself. I knew that God had chosen someone else to speak to Nokwanele, after I had not obliged. Upon hearing this though, I went straight to Nokwanele’s office and I told her that God had given me the same message, but that I had failed to give it to her. She gasped and cried out “yhu, is God going to kill me?!” I laughed and said to her, “no he’s not going to kill you, but God has given you a second chance and he now wants you to use that, to honor him.” It was a moment of revelation for both of us.

The miracles continued in South Africa, and God continued to open my eyes up to these through personal experience. I think God graciously allowed this to happen, as I wanted to believe in such, yet I had still not seen many miracles,

especially first hand. Perhaps my cessationist upbringing was stronger than I wanted to think. However, I was about to witness miracles of healing first hand, even in my own church at Beacon Baptist.

The first of these occasions, was when our diaconate was called upon to lay hands and pray for a woman in our church with cancer. I participated along with the other deacons, even though I was cynical. Pastor Angus then anointed this lady with oil and began to pray for her. As he did this though, I began to feel a tingling sensation reverberate throughout my body. A little startled, I began to wonder if this lady had in fact been healed. I didn't dare suggest this though to anyone else. After all, what if I was wrong? Well God in his mercy did touch that woman with healing that day, but in another way, he also touched me.

This was not the only occasion where this would happen. One of our praise-team members, Miranda, requested prayer for healing for breast-cancer, even though she could not be with us, when we prayed during practice. But we faithfully lifted her up in prayer, along with some other prayer requests, and then went on with our music practice as usual. Among the songs chosen for us to practice that evening however was a song about God's healing. As we began to practice this song together, I experienced the same tingling sensation wash over me. This time I was convinced that healing had taken place, and I wanted to stop playing my keyboard to exclaim this! Yet as I scanned the faces of everyone else, it seemed like no-one else had experienced anything. Thus again, I became afraid that I might be wrong and so I said nothing.

Fear is a silly thing, but how it keeps us from exclaiming the goodness of God to others. That evening I could have proclaimed in faith that God had been merciful in healing Miranda. Which is exactly what happened. The next day I received a text message from my best friend Warwick (who was one of our church drummer's) to say that Miranda had indeed been healed. Warwick had received a text-message from his mother who was a friend of Miranda's. Miranda had been to the doctor for testing and her results had proved this.

The Lord continued to work with healing in our midst, and the next time this happened was for my cat Garfield, and again it involved our Praise Team! After coming home from work one day, I stepped inside briefly to collect something before heading out again. Little did I know, that Garfield had decided to warm himself up on one of my car-tires during those five minutes. But after getting what I needed from home, I then got into my car and backed out as quickly as I had driven in. Thud! It was the most awful sensation. I stopped the car to see what I had driven over. It was Garfield. Absolutely horrified, I tried to catch him, but amazingly, somehow, he ran into the surrounding forest. I felt sick and did not know what to do, but I began to pray for him. Still that night I did not see him, nor did I see him the following day. As several days went by, I began to think the worst, that he had gone into the neighboring forest to die, and I was heart-broken. Garfield was my little buddy who I had become very attached to. I had found him at an animal shelter when I was actually looking for a dog. Perhaps more accurately at that time, Garfield had found me!

After several days, I tried to accept the fact that I would not see Garfield again. That Thursday afternoon however, I arrived home from work, and it wasn't long before I heard a pitiful meowing sound. It was Garfield, who was gasping and rasping terribly for breath. I was at once both pleased and shocked to see him still alive, and I rushed him off to the vet. Following that I went to the Praise-Team practice at our church, and of course, we also prayed for my cat! Following this, I continued to hope and reason with God that if he cared for the sparrows like his Word says, then shouldn't he also care for the sparrow-eaters too, and thus save my cat!

I heard nothing from the veterinary clinic on Friday and was a little too scared to phone them, in case I would hear bad news. Early on Saturday morning however, my vet phoned. Garfield was alive! The vet then told me that this was a cat who shouldn't be alive. He said it was a miracle. The vet had worked around the clock to reconstruct Garfield's insides, and he was amazed that Garfield survived. I then told him that our Praise Team had been praying for Garfield! I smile as I remember this, because I think Garfield even became famous after this experience. The vet told me that he had submitted Garfield's x-ray scans to be published in a veterinary journal. That whole experience made me considerably poorer, but how I praised God that yes, he truly does care for the sparrow and the sparrow-eater alike!

There are so many reasons why I thank God for bringing me to Beacon Baptist, and particularly into Beacon's Praise Team. In October of 2002, I

suggested to our Praise Team that we take a road-trip to Durban to attend a worship conference. Durban is about an eight-hour drive north of East London. Some of the team agreed and one of them suggested that we stay with Noel and Pat Oberem, a family who had previously been at Beacon Baptist but had relocated to Durban. Noel had at one time been the Praise Team Leader at Beacon, while they were still in East London. It was agreed, and that was where we stayed. Finally, after a long drive through the Transkei – a rural part of South Africa, with lots of goats, donkeys and pot-holes – we arrived! As we arrived though, I couldn't help but notice a girl who was standing shyly there with her family, to greet us. It was Noel and Pat's daughter Janine. I was in love! It's funny the things that one remembers, when love is in the mix, as I can still remember Janine wearing a blue Billabong t-shirt that day, and she also remembers me wearing Rexona Cologne!

Needless to say, we enjoyed each other's company and conversation that weekend, and some of the older ladies in our Praise Team began speculating about an upcoming relationship. This did not happen however, at least for a while. In my stupidity, I allowed another girl to come into my life over the following summer. Though this relationship with her did not work out, it did put a strain on things between Janine and I for a while (She was after all Janine's best friend!). When we did eventually begin communicating again however, I became hopeful. I then planned to come to Durban for the next annual worship conference, to worship, of course (among other things). It was a very special conference and

Janine and I became very close. I stayed in Durban for an extra day, and that Sunday morning I went with Janine to her church. That afternoon Janine planned for us both to go ice-skating together. How incredibly romantic, apart from the fact that I cannot skate to save myself! After fumbling and bumbling my way around the ice-skating rink, holding onto the outer rails for dear life, I decided that I was too clumsy for a repeat experience, especially on a first “date.” Meanwhile, Janine had imagined us romantically twirling on the ice together. However, my skating ineptness did mean that Janine and I spent considerable time talking on the side of the skating-rink, which wasn’t so bad. In fact, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Following that, I headed back to East London. Janine and I were still not officially dating at this point, though in my mind, we were dating, even if it was long-distance. Several months later, I would head back to New Zealand for Christmas. This made me a little nervous though, as a previous relationship had gone south after I headed back to New Zealand. I did not want this one to head in the same direction. This was a needless concern however, as Janine was waiting at the East London airport for me when I arrived back, as was a church friend of mine. Thus, it didn’t take long before ALL two-hundred people in my church knew that I was dating Janine, even though it still wasn’t official. Well after this, it didn’t take too long before our relationship did become official, with some helpful prompting from one of Janine’s aunts who lived in East London.

Time went on and we mostly enjoyed a blissful long-distance dating relationship. We tried to phone each other and email each other every day. Janine

was more diligent in writing letters, but she also occasionally got one from me. We would also take turns traveling to each other's city, or both of us would meet up at her parent's home in Worcester (near Cape Town), where they had since moved to. Life was going well, and I was happy.

We dated for about three years when my Pastor, Angus invited Janine and I to lunch one day, when she happened to be visiting. During this time, he challenged both of us to get married. While the idea of this was nice, we both thought it to be impossible. Janine was studying in a Chiropractic degree in Durban, and my South African working-visa only allowed for me to work where I was, so we told Angus that there was no way for us to get married. He replied, "Have you asked God to make a way?" We had not! It seemed both so simple and impossible all at once. That night at our church service however, the Praise Team sang Don Moen's song, "God will make a way, where there seems to be no way." Perhaps God was talking to us.

God indeed was talking to us and I think I knew that. Prior to this experience, I had been resisting God's call into pastoral ministry. If I am to be honest, I think this calling even began, while I was studying Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University in New Zealand. At that time one of my friend's Anna, randomly said, "I think you're going to be a Pastor one day." At that time, I laughed this seeming absurdity off and tried not to think too much more about it. Once in South Africa however, others began to speak into my life in the same regard.

The first of these was Cathy, my seventy-year-old mentor. Cathy had at one time led our Praise Band and was still a member of the team. Somehow, she saw something in me that I didn't see. In some respects, I called her "my Aaron." When God asked Moses to speak to the people, he resisted, and he asked God to send Aaron instead. God then used Aaron as Moses' spokesperson whenever he needed a backup. I felt that Cathy fulfilled this role for me. On every occasion that I lacked confidence, Cathy could step up, though more often than not, she would encourage me to the point where I could step up myself. I owe Cathy a lot. She is mostly the reason that I am where I am today.

Cathy prophesized two things in my life and both have become true. The first was that I would become a Pastor. The second, was that I would experience much pain in my life. More on the latter, later. However, because of Cathy's encouragement regarding pastoral ministry, I enrolled in some long-distance theological studies for a while, with the South African Theological Seminary. At that time, I reasoned that these studies would prove useful, even if I never became a Pastor.

Not long after enrolling in these studies however, Pastor Angus became the pastor at Beacon Baptist. It didn't take long, before Pastor Angus became a good mentor of mine. Like Cathy, he saw something in me that I did not see, and like Cathy, he somehow knew that I was going to be a Pastor. After his exhortation in this direction, I felt that I could no longer ignore God's call. I had been struggling with this internally for some time in any case.

My objections about pastoral ministry were mostly twofold. Firstly, my Brethren upbringing had led me to believe that having a Pastor to lead a church was not biblical. The Open Brethren churches that I had been part of in New Zealand were generally led by a team of elders rather than pastors (though this has since changed, and pastors are now common.) Hence it took me some time to accept that there was in fact a biblical precedent for having one or more pastors, to oversee a church. But perhaps more than this, my greatest hesitancy for not accepting a pastoral call, was one of personal doubt. I highly doubted my own ability to preach. I would shudder as I recalled my experience with high school speeches, and I did not want to think of doing, what I considered to be the equivalent of this, most Sundays, each year.

After I shared these thoughts with Pastor Angus, he then read a passage to me from 1st Corinthians 2:4-5 (NIV), which says, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.” I couldn’t argue with this, even if I wanted to. Pastor Angus then went on to share his own story about not wanting to preach. When he was younger, he had a terrible stutter. But God in his grace had healed him of this. I was astonished to learn about this, and would never had known this otherwise, based on his excellent preaching ability.

Now that I had no arguments left to lean on, Pastor Angus then decided to start some preaching classes at the church. Several guys including myself were

invited to preach a twenty-minute sermon each, based on a supplied Scripture passage. We then presented these sermons during class-time and received feedback from Pastor Angus and another elder. As I preached my sermon, which was about the paralyzed man being brought to Jesus, I sensed my own vocal paralysis lifting. More than that, I sensed a surge of the Spirit rise within me. Indeed, it was a demonstration of the Spirit's power that I would be preaching with, and not my own.

It wasn't long after this experience that I began to preach at Beacon Baptist occasionally, and found myself somewhat enjoying the experience. I began to feel that God had endowed me with a gifting in this area, which surprised me. More than that I began to get serious about my theological training. Up to this point, I had not taken my long-distance studies too seriously. But now I began to realize that I needed to be studying full-time, a point that Pastor Angus had been reiterating for a while!

It was at this time that I began to look at studying in America. The reason for this was that none of the seminaries in South Africa (or New Zealand for that matter) offered the Master of Divinity degree. I could acquire a Bachelor of Theology, but I was not looking for a second undergraduate degree.

Although I was interested in studying in America, I did not want to leave Janine. I did mention the idea to her once casually, but I also told her that I wasn't seriously thinking about it, because of our relationship. Well, it was about five months after this, that Pastor Angus invited Janine and I over for lunch and then

challenged us about getting married, and about praying for a way to make this possible! Janine began to pray that God would make a way. Little did she know what this would mean for both of us.

Around this time, I began to think more seriously about going to seminary in America again. In fact, I am not sure that the idea had ever really left me. Hence, I thought and prayed about the idea some more. I looked at several seminaries in the United States and settled on one in Chicago which was located within driving distance from a Chiropractic school for Janine. I began to pray about this and spoke to Pastor Angus about it, which was met with his encouragement.

At some point after this, I wrote a long email to Janine explaining my thoughts about getting married, and then both of us going to the States to study. I spent such a long time writing and rewriting this email, but eventually I plucked up the courage to send it. This was ten days after Janine began praying that God would open a way for us to be married. At that time, I did not know this.

I spoke to Janine on the phone that night and she said nothing about the email that I had sent. Curious, I asked her if she had received any emails from me that day. She hadn't. I then asked her to go and check again, and I would then phone her in ten minutes. All the waiting was excruciating, as I had no idea how she would respond to my idea. To this day however, Janine has never received that email. Somehow it got lost in cyberspace and I was forced to explain my (or God's) plan about getting married and then moving to America to study. At the

time, Janine did not say “yes” or “no,” but she did promise to pray about it. This was all that I could ask.

Janine began to pray that God would give her a sign signaling that he wanted us to move to America. None were forthcoming. After some months however, on one Sunday morning, Janine simply woke up with a sense of peace about the idea, and decided that yes, we were to move to America. At church that morning, her Pastor preached from Hebrews 11:8 (NIV) which says, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” This confirmed what Janine already knew, that we were to go to America.

For the following Christmas in 2006, I joined Janine at her parents place in Worcester. It was here that I also wanted Noel’s blessing to marry his daughter. I really did not know how this would pan out. Fortunately, God orchestrated everything for the good. After a hearty Christmas lunch, everyone retired to bed for an afternoon nap, except for Noel and me. We began talking and the conversation was going so well that I felt comfortable enough to casually ask him if I could have his blessing to marry his daughter. I think this surprised both of us, but the important thing was that he replied “absolutely!” From there, I had only a few days to put my plan of proposal into action before I headed back to East London.

I then asked Janine if we could spend the day together in Cape Town on December 28th. We would go to the Kirstenbosch Gardens and then go up the

cable-car to the Table Mount. Delightfully, she agreed. It was a very hot summer's day, but we enjoyed meandering through the gardens and then made our way to the Table Mount. Once we got to the top, we enjoyed walking around the top of the mountain. Little did Janine know that I was also trying to find a suitable spot to propose. As I was doing this though, the mountain suddenly became clothed in a thick fog. The infamous Table Mount "Table Cloth" had enveloped us! Not anticipating this, I was devastated! There went my sunset proposal!

Well, I was still determined to propose to Janine on the Table Mount, so I took her inside to where the restaurant was, and I gave her a photo-album which contained photos of some of our good memories together. Finally though, she turned over to the page. There hidden inside the album was an engagement-ring case, surrounded by the words, *Will You Marry Me?* Of course, she said "Yes!" and of course the ring fitted perfectly!

The next few months went by very quickly. Our initial plan was to get married in July, and then leave for the States in August, so we would be ready for the start of our school semesters in September. Before this happened though, I was offered a \$500 grant by my seminary to attend an orientation at the school. This paid for half of my plane-ticket, so I decided it was worth the money and effort, to scout out the area. I was excited and nervous to fly to the States. This was the first time that I had ever been there.

On the first night of arriving in the States however, I found out that Janine had not been accepted into her American school. This was shocking news! Prior to this, she had been promised a year's worth of credit by her school and now they weren't even letting her in! I suddenly felt a huge weight of despair. Were we making a big mistake in coming to America? That night I couldn't sleep because of jet-lag. As I gazed out of my hotel room, I desperately prayed to God that he would show me if we were doing the right thing. Following that, I opened my Bible and landed on the following passage in Isaiah 55:10-11,13 (NIV):

As the rain and the snow
 come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
 without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
 so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
 It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
 and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
 and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord's renown,
 for an everlasting sign,
 that will endure forever.

This passage really spoke to me, that first night in America – particularly the parts about snow and thorn-bushes! Looking out from my hotel room, I could see both snow and juniper trees and not thorn-bushes! I had thorn-bushes growing in my own backyard in South Africa, they are very common South African trees. But after reading this, I felt convinced that God was going to replace the thorn-bushes with the junipers, and that indeed he was still leading us to America. I just needed

to trust that he would continue to provide for the way forward, even though nothing was making sense at this time.

I enjoyed my time at my seminary, and then went and visited Janine's school. I did not anticipate such a large walk from the Train Station to her school though, and my shoes were thoroughly soaked from walking so far in the snow. While visiting her school's bookstore however, I began talking to the cashier. When the cashier heard my story, she decided to take her lunch-break early and give me a ride back to the train-station. Along the way, I found out that she was a believer. I thanked God for sending one of his people at this time to help me.

From there I caught the train to Wheaton to look at the Billy Graham Museum at Wheaton College, which came highly recommended. This is a beautiful center and I became somewhat convicted as I read Billy Graham's words, "Oh God, I'll be what You want me to be and I'll go where You want me to go." At that time, I made this prayer, my prayer.

Returning to South Africa was bittersweet. What an extraordinary contrast between these two worlds, in just one week! Still, the next few months went by very quickly, until at last it was July, the month we were getting married! The date that we picked was July 7th, 2007 which is 07-07-07. The reason that we picked this date was not because it was a cool date (or so I'd remember our anniversary date!), but because that was the weekend that suited our international contingency the best. We had family and friends arriving from New Zealand, the UK, Japan and America. It took a bit of juggling to find a wedding date that suited

all, and 07-07-07 happened to be it. As I was writing my wedding speech though, I also reflected on how the number seven symbolized perfection. But then I also realized something that I had not considered earlier, that our wedding date was also seven years to the *day* that I had left New Zealand to move to South Africa. They say God is in the details! With all these sevens lining up, we felt God's hand of blessing on our marriage. Seven years after leaving New Zealand, I was about to begin a new chapter of my life.

Although I had pre-wedding jitters, our wedding really was a lovely day. We decided to get married in Worcester, which is the town Janine's parents live in. This is a stunningly beautiful area surrounded by mountains and wineries. Some of the best wines in South Africa are produced in this area and we were able to enjoy some of these at our reception. By the end of this day we were very tired, but happy. From there we had a few days meandering along the beautiful Garden Route of South Africa, and then we returned to my home in East London.

It was not to be home for long though. Janine needed to finish off her year of schooling which hopefully would give her entrance into her American school. This was a change to our original plans, which now required me moving to Durban for six months, until Janine finished off her studies at the end of 2007. Moving to Durban was quite an adjustment for me. However, my workplace was very decent and flew me back to East London each month for a week at a time. I spent the rest of my time doing some online seminary classes and playing squash with Pieter, a new friend that I had made in Durban.

The time finally came though, when we were to leave Durban for good. We travelled from there to East London and I was able to say goodbye to everyone at Beacon Baptist. How I would miss my dear friends there, who had really become like family to me. From there, we drove to Worcester, to Janine's parent's place for Christmas. Both Janine's friend Jo from Durban and my best-friend Warwick also joined us in Worcester, to see us a little longer before we left for America. Then finally, that day came, December 31st, 2007.

Chicago, USA – Beauty in Pain and Struggle

Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
Those who go through the desolate valley
will find it a place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
- Psalm 84:4-5 (NRSV)

Stepping onto the plane in Cape Town that would take us to America, reminded me of when I had stepped onto a plane in Auckland to travel to South Africa. Crossing this threshold was equally as terrifying! I sometimes wonder why God has given me a nomadic spirit (as does my wife!), but I thirst for travel and adventure. Yet this thirst is also accompanied with certain heart tremors, when the time finally comes to relocate, especially when this involves moving countries.

Still, at last we were on our way to America. Our luggage was twelve kilograms overweight and we were too poor to afford to pay for excess luggage.

Janine jokingly commented that perhaps God would make the airport scales malfunction. Rather self-righteously I exclaimed, “That’s just dishonest! God would never do that!” Still, I worried about how we would get through the three different airports on our journey, with such excessive weight. As it was, both of us were wearing several layers of clothing to lighten our load. I think Janine was wearing about five layers, and I teased her about looking like a Telletubby!

We finally arrived at Dusseldorf in Germany. The first league of our journey was over, though this was not going to be without complications. Neither Janine nor I had anticipated that we would need German visas while in transit, but Janine did, because of her South African passport, and because we were changing airlines. Suddenly, we became surrounded by German police-officers, who spoke next to no English. One burly policeman then took Janine away, to the transit area and I had to take both her passport and luggage with me, and check us both in. This was awful. We could not find many people in Dusseldorf who spoke English, and I hoped and prayed that Janine was ok. Thankfully, my New Zealand passport easily allows me into many countries, but Janine’s South African passport is not like this. Some countries place South Africa on a similar list to Iran and Iraq!

I took Janine’s luggage and headed to the check-in area, praying all the way. Not only did I now have to worry about our excessive luggage, but I also had to worry about whether the airline would allow me to check in Janine’s luggage, without her being present. And, would I get to see her again? I was tired

and emotional, and so my mind exaggerated every possibility at this stage. I lined up to check in my luggage and to my dismay, I saw that the man checking in before me, had to repack his tiny suitcase, as the check-in clerk informed him that it was overweight! “Oh God!” I prayed, “Help us!” If this man needed to repack his small suitcase, what hope was there for us? I then reluctantly put both of our suitcases onto the scale and took a deep breath, wondering what the clerk would say. As I did so though, my eyes grew big. The scales malfunctioned! According to the scales, our luggage was twelve kilograms less than it really was! Did God cause those scales to malfunction? This tested my theology and it challenged my rather self-righteous comment to Janine earlier! Nevertheless, ego aside, I was still incredibly relieved. Our luggage was booked from there, all the way through to Chicago, even though we had another stop-over in Dublin first. From there I made my way to the transit area, praying that I would find Janine. When I saw her at last, my heart skipped a few beats! I was so relieved. This journey had already become so harrowing. Was this indicative of what was to come, in this next chapter of our lives?

Janine then became incredibly sick on our flight to Dublin, and a sweet Italian lady who sat beside us in the plane began to pray her rosary for Janine. We spent that night, New Year’s Eve, trying to sleep in the Dublin airport. Easier said than done! Loud speakers with booming music were used to deter us from sleeping in the airport and an old lady hovered around us, looking like she wanted to steal our luggage! We persisted in this space, though we didn’t get much sleep.

Thankfully though, Janine was feeling much better the next morning, and so we caught a double-decker bus into Dublin to see the sights and sounds of this Irish city. My Irish genes strongly resonated with this place, and I absolutely fell in love with it. Eventually though, it was time to head back to the airport and to board our flight to the States. Then some eight hours later, we made it to Chicago. Within 36 hours we had gone from 40°C (105°F) temperatures in South Africa, to a freezing snow-laden blizzard in Chicago. What had we come to? We were both excited ... and scared!

Upon arriving in Chicago, it was lovely to be greeted by a pastor who I had been communicating with by email. As I consider the blizzard he drove through to get to the O'Hare Airport that day, it made me even more amazed and thankful to see him! That night, we slept in what would become our new American home, at least for a few months. I had been able to organize accommodation with an elderly couple who were close to the seminary. They had advertised for a seminary couple to help them with yard-work in exchange for free rent.

Just before we flew to America however, the latter deal fell away, and the man Gene, decided to charge us rent, as he said there wasn't really any work for us to do. This in fact, still ended up being about 20 hours of work for us both, each week. Gene's wife Kay was paralyzed, and so Janine's day would begin by doing two hours of therapy with Kay. Janine would then sweep the floors of their

rather extensive house, and then she was to be available for any errands that Gene decided she should do.

The irony of all of this, is that Janine had become a maid in America! Prior to this, she had grown up in South Africa in a family that had both maids and gardeners. I myself, had also employed a part-time maid and gardener in South Africa. Initially I resisted doing this, thinking that it was exploitation. Eventually though I decided to employ a maid, but I determined to pay her as well as possible, and support her family through their education. Now in America, Janine had become a maid, and I had become a gardener. We were doing this, without being paid, while still paying rent. Still, we had a roof over our heads, so we tried to be thankful. We thought that we could witness God's goodness to Gene and Kay, if we set a good example with our lifestyle.

As time went on, I fully immersed myself in my seminary studies, though I also started to become incredibly anxious. Firstly, I was not sure how we would continue to afford my studies, and Janine's, once she was accepted into her school. Secondly, I was on several scholarships which covered about a third of my tuition. I was worried however, that my grades would be insufficient to keep these scholarships going. Night after night, I would like awake with butterflies in my stomach.

Meanwhile, Janine was also having her own battles. She tried hard to be cheerful in her daily work for Gene and Kay, but this is not what she had come to America to do, and she began to sink into a deep depression. I became desperately

worried for her at this time and did not know what to do, so I asked her to see a counseling intern at the seminary that I attended. Janine did find it helpful to simply talk to someone neutral, though this still didn't help with her depression. In South Africa, Janine had had a full and happy life with many good friends, but here in the Chicago winter, she had become a maid, and she didn't really know anyone, nor have any good friends. I was worried about her and in some ways felt guilty for bringing her to America – where she was simply a maid.

We continued to wait on Janine's Chiropractic School, which had still not granted her access. They told her that she needed to do a few extra undergraduate classes first. By this time Janine had twice as many credits as she needed to get into this school, but the crediting institution that evaluated her academic transcript, did not understand the South African schooling system well. We continued to pray that God would show us what to do.

Janine began to think that she would never finish her schooling. I did too. Eventually I wrote an email to Janine's dad. I had promised him that I would see Janine through her schooling in America. I began to doubt however, that I could keep that promise. This was a very difficult email to write.

By God's grace however, one of Janine's former South African professors gave us the name of someone to contact at Janine's Chicago school, who could possibly help us. I then sent this person an email and tried to explain Janine's situation as best as I could. Within a week, this man had cleared all the prerequisites that Janine had previously been required to do. Later I discovered

that this man was actually the President of her school! We were indeed grateful for God's provision in this regard, and Janine was finally able to enroll at the school.

It took us a while though to discover that Janine had been accepted into her Chiropractic program. Her school tried to phone Janine and sent her letters in the mail, but she never received any of these. Finally, the school emailed Janine and told her that they had not received a response to their phone-calls or letters and asked if she was still interested in the program. It was at this time, that we discovered that Gene had been hiding Janine's letters and not passing on the phone-messages. He did not want to lose his maid.

When Janine finally registered, she was able to study for ten hours per week, until her student-visa came through. Her studies however, put some tension on our relationship with Gene, who repeatedly threatened to "kick us out." One day he took me aside privately in the garage (out of ear-shot of his wife), to say that he would in fact "kick-us-out," if Janine was not so accessible to him. I became incensed, especially with everything that we were doing for him and Kay still. I then looked at him squarely in the eyes and said, "Ok, kick us out if you need to!" This was not what he had expected, and a look of fear came into his eyes. I think he thought that I would simply motivate Janine into doing more. Instead, he now realized that he could not intimidate me.

In general though, life at this point was pretty glum and very different to what we had imagined. Our living situation was far from ideal, we missed our

friends, Janine was experiencing depression, and I was not enjoying my seminary experience. I also discovered several things about the seminary that I had not anticipated. One of these was the mixing of theology and politics. Another was a pro-war attitude, which I discovered was also dominant in the evangelical churches that we attended. I did not know what to do with these overarching tones, which American evangelicals seemed to passionately identify with. In all of this, I even began to question my own theology and identity.

In addition, I was also warned by a friend not to use the “Charismatic” label anywhere on campus. This friend thought that others would think I was crazy, if I even as much as mentioned the word. I struggled with this, as charismatic theology had become a part of my identity. Living in South Africa had taught me to respect and even expect the powerful workings of the Holy Spirit. Yet, in one of my classes, one professor mocked a missionary who had claimed certain miracles happening in his context. I got the impression that this professor thought the missionary to be delusional or making things up. “Perhaps” he said, “the missionary had eaten too much chili the night before.” The class laughed. I didn’t know what to do. I was charismatic.

The school was also rather narrow in other areas of theology, and I was struggling in this environment. I was beginning to feel that I was in an arid land of spirituality, which was sucking my own soul dry. The same professor who had mocked the charismatic missionary also had a regular practice of identifying the various theologies of his students, by asking for a show of hands. “Who is

Calvinist?” “Who is Arminian?” “Who is Presbyterian or Reformed?” “Who believes in infant-baptism?” Invariably, I would often find myself to be a minority in the class, sometimes the only student with my hand either up or down. This became wearisome and I became more anxious.

Eventually we had an opportunity to move to another home, one that seemed like a perfect opportunity for us. The owners of this home were particularly wealthy, and they lived a third of the year in the Chicago area, another third in Mexico, and then a final third in New York. We went for an interview with them and they were very nice. The job description was simple. All we had to do was to live in their home, walk their dog daily, and forward their mail. They already had their own gardener and maid. In exchange for this, we would get free rent, along with our own living quarters and \$200 per month. When the phone-call came that we had been accepted for the position, both Janine and I jumped for joy. At last, we could be free from Gene’s clutches, or so we thought.

Within a day or two of being accepted for the position however, I began to strongly sense in my spirit, that we were not to take this position. I could not even begin to explain this “intuition” to myself adequately, let alone to Janine. Yet, I still had to tell Janine eventually about how I felt on this, which was not easy, and when I did, she began to cry. She had shouldered much more of Gene’s tyranny than I had.

All of this coincided with Gene announcing that he wanted to have a meeting with Janine and I, though we had not told him anything about the new position. We wondered if Gene was simply going to ask us to leave, which would then better guide us about whether we should accept the other housing position or not. Surprisingly however, the meeting was mostly a positive one. Both Gene and Kay told us that we kept them young, and that we were like family to them, and that they wanted us to stay on. We were not sure why they had called this meeting, but we breathed a sigh of relief. Following this, I phoned the couple who had offered us the caretaking position, and I turned the position down.

Ten days after this though, Gene called both Janine and I outside, again out of Kay's earshot. He told us that he had since changed his mind, and that he wanted us out of their house within a month. He also asked us to move out of our bedroom (which had its own bathroom) as he wanted his brother to live in there. Instead, we were to clear out an adjacent storage room and move in there until we left. We were both dumbstruck. Janine cried intensely, and again, I felt like I had let her down. I already felt guilty about all the maid-work that she was doing, and now this had happened.

I quickly became angry with God too. Why had I felt so strongly that he was leading us to turn down the other caretaker position, which had seemed so perfect for us? Still, I decided to phone those people up again, to see if the position was still available. I felt humiliated in doing this, but now I was desperate. It was an awful conversation. I learned that another seminary student

had accepted the position. I was also told by the lady of that home that we were foolish to have turned it down in the first place. Now, I tended to agree and didn't have a clue what we were going to do. We were indeed strangers stranded in a strange land.

Eventually, we decided to find an apartment close to Janine's school. This would cost us a lot more money, but we were tired of trying to work for others in exchange for rent. I phoned up a number of different places, and each time balked at how much it would cost us. Our South African money did not go very far in America. To make matters worse, our South African money had halved in value during this time, as the South African economy became weaker.

Everything seemed to be going downhill fast. My seminary experience was not what I had expected, and I mostly hated it. We had no place to live, and so little money. As foreign-students, neither of us could work anywhere except on our school campuses, but even this was difficult. Jobs were competitive at both schools and ill-paying. One job I applied for, was to sort the school-mail which paid \$7.50 an hour, and even that I didn't get. Eventually, the only job that I was able to acquire, ironically, was to deliver pay-checks for other staff. This was once every two weeks, for a grand \$20! I had left a very high-paying job in South Africa and this really felt like a slap in the face. I tried to reframe my situation positively, in that God was teaching me humility. Yet still, life indeed was grim.

I continued to phone up different places to look for accommodation and eventually found out about some apartments at Northern Baptist Theological

Seminary. Unlike other schools in the area, Northern allowed students from other schools to live in their apartments. This seemed like our best and cheapest option, so we decided to make the move. After been used to so much space around me though, I felt like I was living in a prison in our 525 square-foot apartment. I tried to make a joke of the fact that I needed to walk sideways, simply to get out of our bedroom. Our bed practically filled the entire space. Still, it was home, and we had our own privacy at last.

By this time, it was summer, and I was enrolled in summer Biblical Greek classes. These classes are not called “suicide Greek” for nothing. Sixteen weeks of normal Greek classes are crammed into six intensive ones. It was not long before I began to feel the pressure of this, as did most of the rest of the class. Our professor though, was hardly sympathetic to any of our plights. She has mastered six different languages herself and it seemed that she thought we could do the same. During this time, I would try to learn about seventy Greek words per day, in addition to learning a bunch of Greek rules.

My anxiety with learning a new language, was only intensified with the commute to and from the seminary during “Construction Season,” in Chicago, which could easily take two hours or longer each way. Someone duly informed me that Chicago has two seasons, “Winter,” and “Construction Season.” The latter season occurs each summer when the Chicago roads are fixed up because of the previous harsh winter. Indeed, we did find the winter to be harsh, with temperatures even getting down to -40°C or -40°F. At this point, one could take

their pick about whether they preferred to use Celsius or Fahrenheit to measure the temperature, as it made no difference. It was so cold that Celsius and Fahrenheit would meet up! This harsh weather seemed to accentuate our declining emotional condition.

I was losing motivation quickly with the Greek and becoming disillusioned with seminary in general. It did not help me, to learn that my Pastor who had studied both Greek and Hebrew, had mostly forgotten all his biblical languages. Or perhaps it did help. At this point, I began to do some serious introspection. Quite simply, was the one year of languages that I needed to invest in, for both Greek and Hebrew worth it? I began to contemplate switching to an M.A. degree in Counseling.

God came to my rescue during this time of anxiety however. Now that we were living at Northern Seminary, I discovered that I could cross-credit classes between seminaries. This was an incredibly attractive option, as it would save me a lot of commuting time if I took some classes at Northern. I was also looking forward to being in the company of Baptists again, not that I really understood the differences between the various Baptist flavors in America at this point. In South Africa and New Zealand, I think there is only one Baptist denomination.

I made an appointment to speak to the Registrar at Northern about cross-crediting classes. She casually suggested that I consider transferring schools. She also mentioned the availability of an International Scholarship that I could apply for. This scholarship had become available after two other international students

had recently graduated. I inquired about how much the scholarship was worth. The Registrar responded, “oh between 80% - 100% of your tuition.” Sold! Well, not quite.

First, I needed to commit this opportunity to prayer, as it was something that I had not really considered previously. Janine was also concerned about me making the transfer. She reminded me that I had particularly wanted to come to the seminary that I was currently at. Yet this seminary was very different to what I had expected. I told her and myself that if a church was to employ me on the basis that I had graduated from that particular seminary, then that church was probably the wrong church for me, in any case. I also reminded us both, that I ultimately came to America, to study in the Master of Divinity program. This was more important, than which seminary I attended. The more I prayed and reflected, the more that I felt that God was calling me to Northern, even if I did not receive their International Scholarship (which had not been guaranteed). I still decided to make the transition regardless.

This was by no means the end of things. Once my former seminary advisor found out that I was transferring, I was suddenly offered the most prestigious scholarship at that school. The irony of this situation was that the scholarship I was offered was named after a professor who had previously taught at Northern. Still, I didn't know what to do, so I began to pray some more, but in the end still decided that Northern was the right school for me.

It would be a month or more though before I would know whether I had been awarded the International Scholarship. Eventually I found out, that indeed, it was mine. For the next three years, my tuition costs would be fully covered. I wanted to cry tears of joy! God had indeed been good to us and he had used some horrible circumstances to lead us where he wanted us to be. I was reminded of Romans 8:28 that, “all things [do] work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purposes.” The icing on the cake, was that Janine’s school was only two miles from mine.

While living in South Africa, we had wondered how God would close the eight-hour geographical gap between us. Now God had not only given us two good schools to study at, but these schools were also within biking (and even walking) distance of each other. About this time, Janine was given a new bike from a friend, Jodie. Jodie operated a Christian food-pantry, but occasionally she would also receive other things as well. On this occasion, she had received a new Schwinn bike, and she prayed about who she should give it to. After praying, Jodie felt that the Lord was leading her to give it to Janine. This was around the date of Janine’s birthday, so Janine decided that this bike was a birthday gift straight from God. The timing couldn’t have been more perfect as Janine began to use it to bike to her school, thus saving us money on gas.

The first time that we had met Jodie was when Janine was part of an international wives’ group at my former seminary. At that time, I had expressed some disgust at the quality of the bread that we were buying, yet it was all that we

could afford. One day I said to Janine, “if this is the only bread that we can afford, then I would just rather not eat bread.” That Saturday, Janine went to her international wives’ group and there she met Jodie, who was introducing her food-pantry to the international wives. Jodie jokingly remarked to the ladies, “I don’t know which of you prayed for bread this week, but I have a whole trunk-load full!” Indeed, she did! All kinds of good quality organic breads were made available to the international wives. Janine came home beaming and told me the story. I felt thankful to God, and ashamed at the same time. I had complained about our bread, but I had never prayed to God to provide us with quality bread. Yet in his goodness, God still had. From that time on, the Lord’s Prayer became especially personal, as I would pray, “Give us this day, our daily bread.”

Jodie became a very good friend to us and also supplied us with all kinds of things. When we relocated, she even gave us a microwave. Others also responded very generously when we moved to our apartment at Northern, as we really didn’t have anything. Among those who helped furnish our apartment, were those from Bethany Baptist. I had started working as a Worship Pastor at Bethany just a few weeks prior to this, after discovering that I could legally work in a church-setting (providing that such could be credited towards my practical internship requirements). Bethany Baptist was a great fit, and they were also incredibly kind to us.

One day we received a phone-call from a lady at Bethany asking if we needed a bed, because she wanted to give us one. The only thing she worried

about, was whether it would fit in with our décor! What décor? At that point we had virtually nothing and had been prepared to sleep on the floor if necessary. We thanked God for this generous gift. That initiative then seemed to prompt a chain-reaction of generosity, as the church secretary asked us to provide her with a list of things that we needed, as different folk from the church were asking her, how they could help us. We compiled a comprehensive list, fully expecting to only receive a few items off there. The church secretary then posted the list onto a church bulletin board, in addition to referring to our list, in the printed Sunday bulletin. I was rather embarrassed by this, but then both Janine and I became completely overwhelmed, when different church members responded, and supplied us with *everything* on the list. Most of the items were also new. This included everything from pots and pans, to an ironing board. One sweet girl came up to Janine and said, “I don’t want to be culturally insensitive, but is the rubbish bin that you mention on the list the same as our trash-can?” We laughed, but we even obtained a rubbish bin, aka trash-can! We continued to be amazed at God’s faithfulness towards us.

Slowly things were beginning to work out for us. Janine and I were both settling into our schools, and I was beginning to enjoy Northern. It was indeed a much better fit. Over that year however I continued to find myself becoming increasingly anxious. It was not a pleasant feeling and on one occasion I had a panic attack in class. This, plus social anxiety, kept me from becoming too involved in seminary life. I tended to avoid the potlucks, as I would become

socially anxious, and then feel trapped. At this point I did not know what was wrong with me. I did not know anything about social anxiety or panic attacks. I badly wanted to see a counselor or psychologist to talk with, but we couldn't afford the cost of these.

My anxiety continued to worsen. After taking a counseling class however, I learnt about the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory which quantifies anxiety levels in a person, based on life events over a year. As I went through the assessment, I calculated my own score to be 440. This was not good. A person with a score of 150 or higher, is considered to be at risk of having health problems, while any score of 300 or higher is considered to be a high to very high risk. I knew that I was in trouble and I didn't know what to do about it. How could I curb my anxiety levels without seeing a counselor, which I could not afford?

I knew that I needed to speak to someone, but I didn't know who. Because I didn't understand my anxiety, I felt ashamed of it and wanted to hide it, in case others thought I was weird or different. I had spent much of my life feeling different and I didn't want anxiety to contribute to this. By not talking about it however, I was held in a prison of thoughts, whereby I did feel different.

I now realize, just how important it is to have people in one's life for encouragement, council, accountability, and spiritual direction. I am fortunate to have had a number of godly men fill this role in my life. One of these was my British preaching professor Dr. Michael Quicke, who also functioned as my

internship supervisor and mentor, while at seminary. With Dr. Quicke also being a foreigner, I felt that he was in a place to understand my anxieties more than others perhaps could. Certainly, he was a good listener and a great encourager.

Later, in my third year at seminary, I was introduced to the practice of Spiritual Direction in my Spiritual Disciplines class. This was something that I had never heard of before, but the idea of it, quickly resonated with my spirit. I knew that I needed to have a Spiritual Director in my own life, but I also knew somehow that this would become a ministry that I would serve in one day.

As I continued exploring my anxiety more, I believe that God was leading me to find healing in different ways. This was to include Spiritual Direction, which has become a valuable practice over the years, but also other contemplative practices, such as Centering Prayer. I also became intentional about the renewing of my mind. Here, God was beginning to show me that my mind was not a place of health, and that I had become consistently negative and judgmental towards myself and others. In response to all this, I began to recognize different thought patterns and to discern which ones were unhealthy. Then as Paul counsels in 2 Corinthians 10:5, I began to renew my mind, by “taking captive” unhealthy thoughts and surrendering them to Christ. I began to pray that Christ would replace these unhealthy thoughts with those that were “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy” (Philippians 4.8, NIV), the things that the apostle Paul exhorts us to think about.

Another area of mind renewal that I was slowly becoming aware of, was related to Spiritual Warfare. I was already familiar with Scriptures such as Ephesians 6:12 which states that our struggle is not against human forces, but against “rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil.” Yet I had not taken spiritual warfare too seriously. Over time however, God began to awaken me to this reality. One time when we were running a church-based Vacation Bible School, I was collecting supplies at a local store, and I found myself thinking the most awful and judgmental thoughts of condemnation about some other VBS workers. While I was obsessing about this, God opened my mind to realize that these thoughts had been planted by the evil one. Instantly I rebuked this evil in Christ’s Name, and the thoughts disappeared. I then realized how important it is for believers to be aware of evil forces and how they influence our minds daily. I also realized just how important it is to have biblical training and strategies in place to overcome these dark realities in our lives. As I became intentional about mind-renewal in these different ways, I found my anxiety dissipated a great deal.

God was also teaching me to find holistic solutions for my anxiety. This included simple things such as learning various breathing techniques and practicing visualization exercises. I wanted to be careful though with the latter as I was wary about engaging in anything that might be potentially “New Age.” Also, until this point in my life, I had never learned the importance of nurturing a sanctified imagination. Others around me had typically ridiculed the use of the

imagination, using phrases such as “oh you’re such a dreamer,” or “you’ve got such a big imagination!” In general, such statements were intended in a negative sense, rather than reinforcing the good and creative use of this faculty. I was discovering though that I had still been using my imagination, but often in unhealthy ways. In her book *The Healing Presence*, Leanne Payne however encourages us to acquire a “true imagination,” which is “the way we as creaturely receivers ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the inaudible, the invisible. It involves our loving and receiving from God, and from all that He has made and calls good” (Payne 1995a, 163). Now the Lord was showing me how to re-appropriate my imagination for personal healing, for communion with him, and for his glory.

But there were also other holistic types of healing that I came across during this period, such as naturopathic medicine. I have noticed that some Westerners seem particularly eager to adopt certain prescribed psychotropic drugs for emotional conditions, but these also come with a number of side-effects. One of my theology professors wrote an article about this, when he became aware of certain side-effects in his own life. I did not want these side-effects, nor could I afford such psychotropic drugs for anxiety. At Janine’s Chiropractic school-clinic however I could obtain various natural treatments for free, including naturopathy. As a result of this, I became alerted to the fact that my system was deficient in certain vitamins, such as Vitamin D. In South Africa, I received plenty of Vitamin D through the ever-present sun. But this was not the case in Chicago.

One other natural treatment that I particularly benefited from during this time, was acupuncture. Initially, I was a little skeptical about this form of therapy and uncertain whether Christians should be engaging in such treatment. Traditional Chinese who practice acupuncture will talk about the Ch'i (or energy-force) moving through the body. Conservative Christian acupuncture practitioners that I know and trust however, will simply equate the Ch'i to our blood-flow. Blood-flow after all is a major channel of energy throughout the body. As my acupuncture friends explain it, sometimes blood may become stagnant in certain areas of the body, which can cause any number of health-related issues. Acupuncture then, simply re-stimulates the blood-flow with needles, so that it moves throughout the body again, correcting various health issues.

Once I got over my hesitancy about acupuncture, I decided to try this out at Janine's school-clinic. The first attempt at this with an intern, did not go well! The over-eager intern decided to stick a needle into the bottom of my foot. My knee-jerk reaction was to kick him! Eventually I decided to give acupuncture a second chance however, and my next experience was with a Christian friend of Janine's. This time he properly assessed me and then added needles in the correct points. After he inserted the needles, he then put on some tranquil music and let me relax for about twenty minutes, to allow time for the needles to work in my body. I came out of that experience feeling so relaxed and refreshed, that I began to receive weekly acupuncture treatment.

With all of these natural therapy treatments, and others – such as simply walking in nature, and tranquil music, coupled with various spiritual and mind-renewal practices – I found that anxiety simply began to fade from my life. Thankfully, this also included the social anxiety that had chained me to isolation for much too long. Such was a great relief and I began to have a renewed confidence dialoguing in my seminary classes and becoming more comfortable in social situations. What a blessing this was! Of course, being in an affirmative relational setting at seminary also reduced my anxiety even more.

God is good, and I am so thankful that in my financial poverty, he taught me to explore other approaches to alleviate anxiety. I am convinced now, more than ever, that managing and even healing many conditions, can be done successfully through a holistic approach. In 1st Thessalonians 5:23-24, Paul talks about the sanctification of the whole person – body, soul and spirit. I like the Message Bible interpretation of this passage which reads, “May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together – spirit, soul, and body – and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he’ll do it!” The Christian community is slowly beginning to adopt a more holistic approach to ailments. On occasion though, I still hear the Christian clichés, that one must simply pray more or read the Bible more, to alleviate various mental ailments. As important as both spiritual practices are, we must understand that

God gives us many different tools and solutions to promote healing, and we are prudent as we utilize such.

At this point, life was beginning to unfold for Janine and me in a more positive direction. Both of us were content and mostly happy in our schools, and we were acclimating progressively to American life. God also continued to provide for us in many different ways. Even though my school-tuition costs were completely covered through scholarship, we still had Janine's tuition to pay for each year, which amounted to about \$30,000 annually. In addition to this, we had housing and living costs. Yet during this time of seminary, we did not need to take out a single loan. My parents graciously gave us a monthly allowance to assist and I was able to access a scholarship that paid for our accommodation for nine months of the year. God provided in other ways too, including through my job as a Worship Pastor, and also a second position at the seminary library. On other occasions, we received random amounts of money from some generous people. These ranged from \$150 to \$2000!

On one occasion, Janine was driving very slowly through some ice and snow, but our car slid on the ice, and as a result the front axle broke. The cost to fix this was over \$600. Not having the money for this, we prayed, but wondered what to do. Within a day or two of this happening however, Roni, who was the housing facilitator at Northern Seminary informed us that we did not need to pay for rent that month, as somehow there was over \$600 of credit in our housing account. We were speechless and praised God. We had no idea how the

accommodation credit came about (nor did Roni!) but this meant that we could put the money towards the car repair instead.

I cannot begin to write of all the financial miracles that God blessed us with during this time, except to attribute it all to God's incredible goodness and care for us. After some years of these miracles happening, we would simply wait in anticipation each semester to see how God would come through for us. This was a very different attitude, to our initial anxiety about how *we* would pay for our tuition. WE did nothing, but GOD in his faithfulness did. We finally graduated from both seminary and Chiropractic school without owing any school debt, thanks to God's marvelous grace.

I still marvel at this, even though I know I shouldn't. After all, God does indeed promise many times over in Scripture that he will provide for our needs. Thus, why are we so slow to trust him in this, and then marvel, when he does provide? God covered about \$56,000 worth of tuition costs and accommodation costs every year for us both. Quite simply, we are grateful, and bless the Lord for his goodness.

Nearing the end of my studies, I began wondering where the Lord was going to lead us to next. Janine and I had actually begun to wonder if God was calling us to overseas missions. However, this was not to be. Much to our surprise, God was keeping us in America (which I guess, is itself overseas missions!).

One day I casually browsed Northern's job-opportunity board and a pastoral position caught my eye. This was unexpected. As I read about the position however, I became increasingly excited. The position was at an American Baptist Church and one that was heavily involved in intercultural missions, especially working with refugees. I made a copy of the position, and then sent in my resume. I thought that this could be one way of testing the Lord's will on the matter. It was not long before I heard back from the church, and they seemed as excited as I was.

There were some challenging aspects about this church however. Some friends of mine had been "fired" from their intern positions previously, by the senior pastor. The church was also visibly more liberal in their theology than Janine or I were comfortable with. In addition, the pastor was retiring, but not before she intended to mentor the succeeding pastor over the next six-to-twelve months. I did not cherish this prospect, but I told myself, that this was only a temporary arrangement and that I could work with her.

Approval from the church came quickly via interview, and then via unanimous vote from the church's Ministry Board. All that was required of me now, was to preach a candidacy sermon accompanied by a congregational vote on Pentecost Sunday, 2010. Just before this happened however, my spirit became increasingly uneasy about this position.

A week before my candidacy sermon was to take place, I was invited by the Saturday Men's Group to join them for a Bible Study at 8am. It was early, but

I made it. Following the study, the leader of the group (who was from a different church) suggested that the men lay hands on me and pray. As they did this, I felt an incredible surge of confidence and discernment in my spirit. Straight after this, I went into a meeting with the Pastor.

During this meeting with the Pastor however, I became increasingly uneasy with her presence. It is difficult to explain why, except that I felt like I was being “spiritually-seduced.” After such an experience, Janine and I began to pray. Our Sunday-evening small group also laid hands on us and prayed over us. Several folks further joined Janine and I to fast and pray for discernment in this matter.

From that point on, some weird and dark things began to happen to us and around us. On the Monday night while Janine was sleeping, I felt an oppressive dark presence in the room, and I quickly prayed for the Lord’s help. I determined not to tell Janine, as I didn’t want to frighten her. However, she experienced the same thing that night and told me about it. Several things also fell off our wall at this time, including a clock and a photo-frame.

All of this was spooky. I had experienced similar dark things in South Africa previously, but did not expect this in America. I began to wonder what we were getting ourselves into. I decided to talk to two trusted seminary professors about everything that was happening. After receiving counsel from them, I made the decision that I could not work with the current Pastor, even if it was only for six-to-twelve months. Both professors helped me to realize that I needed to meet

with this Pastor and several key leaders. They also encouraged me to write out a statement and read it, rather than going into the meeting, not knowing what to say. This was good advice.

The night before that meeting, I received a call from the Pastor. This call was a little intimidating, and I tried to respond to her questions as generally as I could. I also continued to pray. The next morning however, I felt weak and sick. I had been fasting for about three days and this likely contributed to how I felt, but I also felt spiritual oppression. I desperately prayed for the Lord's help in the situation and then reluctantly began driving to the church.

As I was doing this, Janine decided to go for a walk with her seminary friend Stephanie, and her toddler. While they were walking around the neighborhood however, Janine suddenly became very sick and couldn't walk home. They wondered what to do, but then a man stopped his car to help, and gave them all a ride back to the seminary, where Janine rested in Stephanie's apartment. Not long after this however, Stephanie's toddler began to scream intensely. This was unusual and alarming. For some reason, Janine looked at a clock on the wall, and noticed that it was exactly ten o'clock, the time of my meeting with the Pastor.

Fortunately, I knew nothing about any of this activity at the time, as knowing such would have rattled me even more. Yet as I drove into the church's parking lot, an incredible peace and confidence came over me, for which I have much thanks to God for. I tried to avoid the Pastor's husband though who

happened to be gardening in the church courtyard at the time. I then waited inside for the Pastor to arrive.

Finally, we all met, and I read out the statement that I had prepared. The counsel of my professors had been good. They advised me not to focus on any small issues, but on the main problem. This very simply, was that I could not work alongside the Pastor, as our differing leadership styles could initiate conflict and division in the church. In my statement, I mentioned that I still felt called to the church and asked the key-leaders to contact me, should they still feel the same way, once the Pastor felt ready to retire. There was a long pause after I read the statement and then the Pastor suggested to the other church leaders that they begin to look at other resumes' again. This was no surprise to me. I wondered if I had just given up a good church position and Janine felt sure that I had.

As I came out of that meeting though, I saw the Pastor's husband again, but this time I could not avoid speaking to him. But then he looked at me, and said "Caleb, I am sure that you did what needed to be done in there. May the Lord bless you." I was dumbfounded to hear this, from him. I quickly thanked him and headed back to my car.

That following Pentecost Sunday was bittersweet as I did not preach my candidacy sermon as planned but continued to minister at Bethany Baptist. It was only a week after this however, that I received a call from one of the leaders of the church that I had applied to. This leader told me that the Pastor had announced her resignation that Sunday morning during the church service and he asked, "How

soon can you have your candidacy sermon ready?” I was stunned. I had not expected anything to happen, especially so fast.

The church leader then informed me about some of the things that had happened behind the scenes. Their Pastor was a member of a women’s prayer group, though one not connected to the church. However, the other ladies in this group had decided to confront the Pastor to tell her that it was time to retire. Just before they did this though, they decided rather to pray and ask the Lord to show the Pastor what to do. Following this prayer-meeting, the Pastor then announced her retirement to the church, that next Sunday.

I was excited to hear of these developments and praised God for his help and guidance in the matter. I then preached my candidacy sermon on July 4th, 2010, after which the church unanimously accepted me as their next Pastor. Admittedly, I was a little surprised to see only twenty-five people present in the church however, and five of these included Janine, myself and three of our friends! I had initially been led to believe that the church had about seventy members. The former pastor then led me to believe that there were forty people attending. We certainly had our work cut out for us!

This has certainly been the case. The church has had many challenges and continues to have these. Part of this challenging work has been the need for healing from the abuses of previous leadership. Yet consistently Janine and I found other things, which to our thinking, has prevented any meaningful growth. Of course, we recognized that such growth is nurtured by God and not us, though

we longed for God to use us in the process. This growth however was not to be, at least in our time there. One day while praying to the Lord about this, I sensed the Lord speaking to me through Scripture in Isaiah 52:7,11-12 (NIV):

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”
Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing!
Come out from it and be pure,
you who carry the articles of the Lord’s house.
But you will not leave in haste
or go in flight;
for the Lord will go before you,
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

From this Scripture I sensed the Lord saying that we were to “be pure” by not compromising ourselves in any way while in this context, but eventually, he would move us on from this place to another with mountains. We had to wait a little longer though, we would “not leave in haste.” This message was bittersweet. Knowing that God was intending to move us eventually was exciting, especially to the mountains, but having to wait for that was difficult.

After having been in this church context for seven years however, the Lord has now also called me out. Now I am happy to be ministering and thriving in a semi-rural non-denominational evangelical context in Washington State. The members of this setting are diverse, coming from denominational backgrounds as varied as Quaker, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal/Charismatic,

Anglican and Catholic. With such diversity, I feel that I can comfortably apply all of Richard Foster's "six streams" which he expounds on in his book, *Streams of Living Water* (Foster, 1998). It is wonderful to have such diversity while also ministering with folk who are passionate for God and his Word.

As I have reflected on both joy and heartache during our ministry experiences in Chicago, I also pause to write about other experiences of pain and struggle during this chapter. Such includes Janine's and my resolve to have our own family. After marriage, we decided to wait on having children, until we had both completed our studies. Near the end of our studies however, we found out that it was not possible to have our own biological children. We had determined all along, that if this were to ever be the case, then we would look at adoption. Hence, we began to explore various adoption programs, but we quickly discovered that many doors were being closed in our faces. This was mostly due to the fact that we did not have our Green Cards at the time (which we now have), and most adoption agencies were unsure whether they could work with us. We were finally made aware of an adoption attorney though, who had previously helped to shape adoption law in the State of Illinois. She assured us that it was possible for those on work-permits (such as myself at that time) to adopt within the USA. Many of her clients fitted this description, and that she would be happy to work with us.

Encouraged by this, we were then made aware of a mother who was looking to make an adoption plan, once her child was born. As a result, we began

to work with her, and invested considerable time and funds into adoption training and legal fees. The baby was due to be born in early 2014. We looked forward to this with great excitement.

Then the blow came, and it struck us harder than I could have imagined. One day I received a phone-call to say that the mother was not even pregnant. Shocked by this, we then made some follow-up calls and found this information to be true. To this day we are still unsure why this so-called pregnant woman lied to us. We did not know what she had to gain from us, or how she was trying to con us.

Regardless, it still hurt, and the pain was accentuated even more because of the timing of this information, which was just before Christmas. How could I preach a Christmas Eve Sermon to inspire hope and joy into other people's hearts, when my own was breaking, as was Janine's? On top of this, I had a terrible cold. Our Christmas that year, was simply miserable.

Following this heartache, we didn't do anything for a while. We had spent thousands of dollars on legal and adoption fees to no avail, and we were shy of doing this again. Some parents spend in excess of \$30,000 in adoption fees. This was something we had no intention of doing, nor could we afford this. Because of what had happened however, I became somewhat militant over the issue of abortion. Prior to this, I had always been against abortion, but now this industry reeked all the more, with millions of senseless deaths. I lamented over why so many babies were being killed needlessly, when so many infertile couples simply

wanted to hold a baby in their arms and were prepared to pay tens-of-thousands of dollars for such a privilege.

Eventually, Janine and I spoke about the possibility of becoming foster-parents. We both agreed that it couldn't be any worse than a failed adoption, which we had somehow survived. We then phoned up a local foster-child agency and I left a voice-message. Later I received a phone-call back from them and was heartened to find out that the licensing supervisor was a committed Christian.

Janine and I then spent many more hours in parent training, but this time, it was to become licensed foster parents. Once our training was complete and we were listed as eligible foster-parents, we prayed and waited with anticipation. Eventually we started receiving phone-calls from the agency concerned. It didn't take us long to realize however, the true extent of human depravity, as we heard about what various children had been exposed to. On several occasions, we said no to taking certain children, ones that had very intensive needs. This was a very difficult thing to do, but we felt that we needed to be realistic about our own capabilities, skills and experience. I would still pray for these children, not knowing where they would end up. Many such children are shunted from home to home. Janine and I also prayed that we would know without a doubt, what child, we were to say "yes" to. That day finally came one Thursday evening.

I was finishing off some work at my office when I received a call from the agency. "A four-year old girl is needing foster-care, are you able to take her?" I quickly phoned Janine at her workplace and we both agreed to take the little girl.

When I phoned the agency back, the lady informed me that the girl was actually four months old and not four years. She then changed her mind one more time and told me that the girl was four days old! I knew Janine would be happy with this, as she has always wanted a baby to care for. We both quickly finished work and then rushed into the city to collect this baby girl. Once we got there, we found out that she was five days old! We were also informed that given the circumstances of the case, we would be able to adopt her eventually. I tried not to get my hopes up when I heard this, but that was impossible.

That Christmas was a complete contrast to the former Christmas. Our friends Josh and Laura from St. Louis (who had previously been students at our church) came and stayed with us and we had such a joyous Christmas together. But our lives also changed drastically. I had to quickly learn about changing diapers and making formula. It was a steep learning curve. Janine and I were both tired and worn-out, but happy.

Following this, we then received a surprise phone-call from the foster-child agency in February. They wondered if we would be able to care for another baby. At the time I said no, as we were heading out of town for that weekend with my friend Warwick, who was visiting from South Africa. When I told Janine about this however, she seemed disappointed that I had said no.

However, the following Friday I received another phone-call from the agency. They urgently needed to find some foster-homes for six siblings and wondered if we could take the youngest – a baby-boy, three weeks old – so that

he wouldn't need to spend the night in a foster-shelter. Our hearts were torn, and we agreed to take him for the weekend. After waiting for over an hour in our car, in the agency's parking lot, with the temperature outside being about seventeen below (Fahrenheit), we finally met the latest arrival to our family at 3:15am. What were we doing? I still ask myself that question.

That weekend with our new foster-son extended to the following Tuesday, and then the agency agreed to find another family to look after him, at my request. However, I changed my mind about this after spending a lot of my Sabbath (Tuesday) with this little baby boy sleeping on my chest. It was one of the few places where he would not cry. In those tender moments I bonded much more with him than I thought was possible, and I believed God used that experience to speak to me. Thus, after this experience, I knew that we could not send this precious baby-boy back "into the system." We did not know how we would do it, but we told the foster-child agency that we would look after this baby boy as well. If looking after one baby is chaos, I am not quite sure how to describe looking after two. Yet, it seemed so right.

The days extended into weeks. We were stretched, but we also had fun. On St. Patrick's Day, we dressed our foster children as Irish twins for church, as they were only a couple of months apart in age. For all of our issues with that particular church, it was wonderful to see how the various church members loved and cared for both of our children. On Sunday mornings I am always busy at church, and Janine often is too, and so it was not uncommon to see one or more of

our church folk carrying our foster children around in their arms. They even seemed to relish this opportunity. All of this showed us just how much our church cared for us. They had walked the journey of our infertility with us, and now embraced our new family. We also wondered how many older people in our church, who had no children themselves, had previously walked this same journey, on their own.

I thought that I had already experienced darkness and suffering in my life, but my darkest day was still to come however, March 29th, 2015 (also Palm Sunday). Janine and I were both sick, though I somehow managed to preach at church, that morning. That night however, our foster-son was rather fussy and eventually we put him to bed. After Janine had put our little girl to bed, she then checked on our son, and then went and took a bath with Epson salts, to detox for a while. Sometime later I went in to check in on our foster son. I did not want to wake him up, so I left the light off, but used the light of my tablet to see him. He did not look like he was breathing. Alarmed, I then touched him. His body was lifeless. I quickly picked him up and rushed him to Janine. As a doctor, I thought she would be able to do CPR much better than I could. She quickly got out of the bath to do CPR and I phoned 911. The moments were terrifying.

Within minutes the ambulance and police arrived. The paramedics tried to resuscitate our son but to no avail. They then quickly took him away in the ambulance to the hospital. It was difficult to get information out of anyone, and everything was a blur. During this time, one policeman took me aside and started

asking me questions. Another one did the same for Janine. I have to commend the local police for their incredible sensitivity. They had a job to do, but they were also incredibly sensitive to our needs at that time. After this, a police-photographer came inside and took photos of our place. This was awful. We had been sick and had not tidied the place and it looked like a tornado had gone through our living room. The police finally left, and we were in shock. Everything happened so quickly and it all seemed so surreal.

We eventually made our way to the hospital and waited. Eventually we were taken into a room. Our foster-son was not there, but a doctor, nurse and chaplain were present. I knew that this couldn't be good. I had previously spent five months as a hospital-chaplain intern myself, which was a requirement for my M.Div. degree. During that time, I had often been called upon to comfort those who had lost their loved ones. Because of this, I resented the chaplain's presence, as this told me what I already knew, but didn't want to admit. Our foster son had died. No one had been able to resuscitate him.

We were then taken to see our baby boy. Eventually though, I needed to get away from that room, and I think Janine did too. The medical staff then asked us, if we wanted a private room somewhere. I asked them to take us to the hospital chapel. It was from this point that I appreciated the presence of the chaplain. She took us to the chapel and Janine knelt to pray. I did the same, but as I looked up, I saw some Islam lettering in front of me. I felt so betrayed. "God is not here" I thought to myself. "I am in this interfaith place, only to find another

god.” Angry and in great turmoil, I then asked the chaplain to take us somewhere else. She took us to a counseling room and it was then that I lost it. I wept and groaned so intensely that I began to feel terrible pins and needles all over my body. Janine began to worry that I was going to have a heart-attack. This went on for hours. Never before had such intense emotions come out of me.

Those moments were incredibly dark ones. I had prayed so much earlier that God would revive our son, and when this didn’t happen, I felt so forsaken by God. The following year’s Holy Week took on a whole new meaning, as I meditated on Christ’s own words on the cross, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” Christ also knew what it was like to be forsaken by God, yet I know that he felt this even much more keenly than I did. Still, at that time I felt like I could not go on, there was no hope. I felt forsaken by my God. Following this, I felt pure evil tempting me to give up everything and to give up on God. I came very close to the threshold of doing just that.

Janine suggested that we read Psalm 91 together. I objected. “God has not protected us,” I protested, “Read Psalm 88 instead!” The Psalmist who writes that Psalm, finishes it off by claiming that darkness is his only friend. That is how I felt. Following this, the coroners came and spoke with us and took some notes. I felt like I was in a TV show, nothing seemed real. Janine then contacted Sheree, one of our friend’s, who has been like a mother to us and our foster-kids. She drove about 30 miles in the middle of the night to be with us. Nothing really brought comfort, however.

Eventually in the early hours of the morning, we left the hospital. I was incredibly grateful to the chaplain. She knew what to say and what not to say. At that point I did not want or need religious platitudes. And she didn't give any, but simply offered us herself. We came home, and Janine began to mentally prepare herself for the next day. She knew that the foster-child agency would take our foster daughter away. Our girl, who we had been previously told, that we could adopt.

Monday came. We spent the morning making phone-calls and trying to enjoy our daughter as best as we could. Finally, we got the dreaded phone call from our case-worker. She had been ordered to take our foster-daughter away from us. "Pack up her stuff," she instructed Janine, "I will be there in twenty minutes to collect her." When the case-worker heard Janine sobbing, she said, "don't worry, we'll get you another one when this is all over!" Neither of us could believe what we were hearing. As if our kids were disposable items who could simply be replaced.

Within twenty-four hours, we had not only lost one child, but two. Two children who we felt like were our own. The awful irony of this, is that we took in our foster-son, so that he would not have to go to a foster-shelter. We then found out that our foster-daughter spent her first night away from us, in a foster shelter. How could we go on? How could I continue to pastor others, when I myself needed to be pastored? We did receive an incredible outpouring of love, care and concern from others however, for which I am very grateful.

Although we received such love and care during this time, we also inherited a few of what I call “Job’s friends.” Well-meaning people (I think), who happened to say the worst things imaginable. One lady came to us and said, “I know the biological parents will sue you in the courts for this, but don’t worry I can give you a character reference!” Another said to someone else, “I know they will never get their foster-daughter back!” Still another said to us, “you can be grateful that he wasn’t older, or you would have missed him even more.” Another person told me several weeks after this, that “it was time that things got back to normal,” after I had opted out of attending a committee meeting the day after our son’s memorial service. What was “normal?”

Within a day of our foster-son’s death though, the coroner phoned to say they had found nothing, but they still needed to do pathology and toxicology reports. We were also informed from a supervisor at the foster-child agency that our baby girl would be returned, pending a clear investigation. The four-to-six-week timeframe that we were expecting everything to be cleared by, turned into ten weeks. Eventually the report was released, and our foster-son’s death was labeled as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

A short time after this however, I received another phone call from the foster-child agency to inform us that our foster-son’s sibling (who was in another foster family) was also in hospital and was not expected to live. The pediatric unit had determined that he had a rare genetic heart defect, and it was likely that our

foster-son had died from the same thing. Tragically, this little guy died the next day.

Knowing what had happened to our foster-son's sibling was bittersweet. It was a most awful thing to happen, and we felt nothing but compassion for his biological family, but also his foster-parents. After all, we truly knew how they felt. At the same time however, there was some comfort in knowing that the doctors now knew what the likely cause for our foster-son's death was. At this point, some two months had passed since his death and our foster-daughter's removal. We began to lobby and pray all the more for her return. During this time, I received comfort from several passages in Scripture, including Jeremiah 31:15 (NIV):

A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.

After this morbid biblical account however (unlike Matthew's quotation of this), verse 16 continues with a promise, "Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears," the Lord says, "they will return." While we knew that our foster-son wasn't returning (although one man tried to reassure us that he would resurrect from the morgue!), we clung to this passage in the hope that our foster-daughter would return.

How we prayed and pounded the doors of heaven for her return. After a myriad of administrative and bureaucratic hiccups, we eventually received a call

that our little girl was finally returning three months later. Still, what a gift, or so we thought. Our little girl was returned to us, by a social-worker, but only for eleven hours. We did not know this though when she came to us, and we took her and my parents (who were visiting from New Zealand) to the park for a picnic. On arriving home however, we received another phone-call from the foster-child agency saying that they were coming to collect our daughter, “as someone had not signed off on the papers.” Janine was speaking on the phone, but I demanded to speak to the social-worker concerned. I was livid. How could they do this to us ... again? Still, I had to accept the verdict, and so for the second time, we watched our daughter being taken away. What were we to do?

The foster-child agency promised us that this matter would be sorted out within a day or two, and then our daughter would be returned to us. That “day or two” ended up being two months, and during that time, the foster-home that she went to tried to apply for custody of her. Life had become very bitter all over again.

After experiencing more bureaucracy and in-house power-struggles from the foster-child agency, we finally heard the much-anticipated news. Finally, our daughter was to be returned to us. This was in September 2015, five months later. We dared not believe, nor hope in this too much, until we had had our daughter back in our arms for over twenty-four hours. Constantly we harbored the insecurity of “what if they take her away again.” Thankfully that never happened. Later, our daughter’s attorney told us, “If you both had not advocated for her so

strongly, you would never have seen her again.” While we certainly did what we could, we also now know without a doubt that this was the doing of our Lord. As we have spoken since to different people, we have learned just how much God was working on our behalf, behind the scenes, as he led different people in “the system,” to advocate for us, when the odds were so much against us. How we are truly grateful and praise him.

As I finish off this section however, I wish to share one special memory of a dream that I had following our foster-son’s death. I had lamented to Janine on several occasions that I wished we had seen him smile more. He had experienced many challenges in his life, and hence his smile was not forth-coming. However, one night after his death – being overwhelmed with a variety of emotions and crying myself to sleep – the Lord gave me the most beautiful dream. In this dream, I was holding our foster-son in Heaven. He was a little older than we knew him to be, but he was sporting the widest smile I have ever seen, with snowy-white teeth. I thank the Lord for the gift of that dream, which still means so much to me. One day I hope for that dream to become a reality, as I hold him again in my very own arms, in a place where “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” I also cannot wait to live out eternity in that place, with the One who has made this possible, and who, is “making everything new” (Revelation 21:4b,5b, NIV).

Post-Script

So much has happened to our family since I finished my autobiography, and there is so much more that I want to share. I'll try to stay with what is important. By God's grace we finally were able to adopt our precious daughter, who we named Abigail. This name was in response to a promise I sensed the Lord making to me one day, after petitioning for her to come back to us. During this time of prayer, the Lord impressed upon me that she would indeed return, and that we were to name her Abigail, which means the Father's joy. Indeed, what a joy she is, both to her heavenly Father, and to our family. We officially adopted Abigail on December 26th, 2017. We often use Abbey as the shortened version of Abigail, being intentional about this spelling, as an Abbey is a place where God dwells, and certainly this is our prayerful desire for our daughter.

After signing Abbey's adoption papers, I also tended my resignation to our church in Illinois. This was a bitter-sweet experience. My first ministry experience was a challenging one and I do not wish to sugar-coat this. My greatest joy working in this context however, was mentoring college and seminary students. Some of these have now have gone on to pastor their own churches, and some aspire towards international missions. This I loved about the church, that somehow in all its messiness, it still functioned as a ministry-incubator for passionate students.

Now I am concluding this final part of my autobiography on the semi-rural Olympic Peninsula, which is a very beautiful part of Washington State. As I

conclude, I think it is important to reflect on the overall autobiographical experience, and through it, to recognize distinct divinely-led patterns in my life. In some ways, I feel as if the Lord has brought me “full-circle.” From being born in a place of great natural beauty in New Zealand, to now living in another place of great natural beauty, only this time in Washington State, USA. It is here that the Lord is inspiring all kinds of dreams and will hopefully bring other dreams to fruition. We wait on him for guidance, blessing and empowerment in this regard.

As I reflect on this autobiographical process though, I do recognize one prominent theme, which is interwoven throughout all the others, and that is the theme of beauty. As I consider this theme, I think of the words from Ecclesiastes 3:11a (NIV), “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” How true this is of my life and indeed, of all creation. God is a beautiful God, who creates astounding beauty. He has further created all of humanity in his image and likeness to reflect his beauty. Hence, I believe, we have an innate hungering, both for God’s beauty, and all things truly beautiful.

Unfortunately, as we learn in Genesis 3 however, those things which were originally created to be beautiful by God, then became scarred and wounded by the ripple-effects of human sin. Yet even here, God continues to use his creative beauty, in its many varied forms, to bring healing to restore the beauty that is intended for each one of us. Certainly, he does make all things beautiful in its time, and this is the story of the gospel – that through the cross, God is restoring beauty in his kingdom. That invitation of being restored to the beauty of God’s

image is extended to each of us. Then as we choose to cooperate with the grace of God, we become vehicles of God's beauty to other parts of creation, so that ultimately there will be "healing to the nations" (c.f., Rev. 22:2) and that, "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14, NIV).

In my life the healing and even sacramental nature of beauty, has come in at least three forms. The first has been through the beauty of God's creation or nature itself. When I was a child, I found beauty in nature. I believe that God gave me the gift of beauty in this way, not only to find a place of healing, but also as a sacred and contemplative space to encounter God himself.

God then lead me in the next chapter of my life, to South Africa. In this place, he showed me the beauty of people. Those who surrounded me with much encouragement, love and care. How God knew that my soul desperately needed this. Prior to this chapter, I had not often seen beauty in other people. Instead, I was used to rejection. After building up my soul through beautiful people though, I was finally in a place where God could whisper into my soul, and I could listen. At this point I recognized that the Lord was calling me into pastoral ministry. Then plucking up the courage to respond to this calling, I relocated to America, with my newlywed wife Janine, to study.

Unfortunately, however, my soul over time had accumulated layers of pride and self-centeredness. Thus, I believe that God used our season in Chicago, IL for another purpose in my life, and that was to refine me. He has done this by

peeling away layer after layer of the false-self, particularly through experiences of pain and struggle. Some of these experiences have brought Janine and I much darkness in our lives. Yet we have also come to see a beauty in such experiences, because through these we have also experienced much of God's grace. Such have come in many forms: through refinement of character; financial blessing; healing of anxiety; having the blessing of being able to help others; and so much more.

The darkest valley, or perhaps the deepest pain of all, has been experiencing the death of our son, and then losing our daughter for five months. Yet as dark and as painful as this place seemed for so many months, God continued to give us himself. Truly God has been an oasis of Living Water to feed our souls, despite the aridness that has come our way.

It seems that I am now entering a fourth chapter of life. This also appears to be a chapter of continued healing from previous scars, but also a chapter of bringing God's healing to others, which has happened already in ministry here. This is also a chapter where I have come full-circle, making my home in another land of great natural beauty. Our home is situated with a view across the Strait of Juan de Fuca to distant Canadian mountains on Vancouver Island, and we also have the Olympic mountains behind us.

As I write this, I observe two previously stunted house-plants in my living room, which are now thriving in our new environment and I think that such represent an apt metaphor for my own life. Like these two houseplants, life in Chicago was represented a struggle for me and my family. Now however, the

Lord has graciously brought my family into a place where already we are seeing fruitfulness in ministry, and overall, as my former pastor, Pastor Angus has since observed, “The boundary lines have fallen for [our family] in pleasant places; surely [we] have a delightful inheritance” (Psalm 16:6, NIV).

I believe that God wants to use this place of natural beauty as a place of continued healing for our family, but also as a sacramental instrument of healing for others, and somehow, to use me in the facilitation of the latter. I believe that this healing ministry is especially to those, who like me, have experienced emotional turmoil, such as anxiety.

Hence, as you continue to read through the remainder of my writing, you will detect various themes that have been themes in my own life. For example, the theme of God’s creation, and the theme of holistic spiritual formation and healing, especially for those with anxiety. God has allowed for each of these themes, or threads, to be interwoven into my life. Each of these threads have been pulled together though, through a beautiful God. A beautiful God who has known great suffering at the cross and beckons us to the strange beauty of a cruciform life. This same beautiful God also restores his beauty in each one of us, by truly giving us himself, and giving us the sacramental beauty of his creation. Truly, “He has made everything beautiful in its time,” Ecclesiastes 3:11a (NIV).

Soli Deo Gloria!

CHAPTER THREE:
THE SHALOM PROGRAM:
AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TOWARDS
FINDING PEACE AND WHOLENESS IN GOD

Seek Shalom, and pursue it.
- Psalm 34:14b (OJB)

This section of the portfolio outlines an original curriculum – *The Shalom Program* – designed for an intensive seven-week engagement in learning and practice to build healthy and holy habits. A holistic formational model is introduced and set in contrast with anxiety, one of the major problems in modern society. The goal of the program is to provide opportunities for encountering God and his grace through understanding God’s healing and wholeness and exploring five dimensions of healing and formation. These two themes and *The Shalom Program* are explored below.

Healing and Wholeness

Gordon T. Smith (2014a, 19) writes that “[Jesus] is not merely the healer of physical ailments but the healer of our souls, indeed of our whole beings.” Through the resurrecting power of the Spirit of Life, such humans are increasingly transformed into the *Imago Dei* and filled with the glory of God (2

Corinthians 3:18). Throughout this process, the healing of human wounds can increasingly take place, with the pursuit of true wholeness in Christ. “By his wounds” we are indeed healed (Isaiah 53:5). As our new identity in Christ is progressively realized and harnessed, such healing naturally includes a progressive healing from anxiety. Neil T. Anderson (2013, 27) writes, “The only identity equation that works in God’s kingdom is you plus Christ equals wholeness and meaning.”

In the Celtic Spiritual tradition, the idea of salvation is linked with the idea of healing and a “returning to balance” (Sawatsky 2009, 148). Jarem Sawatsky writes that this return to balance includes “the healing of body, mind and spirit of persons” (Sawatsky 2009, 148). This concept of a holistic salvation, incorporating healing of the various dimensions of a person, is an important one to understand, and is explored further in the following section.

Five Dimensions of Wholeness

The Shalom Program explores five different dimensions that are important for both spiritual formation and healing, as illustrated in Figure 1.

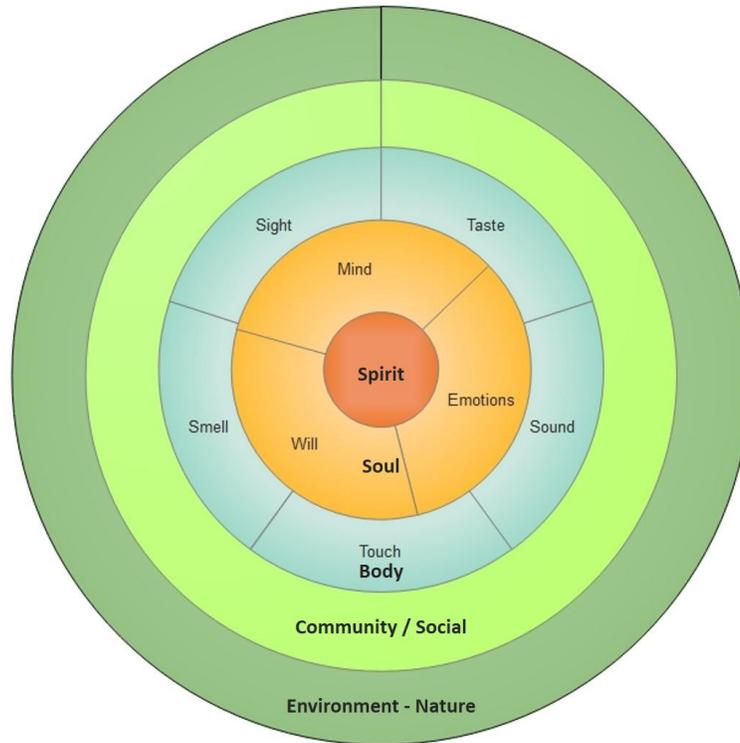


Figure 1. Five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing.

The first three dimensions are the dimensions of a person's being, as noted by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NIV):

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

In *The Message* translation, Eugene Peterson interprets the above passage in relation to the theme of wholeness as follows:

May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!

Both translations point to God doing the wonderful work of sanctification in our spirits, souls and bodies. These three dimensions that Paul refers to here are known as the tripartite nature of our beings.

Various authors, theologians and ministry practitioners make reference to this tripartite nature. One of these is Leanne Payne who, influenced by C.S. Lewis' work, defines the various "parts" of the spirit, body and soul as follows. In relation to our human spirits, she writes that the human spirit is the dimension of our beings that communes with God, through the Holy Spirit. The human spirit "answers to the Spirit (*Pneuma*) of God, and when touched by [God's] Spirit becomes ... the New Man" (Payne 1995b, 47).

The soul then is the dimension of our beings in between our spirits and our bodies, which includes the mind, emotions and will. Payne further writes that the soul includes the "conscious and unconscious ... the imagination [and] the intuitive faculty" while the body is "part of the material world" (Payne 1995b, 47). This dimension of our beings engages with the world, through our five senses, namely, taste, sound, touch, smell and sight. Payne notes that the spirit, soul and body "united" together, are what make up our composite beings (Payne 1995b, 47).

The apostle Paul writes that "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1a; see also John 8:36) and this includes freedom from fear anxiety. With regards to such freedom, Payne writes that as "the human self" becomes "[united] to the Lord ... [the] total person (spirit, soul, and body) [is] freed not only to live

fully, but to realize its incredible privilege of *becoming* (Payne 2012, 87-88). This concept of “becoming,” means to become increasingly molded into the *Imago Dei* that we were originally created in (Genesis 1:26-27, 2 Cor. 3:16-18). Here we experience true freedom.

Watchman Nee who emphasizes the same tripartite view of formation writes the following about the soul dimension of our beings:

The soul which comes under the Holy Spirit's authority is a restful one. Once we busily planned, today we calmly trust the Lord. Once we were flushed with anxieties, today we are like a child quieted at its mother's breast. Once we entertained many thoughts and ambitions, today we consider God's will best and rest ourselves in Him. In obeying the Lord wholly, we rejoice in heart fully. With complete consecration comes perfect peace (Nee 2009, 3053).

Here Nee implies a couple of things in relation to spiritual formation and anxiety:

First, we are to keep in step with the Spirit, as Paul likewise indicates (e.g., Gal. 5:16-26). Naturally as we are governed by the Spirit through our spirits, we will experience “the peace that transcends all understanding” as we intentionally engage in the rest of our Lord (Phil. 4:7, Matt. 11:28-30). Keeping step with the Spirit however, requires that we partner with God’s Spirit. Such can be accomplished as we intentionally engage in various formational practices geared to the formation of soul and spirit – such as practicing the Presence of God, Biblical meditation and Christian mindfulness.

In addition, various practices that aid the sanctification and wholeness of our bodies are also important, so that the body is cooperative and receptive to the grace of God. Tara Owns notes that the concept of “‘Wholeness’ includes being

fully integrated as a human being” and this includes understanding the link between our physical bodies and spiritual formation (in Heiss and Arnold 2012, 52). Owens also adds that healing becomes difficult when we try “to separate our bodies from our souls” (Owens 2015, 828).

One important contribution that Dallas Willard makes in attaining holistic spiritual formation is to attend to the relational or social dimension of humanity. He writes, “Spiritual Formation, good or bad, is always profoundly social. You cannot keep it to yourself. Anyone who thinks of it as a merely private matter has misunderstood it” (Willard 2014, 182). As Willard notes here, the social dimensions of humanity, as with the physical, are often neglected in a Western approach to formation, which tends to cater to such, in an individualized form. Yet this dimension must also be recognized and nurtured, if true healing and sanctification are to take place in a person’s life.

Another dimension which tends to be neglected when considering spiritual formation and healing, is our encounter and interaction with our wider environment that include urban cities and nature. While cities offer many advantages to us, they are also environments that can promote increased mental illness (Bratman et al 2015, 8567). Bratman et al (2015, 8567) propose that the link between urbanization and mental illness can be explained due to a “decreased nature experience.” Very simply, most people in urban areas do not have sufficient exposure and interaction with nature, or God’s creation. This is an unfortunate neglect. Scripture recounts various biblical characters encountering

God through nature, and receive varieties of healing, guidance and formation. For example, our biblical parents Adam and Eve experience relationship and intimacy with God in the Garden of Eden, prior to their rebellion (Genesis 3). Job who had “heard about God” learns to “see God” after God teaches Job through both the vastness and the tender forms of nature (Job 38-42). King David also experiences restoration of soul, after being divinely led to “lie down in green pastures” and be beside “still waters” (Psalm 23:2-3). Hence the final dimension of spiritual formation and healing, is through nature itself.

While it might be tempting to romanticize the serene and pastoral forms of nature here, Scripture does also point to those who experience the Lord, through nature’s harsher manifestations. For example, God begins his task of spiritually awakening and revitalizing Job through a whirlwind (Job 38:1); A depressed and suicidal Elijah receives reassurance and guidance from the “still small voice” of the Lord after experiencing a fearsome combo of wind, earthquake and fire (1 Kings 19:1-18); and, in their fear, the twelve disciples receive reassurance and a faith lesson, when they encounter Jesus in a squall at sea (Mark 4:37-41; Luke 8:22-25).

This project also recognizes Christ’s own example of being with his own Father through nature. Scripture tells of Christ’s communing with his Heavenly Father on a mountain (e.g., Luke 6:12). He also instructs his disciples with these words, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31a,

NLT). The “quiet place” that Christ refers to here was away from regular ministry and the crowds, and a place of rest, with him, in God’s creation.

The Psalmist acknowledges and praises his Creator for making him “so mysteriously complex!” (Psalm 139:14a, TPT). Indeed, how true this is. The five dimensions seek to provide some understanding to the complexity of our beings, while providing a framework for both spiritual formation and healing to be appropriated within.

In summary then, the human spirit is the inner most part of our beings that communes with God through the Holy Spirit. The spirit is closely connected to the soul, which includes the mind, will and emotions (refer to Figure 1). The third dimension of our beings is the body. This includes the five senses of taste, sound, touch, smell and sight by which we can experience various external dimensions. These external dimensions include two important dimensions that can aid our formation and healing, as we encounter the Lord through these. One of these dimensions is community, or the social dimension, and the other is nature, or God’s creation.

Anxiety and Spiritual Formation

General statistics reveal that an estimated 25% of America’s population experience either an anxiety disorder or “serious anxiety” at some point in their lives (Bourne and Garano 2003, 1). Anxiety can be defined as any of the following: “a painful or apprehensive uneasiness of the mind, usually over an

impending or anticipated ill; a fearful concern or interest; an abnormal or overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (as sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Psychologist Dennis Tirsch (2012, 379-383) describes anxiety as "one of the most prevalent and challenging forms of human suffering." He further writes that anxiety "may make us want to run away or scream. It may make us feel heartbroken; it may make us collapse in a protective, tight ball; or it may make us simply go quiet." In extreme cases, he adds, "feelings of pain and shame about anxiety may be so great that we may actually wish to die in order to escape."

America is indeed an anxious nation and this includes those who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ. Gregory Jantz and Ann McMurray write that "Too many of us live [with anxiety] in our lives. The opposite of worry and anxiety—assurance, calm, composure, confidence, contentment, ease, happiness, peace, security, tranquility—is foreign." They add further, "We'd love to go there; we just don't know the way" (Jantz and McMurray 2011, 67). Thus, the purpose of *The Shalom Program* is to point to various ways in which we can find peace and wholeness, through Jesus Christ, the One who offers rest in place of our weariness and heavy burdens (Matt. 11:28-29).

Anxiety in any form affects a Christian's spiritual formation. One might hear Paul's exhortation to surrender their anxiety to the Lord, after which a certain

transcendental peace is promised (Phil. 4:6-7). Yet some may experience shame or guilt if such peace does not happen instantly. Or, they may hear Christ's words about not worrying, but find it difficult to do so (Matt. 6:35-34). Next, a works-based theology, along with guilt or shame may arise, for not achieving the "worry-free" life.

A Christian will find that anxiety affects one's relationship with God. Worship and contemplation on God are replaced with idols of worry, shame and fear. A continued entrenchment of these negative forming qualities then affects the formation of one's persona so that eventually, various unsavory traits begin to repeatedly manifest themselves. Examples of this can include inappropriate response(s) to various situations or stimuli as a Christian may become increasingly reactive – living in a type of survival mode, wanting to fight, flight or freeze – rather than participating in the abundant life of God.

Followers of Christ will find themselves disadvantaged and their spiritual formation compromised in other ways also. Callings and dreams of various ministries and opportunities that the Lord may be drawing one to, go unfulfilled and unrealized, as fear, insecurity, exhaustion and anxiety of various kinds dominate instead.

Certain types of anxiety, especially those of a social nature may also prohibit believers from engaging in the life-giving nature of fellowship and worship, with God's community. If a person has social anxiety for example, they will fear being in social circumstances, and may also worry that others are judging

them. If people with these types of anxieties do find the courage to engage in Christian community, they may be spiritually and emotionally bruised in the process, which only perpetrates further avoidance of community. Yet, if Christ's community of believers is a healthy one, then such a place can actively provide formational opportunities and healing for the one suffering from anxiety, including social anxiety. Thankfully, hope is possible when Christ is present in one's life and community. A new dawn is promised and has indeed arrived, through the incarnation of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ (Isa. 9:6; Col. 3:15). Hence, one can move forward with confidence and formation in Christ.

A Practical Application:
The Shalom Program

With regard to the transformation of the human-self, including the physical, Willard makes it clear, that "even in the disorder of [human] brokenness, God has provided a methodical path of recovery" (Willard 2014, 24). Willard adds, "Grace does not rule out method, nor method grace. Grace thrives on method and method on grace" (Willard 2014, 25). These words are very necessary to appropriate, as the "brokenness of anxiety" is considered in relation to spiritual formation. God's grace is first and foremost in the process. However, Christ-followers must discern the availability and provision of this grace in its various forms, and then secondly, accept and participate in these rhythms of grace, particularly where such can bring healing to anxiety.

The following *Shalom Program* is an example of how this can be holistically and practically applied as a seven-week group-based curriculum. For optimal use of the curriculum, it recommended that group members familiarise themselves with the material for each week, prior to their group meeting. At the group meeting, the curriculum will then be facilitated by a leader, with input from group members. Readers will note that questions and prompts for group discussion are provided, as part of this chapter's curriculum format. The purpose of these are to allow the group (and individuals) to go deeper in reflection, as they learn to apply the different dimensions to their lives and circumstances. While the intention is that this curriculum be used in small-group and retreat contexts, it can also be adapted for individual use.

This curriculum relies on an extensive array of subject matter and research related to the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. Such variety of research is necessary to address the breadth of these five dimensions. This variety of research also relates to the holistic ministry context which I believe the Lord has led me and my wife to at Shalom Wellness. In this context, all dimensions are considered to be of importance in relation to the formation and healing of each person. I have applied the five dimensions to this program, as per the order presented in Figure 1. This order starts with the dimension of the spirit and concludes with the dimension of nature. The following table provides an overview of the content for each week of the seven-week program.

Table 1. Overview of *The Shalom Program*

Week	Primary Human Dimension(s)	Theme	Rhythm(s) of Grace
1	Spirit, Soul, Body, Social	Introduction to <i>The Shalom Program</i> and Core Practices to Nurture the Spirit	Spiritual Direction, Sabbath, Resting Prayer
2	Soul, Social	Renewing the Mind	Reframing the Mind through Scripture Promises
3	Soul, Spirit, Social	Emotions and Feelings	Visualization and a Focus on Spiritual Fruit.
4	Body, Soul, Nature, Social	Restoring Balance and Harmony to the Body	Body Releasing Prayer, Diet, Breath, Sleep, Laughing, Crying, Yawning, Exercise
5	Body, Soul, Nature, Social	Reawakening the Senses	Various Practices Related to Nurturing the Five Senses
6	Social, Body, Soul, Spirit	Transformation through Community	Worship, Hospitality, Personal Narrative Support Group
7	Nature, Body, Soul, Spirit, Social	Retreating with God in Nature	Immersion in Nature, Stillness, Solitude, Silence

Week 1: Introduction to *The Shalom Program*

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious.
- *Philippians 4:5b-6a (NIV)*

Welcome! Thank you for making the time and having the courage to join us in *The Shalom Program*. Our prayer is that you will find this program to be deeply enriching, but even more, that you will encounter Jesus Christ, the divine Healer and the Prince of Peace. May he truly grant peace, rest and healing to you – body, soul and spirit.

As we begin this program together, it is important to understand that none of us are alone in our anxiety. Those that facilitate this group have walked their own journey of anxiety and have found considerable healing along the way. They are eager to support you and assist you in any way possible, as is the community around you. But there is also One, our loving God, who walks the journey with you – Immanuel. The One who promises to be with each one of us, always (Matthew 1:23; 28:20b).

At the beginning of each session, we will invite the Presence of God, Immanuel, to be with us with the lighting of a candle. (For this weekly exercise, consider using a candle that has three wicks inside of it, to symbolize the Presence of the Triune God: our Father and Creator; Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord; and, the Holy Spirit, who imparts the abundant and healing life of God, to us. One God and yet three.) Every time you glance at the candle, be reminded that we are surrounded by the comforting Presence of God, who invites us to experience

peace through him. As we begin, take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]

*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits
Let us be fully present to You,
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray, Amen.*

*Seek Shalom, and pursue it.
- Psalm 34:14b (OJB)*

Goals of the Program

We may know that the Hebrew word “shalom” means peace. But did you know that this word also means wholeness? Our hope is that you will experience both peace and wholeness, as we progress through *The Shalom Program*, and you learn more about what it means to rest in God. We have the following three goals in mind, as we seek to do that.

Goal One: Live Daily in the Presence of God

Today I Awake:

*Today I awake and God is before me.
At night, as I dreamt, God summoned the day;
For God never sleeps but patterns the morning
with slithers of gold or glory in grey.
Today I arise and Christ is beside me.
He walked through the dark to scatter new light,
Yes, Christ is alive, and beckons his people
to hope and to heal, resist and invite.*

*Today I affirm the Spirit within me
at worship and work, in struggle and rest.
The Spirit inspires all life which is changing
from fearing to faith, from broken to blest.
Today I enjoy the Trinity round me,
above and beneath, before and behind;
The Maker, the Son, the Spirit together
they called me to life and call me their friend.
- (Bell and Maule 1989)*

*You keep in perfect peace one whose mind is stayed on You
- Isaiah 26:3a (TLV)*

Did you know that Hebrew expression for “perfect peace” in the above passage is “shalom shalom?” Thus, according to Isaiah, we can experience a double portion of shalom, or wholeness and peace, as we choose to focus our minds on God. Read Psalm 139:8-10 and Psalm 16:11 and discuss what these say about the presence of God.

The Presence of God is truly everywhere, just like the air we breathe. God is all around us, and dwells with us also. As King David reminds us, there is also much life and joy to be found, as we immerse ourselves in God’s Presence. Yet often, we are not aware of God’s Presence and God’s activity in our lives. Without this awareness, we fail to receive the blessings, healing, peace and joy that come spending time with God in his Presence. Brother Lawrence writes the following:

I cannot imagine how a Christian can live a satisfied Christian experience without the practice of being in the presence of Christ... Do not forget the Lord. Think on Him often; adore Him continually. Live and die with Him. This is the glorious employment of a Christian. This is our profession as Christians. If we do not already do this, then we must learn to do it (Lawrence and Laubach 1973, 69,100).

Brother Lawrence calls it a “practice” for a reason. Very simply, becoming aware of, and intentionally spending time in God’s Presence requires practice. The more we practice this, the better we become at it, and the more rewards we will enjoy from simply being with God. Brother Lawrence writes, “I make it my business only to persevere in [GOD’s] holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to GOD, which I may call an actual presence of GOD” (Lawrence and Laubach 1973, 34).

Throughout history many people have found much joy and peace doing exactly what Brother Lawrence describes here. The missionary Frank Laubach writes, “Oh, this thing of keeping in constant touch with God, of making Him the object of my thought and the companion of my conversations, is the most amazing thing I ever ran across” (Lawrence and Laubach 1973, 11,15). We hope that this becomes the most amazing thing for you too. Throughout this program we will show you different ways in which you can experience God’s Presence of joy and peace, and delight in him. We will share various spiritual rhythms and practices, that can assist in drawing closer to God. James promises us, that as we draw near to God, that he will also draw near to us (James 4:8a).

Goal Two: Make Jesus Your Life-Coach

A life-coach is someone who can assist us in our pursuit of wholeness. Our life-coach for the journey ahead, is Jesus. We are encouraged by the writer of Hebrews to “throw off everything that hinders us, and the sin that so easily entangles,” and “[fix] our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1b-2). It is Jesus who can replace our hindrances and sins, with his peace – a peace that transcends understanding (Philippians 4:6). It is also Jesus our life-coach, who can nurture wholeness and provide healing from anxiety in our lives. Consider Jesus’ loving and personal invitation to you as follows:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matthew 11:28, MSG)

In this program, we want to introduce you to knowing Jesus, the Prince of Peace, in deeper ways. He is the One who can truly help us recover our lives and will provide us with “a real rest.” We will also share some “unforced rhythms of grace” that can draw us closer to the Lord and assist us with life and peace in him.

Goal Three: Know God, Know Yourself

Our journey to wholeness is a multi-faceted journey – a journey of drawing closer and closer to God, but also a journey of learning about who God really is, and truly knowing him. Over the course of this program, we may need to

abandon some faulty views about God that we have nurtured in our lives and replace these with a deeper knowledge of who God really is. We will also learn more about how God has uniquely created and wired each one of us as per the following five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing:

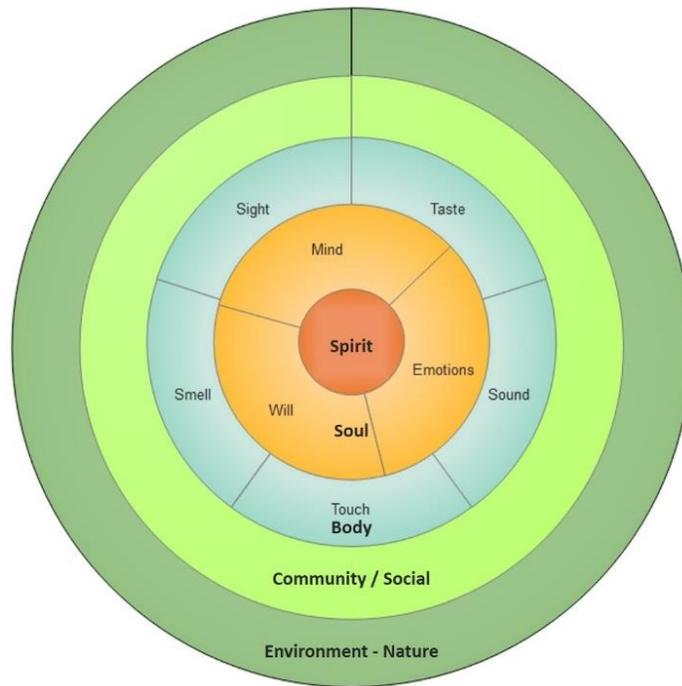


Figure 2. Five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing.

Have someone in the group read out the following blessing of Paul's, taken from 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (MSG). As this is read, take some deep breaths from your diaphragm, feel free to close your eyes and simply receive Paul's blessing over your own life:

May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!

Discuss what you notice about this blessing.

In this passage Paul writes that we have a spirit, a soul and a body.

According to some in Christian ministry, the body is our outer dimension, that connects us with the world. The soul is the inner part of our being that comprises of heart (emotions), mind (intellect) and will (volition). The soul also includes our imagination and desires, which are products of the interactions between the heart, mind and will. Our most inner part is the spirit, which is the part of our being that intimately communes with God, through the Holy Spirit (e.g., Payne 1995b, 47).

King David illustrates how health and wholeness can be manifested at every level of the human-being – as a person focuses their thoughts on the Lord:

I keep the Lord in mind always.
Because He is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad
and my spirit rejoices;
my body also rests securely.
Psalm 16:8-9 (HCSB)

Here we can note, that being continually mindful of the Lord's Presence can bring about gladness to the soul (heart), joy to the spirit, and both security and rest to the body.

As we become more aware of these three dimensions of our being and our social-environmental context, we will also become more aware of how these different dimensions affect our spiritual formation, that is, our walk with God, and our becoming like Jesus Christ. We may ask questions such as, "Why am I thinking these thoughts? Where are they coming from?" or, "What is influencing

my emotions at present, why am I so angry, or fearful, or irritated?” and so forth. Our bodies, souls and spirits can lead us to places of darkness and fear, or, with God’s Spirit leading us, draw us towards greater peace and joy, in Christ. Think about which parts of your being, predominantly guides your life at present and consider whether your life is directed mostly by your body, soul, or spirit?

As we consider which parts of our beings guide our lives, it is important to note that we have other dimensions to our make-up, including the social dimension. As relational beings, we are affected and formed by our interactions with others, both positively and negatively. In a similar way, we also have the power to affect and form other people’s lives, as we interact with them. How would you describe your interactions with others around you in general? What does your community look like? Are you being positively formed by your community?

One final dimension which we can interact with, is through our environment. For the purposes of this program, we are going to pay special attention to one type of environment, which is nature or God’s creation. Research shows that urban living especially can make us prone to compromised wellbeing, such as anxiety or depression, and that one possible cause of this, is having insufficient interaction with nature (Bratman et.al 2015, 8567). Hence, we will explore the dimension of nature throughout this program, but especially in the final session, “Retreating with God in Nature.” This final session is designed to be

in the form of a weekend spiritual retreat, though it can be adapted for other small-group contexts.

Goal Four: Learn to Participate in the Abundant Life of Christ

In John 10:10 (NKJV), Jesus says this, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” Note several things in this passage. Firstly, the thief, that is the evil one, desires to steal and destroy many things in our lives. One of these things, is our peace. Yet Jesus doesn’t simply promise to remedy this situation, he promises much more! His purpose in coming is to bring an abundance of life. This is possible because of two things: 1. Christ’s death which atones for our sins, opening access to God and eternal life; and, 2. His glorious resurrection, which makes it possible for us to live a resurrected and abundant life, through his Spirit. Robert W. Kellemen writes the following,

Resurrection power allows us to do more than survive. We can thrive (2 Corinthians 1:3-11; Philippians 3:7-15). We can move from anger to love, from despair to hope, and from fear to faith. Resurrection power offers fresh, creative energy, and a reawakening of courage (Kellemen 2007, 204).

Here Kellemen identifies some of the characteristics of the abundant life, such as moving from anger to love, from despair to hope, and from fear to faith. As we are filled with, and keep in step with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:16), we will begin to experience the resurrection power of the Spirit in our lives

(Ephesians 1:19-20, Philippians 3:10), and truly manifest the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Pause and rest: As we look to the pilgrimage that lies ahead of us, let us pause, reflect on, and receive the following blessing, as it is read aloud, and consider how God is speaking to you personally:

Blessed are those whose strength is in [the Lord],
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of [Weeping],
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
(Psalm 84:5-7, NIV)

The Psalmist speaks about the Valley of Weeping in this passage. Consider the valleys that you are traversing currently, such as the valley of anxiety, or the valley of worry. Trust that the Lord will transform these valleys into places of beautiful springs, gushing with Living Water also.

Core Practices to Nurture the Spirit

The following three spiritual practices are in a sense, rhythms of grace, catering to the needs of our spirits (but also to our souls and bodies), to assist us in the pursuit of wholeness and peace, as we draw into God's Presence. Such includes a monthly practice of spiritual direction – a place where we can reflect on the spiritual movements in our lives, with a spiritual companion. In this section we also introduce the importance of the weekly Sabbath, whereby we can intentionally learn to slow down and rest, and commune with God. One other

practice which can nurture the same blessings daily, is a quieter form of prayer with Scripture, called Resting Prayer. We will explore these three practices below.

Monthly Spiritual Direction

*The soul is sweetened
by the wise counsel of a friend.
- Proverbs 27:9b (VOICE)*

Gordon T. Smith describes the ministry of spiritual direction in the following way:

A spiritual director offers spiritual guidance and companionship to help us make sense of our faith journey, interpret with us the significant markers on the road, and encourage us, particularly through the more difficult transitions and valleys of our pilgrimage. Most of all, a spiritual director helps us make sense of the witness of the Spirit – assisting us to respond well to the question, How is God present to me and how is God, through the ministry of the Spirit, at work in my life (Smith 2014b,10).

If we were to take a survey of Scripture, we would find similar relationships of nurturing, as described above in the Bible. For example, in 1 Samuel chapter 3 we witness the prophet Eli helping Samuel to discern and respond to the Lord's calling for his life. In the New Testament, examples of spiritual direction include the spiritual nurture, counsel and encouragement that Barnabas provides to many, including the apostle Paul. Paul then in turn, provides similar spiritual nurturing to Timothy, among others. Spiritual direction simply provides us with a space in our lives to discern the voice of God, and to discover where he is working in our lives.

It is always helpful to have someone else, sensitively assisting us with this endeavor.

Spiritual direction also provides a platform, where we can talk through our anxieties, identify patterns of God's grace, confess sins – so that healing can come forth from unresolved sin – and, work through the inner-healing of memories and emotions. Throughout *The Shalom Program*, you will be encouraged to spend an hour-session with a Spiritual Director each month, followed by a concluding session, at the end of the program.

Weekly Practice: Sabbath

*In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth,
and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.
- Exodus 31:17b (NIV)*

Right from the beginning of time at creation, the Lord shows his people that resting is important. In fact, so important that he later ordains a special day of the week for it – called the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11, Leviticus 25:4-7). The Sabbath that the Lord ordains is to include rest for all creation, even the working animals, and the land itself! (According to Leviticus 25, there was to be a Sabbath for the land, every seven years). God sees rest as a necessary spiritual practice for his people to participate in. By observing the Sabbath, we take our minds (and bodies) off our work, and focus them instead, on delighting in God, and recreation, essentially re-creating ourselves weekly.

Jesus says in Mark 2:27 that “The Sabbath was made for *the needs of* human beings, and not the other way around” (VOICE translation). Some folk may think that observing a Sabbath will constitute a 24-hour exercise of pure boredom. Yet Dan Allender in his book called *Sabbath: Ancient Practices* thinks that this day, of all days of the week should be purely about delight. He asks of us each, “what would I do for a twenty-four-hour period of time if the only criteria was to pursue my deepest joy?” (Allender 2010, 14-15). What would you do? Our weekly Sabbaths can be designed for fun, joy, rest, delight and spontaneity. You will find great blessings from scheduling a weekly Sabbath on your calendar. This will provide you with an opportunity to experience a God-given weekly personal mini-retreat. Don’t forgo it, but simply enjoy, breathe and rest!

Daily Practice: Resting Prayer

*My soul finds rest in God alone.
- Psalm 62:1a (NIV84)*

The practice of Resting Prayer is simply a process that can help us rest in God’s Presence through both Scripture and Prayer. This means of praying, has been practiced in various ways throughout Christian history. Resting Prayer has the following components to it:

1. Thanksgiving
2. Confession and Assurance
3. Resting in God Through Scripture

4. Resting in God Through Stillness

You may be wondering why each of the above four elements are included in Resting Prayer. Let's look at each of these elements, and examine their formational qualities, for our walk with God.

Thanksgiving

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)*

The Psalmist encourages us to enter into the Presence of the Lord with thanksgiving (Psalms 50:23, 95:2, 100:4). As we identify the Lord's goodness in our lives, this automatically draws us into a place of worship and praise. Giving thanks to God with gratefulness, also draws our attention away from our own anxieties. Paul encourages us to bring thanksgiving to the Lord, even as we bring our cares and concerns before him (Philippians 4:6). When we are feeling anxious, it may truly seem like a sacrifice to refocus our thoughts, to expressing gratitude to God. Yet this does several things:

1. It redirects our attention to God in worship and provides us with an appreciation of his mighty works.
2. It redirects our attention to the positive things that are happening in our lives, rather than obsessing on those things which seem bad or out-of-control.

3. As we consider the goodness of God, we will be more inclined to trust him with our present cares and concerns.
4. Adopting a regular practice of gratitude can also enhance our sleeping, while reducing depression and anxiety. (See for example, Ng and Wong 2013).

Consider these words by William Law:

If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you... This thankful spirit... heals and turns all that it touches into happiness. For this reason, I exhort you to this method in your devotion that every day may be made a day of thanksgiving, and that the spirit of murmur and discontent may be unable to enter into the heart that is so often employed in singing the praises of God” (Law 1955, 101).

Spend the next moments intentionally thinking about three things that you are grateful to God for and share with your group. Some ideas include:

- Ways in which I have experienced God’s blessing(s) in my life
- The blessing(s) of various people in my life (name some people)
- The blessing(s) of my home, and where I live (name these blessings)
- The blessing(s) of my work, or what I do for a living (name these blessings)
- The blessing(s) of various talents and skills that God has given to me (name these blessings)

Continue this practice of identifying three things (or more) to be grateful for, as you start and finish your day. Over time, fill in the gaps of your day with thanksgiving also. On some occasions, you may find negative thoughts about others, or various circumstances filling your mind as you try to give thanks to

God. As this happens, simply redirect your thoughts, to focus on thankful thoughts instead.

Confession and Assurance

*Confession brings psychological growth and spiritual renewal.
It is “a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.”*
- Mark R. McMinn and Richard Foster (2012, 3477)

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”
- Matthew 3:8 (NIV)

Confession is a vehicle that gives us confidence to enter into the Presence of God. The Psalmist asks, “who may stand in [the Lord’s] holy place?” The answer is those with clean hands and a pure heart. They are the ones who will receive a blessing from God (Psalm 24:3-5). Jesus also reminds us, that it is the pure in heart who shall see God (Matthew 5:8). Thus, it is important to ensure that our lives are made right with God, through the practice of confession, so that we can indeed see and experience him. Once we have confessed our sins, the apostle John assures us that we receive forgiveness from the Lord (1 John 1:9). Once we have received this assurance, we can then enter into God’s Holy Presence boldly, and with confidence. Read Hebrews 4:16 and Hebrews 10:22, and then discuss what you have read together.

Once we have confessed our sins and received the assurance of forgiveness, we find ourselves in a place where we can receive healing from God. The apostle James urges us, as follows: “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is

powerful and effective” (James 5:16, NIV). In his book *Anatomy of The Soul*, Curt Thompson writes,

James points to confession as an avenue of healing. Healing of any infirmity begins with the healing of sin. And sin itself begins with our not attending to our emotional states that ultimately leads to the dis-integration of everything. When confession is done in the presence of a mindful recipient, forgiveness fills the room and healing abounds. Rupture is repaired, and we are reminded that God, through Jesus, has begun a new work that he will continue through the power of the Holy Spirit (Philippians 1:6) (Thompson 2010, 5063).

Interestingly, one scientific study concludes that those who engage in the practice of confession sense themselves being significantly closer to God, than others who have not engaged in confession with God (Pargament 2011, 105-106). The Resting Prayer process will provide a place for you to daily confess any sins to God and receive assurance of his forgiveness. You may also be able to confidentially disclose and confess any sins to your Spiritual Director. As James writes (see above), this can be helpful and healing.

Resting in God Through Scripture

*[The Lord] sent out his word and healed them
Psalm 107:20a (NIV)*

*The law of the Lord is perfect (flawless),
restoring and refreshing the soul
- Psalm 19:7a (AMP)*

*Those who love your instructions have great peace
and do not stumble.
- Psalm 119:165 (NLT)*

Some of us have been taught to approach the Scripture informationally. In other words, we try to know as much of the Bible as possible. While we certainly

benefit from learning and memorizing as much Scripture as possible, it is also important that we read the Bible so that it shapes and forms us. In Psalm 119:11 the Psalmist speaks of hiding the Word of God in the depths of his heart, while in Colossians 3:16, Paul writes of the blessing of having God’s word richly dwelling within us. We are formed in numerous ways as we allow God’s word to “richly dwell,” and be hidden in the depths of our hearts. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 1:2-3 (NIV):

[Blessed is the one] whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

Rather than rushing through larger portions of Scripture, as we might be used to doing, we can do what the Psalmist describes, and that is to meditate on smaller portions of Scripture. This means to savor, or to “chew on” the same Scripture repeatedly. As part of the Resting Prayer practice, we will reflectively read through a small portion of Scripture three times, prior to spending time, simply resting with the Lord. Many Christians throughout history have been greatly blessed from engaging with the Lord prayerfully, in this way. Like them, we can learn to slow down, rest in God’s Word and allow the Spirit of God to gently refresh and revive our souls.

Resting in God Through Stillness

*Like a weaned child that is content in its mother's arms,
I have calmed and quieted myself in Your embrace, O Lord.
- Prayer Inspired from Psalm 131*

Christ's invitation to rest in him never expires, but we need to be intentional about receiving his invitation, and simply come to him (Matthew 11:28-30). After we have deeply reflected on God's Word, we can continue to simply rest in God presence in stillness, through a deeper form of prayer. A prayer where our minds are truly "stayed on God," experiencing his shalom (Isaiah 26:3). Scientific studies have shown that this form of prayer can even positively change our brains over time, rewiring them, to become more receptive to the peace of God (See for example, Moll 2014, 15; and Newberg and Waldman 2009, 6-7).

The practice of resting in God through prayer is a simple one, as follows:

1. Pray a simple prayer to God, asking him to draw near to you, as you draw near to him (James 4:8). Ask the Lord for his presence and protection during this time.
2. Select a word or phrase from your Scripture reading. This might be one that you have been reflecting on already. If none come to mind, you can simply choose a word that describes God's character in some way, such as his love, goodness or faithfulness (See also Appendix B).
3. Take some deep breaths as you silently repeat the word or phrase.

4. As you do this, become aware of God's Presence with you, around you and in you (Psalm 139:7-10; Matthew 28:20).
5. Let your thoughts focus on the Presence of God. As you find them wandering (which you will), gently repeat the chosen word or phrase. This word or phrase functions as a simple way to remind you to bring your mind back to reflecting on God, his Word, and his character (Isaiah 26:3).
6. Continue to rest in God's Presence in this way for a minimum of twelve minutes (if possible). Studies have shown that even just twelve minutes of resting prayer, over a period of eight weeks, can significantly reduce anxiety and enhance feelings of peace (See for example, Moll 2014, 15; and Newberg and Waldman 2009).
7. Finish your time with the Lord's Prayer, just as Jesus invites us to pray. This is an excellent way to focus the rest of the day on things that are important to our Lord, including: Our relationship to God our Father, Abba or Daddy; Worship; Surrendering our wills to him; Entrusting ourselves into his care, Looking to him for provision; Receiving and giving forgiveness; Entreating the Lord for protection against the evil one; and then finally, concluding our time with a Doxology of Praise to the Lord.

Resting in God, in such a simple way as this, is one way in which we can learn to abide in him. Jesus tells us that as we abide in him, we will bear much fruit (John 15:5). This naturally include the Fruit of the Spirit, such as joy and peace.

How Is This Practice Forming Me?

You may discover that the practice of Resting Prayer nurtures any of the following blessings in your life, as you engage in this form of prayer over some time:

1. A deeper relationship with God may be nurtured. Throughout the day, you may increasingly discern God's Presence and consequently rest in his Presence more. The Lord may increasingly become more like a friend in your life (see James 2:23).
2. You may experience a greater awareness about your life. Part of this awareness can include detecting any false thinking, as such arises. Once any false thoughts are detected, they can be "taken captive" and given to Jesus (2 Corinthians 10:5). (This will be explored more fully in Week 2.)
3. You may find the Fruit of the Spirit growing more fully in your life (See Galatians 5:22-23). This might include becoming more peaceful, patient and compassionate. You might find yourself coping better and reacting less, especially in stressful and chaotic situations. (See for example, Pennington et al 2012, 485-492; Bingaman 2011, 477-89; and Ferguson et al 2010, 305-29).
4. You may experience a releasing of locked-up emotions, memories and images that may be harmful. As these are released, your spirit and soul become "reconfigured" in healthier ways. See Figure 3.

As we continue to engage in this practice of resting prayer daily by focusing our thoughts on God through a reflective reading of Scripture and prayer, we will notice overtime that our minds and emotions are beginning to shift towards a healthier place of peace. The following diagram illustrates what can happen during this process of prayer.

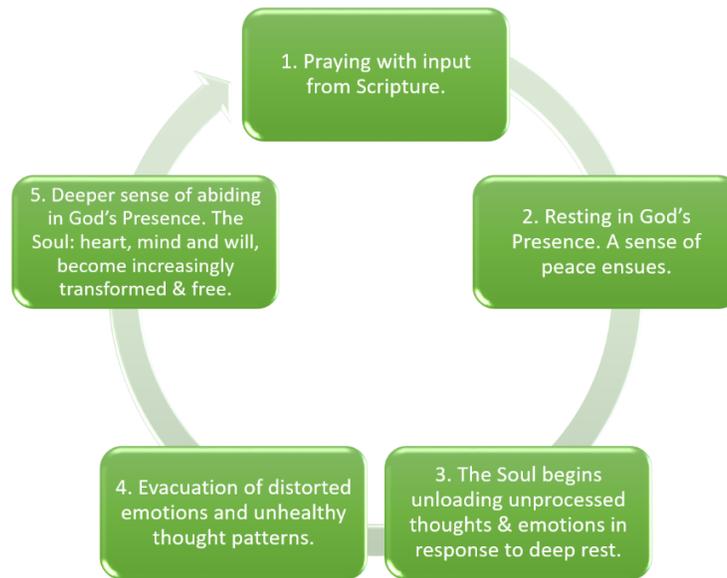


Figure 3. The process of resting prayer
Adapted from Thomas Keating (1994, 77).

The reflection of Scripture leads us into a place of resting with God. As we rest with God, using Scripture as our guide, we may find ourselves perfectly at peace with God. Some practitioners have discovered however that as their mind rests, it is further enabled to process various thoughts and emotions. As such thoughts are “unloaded,” the pray-er may experience some temporary, yet unsettling emotions. These might include melancholy, anger, or even anxiety. At

this point, the soul is initiating a detoxing process. Like any form of detoxing, this part of the process can cause discomfort. One practitioner refers to this process as “[loosening] up the emotional weeds of a lifetime” (Keating 1999, 34). As unhealthy thinking and emotional patterns are removed however, we will begin to experience a deeper sense of abiding in God, along with greater freedom in our soul, that is, our heart, mind and will. We are thus beginning to experience the abundant life and freedom of soul, that Jesus refers to in John 10:10. This is a life of peace and joy in Christ, through his Spirit.

The following are some tips to consider based on the experiences of those who have practiced variations of Resting Prayer (see Bourgeault 2004; Keating 2002; Smith 2016).

- Your mind will likely protest when you try to bring calm to its distracted nature. As you find yourself thinking other thoughts, simply bring your focus back to God with the word or phrase that you have chosen.
- You may experience profound or inspired thoughts about other things, while resting in God through prayer. While it might be tempting to cease your time of prayer to focus on these thoughts, gently return your mind and gaze to the Lord. If the thoughts persist, write them down on a notepad, and return your thoughts to the Lord.
- You may find yourself undergoing different experiences of body, soul and spirit during Resting Prayer. This can include physical manifestations such as crying, shivering, or yawning. You may also experience feelings, such as an

intense joy, delight, or simply a state of peace. The Lord may even grant you visions during this time (cf. Acts 10; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Always be wary of your motivations with regards to experiences. Be wary of seeking out experiences, but also be wary of fearing them. Remember that you have come to simply rest in the Presence of God and experience shalom through him. Manifestations of God's grace can be received with thanksgiving, while remembering that each of us is seeking to rest in God's Presence, rather than to access certain experiences.

We will conclude today's session by engaging in the Resting Prayer practice:

Introductory Prayer:
*Abba Father, [or preferred address]
We honor and bless Your Name.
You are our Lord, our God, our King,
We draw near to you, seeking to rest in your Presence,
As we do this, please protect us from hindrances of any kind,
Let us experience your goodness, your peace and your joy.
We deeply desire to see you, to be with you,
And to behold your beauty.
Fill us afresh with your Spirit,
And let us truly rest in you,
In Christ's Name, we pray.
Amen.*

Read the passage John 5:2-8,14 slowly and reflectively three times, as follows:

- **Read.** Simply read the passage the first time (or listen to someone else reading it).
- Following the reading, pause in silence for 1-2 minutes.

- **Reflect.** As the Scripture is read the second time, become more reflective.
 - What words or phrases do you react or respond to?
 - Is God inviting you to engage with the text in some way?
 - Feel free to visualize yourself in the narrative
 - Following the reading, pause in silence for 1-2 minutes.
- **Rest.** As the Scripture is read the third time, simply allow yourself to rest with the Lord.
 - Following the reading, select a word from the passage, that you can use to draw your attention to God. Rest with God in this way for 12 minutes. If you are unsure about what word or phrase to choose, simply use the word “Healer.”
- **Lord’s Prayer.** At the end of twelve minutes, the facilitator will invite the group to say the Lord’s Prayer together. Read Matthew 6:9-13 (NKJV):

*Our Father in heaven,
 Hallowed be Your name.
 our kingdom come.
 Your will be done
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 As we forgive our debtors.
 And do not lead us into temptation,
 But deliver us from the evil one.
 For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
 Amen.*

Closing Prayer

*O Lord my God, to you and to your service
I devote myself, body, soul, and spirit.
enlighten my understanding with the light of your Holy Spirit;
and may all the desires of my heart and will
center in what you would have me do.
Make me an instrument of your salvation
for the people entrusted to my care,
and grant that by my life and teaching
I may set forth your true and living Word.
Be always with me in carrying out the duties of my faith.
In prayer, quicken my devotion;
in praises, heighten my love and gratitude;
in conversation give me readiness of thought and expression;
and grant that, by the clearness and brightness of your holy Word,
all the world may be drawn into your blessed kingdom.
All this I ask for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen
(Tickle 2006, 539-540).*

Week 2: Renewing the Mind

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
- Romans 12:2a (NIV)*

*The mind governed by the flesh is death,
but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.
- Romans 8:6 (NIV)*

*A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh
- Proverbs 14:30a (NRSV)*

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]

*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray, Amen.*

As we learn to discern the various reasons why we have anxiety in our lives, we will also realize how important it is to discern what is going on, in our minds, emotions and will.

This week we look at the all-important topic of renewing our minds. In Proverbs 23:7 (NKJV), the sage advises in relation to a man, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” Think about the thoughts that consume your daily life, what are they filled with? If our thoughts are continuously anxious thoughts, what does that make us? It is time for a mind-makeover.

The Pattern of This World and the Patterns of Our Thoughts

*We need to decide: will our minds be filled with the values and perspectives of our society and culture (that is, the world), or will our minds be richly indwelt by the Word of God?
- Gordon T. Smith (2001, 46-47)*

As Paul urges us to renew our minds in Romans 12:2, he also urges us not to “conform to the pattern of this world.” How do we know whether we are conforming to the patterns of this world or not? We can simply examine what influences are infiltrating our minds, and then assess whether these influences are in keeping with God’s Word.

Spend some time filling in the following table and then discuss with your group, the inputs that each of us allow into our minds, along with the time allocated to each input. This will give you some idea about what inputs are prominent in your life. While some of these items might not be wrong in themselves, they can go a long way to forming the contents of our minds and aiding our anxiety. Put a zero in the box, if you don't do an activity.

Table 2. Assessing your input influences
Adapted from Hardy (2010, 171)

Activity	Number of Hours		
	Per Day	Per Week	Per Year
Watch, read or listen to the news on TV, from newspapers, on the radio, or through other media			
Reading gossip in magazines, blogs, websites, readers etc.			
Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter etc.			
Games (video, board games etc.) that include violence, smut or elements of darkness			
Movies, TV, or theatre that include violence, smut or evil			
Music that include violence or smut			
Other less-than-life-affirming activities (write them here):			
Total			

Your Plan To Feed Your Mind

*Well, woke up this mo'nin with my mind, stayin' on Jesus
Woke up this mo'nin with my mind, stayin' on the Lord
Well, woke up this mo'nin with my mind, stayin' on Jesus
Halleluh, halleluluh, halleluluh! (African-American Spiritual)*

Consider the following narrative by neurologist William M. Struthers.

When I was young I visited a farm that had an old-fashioned water pump. It was situated in the center of a cement slab and would drip ferociously, long after you stopped pumping. Over the years the leftover dripping water had cut a trough from under the spigot to the edge of the slab. The trough was nearly two inches deep, and any standing water on the slab would be channeled to it, cutting it deeper. (Struthers 2009, 135)

Struthers goes on to explain that inappropriate inputs going into our mind, are just like that constant dripping, in that they deepen various neurological pathways, to make their own trough. Struthers writes that with repeated unhealthy activity, eventually, “a neurological, emotional and spiritual erosion carves out a channel that will eventually develop into a canyon.” Thus, our mind becomes a canyon filled with unhealthy habits and thinking. The good news is however, that if we are intentional about avoiding the corrupted pathway, then a new neuro-pathway can be formed (Struthers 2009, 136). Struthers’s explains,

By intentionally redirecting the neurochemical flow, the path toward right thinking becomes the preferred path and is established as the mental habit. ... By deepening the "holiness" pathways, ways, we are freed from deciding to do what is right and good as they become part of our embodied nature (Struthers 2009, 136).

As we consider avoiding unhealthy inputs that create unhealthy thought pathways, we also must consider healthy inputs, and healthy ways to focus our minds – creating the “holiness pathways” that Struthers refers to. Read and discuss what Paul says in Philippians 4:8 and then circle any of the following practices and influences which you engage in regularly:

- Reading God’s Word
- Spiritual Direction / Spiritual friendship
- Godly mentor(s)
- Spiritual Father/Mother influence(s)
- Different forms of Prayer
- Worship and Fellowship with God’s People
- Other

After reflecting on the ungodly influences, and the godly influences in your life, next think about some ways in which you can proactively feed your mind with positive, godly, inspirational and abundant-minded ideas, information and input. Discuss these with your group.

Recognizing Distortional Thought Patterns

*“... we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”
2 Corinthians 10:5b (NIV)*

So far, we have assessed both unhealthy and healthy inputs to our minds. It is also important, however, to understand and recognize various distortional thought patterns that can influence our lives. As we understand and recognize these, we can then do something about them!

Negative Thoughts Patterns

The following thought patterns may be some that you can identify with (Amen 2015, 1170; Colbert 2009, 36-47):

1. “What If” Thinking: We think to ourselves, “what if this, or that were to happen?”
2. Catastrophizing: Unpleasant events become magnified in our minds.
3. Fortune-telling: We habitually expect the worst outcomes.
4. Mind Reading: We assume that we know the thoughts of others, and then jump to certain conclusions. This may also include role-playing. That is, we role-play a dialogue in our minds with someone else, which may play out negatively.
5. Black-And-White Thinking. We tend to view circumstances in black and white terms. For example, “it is either this or that.”
6. Guilt Beating: We impose a rigid set of rules on ourselves and others, about what must, should, or ought to be done.
7. Labelling: We identify ourselves or others in a negative way, such as jerk or loser.
8. Negative Filter: We discount any information that is positive or good and reframe it negatively.
9. Emotional Reasoning: We base our thought-patterns on our feelings.
10. The Blame Game: We tend to blame ourselves, others or God. This can then lead to anger, resentment, bitterness, depression and anxiety.

11. “Always/Never” Thinking: Our thoughts are consumed with words such as “never,” “no-one,” “everyone,” “every-time,” “everything.”

12. Personalizing: We ascribe personal meaning to neutral and harmless events. For example, if a person doesn’t smile at us, as we walk past them, then we assume that they must hate us. They may in fact be thinking about a grief that has just hit their family, or an exam they are about to sit, or an array of other scenarios.

Replacing Negative Thoughts with God’s Word

*When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart’s delight
- Jeremiah 15:16a (NIV)*

*It takes more than bread to stay alive.
It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.
Matthew 4:4b (MSG)*

After learning about different kinds of negative thoughts, we can then practice becoming more aware of them in our own lives. One easy way to nurture this awareness, is to keep a log for a week or longer and record any negative thoughts that you notice. Some people find this exercise overwhelming or scary, particularly if they discover that there are many negative thoughts in their lives. Some might be tempted to give up this activity and resign their minds over to being a lost cause.

Persistence however is key for all of us. While this process of recording negative thoughts may appear daunting at first, over-time we will be able to

determine that we are in fact making progress. Eventually, we will find ourselves detecting the presence of negative thoughts as they surface, and then quickly eliminating them.

One of the most effective ways to eliminate negative thoughts, is to daily surrender our souls – mind, will and heart – to the Lord. We can accomplish so much more in the power of God’s Spirit. Next, we replace the negative thoughts with promises from the Word of God. Think about a negative thought that has been affecting your mind. Next, think about how you can replace this negative thought with a promise from God’s Word (see table below). You may find it helpful to discuss your findings with others in your group.

Table 3. Renewing the mind

Negative Thought	Promises of God’s Word
e.g., I can’t do anything	Philippians 4:13. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength
e.g., I am ugly	In Genesis 1:31 God smiles as he calls me – with the rest of his creation “very good.” The Psalmist also declares “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” in Psalm 139:14

A more comprehensive version of this is available in Appendix C, which can be used as a daily exercise for a week or longer, to help us become more aware of the types of thoughts that we have and whether these are leading to peace and rest in God, or anxiety in our flesh.

Don’t be disheartened if you are not familiar with many promises from Scripture. This may be a good time to begin memorizing key promises from

God's Word. You may find the resource helpful: *Bible Promises for You: from the New International Version* (Zondervan 2005).

Practice Your Awareness of Being in God's Presence This Week

Invite God's Presence and increasing wholeness into your week, with the following practice:

Prayerfully go through the exercise of replacing negative thoughts with promises from God's Word (in Appendix C). Be aware of the Lord's Presence with you and ask God to reveal to you what negative thoughts are clogging up your life. Learn how to replace these, with promises from God's Word.

Week 3: Emotions and Feelings

*Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life.
- Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)*

*Emotion is something that you regulate and that regulates you.
Your awareness of it ... enables you to harness it for the purpose
of growth in your relationship with God and others.
- Curt Thompson (2010, 2129)*

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]

*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray, Amen.*

Today we consider the world of emotions and feelings. What are emotions? Consider this definition from Robert W. Kellemen, "Emotions are our God-given capacity to experience our world and to respond subjectively to those experiences. This capacity includes the ability to react internally and experience a full-range of both positive (pleasant) and negative (painful) inner feelings" (Kellemen 2007, 201). In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman (2005, 287-288) lists eight main families of emotions, which include the following:

Anger: fury, outrage, resentment, wrath, exasperation, indignation, vexation, acrimony, animosity, annoyance, irritability, hostility, and, perhaps at the extreme, pathological hatred and violence

Sadness: grief, sorrow, cheerlessness, gloom, melancholy, self-pity, loneliness, dejection, despair, and, when pathological, severe depression

Fear: anxiety, apprehension, nervousness, concern, consternation, misgiving, wariness, qualm, edginess, dread, fright, terror; as a psychopathology, phobia and panic

Enjoyment: happiness, joy, relief, contentment, bliss, delight, amusement, pride, sensual pleasure, thrill, rapture, gratification, satisfaction, euphoria, whimsy, ecstasy, and at the far edge, mania

Love: acceptance, friendliness, trust, kindness, affinity, devotion, adoration, infatuation, agape

Surprise: shock, astonishment, amazement, wonder

Disgust: contempt, disdain, scorn, abhorrence, aversion, distaste, revulsion

Shame: guilt, embarrassment, chagrin, remorse, humiliation, regret, mortification, and contrition

Discuss in your group which of the above emotions you most identify with in your own life, and why you think this.

As we most likely will realize, we do not always experience those emotions which we see as positive, such as joy, serenity and peace. Throughout our lifetimes, we also experience other emotions, such as grief, sadness and anger. Sometimes we experience these latter emotions more frequently, than the former. On other occasions, these might be mixed with yet other emotions (and motivations), causing even darker shades of emotion and feelings to manifest, such as jealousy, bitterness and hatred.

As Christians, we might wonder why we experience distorted and darkened thoughts and feelings. After all, when we are born again into new life in Jesus Christ, we find ourselves rebirthed as New Creations. While this is the case, it is important to understand that we still have some healing work to do in our souls – our thoughts, emotions and will. This healing progressively comes forth as we allow Jesus to bring about transformation in these areas, and as we cooperate with his Spirit in the process (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Galatians 5:16).

Emotions Function as Signposts

It is important for us to understand that experiencing intense emotions is not necessarily a bad thing and this also includes emotions that we may see as adverse or dysfunctional. Such emotions and feelings can simply be God-given signposts, leading us to a pathway of healing. For example, if we are feeling

overwhelmingly sad, then we would be prudent to explore reasons behind the sadness and receive appropriate healing. In some ways, you are doing the very same thing with the anxiety that is affecting your life. You have discerned the anxiety present in your life, and you feel its overwhelming nature and effects on your wellbeing. These experiences then function in a way that are pointing you to a path of recovery. They show you that there are things in your life that need recalibrating, so that balance and healing can be restored to your life, through Jesus Christ. As you work through this process, please do consult with a licensed Christian counselor, should you find your anxiety overwhelming or unmanageable.

Distorted Emotions

While emotions can act as signposts in our lives, it is also important to recognize when they are distorted. Distorted emotions can happen for any number of reasons, including childhood wounds, trauma, and the consequences of our sins, or the sins of others. The following table shows how we can understand, and further, discern whether our emotions are appropriate, or whether they are distorted. Once we recognize this, we can then respond in a fitting way, to nurture correction and healing where needed.

Table 4. Understanding our emotional responses
Adapted from Robert Kellemen (2007, 202)

External Situation	Internal Perception	Emotional Response
Negative Action	Belief From: Scripture The Spirit's guidance Discernment from godly community	Appropriate Painful Emotion (Sorrow, Sadness, etc.)
Negative Action	Belief From: The evil one The world The flesh	Distorted Painful Emotion (Hatred, Despair, etc.)
Positive Action	Belief From: Scripture The Spirit's guidance Discernment from godly community	Appropriate Positive Emotion (Joy, Peace, etc.)
Positive Action	Belief From: The evil one The world The flesh	Distorted Positive Emotion (Pride, Self-Sufficiency, etc.)

As the table illustrates, negative actions, plus correct beliefs, can cause appropriate God-given emotions, that are also painful, such as sadness. Negative actions, plus incorrect beliefs, create distorted emotions, including hatred. The same is true for positive actions. Joy and peace are wonderful God-given emotions to experience in response to positive actions. Pride however, is a distortion of our God-given emotions.

Read the following passages that are about different biblical characters: Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:8-12; Ruth 1:19-20; and Judges 6:11-15. Once you have read these passages, discuss with your group what distorted emotion(s) you can identify in each of these situations.

All the above biblical characters were godly people, yet they allowed unhealthy emotions to affect their thoughts about God and affect their relationship with him. Thankfully the Lord continues to lead and guide each one of them and reveal his Presence in their lives. In his grace, the Lord does the same, for each one of us.

As you begin to pay attention to your emotions and recognize them, you will be able to: 1. See them as helpful signposts, which can point you in a certain direction; and 2. Discern whether they are appropriate, or distorted emotions. Next it will be helpful to understand the roots of these emotions. Where are they coming from? Why are they surfacing? If we recognize them as distorted emotions, how can these be transformed? If they are caused from previous wounding in our lives, how can there be healing to touch these places in our lives? As we become intentional about working through the wounds of our pasts, and further, eliminating the lies that have interwoven their way into the fabric of our soul, we will be well on our way to receiving healing in our thoughts and emotions, through God's Spirit. *The Shalom Program* can assist you in bringing healing and transformation emotions in various ways.

Spiritual Fruit

One of our great callings in the Christian life is to grow in the Fruit of the Spirit, as we are filled with, and keep in step with the Spirit of God (Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:16,22-23). Hence, as we continue working through various

distorted emotions, and emotional wounds, it is important to keep the Fruit of the Spirit, as a focus in our transformation. For example, through the Spirit, we might find that:

1. Worry, fear, anxiety or melancholy can be transformed into joy, faithfulness and peace.
2. Bitterness or hatred can be transformed into love, kindness and goodness.
3. Anger or frustration can be transformed into patience, gentleness and self-control.

Name one distorted emotion that you would like to work through and consider which Fruit of the Spirit would you like to see, in its place. As you prayerfully resolve to bring transformation through the Fruit of the Spirit, receive the following blessing from Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (NIV), “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

Concluding Exercise

1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
2. Listen to these words from Romans chapter 5:5, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”
3. Imagine yourself being underneath and being showered by a great waterfall, which is God’s love being poured onto you and into you, by the Holy Spirit. If you prefer, you can think about another spiritual fruit being poured over you

and into you. Imagine joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, or self-control, being poured into your heart, through the Living Water of the Holy Spirit.

4. Allow the Living Water of the Spirit to soak you, and to fill you with an abundance of the spiritual fruit that you have chosen. Linger and savor this moment, for another minute.
5. Thank the Lord for his gift to you, and then open your eyes.

Practice Your Awareness of Being in God's Presence This Week

Invite God's Presence and increasing wholeness into your week, through any of the following practices. Consider trying the following exercises from Curt Thompson, in his book *Anatomy of The Soul* (Thompson 2010, 3855-3862).

- Choose one of the nouns listed as the outgrowth of a Spirit-filled life in Galatians 5:22 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control).
- Focus your attention on that word daily, throughout the day. Feel free to create images in your mind that represent that word.
- Dedicate seven consecutive days to focus on each word, continuing to cycle through all nine on an ongoing basis.
- Whenever you encounter another person or sense an emotional shift that tempts to take you down the low road, allow yourself to be immersed in your

awareness of your word for the day. Be mindful of how that word is calling you to reflect and manifest it in that moment, especially when your mind is screaming for you to do just the opposite. Ask yourself how you can be a conduit of joy, peace, patience, or gentleness in this moment.

- Read Anderson and Miller (1999); Scazzero (2014); or Seamands (2015).

Week 4: Restoring Balance and Harmony to the Body

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do,
do it all for the glory of God.
- 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)*

*When we try to split ourselves in two,
to separate our bodies from our souls, we do violence
and make difficult the healing of our bodies.
- Tara Owens (2015, 828)*

*Through scientific research we are gaining a
fuller understanding of how our bodies work,
and this research is telling a fascinating story:
our body's design enables us to
commune with God and to fellowship more closely with others.
As we understand that design, we can even learn to take up the
practices that help us to most closely follow God.
- Rob Moll (2014, 16)*

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]

*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray, Amen.*

Spiritual Formation of the Body

*'Wholeness' includes being fully integrated as a human being
therefore, physical health and spiritual formation
are closely related.
- Tara Owens (in Heiss and Arnold 2012, 52)*

In *The Shalom Program*, we believe that any movement towards wholeness is multi-faceted and it must take into consideration the physical element, including our bodies, and what we do with them. We may be surprised to learn that the Bible has much to say about spiritual formation and our bodies. Read and discuss the following passages Genesis 1:27, 31; Psalm 139:13-16.

As a popular saying goes, "God don't make no junk!" More than this, God makes his creation beautiful, and he calls it "very good!" This especially includes all of humanity, the pinnacle of his creation. It is worth noting that God's Story does not begin with *The Fall*, as the narrative is often expressed in Christian circles, but with the goodness of God, and the goodness of his creation. Hence, we can appreciate that our bodies have been made "very good," and as the Psalmist declares, we are thus "wonderfully made."

As we consider the goodness of our bodies, we should also consider how to treat our bodies. In Romans 12:1 Paul reminds us that we are to worship the Lord with our bodies, “as a living sacrifice.” We also learn from Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and are thus sacred. Because God paid a heavy price for us, through the death of his Son Jesus, and because he now dwells within our bodies – our temples – through the Spirit, we are to honor our bodies. We do this, as we treat them well, taking good care of them. When we neglect, or even abuse our bodies, we begin to experience adverse effects. Such include diseases and symptoms of a body that is experiencing disharmony. Anxiety can be one of these symptoms.

Practically speaking though, how do we worship God with our bodies? What does taking care of the body look like as we also consider our spiritual formation? Today we will examine various ways in which we can honor God by taking good care of our bodies, and simultaneously, bring about peace and harmony to our physical wellbeing.

Consecrating Our Bodies

The apostle Paul writes, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV). As we consider how to live in our bodies “for the glory of God,” let us now consecrate them to him, with the following “body-releasing” exercise. This exercise is inspired from a practice compiled by Dallas Willard (in Willard and Johnson 2014, 955-957) and is

combined with a body-relaxation technique known as a body-scan, which can assist in reducing anxiety.

Body Releasing Practice

1. Close your eyes and pray aloud, “Lord I give my body to you, and consecrate it for your purposes and will for my life.”
2. Next, focus your thoughts on the different parts of your body. You may wish to start with the feet, then legs, followed by the middle parts of the body, then stomach, lower and upper parts of the back, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, and face – including mouth, nose, eyes and forehead. Don’t rush this process. As you work your way up your body, be mindful of the following:
 - Thank God for the goodness of each part of your body which he has created
 - Ask God to fill each part with his life, and use it for his purposes
 - Release any tensions of the body to the Lord, that you become aware of.

As you become aware of each of the different parts of your body in this exercise, you may be surprised to discover that certain parts of your body feel tight or tense. Over time, our bodies accumulate and absorb our anxieties. As we become aware of these tensions in our bodies, we can simply pray “Lord I release the tensions in ... (part of body) to you” and then move on to the next part of your body.

Tip: When you find your body tense, and time is limited, you can briefly bring your awareness to each part of your body, praying “Lord I release (body-part) to you,” and then move onto the next part of the body.

The body-releasing exercise will require practice at first. Over time however, you may find that you can move through, and release the parts of the body to God, more quickly. Try using this practice to start out your day, as you commit your body to the Lord, and then finish your time resting in God through Scripture and prayer. The *Body Releasing* exercise is a wonderful way to relax your body and can be further combined with spending time with the Lord in Resting Prayer. Consider finishing this dual practice, by meditating on Psalm 139:1,13-18.

Our Daily Diet

*Dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything
that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness
out of reverence for God.
- 2 Corinthians 7:1b (NIV)*

Naturally, wholeness of body, soul and spirit, includes a consideration of what we eat. When you have some free time, read about the Mosaic Dietary Laws in Leviticus chapter 11, with regards to clean and unclean foods. While these laws existed with regards to edible and non-edible meats, most Israelites probably did not consume much meat in their diet (Borowski 2004, 100). Such tended to be reserved for festive days, holidays, Sabbaths and family celebrations (Kraemer 2007, 22). A common Israelite diet likely consisted of barley bread, vegetables and fruit, supplemented by milk products and honey (Cooper 1993, 3).

As Christians living in the New Covenant, we have many more freedoms than the Old Covenant Israelites did, especially with regards to food choices

(Mark 7:19, Acts 10:9-16). However, we can still exercise prudent wisdom as we eat foods that nurture our bodies. Read Genesis 1:29; 9:3 and discuss what foods God has given us to eat. Discuss how this varies from your own eating habits.

It is important to remember just how interconnected our bodies are to our souls. What we eat does affect our thoughts and emotions. Because no two people respond and react to foods in the same way, you may find it helpful to compile a food log for at least a week (though preferably longer), to monitor how your moods are affected by what you eat. Perhaps you can try doing this, over the next week. Remember to record exactly how you feel, and what moods and emotions are expressed, in the hours following each meal. See Appendix D for this exercise.

Breathing

*You know to take off your former way of life,
your crumpled old self ...
to take a fresh breath
and to let God renew your attitude and spirit.
Then you are ready to put on your new self.
- Extracts taken from Ephesians 4:22-24 (VOICE)*

*May the memory of Jesus be united with your breathing.
- St. John Climacus (in Bacovcin 2003, 181)*

We might not think too much about our own breath. Yet, how fundamental this is to our physical, emotional, and even our spiritual lives. From the beginning of time, Genesis 2:7 tells us that God breathes his Divine Breath into us. This breath given to us, is a valuable tool to aid us as we rest in God through prayer. It

also is a valuable tool, to assist us in reducing anxiety. Margaret Wehrenberg writes, “To manage the anxious body, there is no single technique as effective as breathing. It is almost miraculous what control of breath can do to calm your physiology” (Wehrenberg 2008, 50).

Breathing Exercises and Breath Prayers

You may find the following breathing exercise helpful, to bring you more intentionally into God’s Presence. As you practice, you may also find this to be helpful in relieving fear, anxiety and even panic attacks. The simple practice goes as follows: breath in deeply through your diaphragm for 4 or 5 seconds; hold for 4 or 5 seconds (or briefly pause); then breathe out for 4 or 5 seconds and pause. Repeat this exercise for several minutes, or as long as needed until you are feeling calm and peaceful and connected with God’s Presence. You may also wish to combine your breathing with a simple breath prayer. Breath prayers have been used throughout Christian history, as a means of drawing near to God and looking to him for mercy. The most famous breath prayer in Christian history is known as “The Jesus Prayer” which is described below:

Take a seat in solitude and silence. Bend your head, close your eyes and breathing softly, in your imagination, look into your own heart. Let your mind, or rather, your thoughts flow from your head down to your heart and say, while breathing: ‘Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.’ Whisper these words gently or say them in your mind. Discard all other thoughts. Be serene, persevering and repeat them over and over again (Calhoun 2005, 205).

Feel free to try out The Jesus Prayer to the following 4-4-4 pattern:

- As you breathe in for four seconds, say to yourself “Lord Have Mer-cy”
- Hold your breath for four seconds (or pause), and repeat “Lord Have Mer-cy”
- Release your breath over four seconds, saying “Lord Have Mer-cy”

Try the same pattern, for any of the following:

- God Is With Me
- “Come Lord Je-sus” (or Mar-an-ath-a)
- “In Christ A-lone”
- “God Is My Rock”
- “God Is My Strength”

5-5-5 Pattern:

- “God Is My Ref-uge”

If four or five seconds are difficult, you can try the same pattern for three seconds:

3-3-3 Pattern:

- “Help Me Lord”
- “Save Me Lord”

Alternatively, you can try the following 7-7 Pattern (from Psalm 121:2):

- Breathe in for seven seconds with: My Help Comes From The Lord (Pause)
- Breath out for seven seconds with: Ma-ker Of Hea-ven And Earth

You can also consider using other Scriptures or short prayers to assist you in this exercise. See Appendix B for some more options.

Sleep and Rest

*In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety.
- Psalm 4:8 (NIV)*

*When you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
- Proverbs 3:24 (NIV)*

Sleep is not always something that comes to mind when we think about our spiritual formation and healing. Yet consider what James Bryan Smith writes below:

The number one enemy of Christian spiritual formation today is exhaustion. We are living beyond our means, both financially and physically. As a result, one of the primary activities (or anti-activities) of human life is being neglected: sleep. According to numerous studies, the average person needs approximately eight hours of sleep in order to maintain health. This tells me that God has designed humanity to spend nearly one-third of our lives sleeping. This is a stunning thought. We were made to spend a large portion of our existence doing nothing. The failure to do so results in damage to physical health, loss of energy and decreased productivity ... If our bodies suffer, so do our souls. We cannot neglect the body in pursuit of spiritual growth. In fact, neglecting our bodies necessarily impedes our spiritual growth. ... If our bodies are not sufficiently rested, our energies will be diminished and our ability to pray, read the Bible, enter solitude, or memorize Scripture will be minimized (Smith 2009, 33, 34).

As noted above, God designed our bodies to rest. When we do not have adequate sleep, such impedes not only on our physical health, but also our spiritual health

also. We will lack the energy to devote time to the things of God, and to engage in his kingdom work. Sleep, as Ronald Hutchcraft notes, is indeed “the balanced wheel of our health and personality” (Hutchcraft 2000, 61). If you find yourself not sleeping well on a regular basis, try a body-releasing exercise, or spend time with God at night in Resting Prayer. Also consider reading any of the following resources that provide recommendations for better sleeping: Rosenberg 2014; Reynolds 2014 and Stevenson, 2016.

Laughter

In Proverbs 17:22-23 (NIV), the sage writes that “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” In your group time, consider taking a few minutes to engage in “laughing therapy.” Once you have overcome your initial shyness of this exercise, you may actually find yourself enjoying this, and having a good laugh at the same time! Video-clips found online can assist you in this exercise. After the exercise, discuss how this made you feel.

Crying

After having spent time exploring the gift of laughing, it may seem oxymoronic to focus next on crying. Yet perhaps we can also learn to see crying as God’s gift to us – to aid in release of tension and healing. Some of us may have experienced emotional relief, or even an increase in positive mood, from crying

(see Bagby, 1999). Our tears may be an indication even, that we are opening ourselves up to God's grace in our lives (Philips 2008, 36). Certainly, we see this in the Book of Psalms. Glenn Pemberton notes that 40% of the Psalms are psalms of lament (Pemberton 2012, 32). We may be surprised to learn that God deeply values our tears. The Psalms even tell us that God collects our tears in a bottle and records them in a book (Psalm 56:8). As we experience release of intense emotions in our tears, we can also look forward to the hope of joy that God promises to us – read Psalm 126:5.

If you have been repressing your emotions and fighting back the tears, consider spending some time with the Lord, allowing his Spirit to touch your soul in this way. Allow him to do the work of some deep healing in your inner-being, as you release some intense emotions and feelings to him, through your tears. This is a work that can be done in solitude with God, or in the company of a trusted companion.

Yawning

Some scientists believe that yawning is “one of the best-kept secrets in neuroscience,” with the capability of relaxing our bodies quicker than meditation techniques (Newberg and Waldman 2009, 155, 157). While we might be embarrassed to do so in public, these same scientists recommend intentionally yawning ten times in a row (Newberg and Waldman 2009, 157). Jim Wilder

(2012) suggests the following yawning exercise to help quieten ourselves, and to assist with anger and fear:

- Turn your head to the right and yawn. As you are yawning, bring your head back to the center quoting Psalm 56:3 (NKJV), “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You [O Lord].”
- Do the same, by turning your head to the left and yawning out Psalm 56:3.
- Repeat this exercise four times.

It may surprise us that God has created the ability of yawning, even as a healing grace, for release of anxiety, and as an aid to relaxation. Why not try intentionally yawning, this week?

Physical Exercise

*It's easier to call the stuff of our bodies evil than
to own the hard work of training
—not just our minds but indeed our very flesh
—to want something different.
- Tara Owens (2015, 1439)*

*We are subject to all of the brokenness of the fall.
But our bodies were designed for more,
and as we integrate our faith with our health
we catch glimpses of what this deep communion
with God and others can look like.
- Rob Moll (2014, 188)*

*For physical training is of some value ...
- 1 Timothy 4:8a (NIV)*

Physical exercise can really be a wonderful brain tonic to buffer any stress that comes our way (Moll 2014, 188). Even simple exercises such as walking, or

gardening, can promote a positive well-being (Moll 2014, 104). Consider the following physiological and psychological benefits of exercise adapted from Bourne and Garano (2003, 76-77):

- Reduced skeletal muscle tension, which is largely responsible for your feelings of being tense or “uptight”
- Discharge pent-up frustration, which can aggravate phobic reactions
- Stimulation of the production of *endorphins*, natural substances that positively affect your sense of well-being
- Increased brain-levels of serotonin, helping to offset both depressed moods and anxiety
- Increased subjective feelings of well-being
- Reduced dependence on alcohol and drugs
- Reduced insomnia
- Increased self-esteem
- Greater sense of control over anxiety

You may have discovered just how refreshing it can be to commune with God, while taking a walk with him in creation. If you haven’t already, hopefully you will soon find an enjoyable form of exercise, which you can enjoy participating in, while spending time with the Lord. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell is famously known for saying, “[God] made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure” (Hudson, 1981).

If you are finding it difficult to add exercise into your life each week, consider how the following FITTE program adapted from the National Academy of Sports Medicine (2008, 179-182) might work for you personally:

Frequency: How many times are you able (or willing) to work out each week? Consider exercising daily where possible, even if this is for a short interval.

Intensity: How intense can you make your exercise? Consider engaging in a moderate exercise, that can increase your heart and respiratory rate.

Time: How much time can you spend on each exercise session? Ideally, consider spending at least 20 minutes in exercise each day.

Type: What type(s) of exercise can you do? This can be anything from gardening, to walking, to aqua-aerobics, to weight-lifting. Feel free to try out new types of exercise. Also, consider any exercise types that are freely available to you.

Enjoyment: It is important to select exercise(s) that you will enjoy, to ensure that you will continue exercising.

Practice Your Awareness of Being in God's Presence This Week

Invite God's Presence and increasing wholeness into your week, through any of the following practices:

- Try some deep breathing, and combine it with prayer to God
- Walking with God. Take thirty minutes or an hour to go for a walk with God ... Leave the things that might distract you (mobile devices, mental to-do lists) at home. Take a deep breath as you step out the door, and pray these words: Jesus Christ, I commit this journey to you. I want to walk with you, God. Let me feel, see and know what you would have for me in this time. As you walk, notice in particular how it feels to step across thresholds and over obstacles. Do you feel confident stepping into new spaces on the path? Are there times your body hesitates, not sure that this is the right way to go? Don't

try to reach a destination as you walk. Simply be present to what God is stirring in you. Is there a fear about your own body, or the material world, that surfaces as you journey with Jesus in this time? Is there something you are resisting or disagreeing with? Make space for what arises on the journey. Notice whether your thoughts are churning or if your stomach is in knots. Pay attention to the way the path leads you back to the safety of home. Afterward, take some time to reflect or journal on your experience of walking ... Listen to the whispers of Christ as he gently encounters places in you that are afraid or unsure. Thank God for the experience of journeying together during this exercise. (Adapted from Tara Owens 2015, 235-243)

- Keep a food-log to become more aware of what you are eating and how this corresponds to your moods. Commit this activity to God, asking him to help you to become wise and more intentional about consuming healthier food choices. See Appendix D.

Week 5: Reawakening The Senses

*Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
- Psalm 34:8 (NIV)*

*Bless to us, O God,
our souls that come from on high,
Bless to us, O God,
our bodies that are of earth.
Bless to us, O God,
each thing our eyes see.
Bless to us, O God,
each sound our ears hear.
Bless to us, O God,
each odour that goes to our nostrils.
Bless to us, O God,
each taste that goes to our lips,
each note that goes to our song,
each ray that guides our way.
Amen
- Iona Community (2001, 165-166)*

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]
*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today [tonight],
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray,
Amen.*

In the book of Genesis, we read about God creating a Garden of delight which appeals to all of the five senses, that humans are given. In this garden,

Adam and Eve can truly “taste and see that the Lord is good” as they experience a daily relationship of intimacy with God and enjoy his good creation.

Unfortunately, however, they become discontent with the goodness and grace of God and give their God-given senses over to the purposes of sin. Instead of listening to God, they listen to the serpent. Next, they succumb to temptation, through sight, touch, possibly smell, and taste, as they partake of the forbidden fruit.

Adam and Eve could have used their senses to indulge in the abundance that God has given to them and enjoy a relationship with him. They choose however, to compromise the use of their senses, which then results in fear, pain, and a fractured relationship with God. Thankfully, as we know, this is not where the story ends. The Bible continues to unfold God’s glorious redemptive plan, where Jesus Christ – the second Adam – experiences the fruit of another tree – the tree of death – in order that we might have life.

As we consider how Adam and Eve use their senses to bring about shame and suffering, let us explore ways in which we can use our God-given senses, to engage in healing. As we delight in God’s gifts through our senses, we are less likely to focus on things that can bring fear and anxiety.

Sight

God designed our souls to be filled with his beauty. In our final week, we will explore how the beauty of God’s creation can fill our souls with wonder and

worship. As we “bathe” in the healing graces of creation, through our various senses, which includes our sight, we can receive God’s healing balm, for our anxiety.

Exercise: Engaging with your God-given imagination. Think about God’s creation that you have already experienced. What colors do you notice, as you employ your memory and imagination? What textures do you notice? What else do you see, as you spend time immersed in the rich hues of God’s goodness, using your imagination?

When you cannot be physically immersed in creation, you can do so through your imagination, like we have just practiced. You can also look at an image of nature, or perhaps even, a piece of art. As you savor the goodness of God, through your sense of sight, you can even go further and prayerfully ask, “how is God speaking to me in this image?” or, “What is God inviting me to do, as I look at this?”

Another way in which we can engage with our visual senses is through adult coloring books. While at one time, coloring books were simply seen as activities for children, they are now becoming increasingly popular with adults for their stress and anxiety-relieving qualities. Various studies are beginning to demonstrate how coloring can help adults de-stress, generate wellness, adopt quietness, and stimulate the senses in creativity (e.g., Muthard and Gilbertson, 2016; Modern Healthcare, 2016). Author, Margaret Feinberg (2017) further notes various benefits associated with Christian Coloring Books for Adults. This

includes an invitation to slow down, away from the noise of technology and focus on a creative outlet that brings a sense of calm into our lives. Margaret notes that such is especially the case, when coloring is combined with Scripture memory. This then becomes a wonderful means of crafting Scripture into one's heart. An intentional engagement with color, slowing down, and Scripture, can reduce activity in the amygdala, which is the part of our brain that controls stress induced emotions. Discuss in your group what other ways you might be able to use your God-given sense of sight for healing

Taste

God has given us the sense of taste for both delight and comfort. Consider for a moment, the enjoyment of sharing a good meal with family or friends, or even think, about the comfort that a hot-chocolate drink provides. Of course, as we explored in Week 4, we are also learning to “eat to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31), even as we acknowledge the sense of taste, and the good gifts of food from above (James 1:17).

While considering the goodness of God's food through the sense of taste, we can also consider the true goodness of God himself, especially as we participate in Holy Communion. Have you ever thought about truly “tasting God's goodness” as you partake in this holy meal? (Psalm 34:8). As you participate in Holy Communion, in the future, think about the healing graces that each of us is given, as we “discern the body of Christ,” and are spiritually

nourished through the elements of bread and wine (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 10:16, 11:23-26,29). We are indeed healed by Christ's wounds (Isaiah 53:5). Discuss in your group what other ways we can receive God's healing graces through the sense of taste.

Sound

It is no secret that certain types of music can bring healing to our souls and lift our focus to God. The Psalms speak of directing our attention in praise to God, through the sound of instruments (e.g., Psalm 150) and singing. Read out loud the following Scriptures: Psalm 96:1-2, Psalm 104:33 and Isaiah 42:10.

Science affirms the healing properties of the right kinds of music, including singing, chanting and humming (Amen 2015, 3701). These may also make a positive difference in both mood and memory. Daniel G. Amen writes,

Mozart hummed as he composed. Children hum when they are happy. Adults often hum tunes that go through their minds, lifting their spirits and tuning their mind. Consciously focus on humming during the day. As the sound activates your brain, you will feel more alive and your brain will feel more tuned in to the moment (Amen 2015, 3722).

Scripture also provides us with various accounts of soft music such as the harp, bringing soothing and deliverance to souls in distress (e.g., 1 Samuel 16:23; 2 Kings 3:14-18). Calming music can improve both spiritual well-being and promote a state of relaxation (Newberg and Waldman 2009, 155). We can also look to the sounds of God's creation, to manifest their healing graces in our lives. Some studies have looked specifically at nature-sounds as a means of reducing

anxiety. Exposure to these sounds have lowered stress and pain, promoted states of relaxation, lifted mood, and decreased fatigue (Selhub and Logan 2013, 97).

When exploring different types of music for their God-given healing and soothing properties, remember to avoid music with intense beats or rhythms, or those with darker or violent lyrics. These will only serve to heighten anxiety and promote darkness in our lives. Consider listening instead, to any music that nurtures the qualities Paul lists in Philippians 4:8. You may wish to consider listening to a variety of vocal or instrumental varieties of traditional hymns or contemporary praise. Some Christian traditions encourage believers to lie down and “soak” in the Presence of God, to receive his blessing and healing, while listening to praise-music. If you have children, you may also find yourself inadvertently listening to children’s praise music. While some may not appreciate this style of music, it can still function as a powerful means of orienting our souls towards joyfulness, while reminding us of God’s simple, but profound truths. One example is the children’s song “Everywhere!” which is a simple joyful reminder that the God’s Presence is all around us, and that he will never leave or forsake us (Maranatha Music 1991). If time permits, consider listening to gentle music accompanied by Scripture as a prayer exercise for your group.

Smell

We can either be attracted to certain smells, such as perfumes and scented soaps, or we can be repelled by odors that we deem offensive. The sense of smell

is processed by the limbic-system, which is the part of our brain that functions as the center for memory and emotional response, among other things (Amen 2015, 1374, 1388). Have you ever noticed that a certain smell can remind you either favorably or unfavorably of a particular event? Certain smells can also aid in the healing of our emotions and orient our focus to God, including using essential oils, which are oils derived from plants (cf., Ezek. 47:12). The Psalmist writes, “Therefore God, your God, has anointed you, pouring out the oil of joy on you” (Psalm 45:7b, NLT). The sage in Proverbs also adds, “Oil and perfume make the heart glad (Proverbs 27:9a, ESV).

You may be surprised to learn that the Bible references at least 33 types of essential oils and aromatic oil-producing plants, and that these are referred to in Scripture over 600 times (Axe et al 2016, 28). The word “incense” is also mentioned 68 times (Axe et al, 28). Read James 5:14-15 and discuss what you notice.

Common biblical oils that have been used for the healing and anointing of the sick, include: frankincense, myrrh, rosemary, hyssop and spikenard. The Bible also provides several formulas for healing and anointing with oils, including one that God gives to Moses in Exodus 30:22-25. Read this passage aloud in your group.

With such emphasis of essential oils in God’s Word, we would do well to understand more about them, and learn how they can bring peace, healing and relief to our lives. Various studies conclude that essential oils have a place, in the

healing of anxiety. Some hospitals have even applied this knowledge, either via vapor or massage, to their healing programs to reduce anxiety and induce sleep in patients (e.g., Johnson et al. 2016, 164-69). There are numerous resources available for providing guidance and medical advice, on the uses and blessings that essential oils provide. We recommend *Essential Oils: Ancient Medicine*, by Axe et al., (2016).

Essential Oils and Spirituality

*My name will be great among the nations,
from where the sun rises to where it sets.
In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me,
because my name will be great among the nations,"
says the Lord Almighty.
- Malachi 1:11 (NIV)*

Scripture is replete with examples of essential oils, as incense, being used in worship and devotion to God. As you engage daily with God through Resting Prayer, consider complementing this practice, by diffusing essential oils. Some of the biblical essential oils, such as frankincense, are known to enhance one's meditation with the Lord (Axe et al. 2016, 147). For other ideas, refer to Stidd, 2015.

Touch

*Your body needs to be held and to hold,
to be touched and to touch.
None of these needs is to be despised, denied, or repressed.
But you have to keep searching for your body's deeper need,
the need for genuine love.
Every time you are able to go beyond the body's
superficial desires for love,
you are bringing your body home and moving
toward integration and unity.
- Henri Nouwen (1996, 19)*

In exploring the spiritual formation of our bodies, Tara Owens comments, “We still need to be shocked back into the realization that we are bodies that need [touch], and need to touch” (Owens 2015, 132). She adds, “Today, we can go through days, weeks and even months without touching another human being. We correspond electronically, which detaches us from the physicality of communication” (Owens 2015, 132). How true it is, that we are more connected than ever before, via social media, and other means, but we still find ourselves lonely and deprived of the healing grace of touch.

Some of us may intentionally deprive ourselves of this God-given grace, if we, or others that we know, have been tarnished by the abuse of touch. Unfortunately, any earthly gift given to us from the Lord, can also be tarnished through human sin and evil. When abuse has happened through touch, a person might consider engaging with touch-therapy, in a safe environment. Some abuse-survivors find medical-massage to be helpful (e.g., Price 2005, 46-57). Many therapists are sensitive and trained to assist abuse-survivors.

Medical massage is a wonderful way to achieve rest and relaxation for the body. This increases the levels of oxytocin, a hormone that nurtures wellbeing (Cozolino 2014, 121-124). Various studies conclude that massage can bring about healing or relief to anxiety (e.g., Garner et al., 2008; Rho, 2006).

Throughout your time in *The Shalom Program*, we hope that you will consider the healing-graces that God makes available through touch. For example, if you are open to medical-massage then do consider receiving healing via such. Scripture provides many examples of how the sense of touch can be used as a means of providing strength and healing to different people. Read the following instances: Daniel 10:18; Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 6:56; 8:22-25. Today God can still choose to effect healing through touch, and may do so even more directly, such as through the laying on of hands (e.g., Luke 4:40, Acts 28:8). This option will be available to the group in Week 6. Discuss in your group, what other means of appropriate touch may aid you or others on the journey to wholeness and healing.

Practice Your Awareness of Being in God's Presence This Week

Consider how you can spend time with the Lord, while engaging with your God-given senses. The following are some suggestions:

- Consider engaging with the Lord through your senses with some of the practices suggested in this session.

- Complement your Resting Prayer time this week with essential oil.
- Try “soaking” in God’s Presence with praise music. Relax in a comfortable chair, or lie down, while listening to praise music (vocal or instrumental).
Continue to remain in this rested state, soaking in the words of praise and lift them up to God, as an offering of worship. You can choose to sing out loud, or silently. You may also like to diffuse essential oil such as Frankincense, as you participate in this activity. Be aware that God is with you when you sing. Also, meditate on these words from Zephaniah 3:17 (ESV): “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”
- Engage in a repetitive and relaxing activity involving the sense of touch, such as knitting, or stroking a pet. As you engage in this repetitive activity, simply bring your awareness to God, enjoying him and resting in him. When you find yourself being distracted, simply bring your thoughts back to God.
- Experience your senses as you eat a meal. Some of us may find ourselves quickly gulping down our meal(s), so that we can hurry on to the next “thing to do,” on our busy agendas. As you engage in your next meal, plan to slow down, and spend time being more aware and thankful of what God has given you to eat. What senses do you notice as you slowly chew the food? How does the food truly taste? What textures are present? What aromas are there? What colors bring delight to your eyes? What sounds are you responding to? What

healing qualities does the food have, to nurture your body and soul? What else do you notice? Thank God for his provision of good food, and also for any company, that you are enjoying the food with.

Week 6: Transformation Through Community

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]
*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray,
Amen.*

We recommend that you conclude your time together in this session, by fellowshiping together, with a meal.

Community Practices

Extraverts may view community as a wonderful invention given by God. Introverts may agree or disagree, depending on their level of introversion. Some however, may prefer to engage in quiet and solitude. Dietrich Bonhoeffer concludes that both solitude and community are necessary for us all. He writes,

Each taken by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. Those who want community without solitude plunge into the void of words and feelings, and those who seek solitude without community perish in the bottomless pit of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair. Whoever cannot be alone

should beware of community. Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone (Bonhoeffer 2004, 1884-1888).

We will all benefit, as we learn to embrace spiritual practices that engage with *both* community and solitude, even if this sometimes takes us out of our comfort zones. Have you ever thought about whether you have any preference for community, or solitude, or a little of both?

In this session, we will examine three spiritual practices that can enhance our wellbeing, in the context of community. As we explore these practices, hopefully we will also recognize that these practices can assist us to draw closer to God, and to others. Positive communion with God and others, also goes a long way to reducing our anxiety.

Corporate Worship

*Joyful Christians often enjoy music.
Have you noticed how it's hard to worry
while singing songs to God?
- Chuck Swindoll (2016,62)*

One of the best spiritual practices to employ when feeling stressed, or heavy in heart, is to spend time worshipping the Lord. As we connect with God in true worship, we will find our attention is where it should be, on the Lord, rather than on our anxieties. Consider the words of the following worship song called *Garment of Praise* (Ingles 1976), which are words that are taken from Isaiah chapter 61.

Put on the garment of praise
For the spirit of heaviness
Lift up your voice to God
Praise with the Spirit
And with understanding
Oh magnify the Lord

This song encourages us to put on the “garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” In doing so, we will find that our heavy hearts are replaced with joyful ones, as we lift up our voices, our hearts and even our hands to the Lord. Unfortunately, we might want to avoid God’s people, and corporate worship to God, when our hearts are heavy. As we refrain in this way however, we miss the joy of corporately communing with God and others. However, when we have the courage to worship God, alongside others, and even with a heavy heart, we may find that this brings healing to us in the process, as we lift our spirits towards God, and consequently receive his love, joy and peace. Rob Moll comments as follows:

At its most powerful, worship balances the mind and the body in a way that we can experience union with God, transforming our nature. ... It forms our desires and shapes our emotions, making us more like Christ, uniting heaven and earth, creation and Creator. But it’s not until we get off the sofa and into the pew that we are able to experience these things (Moll 2014,137-138).

Through prayer, worship and study, as God rewires our brains and renews our minds, he makes us into new creatures. We can allow God to work his change in our lives by intentionally pursuing encounters with him. ... we can experience God in profound ways that lead to permanent changes in our lives (Moll 2014, 170).

Discuss in your group what kinds of corporate worship are you “comfortable with,” or drawn to. Circle any of the following:

Traditional	Charismatic	Contemplative
Contemporary	Liturgical	Other

Think about the last few times that you came together with other worshippers. If you feel comfortable share with others share what this was like: What was the content of your heart like? Circle any of these words:

Joy	Celebration	Obligation
Solemnness	Desire for God	Holiness
Gratitude	Lament	Love
Thanksgiving	Truth	Wanting to Please Others
Other		

Understandably, we may experience anxiety simply finding, or entering, a church community. We might not know what to expect. We might worry about others judging us. We may be introverted in nature and find this exercise exhausting. Whatever our reasons might be, be encouraged to make the effort still. You may find the following tips for attending church helpful:

1. If you haven't found a church that you are comfortable with, ask God to help you to find a church that is a good fit.
2. Find a church that takes God's Word seriously.
3. You may wish to take your time getting to know people but all the same, do try to express friendship to others.

4. Consider asking a friend to join you.
5. Understand your own personality and preference for worship style. For additional resources, refer to McHugh (2009) and/or Thomas (2010).
6. Many churches offer ministry assessments to help you discern where you can use your God-given gifts and talents in fulfilling ways. Being involved in ministry may help you to integrate into the community more easily, while being able to offer your gifts to the Lord.

Fellowship

[True] social wholeness is achieved by moving from being self-centered to being other-centered.

- George Seber (2013, 2022)

One valuable community practice which can function as a means of releasing anxiety, is coming together with others through “sacred socializing,” commonly known as fellowship. Unfortunately, fellowship is sometimes defined in simple terms, such as a church’s coffee hour or pot luck time. While these are marvelous ecclesial inventions in and of themselves, biblical fellowship is still, a much richer concept. Fellowship in a sense is a verb, where our relationship with God spills over into encouragement, prayer, care, concern and love with other believers.

Philip Yancey expresses how we can fellowship well, through the “one another’s” of Scripture. These include:

[Love] one another; forgive one another; pray for one another; bear one another's burdens; be devoted to one another; regard one another as more important than yourself; do not speak against one another; do not judge one another; show tolerance for one another; be kind to one another; speak truth to one another; build up one another; comfort one another; care for one another; and, stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Yancey 2014, 108).

In your group talk about occasions where you have experienced any of these "one another's" in a church community, or in other places, and how this made you feel.

Have someone in your group read out the following passages: Romans 12:13; Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Based on these passages, and other ideas you may have, discuss some ways in which we can provide fellowship for each other, and "carry each other's burdens."

Have someone in your group read Acts 2:44-47. Discuss with your group what stands out in this passage, and how this passage describes the people's hearts.

Personal Narrative Support Group

Our stories are an important part of who we are, and they show patterns of where and how God is forming and guiding us. It is possible though, that our stories are also embedded with pain and anxiety. These are places where we need to seek God's healing, or intervention, and the support of Christian community. For the remainder of this session, we will have an opportunity to tell part of our life-story, and to listen to the stories of others. Additional weeks can be arranged

to accommodate this part of the program as needed. As you prepare your narrative for the group, consider the following:

1. Spend some time writing down a part of your life-story that is significant to you, and something that you would like input and prayer for, from your group.
2. Where is there pain and anxiety embedded in this story?
3. Where do you see God's goodness and grace woven into the story?
4. How can your group pray for you?

As you present your narrative, the remainder of the group will be guided by the narrative process found in Appendix E. Throughout this process, we hope that you will discover that your pain matters both to your group, and to God. The story-telling part of this group is designed to be a safe place of healing and nurture for everyone.

In the Week to Come

Think about the stories and needs expressed (and those unexpressed) by members of your group this week, and lift them before God in prayer, every time you think about them. Ask for the Lord's blessing, healing and guidance in your peers' lives, and pray for anything else that the Lord may lay on your heart, as you intercede for them. If you have contributed your own story this week, do the same for yourself. Thank you for your courage in sharing. May the Lord bless you with much healing, wholeness and grace.

Week 7: Retreating with God in Nature

*Jesus said,
“Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.”
- Mark 6:31a (NLT)*

*I said, “If only I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and find rest.
I would stay in the wilderness.” Selah
- Psalm 55:6,7b (HCSB)*

Welcome to your own personal retreat! This weekend is a time to kick off your shoes and simply relax, to rest with God, and, to enjoy the tranquil environment of his nature. Throughout this weekend we will have three sessions together: Friday night, Saturday morning, and Sunday morning. However, the primary reason for this retreat is to *experience* God through nature, stillness, solitude and silence, and this program wants to make space for that to happen. For this reason, you are encouraged to have meals in solitude in your own time, or to have them in silence, should you be dining with others.

Although this weekend is intentionally catering to the graces of stillness, silence and solitude, please don’t equate this to many hours of boredom! Rather, rest, breathe deeply, laugh, experience joy in God’s presence, dance, cry, sleep, journal, walk in God’s nature bounty, or do anything else, that will help you heal and experience God. This is a time to simply *be* with God and experience him, as one of his beloved sons or daughters.

Where possible, please turn off any electronic devices that you may find distracting this weekend, so that you can intentionally tune your heart to the

whispers of God's love for you instead. May you experience this weekend of solitude as a time of great peace and joy!

Friday Evening Session: Pausing in God's Creation

*I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.
- Psalm 77:2 (NIV)*

*It's our human nature to fret and stew
and try everything in the world to satisfy ourselves,
but that is never going to be the answer.
I myself have found tremendous comfort and joy
in observing God's creation.
- Elisabeth Elliot (in Dunn and Leonard 2004, 303)*

Take three deep breaths, breathing from your diaphragm, as the facilitator (or volunteer) lights the candle and says the following words (close your eyes if you prefer):

[Invocation]
*Lord, our God, we ask You to be Present with us today (tonight),
Quieten and calm our bodies, our souls and our spirits,
Let us be fully present to You.
Give us peace, and comfort us by Your Spirit,
In Christ's Name we pray, Amen.*

When Jesus asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves, have you ever thought of this more broadly, to include all of creation? Have you thought about what it might look like to breathe deeply, and gather some appreciation for the sparrow that the Lord created and cares about, that is resting on your bird-feeder?

(Matthew 10:29,31). Have you ever experienced any fascination, as you watch a squirrel scurry and spring through the grass? What about the majestic soaring of a hawk or eagle? Or, how about soaking in the rich green tapestry of the forest, or smelling the earthly aromas of the forest floor? What is it about the vast scenes of the ocean or mountains, that captivates our emotions? Where we, like the Psalmist declare: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:9, ESV).

Certainly, there is much to enjoy about the beauty of God’s good green earth. Many hymn/song writers and poets know and understand this, which is why much of our praise and worship is geared towards worshipping God, as our Creator. What songs or poems can you think of that have this emphasis?

Science also shows us that there is merit with being immersed in and appreciating God’s creation, including viewing beautiful natural scenes, such as the sky, trees, waterfalls, green plants and flowers (e.g., Barton and Pretty 2010). These blessings include the reduction of negative thoughts, stress and anxiety, and the promotion of relaxation (e.g., Morita et al. 2007). Various studies confirm that spending time within a forest setting can reduce psychological stress, depressive symptoms, and hostility, while at the same time improving sleep, and increasing both vigor and a feeling of liveliness (e.g., Lee et al. 2011, 93, 96). Other benefits include lower levels of cortisol, and lower blood pressure and pulse rate (Selhub and Logan 2013, 13).

What is there not to love about being immersed in God's good green earth? Perhaps you can gain an appreciation of this from the following excerpts of

Psalm 104:24-30 (MSG):

What a wildly wonderful world, God!
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side,
made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.
All the creatures look expectantly to you
to give them their meals on time.
You come, and they gather around;
you open your hand and they eat from it.
Send out your Spirit and they spring to life—
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

The Psalmist is drawing our hearts to worship in various ways. Whenever we focus our attention on God in worship, and express gratitude for his works, we take the focus off ourselves and our anxiety. We are also reminded of God's strength and might, that he will indeed care for us, as he does for all of creation (Matthew 10:29-31).

Your weekend schedule has been designed to be very flexible to cater to your personal meeting with God. However, one suggestion for your time here, is to meditate on the Psalms of Nature. These include the following Psalms: Psalms 8, 19, 23; 24, 33, 57, 65, 66, 89, 95, 96, 104, 121; 145; 147, 148. You may also like to reflect on Job 38-39, 42:1-6 and Matthew 6:25-34; 10:29-31. One other recommended resource is *Resting Place: A Personal Guide to Spiritual Retreats*, by Jane Rubietta (2009).

Saturday Session: Stillness, Solitude and Silence

*For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.
- Psalm 62:1 (NRSV)*

*“Don’t be afraid. Just stand still
and watch the Lord rescue you today.”
- Exodus 14:13b (NLT)*

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations
I will be exalted in the earth.”
- Psalm 46:1,10 (NIV)*

*In the inner stillness where meditation leads,
the Spirit secretly anoints the soul and heals our deepest wounds.
- John of the Cross*

For the majority of your nature-retreat, you will be spending your time in solitude, silence and even stillness. If you are not familiar with these spiritual practices they may appear to be daunting at first. Yet the blessings that come forth are many and varied. Consider what Kyle Stroble says below about solitude and silence:

Times of silence and solitude integrated within the weekly rhythms of your life are important to foster the rest necessary to wait on the Lord (Lamentations 3:24-29). Silence and solitude are not ends in themselves, of course, but are means to greater ends. The benefit is the result of the space created in one’s life to be present to the Lord. It is often only in the quiet that God illuminates his presence (1 Kings 19:11-12) ... If you are a Christian who avoids silence and solitude, the question is, why? Have you sold your soul to achievement? Do you find your value in what you get done and therefore cannot put it aside to focus on your Lord? Do you fear the reality of your own heart and therefore fear being alone? Do you fill your life with noise, busyness and distraction to hide from God? The Christian who avoids silence and solitude has much to meditate on and is

the one most called to “retire from this world with all of its vanity” (Strobel 2013, 158, 159).

After reflecting on what Kyle Strobel says above, discuss in your group what your thoughts are on silence and solitude. Do you choose to embrace, or avoid these rhythms of grace? Why?

As Tim Dearborn notes, “Solitude is the surgical operating room that is required for the deep therapy of grace.” It is in this place that “we eliminate the normal scaffolding that props up our sense of worth and well-being, or our chronic self-loathing and dismay” and we find ourselves in a place ready to meet with God and hear his voice (Dearborn 1996, 103).

Christ’s Example of Solitude

Within your group, have different members read Mark 1:12-13, 35, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12-13, Matthew 14:13a and John 6:15. Discuss what patterns these Scriptures show us about Jesus’ life. Further, read Matthew 11:28-30 and Mark 6:31-32 and discuss what you think Jesus’s call is to us as disciples, even today.

Stillness and Silence

Adam McHugh describes the practice of silence as “feast[ing] on the gluttonous banquet of quiet” (McHugh 2009, 67). Hopefully this rhythm of grace will be as tasty for you in your remaining time of retreat here. Before we each have an opportunity to do just that however, let’s conclude our time with an

exercise in stillness. Jane Rubietta writes “In silence we move into God’s creative, sustaining, loving presence. May God envelop you in the stillness” (Rubietta 2009, 105). This following practice which is inspired from Psalm 62:1,5 and Luke 10:38-40a is designed for us to be enveloped in stillness with God (adapted from Gaultiere 2016, 152, 154-155). You can practice this exercise anytime.

Read the following passage from Luke 10:38-40a:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Who are you feeling like at present – Mary, or Martha? Close your eyes and calmly acknowledge your feelings to Jesus. Like Martha, we can now set aside our work and our thoughts of being “productive.” We can put aside our concerns about what others want us to do. We can lay aside our worries about money and anything else. Now imagine yourself at Jesus’ feet like Mary and simply enjoy being with him.

- Begin to breathe deeply from your diaphragm
- Next, pray each line with a breath until all that you pray is “Christ”:

In Christ alone ... my soul finds rest, Selah
In Christ alone my soul... Selah
In Christ alone... Selah
In Christ... Selah
Christ

- On another occasion, you might like to try the following breath prayer which has been used in other settings, from Psalm 46:10:

Be still and know that I am God ...
Be still and know that I am ...
Be still and know ...
Be still ...
Be ...

Sunday Session: Worshipping in Nature

Your Sunday session can include a short-and-simple time of worship as a wonderful way to conclude the retreat-time and Shalom Program together. You could also think about worshipping outside in nature – weather and context permitting. Consider including the following elements in your worship service:

- Play and/or sing some worship songs together – songs about God’s creation and stillness are especially suitable for this time.
- Read a creation Psalm together, such as Psalm 148.
- Conclude by receiving Holy Communion together.

Practice Your Awareness of Being in God’s Presence This Week

Invite God’s Presence and increasing wholeness into your week, through any of the following practices:

- Try to integrate stillness, solitude and silence into your life in some way, perhaps by going to a local park on your own, or somewhere quiet. Consider combining this with your regular practice of Sabbath.

- Take some time out of your schedule this coming week to walk in nature. Perhaps you can do this at a local park. Find a park-bench, or even sit on the grass. Deeply breathe in the clean air around you. Relax and smile. Be aware that God is with you, and in you. Whisper “thank you God” to him, as you begin to notice and appreciate the nature around you. What can you see, hear, smell, feel and even taste? Linger for a while. When distractions and anxieties creep into your mind, gently bring your mind back to being aware of the creation around you, and to God who is with you, and in you.
- Find a quiet place to sit and breathe deeply. Become aware of God’s presence all about you and within you.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Summary

This past chapter provides a spiritual formation manual to assist Christians experiencing anxiety. It draws from, and applies five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing, namely spirit, soul, body, community and nature. In the following section, I draw on the latter dimension of nature in particular (though other dimensions are also included) for a field research report, to assess the benefits of a spiritual practice known as Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI) for Christians experiencing anxiety.

CHAPTER FOUR:
AN EVALUATION OF USING SCRIPTURE
AND NATURE IMMERSION AS A
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, FOR PROMOTING
POSITIVE SPIRITUAL AND MOOD
FORMATION

Christians are not immune to stress and anxiety, even though Scripture exhorts believers not to worry, and promises peace in Christ. As Christians experience anxiety however, they may find it that it limits or even blocks a fulfilling relationship with God, fellowship within the Christian community, and any Christian service that they might engage in. Hence, this research explores whether Scripture immersion in a natural environment can provide an effective vehicle for connecting participants with God, reducing anxiety and enhancing positive mood formation. The Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI) process used in this research was conducted using a simple form of Lectio Divina in both natural and virtual-natural settings. Participants further experienced the SNI process in two group settings and two settings of solitude. Data was collected via pre- and post-questionnaires to assess the participants perceived moods and connection to God. Additional focus group discussion and participant observation

were also utilized, the latter through field notes and photography. This study concluded that the SNI process provided participants with a heightened awareness, especially with regards to connecting with God in various ways. This awareness appeared to reorient negative emotions such as anxiety to positive ones, including nurturing a sense of calmness.

Background

Fear and anxiety have been part of the terrain of my life, and I find this also to be true for other Christians, as I spend time talking and ministering to them. For some reason my anxiety became accentuated while in urban areas, and it seems that such is part of a trend worth observing. Bratman et al. (2015, 8567) for example note that anxiety along with other emotional ills, are especially prevalent in urbanized areas. There are likely many factors for such, as Kwon (2016) observes which include, “elements of the social environment (such as inequality and isolation) and physical stressors (such as pollution and noise).” Kwon (2016) also notes that those predisposed to mental illnesses may move into urban areas for support.

In my suburban ministry context in which this study took place, Christians have spoken about how their own anxiety may limit their involvement in ministry, fellowship and interfere with their relationship with God. Some have also shared how various other priorities compete for their time and resources, so that they do not always encounter or experience the Lord daily, or in meaningful ways.

Hence the aim of this research was firstly to explore how believers could connect to God through spiritual practices that include nature, but that were also easily reproducible, affordable and accessible. Secondly, the aim of these practices was further, to reorient participants away from negative mood states towards nurturing positive ones.

Response / Innovation

Articles Two and Three of the Belgic Confession propose that we can know God through two different books, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation. This Confession and its doctrines were originally compiled in the sixteenth century and are still used by many churches within the Reformed tradition today.

The Book of Scripture makes such assertions about itself (e.g., Psalm 1; Psalm 119:11,105; Jer. 31:33-34; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Heb. 4:10-13), but Scripture also makes such assertions about knowing God through nature (e.g., Psalm 19:1-4; Rom. 1:20). As per Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, we see that nature “is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity.” Further, nature can also function as a vehicle to counter the emotional ills that urban life may propagate (Bratman et al. 2015). Existing research proposes that even five minutes in nature can enhance a person’s emotional wellbeing (Barton and Pretty, 2010). Research on the Japanese

practice of Shinrin-yoku (or forest bathing) – which has become a prevalent practice in the western suburbs of Chicago where this context is based – also concludes that immersion in lush green forests, provide a means for reducing stress, hostility and depression, among other things (e.g., Morita et al. 2007). Hence this research hypothesizes that Christians immersing themselves in Scripture in a natural environment can experience positive spiritual and mood formation, while simultaneously reducing stress and anxiety.

Definition of Key Terms

Anxiety: This term is intended to be applied in a generic sense throughout this paper and relates to the pastoral-care needs of any person(s), as per their personal worries, cares, concerns and/or stress. For the purposes of this project, it is not being used to describe any person(s), who have been diagnosed with any psychological condition(s).

Ecotherapy: A term used by pastoral counselor Howard Clinebell that refers to: “the healing and the growth that is nurtured by healthy interaction” with nature (Clinebell 1996, xxi).

Lectio Divina: This is a reflective spiritual practice, where both heart and mind are engaged in the prayerful reading of Scripture. In this project, Lectio Divina will comprise of the following three steps (adapted from Barton 2006, 566-586):

1. Reading (or hearing) the Scripture
2. Reflecting on the Scripture, i.e., “what is God inviting me to do?”

3. Resting in God – through Scripture (and for this project, nature)

Meditating: The spiritual practice of prayerfully reflecting repeatedly on the same passage of Scripture.

Nature: This research adopts the definition of nature by Bratman et al (2012, 120): “areas containing elements of living systems that include plants and nonhuman animals across a range of scales and degrees of human management, from a small urban park through to a relatively ‘pristine wilderness.’” In addition, for the purposes of this research it generally refers to non-hostile forms of nature, which can facilitate peace, joy and other similar qualities.

Nature Immersion: The spiritual practice of spending time in God’s creation, bringing awareness to both the presence of God – the Creator – and the blessings that God’s creation provides to body, soul and spirit.

Positive and Negative Emotions: For the purposes of this study, positive emotions are defined as those human emotions which “include pleasant or desirable situational responses, ranging from interest and contentment to love and joy” (Cohn and Fredrickson, 2009,13). Negative emotions then are those human emotions that include unpleasant or undesirable situational responses.

Shinrin-Yoku: A Japanese practice, also known as “Forest Bathing,” where participants “bathe” – lingering and relaxing – in a green and natural space

(especially a forest), for a variety of therapeutic benefits – including stress reduction (for a fuller description, see Clifford 2013).

Tripartite Nature: In this project, the tripartite nature refers to the three dimensions of a human-being known as body, soul and spirit, as referenced in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Refer to the Introduction in Chapter Two for more information.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

This project took place with four participants who were connected in some way with Shalom Wellness in Winfield, IL (USA). Shalom Wellness is a ministry co-owned by my wife Dr. Janine Smith, and myself, that seeks to provide holistic healing and therapeutic practices for body, soul and spirit. Participants in the project had previously connected with our Wellness Center for natural therapies, such as chiropractic treatment, medical massage or acupuncture and each had verbally expressed that they had anxiety.

In addition to having the support of Shalom Wellness, I was accountable to the Ministry Board of Christ Community Church, where I served as Pastor until January 2018, and where some of the participants of this project are also members.

Each prospective participant received an invitation letter (see Appendix F), which explained the following information:

1. The nature of the project
2. Any potential benefits and risks that might accompany the project
3. A description of the project's duration
4. Reference to the anonymous and confidential nature of the project
5. How the project would be reported

Context

I was raised in a Christian family, in a small rural village, in New Zealand. My family owned a large sheep and beef farm in the village, encased by mountains and lush green forest. Because my family did not have television for much of my childhood, I spent a considerable amount of time outside, and especially enjoyed solitude in nature. Over time, I discovered that God's creation provided a beautiful and sacred space to connect with God, and a healing balm for the many dysfunctions of life. The chapters of my life that followed, were then situated in various urban centers, in South Africa and the USA. While I enjoy the conveniences of urban life, my soul still hungers for sacred spaces of quiet, to be with God in nature.

At the time of this research, I was a Pastor at a small church in Wheaton, IL – though I am now pastoring a semi-rural church in Washington State. In addition, I provide ministry in Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction. I believe that the Lord is calling me, to become increasingly involved in the latter two areas of ministry – particularly as my wife Janine and I continue to develop a

fledgling Wellness Center called Shalom Wellness, which provides nurturing care and therapy for physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

Participants Involved and Locations of Project

Those who indicated a desire to participate in this research were initially diverse in terms of age, experience and ethnicity. For a variety of reasons however, all of those who were Seniors did not end up participating. Those who did end up participating were all in their thirties, and all but one were African-American. The other participant was Caucasian. All but one had also completed seminary graduate degrees. Each of these participants verbally referenced their stress and anxiety on repeated occasions either at Shalom Wellness or Christ Community Church, prior to the research being conducted.

This project was conducted in the following four settings: A suburban park in Wheaton IL, as a group and in solitude; a virtual-nature setting as a group and in solitude. The group-based virtual nature setting was conducted in the library of Christ Community Church, in Wheaton IL. The final virtual-nature session was in a setting of the participants choice where they could go through the SNI process in solitude. The table below shows the various solitude settings that each participant chose for this final study.

Table 5. Settings used by each participant for the final session

Participant	Screen	Speaker
1	Smart TV	TV speakers
2	Phone	Phone speakers
3	Phone	Car speakers
4	Laptop	Computer speakers

While Wheaton has historically been a suburb consisting mainly of white evangelicals, it is fast becoming more diverse in its demographics. This is somewhat due to its proximity to Northern Seminary and Wheaton College, along with refugee immigrants beginning to populate the area.

Current State of the Ministry That Needed Attention

Bratman et al. (2015, 8567) observe that urban centers with their business and stress, tend to exhibit higher rates of emotional ills than rural areas do. They also propose that a “decreased nature experience may help to explain the link between urbanization and mental illness.” With their busy urban or suburban lifestyles, some clients of Shalom Wellness (including some who are members of Christ Community Church) identify with such in terms of stress or anxiety. These clients, and other Christians have expressed to me personally, that their anxiety in its varied forms prevents them from engaging in meaningful fellowship and ministry. They have further expressed that their stress and anxiety can negatively affect their relationship with God. Hence, each of these participants were looking

for approaches that could integrate their Christian faith, for the relief and healing of anxiety.

Cultural and Spiritual Contexts of Participants

All of my participants were young females and all except one, were urban or suburban African-Americans. The other participant was Caucasian and had lived in both suburban and rural settings. At the time of this research the majority were living in, or close to the suburb of Wheaton.

My one concern before and during the research was that those who were African-American might struggle in their interaction with nature. In my own experience, African-Americans have tended to avoid interacting with nature. African-American writer Audrey Peterman (2010) writes about a similar avoidance in her book *Legacy on the Land: A Black Couple Discovers Our National Inheritance and Tells Why Every American Should Care*. Here she reports that 72.7% of the workforce in the National Park System are white and speculates that “A visit to any of the vast, scenic landscapes such as Yellowstone National Park might reveal less than one percent of non-white Americans enjoying the spectacular views and wildlife, or working among the staff” (2010,418). Rue Mapp, the CEO of “Outdoor Afro” – which is an organization trying to involve more African-Americans in nature – says that “Nature has a PR problem.” She believes this problem can be at least partially attributed to African-American memory, saying “For generations when [black] people have worked

really hard on the farms, the idea of going out and sleeping on the ground is not appealing. It doesn't signal progress to some people. I've heard people say, 'Why are you going to play homeless?'" (in Whitney, 2018).

While my concern about perceptions towards nature lingered throughout the studies, two of the African-American participants told me beforehand that they enjoy spending time in nature. During the first study however, the other African-American participant spoke about her distaste for the bugs in the suburban park setting. At the conclusion of this study however, she still wrote that her time in nature was "very meaningful." Following the second study in the same suburban park she further wrote, "I connected more to Nature this time" even though she still got "a little distracted by the bugs." Other than this, all of the African-American participants demonstrated their appreciation and reported benefits of spending time immersed in nature.

All of my participants are regular church attenders, coming from a variety of evangelical, and charismatic backgrounds. Three of these participants have earned graduate seminary degrees and these were ministering in various church settings at the time of the study. These same participants were used to a variety of Christian traditions, including contemplative approaches to worship. The other participant comes from a charismatic context and was not used to contemplation and stillness in a spiritual setting. While the four studies were contemplative in some ways, each of the participants responded well to this approach.

Model and Other Resources

Background from Spiritual Autobiography and Model of Spiritual Formation

The nature of my project, in some senses is derived from my childhood experiences immersed in God's creation. These experiences are detailed in Chapter Two, in my spiritual autobiography. This details how nature functions as both a backdrop and vehicle for encountering God. It further provides a healing grace for the soul, in times of turmoil and distress. Perhaps the biggest turmoil of my soul has been coping with various types of anxiety, throughout the various chapters of life.

As I have interacted with many folks in various ministry settings, I have discovered that anxiety is not uncommon. I therefore intentionally oriented my spiritual formation model to assist those who experience anxiety. This included the themes of Healing and Wholeness (e.g., Isaiah 53:5); and, the Tripartite Human Nature (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). As Willard (2014) observes in his book *Renovation of the Heart*, it is important to understand the need for healing and wholeness at each level of our humanity – body, soul and spirit – if we are to be successfully transformed into the image of Christ, to the glory of our Creator. This journey to wholeness also means intentionally partnering with the Spirit, and intentionally cultivating spiritual practices geared to these different dimensions of our being.

As I unpack the above themes in my spiritual formation model, one of the spiritual practices that I explore is “retreating with God,” in a natural

environment. Many Scriptures point to the blessings that can be received in nature, as we learn to worship the Creator through nature (e.g., Psalms 8; 19:1-4; 148); as creation points to the caring and sustaining nature of God (e.g., Psalm 104:24-28; Matthew 10:29-31), and as creation itself compels us to recognize the eternal power and divine nature of the Lord (e.g., Romans 1:20).

This project also recognizes Christ's own example, as he connects with his Heavenly Father in the "quiet places" of creation (e.g., Luke 6:12). Christ also instructs his disciples with these words, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile" (Mark 6:31a, NLT). The "quiet place" that Christ refers to here was away from regular ministry and the crowds, and a place of rest, with him, in God's creation. Today however, even with Christ's own example of encountering God through creation, and his exhortation for his disciples to do likewise – and thereby receive divine rest – we may still fail to encounter God in this beautiful way, particularly if we live busy and stressful urban or suburban lives. We are impoverished on multiple levels – including spiritually and emotionally – for neglecting such a practice.

In addition to Christ's solitary experiences of resting and encountering the Father in nature – and his exhortation for his followers to do likewise – Christian history also points to a diverse range of Christian believers who herald the blessings of "Nature Immersion." For example, Calvin describes nature as God's "glorious theatre," adding "that it is a rare and singular wisdom to meditate carefully on these works of God" (Calvin [1536] 1845, 1.5.8). He later writes that

[In] each of the works of God, and more especially in the whole of them taken together, the divine perfections are delineated as in a picture, and the whole human race thereby invited and allured to acquire the knowledge of God, and, in consequence of this knowledge, true and complete felicity. ... the Lord there manifests his wisdom, power, and energy ... he there displays his justice, goodness, and mercy (Calvin 1845, 1.5.10).

History also shows others, such as St. Francis of Assisi, developing an intimate communion with God through nature. Various Christian traditions, such as the Celtic tradition, also highlight a promotion of creation spirituality (see for example Hunter 2010,14-24 and Simpson 1999, 110-116).

While saints through the ages have found great benefit from being immersed in God's "Book of Nature," this project also sought to explore the blessings of combining this, with God's other book, the "Book of Scripture" (Belgic Confession, Articles 2–3). Hence, this project further drew on the contemplative tradition of Christianity, and particularly the spiritual practice of Lectio Divina, as participants immersed themselves in scripture and nature, as a means of encountering God, and receiving his healing graces.

Other Resources and Cases

My project was interdisciplinary in nature, and integrated knowledge from a range of former and current studies including ecology, pastoral counseling and spiritual formation. Both Sensing (2011) and Stringer (2013) were useful guides for understanding research methodology in a Doctor of Ministry program. I then used Barton (2006) and Wilhoit and Howard (2012) for further insight into the spiritual practice of Lectio Divina which in turn, helped to inform the SNI process

of my research. In addition, Barton and Pretty (2010), Clifford (2013) and Morita et al (2007) both informed and provided insight for the Nature Immersion part of the SNI Process.

Field and Scope

Originally the study was to include data derived from the experiences of eight different participants. About a month before the data-collection began however, four of the participants withdrew for a variety of reasons: one was relocating out of State; one revealed that she had been clinically diagnosed with anxiety which disqualified her from the study (see Scope below); and, the circumstances of two of the participants changed, where they felt that they would no longer benefit from the study. One of these expressed to me that she could view nature outside her condo. Following these withdrawals, data was then collected from the four remaining participants, as tabulated below:

Table 6. Demographics of the research participants

Age Range	Ethnicity	Gender	Faith	Occupation
25-39	African-American	Female	Evangelical Charismatic	Seminary Alum/Various Church Ministries
25-39	African-American	Female	Evangelical Gospel	Seminary Alum / Director of College Administration
25-39	African-American	Female	Evangelical Gospel	Unemployed
25-39	Caucasian	Female	Evangelical	Seminary Alum/Chaplain

All four participants who were younger evangelical females in their thirties. Three of the four were African-American in ethnicity, and one was

Caucasian. All of the participants for this project were connected in some way to Shalom Wellness – a Christian Wellness Ministry, in Winfield, IL. Some also attend Christ Community Church, Wheaton IL, where I previously pastored. Like myself, all participants, other than one, had graduated with a Master of Divinity degree from Northern Seminary. I had also worked alongside these three in ministry at Christ Community Church to assist them in completing ministry requirements for their studies.

I decided to continue gathering data from this limited sample size, which could still provide sufficient data for a pilot study. This in turn, could provide possible patterns and recommendations for future study. Data was collected from the participants to measure the effect of Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI) in assisting them to encounter God and reduce anxiety.



Figure 4. The setting for studies 1.1 and 1.2.
Photo by Janine Smith (2017). Used with permission.

Each of the settings included opportunities for multi-sensory interaction with Scripture and Nature, including immersion in nature and virtual-nature for a duration of five minutes. Data was recorded from the following four settings:

1. Study 1.1. Herrick Lake, Wheaton IL – a natural suburban park with a lake, as a group.
2. Study 1.2. The same setting as Study 1.1 but in solitude.
3. Study 2.1. Christ Community Church Library – Here a High-Density TV screen was used to provide a virtual-nature setting – along with multi-sensory elements for natural touch, sound and aroma with the focus-group.
4. Study 2.2. A setting of the participants own choosing, but in solitude with access to an online virtual-nature video-clip.



Figure 5. The setting for studies 1.1 and 1.2.
Photo by Janine Smith (2017). Used with permission.

Participants underwent the four studies during October 2017 (the Fall Season), in Wheaton IL.

The aim of this project was to explore whether Scripture immersion in a natural environment could provide an effective vehicle for connecting participants with God while reducing stress and anxiety. I also assessed personal preferences and the effect of these activities within natural and virtual-natural environments, and within both group and solitude settings.

Our fledgling Wellness Ministry and congregation are both small, so the group was naturally limited in size. As per discussion in the Field Section, I ended up with four participants for this study. While this number was useful for a pilot study, there were not sufficient participants to assign to different groups for the different settings. In some respects, this would have been useful, providing me with a different type of data, with regards to anxiety. However, using the same group for both studies meant that those who participated were able to identify their preferences for either a natural or virtual-natural setting, and also, whether they preferred these activities in a group or solitude setting.

My context further limited the demographic of participants to those professing a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In my context, these participants also identified themselves as evangelical or charismatic-evangelical in belief. Another limitation was that the study was restricted to those expressing a generic sense of anxiety, as per their personal worries, cares, concerns and/or stress. For the purposes of this project, it was not being used to describe any

person(s), who have been diagnosed with any psychological condition(s). As a result, one original participant was excluded, once revealing an official diagnosis with anxiety.

While each of the group times typically took about 45 minutes, the extent of the nature immersion experience itself (including viewing nature in a virtual setting), was limited to five minutes. A multi-study analysis by Barton and Pretty (2010) suggests that five minutes is an optimal “dose” of nature immersion to improve mood. This recommended period was ideal for my participants who have busy and stressful lives and may not be inclined to spend longer periods in God’s creation. This study thus aimed to explore whether even five minutes of nature immersion, could be beneficial for busy urban and suburban dwellers. As was the case with the participants for this research, my hope is that others who experience the blessings of connecting with God through nature, will then want to increase the time they spend with the Lord, in nature, and will also receive the benefits thereof.

Because easy access to a suburban park was necessary for part of this project, participants were also limited to those who were freely mobile. The results from the second week of “virtual-nature” immersion however, may provide useful data for people who experience various physical disabilities. Given the severe nature of Chicago winters, it was also necessary that the project be conducted outside of this season.

Methodology

As Sensing (2015, 56-57) notes about research, my own personal experience and insight helped to shape my research, and “My identity, social location, experiences, skills, and insights” are primary tools in my inquiry. The same is also true in some respects for all who participated in this research, as they brought their identities and so forth, as input into this research.

The research conducted was undertaken through qualitative and quantitative input via the following: 1. Pre-SNI questionnaire; 2. Post-SNI questionnaire; 3. Written contributions from a brief centering-exercise; 4. Focus-group discussions; 5. Participant observation via field-notes; 6. Participant observation via photography, and 7. Final questionnaire with regards to setting preferences.

Methods

Data for my project was collected in multiple ways, as per above, to ensure that quality data was obtained through data triangulation. Stringer notes that “The credibility of a study is enhanced when multiple sources of information are incorporated” (2013, 93).

Participant Observation data was collected via field-notes and photography, during each group session. Such included capturing data about the participants tone and body-language (see Sensing 2011, 104) or those “acts ... [the] single actions that people take,” and, their “feelings,” which include, “emotional orientations and responses to people, events, activities, and so on”

(Stringer 2013, 114). All photography was taken by my wife Janine, an amateur photographer. All participants knew my wife well and were comfortable with her presence. She also filled in a confidentiality agreement. In Study 1.1 Janine was able to take photographs of the participants reasonably unobtrusively with various zoom lenses. Janine and I both decided however that her presence for Study 2.1 at Christ Community Church Library would be too obtrusive and distracting during the actual SNI process, hence she only took photographs of the setting and participants prior to this. All dialogue was recorded using a digital device, with the permission of participants, for purposes of accuracy.

The following table summarises the datasets that were collected:

Table 7. Datasets collected

Dataset	Event	Date Collected	Data Collected
1. Questionnaire 1 Pre-SNI	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group	10/9/17	Participants wrote about:
	Study 1.2 Suburban Park in Solitude	Varies (October) 10/16/17	- Felt mood or emotion prior to SNI
	Study 2.1 Virtual-Nature in Group	Varies (October)	- Situations participants involved in, related to felt mood or emotion
	Study 2.2 Virtual-Nature in Solitude		- Perceived connection to God prior to SNI - Perceived desire to worship God prior to SNI. See Appendix O.

Dataset	Event	Date Collected	Data Collected
2. Brief Centering Exercise	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group Study 1.2 Suburban Park in Solitude Study 2.1 Virtual-Nature in Group Study 2.2 Virtual-Nature in Solitude	10/9/17 Varies (October) 10/16/17 Varies (October)	Participants wrote down 3-5 things that they were thankful for, followed by writing down any troubles, cares or wrongs they wanted to “offload” during this time. See Appendix M.
3. Questionnaire 2 Post-SNI	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group Study 1.2 Suburban Park in Solitude Study 2.1 Virtual-Nature in Group Study 2.2 Virtual-Nature in Solitude	10/9/17 Varies (October) 10/16/17 Varies (October)	Participants wrote about: - Felt mood or emotion post-SNI - Perceived connection to God post-SNI - Perceived desire to worship God post-SNI - Any meaningful experiences from Scripture immersion - Any meaningful experiences from nature immersion. See Appendix O.
4. Focus Group Discussion	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group Study 2.1 Virtual-Nature in Group	10/9/17 10/16/17	Participants discussed: - Felt mood or emotion post-SNI - Perceived connection to God post- SNI - Perceived desire to worship God post-SNI - Any meaningful experiences from Scripture immersion - Any meaningful experiences from nature immersion

Dataset	Event	Date Collected	Data Collected
5. Participant Observation Field Notes	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group Study 2.1 Virtual-Nature in Group	10/9/17 10/16/17	Participants tone, actions and body-language.
6. Participant Observation Photography	Study 1.1 Suburban Park in Group (This was too distracting for Study 2.1)	10/9/17	Participants actions and body-language.
7. Questionnaire 3.	Written after all 4 studies were completed.	By end of October	Participants wrote about: - Preference for suburban park or virtual-nature setting - Preference for group or solitude setting See Appendix O.

Once data was collected, it was analyzed and appropriately coded, based on the various themes that emerged. The following sample from Participant 4 (taken from Dataset 3), provides an example of how participant responses were coded, where she writes, “I watched the geese and ducks fishing and it was comforting to see them eat fish easily. I feel more at peace. The stress is gone. The sadness is there, but I am letting myself be sad and not fighting the grief.” In this instance the codes “calm” (for “peace” and “stress is gone”), “comforted” (for “comforting”) and “melancholic” (for “sadness” and “grief”) were extracted and recorded. These codes were compiled in consultation with a licensed counselor

and licensed psychotherapist. Refer to Table 9 and Appendix L for additional code information

All quantitative data derived from questionnaires before each experience, was compared to quantitative data derived from questionnaires written after each experience. Quantitative data was further paired alongside the qualitative data derived from each session and experience, to discern whether there were any apparent relations between Scripture and Nature Immersion, and positive spiritual and mood formation. The purpose of analyzing all data as described, was to observe any changes and discern any transformation in the participants (Savage and Presnell 2008, 124).

The phases and timetable for my research are tabulated below:

Table 8. Phases and timetable of SNI research

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Preparatory Phase	Sent out information / consent letters to prospective participants	Early September	Caleb	Via mail, email or hand delivery
	Ensured that all implementation material was available	Early September	Caleb	
	Ensured that all signed information / consent letters were returned	Mid-September	Caleb and participants	Followed up with participants as needed
Implementation Phase	1-2 hour Orientation	October 2nd	Caleb and participants	Discussed project goals, sessions and

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
	session for all participants			the confidential nature of project. Answered questions and concerns from group Handed out first questionnaire.
	First session at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve	October 9th	Caleb, participants and photographer	Focused on SNI, in a natural setting, by group. Data was collected onsite as per Table 7. Handed out questionnaire for second session
	Second session at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve	Early October	Participants were on their own	Focused on SNI, in a natural setting, in solitude. Data collected as per Table 7.
	Third session at Christ Community Church Library	October 16th	Caleb and participants (and photographer (prior to SNI process))	Focused on SNI, in a virtual-natural setting, by group. Data was collected onsite as per Table 7.
	Fourth session online	Mid-October	Participants were on their own	Focused on SNI, in a virtual-natural

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
				setting, in solitude. Questionnaire data was collected during the following weeks, by Caleb.
Data Analysis	Coded data into appropriate themes	November – March (I moved from Illinois to Washington State during this time, which delayed my analysis)	Caleb	Discerned changes and transformation in data
	Compared Likert Scales from questionnaires	November – March	Caleb	Discerned changes and transformation in data
	Collated and compared all data	November – December	Caleb	Discerned changes and transformation in data
	Where appropriate, contacted participants to confirm or clarify data	November – April	Caleb and all participants	Via email, phone and/or focus group
Reporting	Draft written report	June	Caleb	
	Final written report	June	Caleb	

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

All participants in this program were clients at Shalom Wellness – a holistic Christian Wellness ministry co-owned by my wife Janine, and I. Some of the participants were also attending Christ Community Church, where I was previously serving as Pastor. I was aware that there may be some level of power differential for each of these participants, because of my relationship with them through these two ministry contexts.

In relation to Shalom Wellness any power-differential may have been lessened, as each of these participants were clients of Janine's, rather than my own. Janine is very intentional about maintaining confidentiality with her clients and abiding by regulations and ethics of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. I also think that any power differential at Christ Community Church may have been lessened due to the following:

1. As a congregation with Anabaptist leanings, Christ Community Church places intentional focus on being egalitarian and non-hierarchical in its ecclesiology.
2. The congregation's emphasis on equality also includes focus on each member utilizing a variety of different gifts in the congregation, and as a whole, the congregation takes the priesthood of all believers seriously – rather than emphasizing distinctions between clergy and laity. Therefore, the Pastor's gift mixes are not identified as more important or superior to others, and most of the congregation address me by my first name – rather

than Pastor, or Reverend. I encouraged all participants in this project to do the same.

3. Christ Community Church is also an educated congregation, with the majority of congregants having graduate degrees (including doctoral degrees). Like myself, three of the participants also had seminary degrees. Hence, it is likely that I was not viewed as an “expert” over and above others, which may have further minimized power differential.

While Christ Community Church recognizes me as its Pastor, the sense of authority that I have is limited. Any such authority is also shared with the Board of Deacons. In general, however, the church functions in a non-hierarchical way – emphasizing equality, rather than power and authority.

I also tried to further limit any power that I might have with participants, by means of an introductory consent letter (see Appendix F). In this letter, each participant was made aware of the following:

1. An overview of the project.
2. That any participation in the project was voluntary, and that participants could withdraw at any time.
3. An outline of risks.
4. Information about the confidential nature of the project.
5. Possible benefits of the project for participants.
6. How the information from the project would be shared with participants.

Before the project commenced, each participant was invited to an Orientation Session, where they were presented with an overview of the project, and information about what to expect. Each participant also had an opportunity to voice any questions or concerns.

The dual roles of minister and researcher fitted well in my church context, as the congregation expects both roles from their pastor. The church is a hub for retired seminary and college professors, and seminary and college students, and I have been actively encouraged from the outset, to engage in both pastoral ministry and doctoral research.

Christ Community Church also welcomes diversity in its scope of ministry, and hence my proposed project was easily within the scope of ministry in this context. Projects engaging with nature and “ecotherapy” have also been conducted by Rev. Keith Cerk who ministers in both the same denomination (the American Baptist Churches USA) and denomination region (Metro Chicago Region) as I did during this research (see Hutcherson, 2012).

Participants were further encouraged to communicate any expectations, or any felt or perceived needs during the initial orientation session. It is also my hope that I had gained sufficient rapport with all participants prior to the research, so that they then felt comfortable to continue communication with me throughout the project cycle, regarding their expectations and needs. This research was approved by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board on September 20th, 2017.

Outcomes, Conclusions, and Back Matters

In this section I present my findings derived from the datasets identified in Table 7. I then provide my interpretations and outcomes of the data.

Findings

Data was collected into seven different datasets (Table 7) and then coded and analysed as per the Methods section. The following presents my findings, based on this data.

The following chart shows the frequency of both positive and negative emotions that were identified by participants prior to the SNI process, these are derived from Dataset 1, supplemented by Dataset 2.

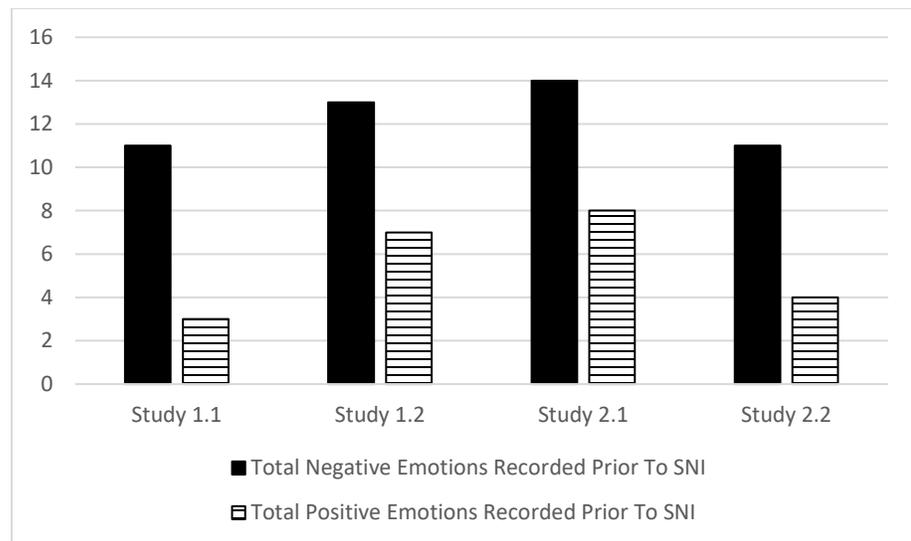


Figure 6. Frequency of both positive and negative emotions that were identified by participants prior to the SNI Process.

Before the first study took place, only two participants recorded positive emotions during their day. The positive emotions expressed were associated with joy and various forms of renewal, including hopefulness. Positive emotions recorded prior to Studies 1.2 and 2.1 increased, though decreased again in the two Studies 1.2 and 2.1 increased, though decreased again in the final study. With the exception of Study 2.1 (with 3 participants), only half of the participants experienced positive emotions prior to undergoing each SNI process. For those who did experience positive emotions, the predominant feeling was a sense of renewal, in the sense of being hopeful with anticipation. Overall however, the chart above suggests that negative emotional states were noticeably more prevalent prior to the SNI process in each study, than positive emotional states were.

The negative emotions that participants identified are tabulated as follows, which have been extracted from Dataset 1, supplemented by Dataset 2:

Table 9. Number of reported negative emotions by participants per study

Negative Emotion	Study 1.1 (G, N)	Study 1.2 (I, N)	Study 2.1 (G, VN)	Study 2.2 (I, VN)	Total	% (rounded)
Agitated	1	1	2	0	4	8
Anxious	5	9	4	3	21	44
Fatigued	3	0	2	1	6	13
Inadequate	0	0	5	1	6	13
Melancholic	*1	2	1	3	7	15
Purposeless	1	1	0	2	4	8
TOTAL	11	13	14	11	48	101

* in response to a bereavement.

Key:

G: Group Setting

I: Individual Setting

N: Nature Setting

VN: Virtual-Nature Setting

As the above chart illustrates, the predominant negative emotion recorded (44% of all recorded negative emotions), was the feeling of anxiousness. All the participants experienced anxiety in a variety of ways. For example, one participant commented, “Everyday emotionally has not been easy for me.” Her comments were in relation to various personal transitions, including her job, church and income. Participants also experienced a variety of melancholic feelings prior to all the study sessions – accounting for 15% of reported negative emotions. In Study 2.2, melancholy was further linked to a sense of anxiety and purposeless for one participant, who responded, “I don’t see a lot of upward movement in my life right now so that is causing me a little stress and I’m tired of thinking about the same things, so I just feel blah today.” Another participant in

Study 2.2 also expressed a sense of purposeless linked with melancholy. She wrote that she felt “numb,” followed by writing, “I’m just at a standstill in life.”

Feedback from participants revealed that they would ruminate on the various situational concerns present in their lives, which they then perceived to contribute to their negative emotions. The following table lists various situational worries and concerns recorded by the participants which have been sourced from Dataset 1, supplemented by Dataset 2:

Table 10. Situational worries and concerns reported by the participants per study

Situational Worries and Concerns	Study 1.1	Study 1.2	Study 2.1	Study 2.2	Total	%
Busyness	2	1	1	2	6	15
Finances	2	2	0	2	6	15
Future	1	1	0	3	5	12
Health	4	0	0	0	4	10
Job	4	3	0	3	10	24
Life Transition(s)	2	0	0	1	3	7
Relationship(s)	3	2	1	1	7	17
Total	18	9	2	12	41	100

The most common situational concern, which participants ruminated on was “job” related, which accounted for almost a quarter of the recorded situational concerns. Job related concerns affected all participants, in one of the following ways: frustration with a current job; a new job; pressures from needing to satisfy certain certification requirements; or, because of unemployment. One participant wrote that she felt “anxious” about a certain board certification process and added, “I am anxious that I might not pass the interview.” Another participant who had just started a new job, expressed some angst as she wrote “Will I do good at my job?”

Surprisingly, the data shows a dip in the number of situational concerns recorded in Study 2.1, even though the negative emotions recorded prior to SNI were similar to all other sessions (See Table 9). While I am uncertain why this data discrepancy occurred, I suggest that some of the group failed to address this part of the questionnaire accurately due to fatigue or agitation. As shown in Table 10, the participants reported slightly more fatigue and agitation in the group settings. With regards to agitation, Participant 1 arrived rather later to this session, and not only seemed agitated, but she spoke about being agitated. This seemed to affect her responses, and sometimes her failure to respond to questions. It is possible that such also affected the other participants to varying degrees.

Prior to the SNI process in each session, the participants went through a two-part centering exercise, where they were firstly invited to write down 3-5 things that they were thankful for. In addition to this, they were invited to offload any worries, burdens, cares or wrongs that were weighing them down. They had the option of writing these down on paper, which each participant chose to do. Participants noted verbally that this exercise did assist them in being centered, prior to the SNI process itself. Participants were also given a stone with a cross etched into it for the offloading part of the centering exercise. Participant 2 revealed that she found the stone comforting, and wanted to continue to touch it. Meanwhile Participant 4 said that the stone was heavy, and a reminder of the burdens that she needed to offload to the Lord. The below photo depicts one of

the participant's holding a cross-etched stone during the offloading centering exercise.



Figure 7. Offloading in the Centering exercise.
Photo by Janine Smith (2017). Used with permission.

Following the brief centering exercise, participants went through the SNI process. The comparisons between emotional states prior to the SNI process and after are shown in the chart below (Here data from Dataset 1 is compared with Dataset 3, supplemented by Datasets 2,4-6).

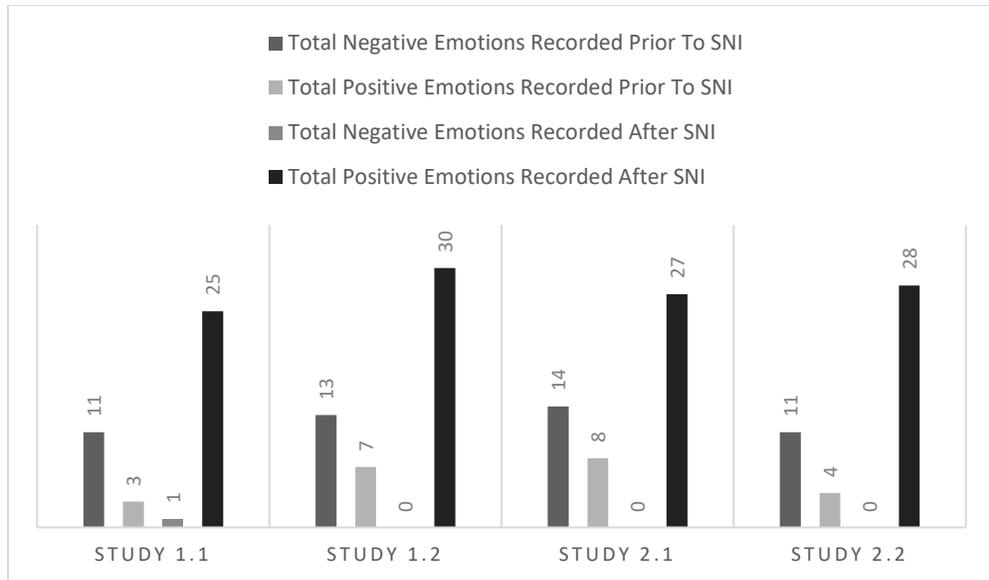


Figure 8. Comparisons of emotional states recorded before and after the SNI process for each study.

The above chart suggests that while negative emotional states are somewhat consistently dominant for each participant prior to each SNI, these emotional states change noticeably and consistently to positive emotional states following SNI. Accordingly, only one negative emotion is recorded following the SNI process, in Study 1.1.

The following chart demonstrates though the positive moods or feelings recorded, following the SNI process (These are extracted from Dataset 3, supplemented by Datasets 4-6):

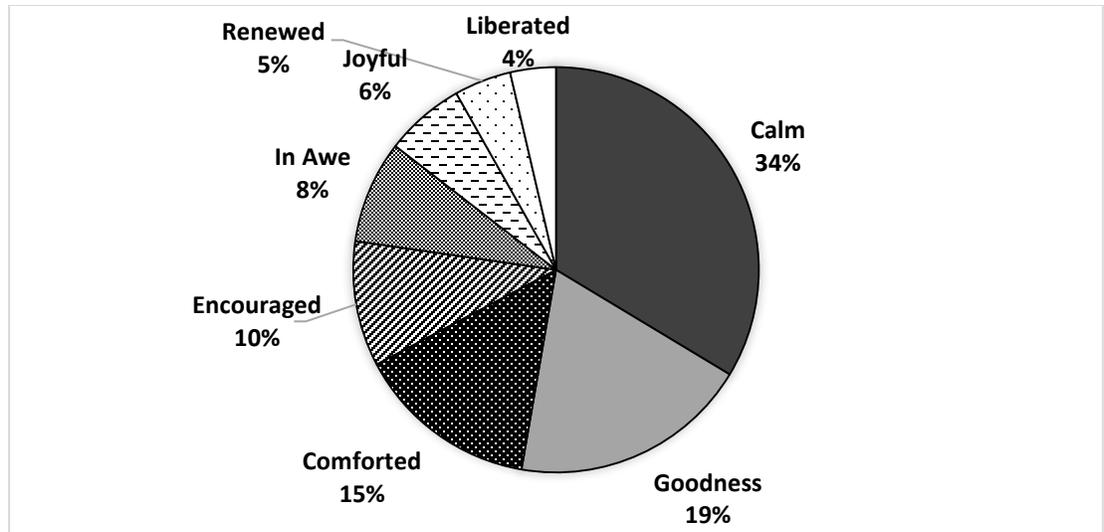


Figure 9. Percentage of positive emotions recorded after the SNI process.

As the above chart illustrates, the positive emotion most consistently reported for each of the four studies following SNI, was a sense of calmness. This accounted for over one-third of reported moods or feelings. On some occasions this feeling was linked to other positive moods or feelings. For example, in Study 1.2 Participant 1 pointed to a sense of calmness, after experiencing God’s goodness, and receiving reassurance of his provision. She then wrote, “Peace came over me.” Participants experienced calmness in a variety of ways. Terms that were consistently used by participants to describe their moods and feelings following the SNI process included “calm,” “peaceful,” “relaxed,” “centered” or “still.” Participant 2 felt God exhorting her to stillness, while encouraging her about his comforting leading. In Study 1.2 she wrote, “he spoke ‘Be Still – I will lead you during this hard time.’” The following photograph shows one of the participant’s engaging in stillness through Scripture and Nature during Study 1.1:



Figure 10. Nature immersion exercise.
Photo by Janine Smith (2017). Used with permission.

Feelings of goodness and comfort were also consistently experienced by the participants following the SNI process. With regards to the former in Study 1.2, Participant 4 commented that she was more “aware of God’s goodness” and “aware of the things he has done for me.” This awareness and receptivity to God’s goodness, led to her being encouraged “that things will turn out for the best.” With relation to her awareness of God, Participant 2 wrote the following in Study 1.1, “God spoke his comfort to me. Comfort in knowing he is real and there.”

All in all, participants seemed to find great emotional benefits from the SNI process. Additional positive moods and feeling experienced by participants included encouragement, awe, joy, renewal and liberation. The one exception where a participant did not experience a “positive” mood or feeling in response to the SNI process was in Study 1.1, where Participant 4 expressed a sense of sadness and grief, before and after the SNI experience. These emotions resulted from a recent passing of one of her relatives. Yet, even here, Participant 4’s grief was coupled with a sense of peace and comfort, following the SNI process. She wrote, “I am much less worried. I watched the geese and ducks fishing and it was comforting to see them eat fish easily. I feel more at peace. The stress is gone. The sadness is there, but I am letting myself be sad and not fighting the grief.” In addition to birds, the following table shows how other primary natural elements affected the participants emotions in a positive way (from Dataset 3):

Table 11. Effect(s) of different natural elements of nature on participants emotions.

	Calinness	Comfort	Goodness	Encouragement	Goodness	Liberation	Positive Emotions Evoked Per Natural Element
Animals	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
Birds	5	1	0	3	0	0	9
Clouds	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Creation	0	1	0	4	0	1	6
Light / Sun	0	0	1	1	1	0	3
Season	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Trees	1	1	1	2	3	1	9
Water	7	1	1	3	1	3	16
Wind	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Total	14	5	4	16	7	6	
Positive Emotions Evoked							

The above table shows water commonly being a natural element that yielded positive emotions among the participants, especially as it nurtured a calming effect. As Participant 4 wrote (above), the presence of birds also provided this calming effect. The presence of trees seemed to nurture a variety of positive emotional responses, including joy. Overall, it seems that the various elements of nature nurtured not only calmness, but also encouragement for the various participants.

For this research, I was curious to discover whether SNI would prompt a greater awareness of God. At first glance, the following table which was extracted from pre- and post- questionnaires, shows virtually no change in the participants

sensing God’s presence, before and after each SNI process (from Datasets 1 and 3).

Table 12. Participant’s sense of God’s presence before and after SNI

Sensing God’s Presence	P1 Before	P1 After	P2 Before	P2 After	P3 Before	P3 After	P4 Before	P4 After
Study 1.1	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3
Study 1.2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Study 2.1	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3
Study 2.2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3

Key:

- 0 I do not sense God's Presence with me
- 1 I think God's Presence might be with me
- 2 I am somewhat aware of God's Presence with me
- 3 I am very aware of God's Presence with me
- P Participant

As this data demonstrates, participants mostly identified themselves as being “very aware” of God’s presence before and after each study – though there were two instances of being “somewhat aware.” In some instances, participants even demonstrated a decrease in awareness to God’s presence – changing from being “very aware” of God’s presence, to being “somewhat aware.” Participant 2 acknowledged that her awareness of God was affected by her being in a group setting (she had verbally identified her own introversion to me previously). She wrote, “Sometimes when I get around people in a public place ... I face a struggle with sensing God's presence. Sometimes being around people causes me to feel anxious or aware of myself therefore not being aware of God's presence.” Study 1.2 following this one, was solitude-based and Participant 2 then wrote, “God is

who I am clinging to at this time. I need his presence and I believe he is with me.” She later added, “I needed to sit with God, I needed his presence - so in a way I am searching more for God's presence today.”

Qualitative data extracted from the questionnaires and group discussion suggests that while the participants “general awareness” of God’s presence did not change following SNI, their awareness of him did change, in relation to some of his divine attributes. The following table (taken from Dataset 3) shows the different types of divine awareness that participants perceived from SNI:

Table 13. Participants awareness of God through various divine attributes after SNI

Attributes	Scripture	Nature	Total
God’s Beauty	1	4	5
God’s Care	13	5	18
God’s Guidance	2	0	2
God’s Power	3	1	4
God’s Reassurance	4	1	5

The above table shows that the divine attribute of God’s care was commonly recorded by each of the participants. Following the Scripture Immersion exercise in Study 1.1, Participant 4 wrote, “The Scripture reminds me of how God provides for his people. He cares for the earth and provides for me.” In the same study, Participant 1 also wrote, “I felt [God] saying I’ve been waiting with my arms open and I want to carry the burden and I want to hold you up opposed to you trying to hold yourself up.” After the Nature Immersion exercise that followed, she then added, “As I was reading the text about God providing and him waiting on us God drew my attention to the water and the geese swimming in the

water and how they look effortless but they are moving swiftly underneath treading water and I just felt God’s Presence and him saying, ‘I can hold you up.’”

The data from Datasets 1 and 3 in the table below, further shows the participants desire for worshipping God before and after the SNI process:

Table 14. Participants desire for worshipping God before and after SNI

Worshipping God	P1 Before	P1 After	P2 Before	P2 After	P3 Before	P3 After	P4 Before	P4 After
Study 1.1 - Group	1	2	2	3	3	3	2	3
Study 1.2 - Solitude	3	3	3	3	1	2	1	2
Study 2.1 - Group	3	3	1	2	2	3	1	2
Study 2.2 - Solitude	1	2	3	0	2	2	1	2

The below key is based on the question, “how much do you wish to worship God right now?”

- Key
- 0 Not at all
- 1 Somewhat
- 2 Very Close
- 3 As much as possible
- P Participant

The shaded cells in the table show that the desire to worship increases for the first three participants in half of the sessions – either from “somewhat” to being “very close” to God in worship, or from “very close” to “as much as possible.”

Meanwhile Participant 4 shows an increase in her desire to worship for all of the sessions. After completing the SNI process in Study 1.1, Participant 4 wrote, “My

desire to worship has increased. It has been more strong, since my worries are less.”

In one instance however, the desire for worshipping God appeared to decrease for Participant 2, in Study 2.2. This response occurred in the wake of a busy weekend “doing ministry” at church, including some stressful translating work in a worship service. Participant 2 explained the decrease in desire as follows: “I just want to sit still and bask in God. For me, at this moment, ‘to worship’ means doing something. I don’t want to do; I just want to sit still.” Following that same SNI process, the same participant 2 wrote “he spoke stillness to me – through the sounds [of water and birds].” In this study session, Participant 2 indicated that she did not perceive stillness with God as a form of worship. It may be worth noting that this participant worships within a charismatic tradition – a place where stillness may not be utilized to the same degree as in various other traditions. While Participant 2 did not consider stillness with God as worship, it is apparent that she still did appreciate the value of stillness in God’s presence.

Despite this perception difference, I have still chosen to classify stillness as a valid expression of worship (see Figure 11 below), given that certain traditions, such as the Contemplative tradition highly value stillness in worship, and that Scripture itself attests to stillness as a valuable aspect in worship (e.g., Psalm 146:10, Zech. 2:13; cf. also with its counterpart silence e.g., Hab. 2:20).

In addition to stillness (which I have also classified as a sub-code of calmness under positive emotions, see Appendix L), one other positive emotion

received or experienced by participants that can also be expressed as a worshipful response is “awe” (see for e.g., Saroglou, V., Buxant, C., and Tilquin, J. (2008) and Keltner, D., and Haidt, J. (2003); also Heb. 12:28). The various favorable responses to God, including stillness and awe, are illustrated in the chart below (From Dataset 3, supplemented by Datasets 4-6. See Appendix L for additional coding data and definitions):

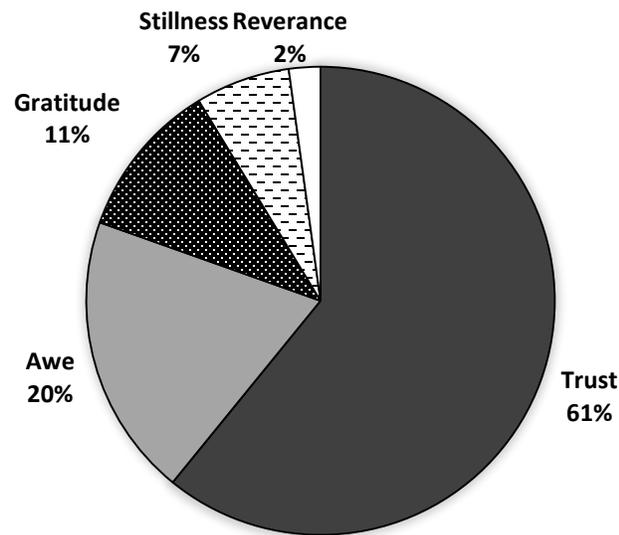


Figure 11. Overall percentage of favorable responses recorded after the SNI sessions.

The above chart shows that the majority of favorable responses expressed to God (throughout the four studies) were in the form of trust – amounting to 61% of the recorded responses. In Study 1.1, Participant 2 commented, “I felt a good escape to what God wants me to do – receive and trust Him – Let God take care of me the same way he takes care of the trees, animals, his creation. Why do I

think I am so separate from this?” The second largest favorable response, accounting for 20% of the recorded responses, was awe. In Study 2.1, Participant2 wrote, “The focus on the water helped me to be in awe of God and his beauty. To hear and see the waterfall was a worship moment for me.” Although reverence as a favorable response was only recorded once throughout the four studies, the comments of Participant 1 are worth noting in Study 1.1. She wrote, “Seeing His creation just makes you want to revere Him and show gratitude. We don’t always take the time to SEE or Notice what we are looking at. We look just because we have eyes or we look so we can ‘get there’ wherever there is but seldom do we SEE God's creation.” Here Participant 1 points to how a heightened awareness of God’s creation can lead to reverence, and as other previous data suggests, other favorable responses also.

The table below (from Dataset 7) shows the preferences of the group members with regards to the various settings utilized for the research.

Table 15. Setting preferences of participants for SNI

Setting	Group	Solitude	Indifferent
Nature	3	0	1
Virtual-Nature	1	2	1

While the overall preference of the group was for the group-based nature setting, the following table shows that both the nature and virtual-nature settings prompted a similar number of positive emotional responses (from Dataset 3, supplemented by Datasets 4-6).

Table 16. Number of positive emotions recorded per each SNI session

Study 1.1	Study 1.2.	Study 2.1	Study 2.2
25	30	27	28

The above data does not imply that a virtual-nature setting has the same emotional value as being outdoors in nature. Not all positive emotional responses recorded are necessarily of equal value, nor do different settings necessarily have the same value. The data does suggest however, that positive emotional value can be gained from utilizing virtual-nature for SNI. Several participants including Participant 2 wrote about their positive experiences with virtual-nature. Participant 2 noted that her experience with Study 2.1 (which finished at about 9pm) put her “in a restful state.” She further added, “Being able to meditate before bed was a good experience for me.” Later, she also noted her preference for the virtual-nature activity in solitude, writing, “I spend a lot of time in my room by myself. During this exercise by myself, I enjoyed it better. I was more in tune and focused on the video better.” Participant 4 also experienced benefits from the virtual-nature exercise in solitude, adding, “I like the chance to do it on my own. It is something I can easily do on a daily basis.”

Interpretation and Outcomes

The following diagram proposes a model that demonstrates the relationship(s) between the various parts of the SNI process:

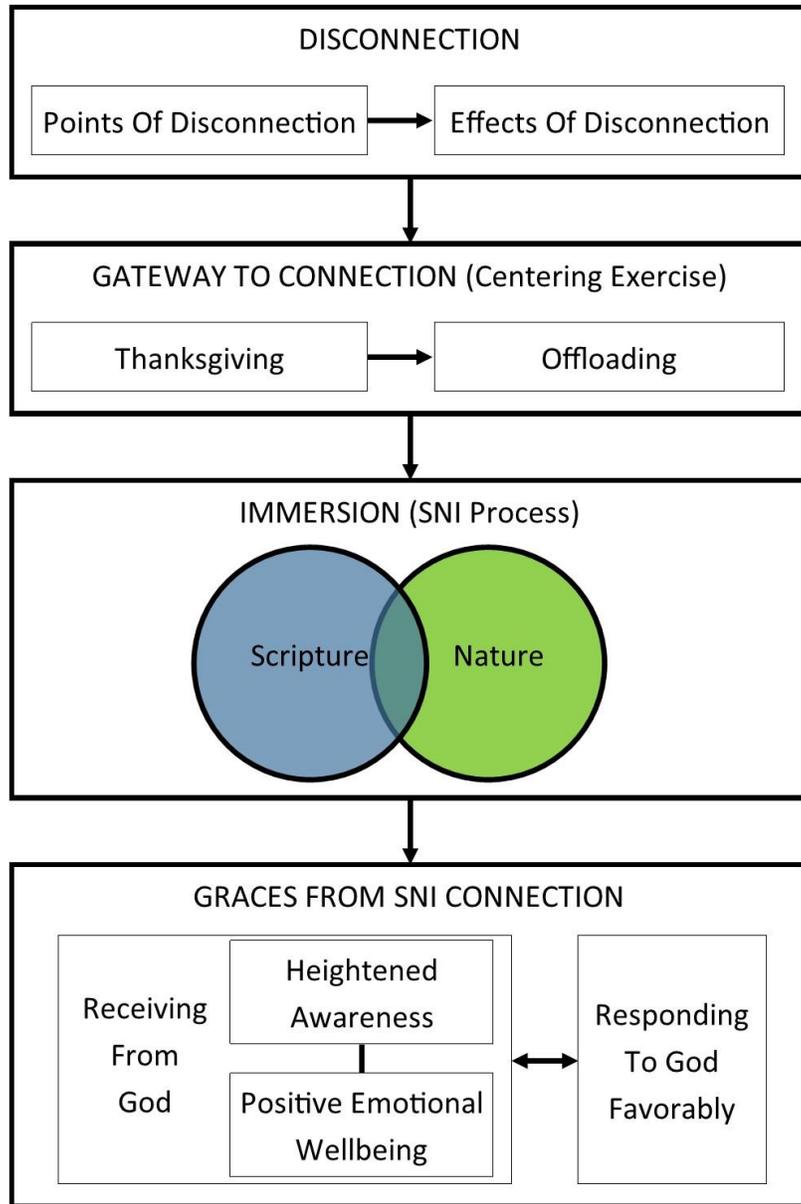


Figure 12. Model of how SNI may assist nurturing positive spiritual and mood formation.

The above model firstly proposes that the various situational worries or concerns that occur in each participant’s life function as “Points of Disconnection,” (POD’s) which play a disconnecting role (either temporarily or

longer-term) from an abiding life in God. As my findings suggest, these POD's can become places of mental and emotional focus. As participants continue to ruminate on various POD's, these in turn appear to produce negative emotions, or various Effects of Disconnection (EOD's) (see Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, 569 for more information about adverse ruminations and their effect). These EOD's will likely vary for each person, based on personalities and the situation(s) at hand. Recorded data for this research suggests however, that the predominant EOD overall for participants, was anxiety, followed by melancholy.

Before believers engage with the SNI process to aid in their connecting to God, and reorienting their emotions, I would recommend introducing an initial centering exercise. Although I was not able to differentiate the effect of this from the effect of the SNI process for my participants (which is a limitation of this study), nonetheless, I still recommend it as a means for assisting participants to center themselves. Such can also provide a gateway for divine encounter, if participants are not already experiencing God's presence. Benner (2010, 31-46) writes a chapter on "Preparing for the Divine Encounter." Here he writes that an openness to God and preparation are necessary, where we are "ready to meet God on God's terms, not ours" (Benner, 39).

In some ways, the combined centering ritual of "Thanksgiving" and "Offloading" is an act of preparation or a "gateway to connection" to "meet God on God's terms." For example, Psalms 95:2 and 100:4 encourage God's people to prepare themselves for entering the Lord's presence, with thanksgiving. Further,

Scripture promises that those who offload their cares, concerns and wrongs to the Lord will be able to see him and experience his presence (e.g., Psalm 24:3-5; Matthew 5:8). Pargament (2011, 105-106) also concludes that those who engage in the practice of confession, sense themselves being significantly closer to God, than others who have not engaged in confession with God. Certainly, all the participants voiced favor towards the centering exercise, commenting that such enabled them to become “more centered.”

Following the centering-exercise, the model shows participants going through the actual Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI) process. Data suggests that the SNI process heightens individuals’ awareness in a positive way particularly to God and his divine attributes. This then in turn promotes positive emotional responses in the individuals, and also can prompt worship to God in various ways.

Interestingly, the research data suggests that each participant’s “general awareness” of God did not increase in any meaningful way (see Findings Section, Table 13). This came as a surprise, and I propose any of the following reasons for this overall lack of change. Firstly, the participants simply may have been close to the Lord already in a general sense, as per their recorded responses, and possibly because of the circumstances that they were each encountering. Secondly, the way in which the questionnaire was worded – in relation to the immediacy of sensing God’s presence – may have aided their immediate positive awareness at that time, and thus, influenced their positive recorded response. Thirdly, such may be linked

to a perceived power differential, which may have prompted participants to overestimate their initial closeness with God, perhaps in their desire to “appear more spiritual” to me personally.

As noted in the Findings Section though, while the participants seeming “general awareness” of God did not change positively (as it was already positive), the ways in which participants became aware of, and close to God did seem to change positively through SNI. Here, the data suggests that the participants became especially aware of God’s care, reassurance and beauty. These types of divine awareness are not surprising, as the Scriptures selected for these Lectio Divina exercises (see Appendix I) were intentionally based around themes of encountering and worshipping God through rest; the beauty of nature; and, God’s personal care of nature (including humans). Had the Scriptures being based on different themes, it is likely that the participants positive divine awareness would also change to reflect these themes. In some instances, participants demonstrated how Scripture influenced their experience of God in nature. In one instance, the voice of Scripture about God’s care and reassurance was further confirmed to Participant 1 as she watched the geese and sensed that God was reassuring her that he would care for her too.

As proposed in my model above, positive heightened awareness, especially in relation to divine attributes, can then lead the participants to becoming receptive to various “therapeutic graces” from God – in this instance, in the form of positive emotions. It is likely that such graces could be appropriated

without a positive heightened awareness, but my data does suggest that such can, and does play a nurturing role in this regard. In Scripture, Job appears to benefit from a positive heightened awareness of God, following his time of intense suffering. After Job thoroughly questions God about his suffering, God then provides Job with a discourse of both his greatness and care through creation. It is after this that Job concludes, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:4, NIV). Heightened awareness of God through his Word and creation can similarly bring comfort, resolution and relief for us today.

While the therapeutic graces received from SNI will likely vary for any who participate, my data shows that the predominant positive moods and feelings experienced for my participants were a sense of calmness, followed by a sense of goodness (see Appendix L). Such is not surprising, as other research geared towards Scripture Immersion, or Nature Immersion, conclude with similar emotional benefits. For example, after researching the use of Lectio Divina in a clinical psychology setting, Baker (2002, iii) concludes that “the individual attains many of the goals of psychotherapy: sharpening insights, steadying the emotions, finding the courage to confront previously unconscious material, and effecting psychic change.” Other researchers in ministry have concluded similar results using Lectio Divina (see for e.g., Jordan 2017, Blais 2012). Wilhoit and Howard (2012, 750-752) also note the following with regards to Scripture Immersion, using Lectio Divina. They write,

Unlike the mind-chatter of automatic meditation, intentional meditation is deliberate and provides a way to change our automatic thoughts. The power of practiced meditation comes from the way it shapes our patterns of automatic thought, making them less negative and more appreciative of the grace that fills our lives, and changing their actual content, as our minds are filled with noble truths that restore and set us right.

Indeed, meditating on Scripture does “restore and set us right,” as we are further promised in Psalms 1 and 19. The latter Psalm promises that Scripture “revives the soul” (v. 7), provides “wisdom to the innocent” (v.7); brings “rejoicing to the heart” (v.8) and brings about enlightenment (v.8).

These therapeutic divine graces are further found in nature itself. A growing literature-base attests to many benefits of Nature Immersion, including increased emotional wellbeing, such as stress reduction and alleviation of depression and anxiety (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Ohira et al., 1999). Of interest to my research though, given its similarities (and because this practice is becoming popular in the Western Suburbs of Chicago, where this research was based), are the emotional benefits of the mindful Japanese practice known as Shinrin-yoku or “forest bathing.” The practice of Shinrin-yoku was originally launched by The Forest Agency of the Japanese Government in the 1980s. The practice is a non-religious one (though like any practice, religion can be integrated) and simply includes “staying and/or walking in forests in order to promote physiological and psychological health” (Morita et al., 2007). One study measuring the psychological effects of Shinrin-yoku on young Japanese males concluded that “forest bathing significantly increased scores of positive feelings and significantly

decreased scores of negative feelings” and, that “[p]articipants felt significantly more comfortable ... soothed ... and refreshed” (Lee et al. 2011, 93,96). My data suggests similar results for participants undertaking the four SNI studies, particularly in relation to feeling a sense of calmness, and a sense of goodness.

My data further concluded several other items of interest in relation to nature immersion. First, as Barton and Pretty (2010, 3949, see also Mayer et al. 2009; Ryan et al. 2010) propose, five minutes is sufficient, and even optimal, for accessing emotional benefits from being in a natural environment. Though my data attests Barton and Pretty’s findings, I also found my participants demonstrating a reluctance (in the two natural-setting studies) to limit their time in nature to only five minutes. Once immersed in nature with God, they wanted to stay there.

Secondly, the presence of water, and additionally birds and trees, did appear to make a positive difference to my participants emotional wellbeing. Water, particularly promoted a sense of calmness, which parallels the findings of Barton and Pretty (2010, 3947) who conclude that while every natural setting promotes positive mental wellbeing, those that include “the presence of water [generate] greater effects.” Triguero-Mas et al. (2017) also observed in one study that their participants mood scales were rated higher, when a forest was facing a lake. Perhaps in some measure, all this reflects King David’s understanding of the healing relationship between water and emotional wellbeing, when he writes,

“[The Lord] leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2b-3a, ESV).

Participants were encouraged to engage the SNI process using their senses, so possibly the collective sights and sounds of water in these environments nurtured such a tranquil emotional-effect (for more information on the restorative qualities of water sounds see McGeeny 2016, 111, for bird sounds see Ratcliffe et. al. 2013, 227, and for general nature sounds, see Benfield et al, 2014).

One last grace which my model proposes, is that the SNI process prompts participants to worship God, or respond favorably in other ways. This desire to worship may already be intrinsic, but, it may also be linked in some way to the SNI process itself. Where it links to the latter, it may further stem from any positive heightened awareness and/or positive emotional wellbeing that are gleaned from SNI. Participant 4 highlights a connection between receiving emotional benefits from SNI and then responding with worship, where she writes, “My desire to worship has increased. It has been more strong, since my worries are less.” In the following study she wrote before the SNI process, “I’m more in the mood to ask Him for help than to worship,” but after the SNI process responded, “I feel more grateful and have more of a desire to praise Him. I even feel like singing.” Overall, the pre- and post-questionnaires show the participants desire for worshipping God did increase in at least half of the studies, and for one of the participants, her desire to worship increased in all the studies.

My data suggests that favorable responses to God can vary, according to person, their Christian tradition, temperament and their unique situation(s). For my participants, these responses included increasing trust in God; expressing awe of his creation; expressing gratitude; spending time in stillness before him; and, exhibiting reverence in his presence. These themes are not surprising, given that the participants responses were often oriented towards God's provisions through Scripture and Nature Immersion, but also the creative beauty that nature reminded, and prompted the participants with. Psalm 19 calls our attention to nature, which in a sense summons the rest of the world to worship its Creator. Nature "declare[s] the glory of God" (v.1), "proclaims his handiwork" (v.1), "pours out speech" (v.2) and, "Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (v.4). My data suggests the same, that as participants spent their time in nature, they not only received various therapeutic graces, but they also were inspired by nature to worship their Creator in a variety of ways.

What I did find surprising from this research, is that while my participants exhibited clear preferences for the SNI process as a group in a natural setting, the positive emotional benefits received from such seemed similar to those in virtual-natural and solitude settings (see Findings, Table 17). I did expect to observe similar emotional benefits between group and solitude settings, based on participant temperaments. However, I did expect there to be more positive emotional value in the natural settings than in the virtual-nature settings. Selhub

and Logan (2013, 214) conclude the same, writing, “Actual nature enhances a positive mood state, leads to greater reflection, and improves our ability to work through life problems more effectively than does virtual nature.” They add,

We acknowledge that natural light boxes, dawn stimulators, acoustic gadgets with the sounds of crickets and birds, negative ion generators, and aromatherapy devices are just some of the examples of manufactured nature with medicinal potential. Indeed, sitting in a virtual forest has been shown to reduce stress, although in head-to-head duals, actual nature experience appears to have the edge on mental energy, vitality, and restoration (Selhub and Logan 2013, 214).

My sample size is too small to be conclusive, but interestingly, it stands somewhat in contradiction to the latter which maintains that “actual nature experience appears to have the edge.” Selhub and Logan do acknowledge regardless, that there is “stress reduction and cognitive enhancement upon viewing photographic and video-based scenes of natural environments” (2013, 214). Kahn Jr. (et al. 2008) also points to the restorative health value that humans can access, even by looking at nature through a window. Certainly, my participants attest to the same with regards to viewing nature via a variety of screens – including a High-Density TV screen, laptop and phone screens. Further, two participants perceived additional benefit from this activity in solitude, reporting that such either promoted a restful sleep, or perhaps could even be used daily, as a form of devotional activity.

Presumably, a virtual-nature medium would also serve a Christian (and non-Christian?) audience well in the following instances: when a person has a disability that prevents them from accessing outdoor nature easily; for the sake of

convenience (it can be accessed even on a phone); when a person perceives themselves to be unsafe in nature (see Shanahan et al. 2015, 154,159); or even when nature itself may seem hostile. Of special mention here are the Chicago winters, where this research was conducted. Here the temperatures may become as severe as forty-below (Fahrenheit) during winter. In such instances, virtual-nature would likely have more appeal, and promote greater positive emotional wellbeing.

A relevant question might be, “where to from here, and how has this project lead to positive development in ministry?” In some ways, this project has been the catalyst, or perhaps “a final piece in the divine puzzle of my life,” guiding me to see a fuller picture of God’s plan for my life, and that of my family. While the focus of this project was to aid busy urban and suburban Christians to encounter God through nature, and reap the consequential blessings of positive emotions, my desire has always been to return to my roots – not to New Zealand as such, but to a place where there is natural beauty not dissimilar to that in New Zealand, where I grew up. Rural Washington State where we relocated to, offers such beauty with its forests and sweeping coastlines, along with the grandeur of the mountain-ranges encasing it all. At last I feel like I am home again.

However, not only do I want to live in a space that feels like home to me, but I also want to utilize this sacred natural space to encourage others to encounter God through nature, and to receive the emotional benefits thereof. My longer-term desire is to buy land that takes advantage of the surrounding natural beauty

and develop this into a holistic retreat center. A place, where both Janine and I can be used by God, to minister to the whole human – that is, body, soul and spirit. For now, we have just purchased a vacation beach-cottage adjacent to forest, and overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the glorious Mt. Baker, and the Canadian mountain ranges of Vancouver Island. While the intention of this property is to secure added income, we are offering it to pastors and missionaries at discounted rates (and sometimes free of charge) as a place to be rested, revitalized and renewed, with the added options of spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, and various natural therapies – including chiropractic care, medical massage and nutritional counseling. God is good, and we feel so blessed to be led on this journey, which is so different to what we ever dreamed possible.

Conclusion and Implications

This project has been inspired by my former context, where some urban or suburban Christians experience busy lifestyles, along with stress or anxiety. As a result, these believers may find difficulty in setting aside time to meaningfully encounter God, and to work through their anxiety in appropriate ways. Thus, the aim of my project was to firstly teach such persons a spiritual practice called Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI) which importantly for my participants was accessible, affordable, and reproducible.

Secondly, my aim was also to evaluate whether SNI could help to nurture an encounter with God, and further be instrumental in reorienting negative emotional states into positive ones. Data from this project concludes that SNI can

be an effective tool in a variety of settings – natural, virtual-natural, group and solitude – to accomplish all of the above, even with just five-minutes of nature-immersion.

Based on the data which I obtained, I propose a SNI Model with the following elements:

1. Different situations and activities, which are sometimes adverse, can become Points of Disconnection (POD's) for participants. As participants begin to ruminate on these POD's, they can play a disconnecting role (either temporarily or longer-term) from an abiding life in God.
2. Ruminating on POD's can then promote Effects of Disconnection (EOD's) – that is, any negative emotional state resulting from the POD's. It may be helpful for participants to be made aware of their POD's and the resulting EOD's, prior to going through the SNI process.
3. A Centering Exercise that includes the dual practices of “thanksgiving” and “offloading” may assist participants in becoming centered and freer from distractions. This exercise might be seen as one that functions as a “gateway to connection” with God. Psalm 100:4 exhorts us to enter into the Lord's gate with thanksgiving. Further, the act of “offloading” any cares, concerns and wrongs to the Lord, may assist participants to see and encounter God more readily (e.g., Psalm 24:3-5; Matthew 5:8). A natural instrument to hold, such as a stone with a cross etched into it, or a wooden

cross, may aid this time of centering, as participants focus on its meaning to them personally.

4. The SNI process then involves a simple process of reflecting on short passages of Scripture relevant to the needs of the participants. For those suffering from anxiety, passages that speak about God's peace, protection and care may be helpful. The reflection of Scripture can easily be accomplished through a simple form of Lectio Divina: 1. To read the Scripture slowly and meaningfully, pause and breathe deeply; 2. To reflect on what God might be saying or inviting the participant(s) to, through his Word, pause and breathe deeply; and 3. To simply rest with God, as Scripture is read again, and then rest in God's presence. Following this, participants can continue to rest with God in nature for at least five minutes. If the setting is virtual-natural, the Scripture can be easily incorporated into the natural video-clip – allowing time for rest and reflection.
5. Following the SNI process, it may be useful for participants to write down (or verbalize) how they have become more aware of God, how they encountered him, and any moods or feelings that arise from this experience. Over time, they can write their findings in a journal to encourage themselves and others, as they continue using this practice.

No doubt the SNI process will be utilized overtime in my own (new) ministry context – though as I consider the implications of this research, and the SNI

process, I tend to conjure up more questions (for now) than answers. For example, does SNI provide scope for pastoral counseling outdoors? For developing devotional video-clips which include Scripture? Can these be geared towards a variety of needs, such as anxiety, depression or other pastoral needs of Christians? How about its usage in spiritual retreats, what would this look like? Shinrin-yoku experiences are becoming increasingly common in parts of America, could SNI be “marketed” in a similar way, to point Christians and non-Christians alike to encountering God and receiving his therapeutic graces – rather than simply looking to nature as an end in itself? How might SNI affect church worship, or even the architectural design of ministry spaces?

Taking these questions and others into consideration is exciting, as Janine and I continue to dream in line with God’s will. Longer term, I envision using this spiritual practice in various retreat settings. Further, the dream of my wife Janine and I is to develop our fledgling Wellness Center into a Retreat Center – located in a natural environment. Thus, I hope to use Scripture and Nature Immersion, as a tool to aid those searching for rest and retreat – whereby they can simultaneously encounter the Lord and find relief from stress and anxiety. It may further be a tool which other pastoral counselors, spiritual directors and other Christian leaders can utilize and adapt, to aid others in their Christian journeys. Lastly, I also hope that this tool – possibly in adapted forms – can be a means whereby non-believers are drawn to their Creator, while finding relief from stress and anxiety.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

As I consider Paul's tripartite benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 with regards to the sanctification of our "whole spirit, soul and body," I marvel at the work that God is doing in each one of us, including myself. What a miracle this great work truly is. That God would take each of us as unregenerate sinners, filled with brokenness and various forms of dysfunctions – some, being of our own making, and some, from the wounds caused by others – and then draw us to himself, make us alive to himself by means of the cross, and through the Spirit, and then continue the great work of transformational wholeness in us. This great work is truly profound.

I am grateful for writers such as Leanne Payne and Dallas Willard, who have impacted my thinking with regards to the various dimensions of each human. Prior to engaging with these authors, I had not really reflected on the fact that we are multi-dimensional beings, and that the Lord is seeking to transform us in each of these elements – body, soul and spirit. This certainly is first and foremost God's work, but he also longs to partner with each of us in this transformational process and grace.

In addition to understanding these three dimensions, Willard encourages us to further reflect on the social or relational dimension that surrounds us and forms us. This social formation can be negative or positive, depending on the social influences we are exposed to. For many of us, this social formation may nurture dysfunction and wounding in our lives. Such is part of my own life narrative. While I was positively formed in some ways, there was also a level of dysfunction that I was exposed to in my younger years, which acted as an agent for heightening personal fear and anxiety. Thankfully, the Lord has brought the forming and healing benefits of positive community into my life since this time.

A final dimension which offers formational value for each of us, is interaction with nature itself. Adam and Eve first began their lives by encountering God in beautiful nature, and I believe that we still have an inherent need to interact with God through nature even now. Bratman et al. (2015, 8567) propose that emotional distresses such as depression and anxiety are more prevalent in urban centers. One reason that they propose for such, is our choosing to dissociate ourselves from the healing effects of nature. And yet, as my SNI process illustrates, interaction with nature can be done in easily accessible places, even in cities, such as a local park. Regardless of location, nature in its many varied forms, does indeed function as a balm to the soul, providing healing and also opportunities to encounter our Creator.

The five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing are interwoven throughout each part of my portfolio – these are spirit, soul, body, community and

nature. The first section of my portfolio provides glimpses into various themes of my life, through a spiritual autobiography. As already described in part above, I have been formed in many ways, both negative and positive, through each of the five dimensions. But knowing and understanding the five dimensions continues to assist me in moving forward in a positive trajectory, as I encounter and commune with God, and become increasingly whole through him.

My spiritual autobiography first explores the overarching theme of beauty. Given that beauty means something different to each person, I explore what this means in my own life through different settings. First, I explore beauty, through the beauty of nature – a theme that has become reoccurring throughout my life. I next look to the beauty of people in the next setting of my life, which is in South Africa. Finally, I explore the idea of even pain and struggle having their own kind of beauty – or at least, producing a kind of beauty in me, as God continues his work of transformation.

Throughout my spiritual autobiography (along with the subsequent chapters), I unpack other themes in addition to beauty. Perhaps God's greatest work of healing and wholeness in my life has been with regards to replacing my fear and anxiety, with his abundant life – especially through a newfound peace and joy (John 10:10). I found this to be especially true in Janine's and my most troubling season of all, in Chicago. Here I not only battled with anxiety of various kinds, especially during my time in seminary, and also dryness and disillusionment in church ministry. But, we also experienced great turmoil and

trauma during this time also, due to the death of our foster-son Gabriel, along with our foster-daughter Abigail being removed from our care for five months (who since we have been able to adopt). What a season of anxiety, pain and struggle. And yet, as I look back in retrospect, I believe that God has done his greatest work in my life yet, in and through this time of darkness. Thankfully however, he has now brought us into a new season of light and fruitfulness, for which we praise and declare his Name.

In one sense, my own life story has informed the following chapters of my portfolio. Once God had brought a sense of healing and wholeness in my own life, I felt compelled to share what I had learned from him, with other Christians who regularly encounter fear and anxiety. This forms the main thrust of my second chapter, a spiritual formation manual for assisting anxious Christians find relief, healing and wholeness through Christ.

My approach to this manual again draws from the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. In his book *The Spiritual Man*, Watchman Nee proposes that our greatest place of communion with God is through the dimension of our spirit. Yet he argues that the dimensions of soul and body also need to be transformed by God, through his Spirit (as per the apostle Paul's benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23). In addition, as already noted, the social and natural dimensions also need to be considered and integrated, as each of us continues to be positively spiritually formed and receive divine healing. Hence the third chapter of my portfolio not only explores the five dimensions of spiritual

formation and healing in more detail, but it also unpacks how these might be applied into our lives, with the aim of encountering God, and appropriating his wholeness and healing in our lives.

The fourth chapter of my portfolio continues to explore these five dimensions further, but with particular emphasis on the fifth dimension, which is nature itself. This dimension has particularly aided my own life, both in nurturing ongoing encounters with God, but also in opening me up to receive God's therapeutic graces, from such encounters. While I was in this research stage of my portfolio, I was living and ministering in the north-west suburbs of Chicago. During this time, my wife Janine and I also owned a fledgling wellness center called Shalom Wellness, which aimed to eventually offer therapies for body, soul and spirit. While we lived there however, Shalom Wellness mainly offered the natural therapies of chiropractic care, acupuncture and medical massage. Through both this wellness center and through church ministry however, I was discovering that a number of our clients and parishioners respectively, were experiencing various levels of anxiety. Some were consulting psychologists and others were consulting pastoral counselors, including myself. Having experienced much anxiety and having received much healing from the Lord through nature, I thus wanted to research into this further for the sake of others. Thus, my research project focuses on relief and healing of anxiety through "the two books" by which God reveals himself to us – the Word of God, and Nature (Belgic Confession,

Article 2). From this dual focus, stemmed a spiritual practice which I have called Scripture and Nature Immersion (SNI).

My hypothesis was that Christians immersing themselves in Scripture in a natural environment could experience positive spiritual and mood formation, while simultaneously reducing stress and anxiety. One of the limitations of this study, was that my sample size ended up being rather small, with just four participants. Still, I decided that such was sufficient to provide a pilot study, which further research could utilize. The data from my participants did however seem to validate my hypothesis for each of the four different settings which the SNI process was researched in.

Overall, my research suggests that my participants' anxiety was somewhat due to ruminating on certain situations or factors in their lives, such as stressful job situations and relationships. The SNI process may then assist participants, by changing any adverse ruminations and consequential negative emotions, into positive emotions such as peace and joy. It may further heighten participants awareness of the Lord in various ways, such as perceiving him to be a God that personally cares. In addition, SNI may further aid participants in expressing worship and various favorable responses to the Lord, such as trust, awe and gratefulness.

I have already alluded to one limitation of Chapter Three, with is the limited sample size that I had to work with. The portfolio also has other limitations as follows. Firstly, as the Psalmist proclaims, each of us has been

made “so mysteriously complex” (Psalm 139:14, TPT). While this is certainly not a limitation per se, I did find it difficult to unravel the “mysteriously complex” themes of my life into a spiritual autobiography, as these themes are so many, varied and complex. I did extract several major themes, which I have explored in some detail, yet there are many others that I chose not to unpack due to space, keeping focus, and also for the sake of protecting certain people in my life.

I have also discovered that basing my spiritual autobiography on the overarching theme of beauty has meant limiting my autobiography in other ways. When I compiled this life narrative in 2015, this theme of beauty seemed paramount to me, and in some ways, it still is. Even as I write this, I am privy to the awe-inspiring majesty of Mt. Baker across the Bay, and also, the occasional sea-lion bobbing in the Bay itself. Beauty – especially the beauty of nature – continues to inspire my life. Yet, I long to delve even more deeply into other themes in my life, including nature itself – especially given the natural context to which the Lord has now led my family and I.

While the theme of nature does feature prominently in this portfolio, there are sub-themes of nature that I could have explored in more detail. For example, this portfolio does present, at least in some respects, a romanticized view of nature. Granted I do attempt to cover biblical encounters with the Lord in “harsher,” less romanticized types of nature in Chapter 2 – such as by way of fire and earthquake. Yet overall, my own perspective of nature, and the nature I promote for encounter with God (including the peaceful settings for my research),

can generally be considered as being part of a romanticized view. Pepper (189-190, 2002) notes that the Romantic movement was “an artistic and intellectual one” that “hated how industrialization made previously beautiful places ugly,” and thus its preference was for an “organic view of nature.”

For some (including myself) romanticism of nature could be taken further to contemplate the spiritual as well. In observation of various transcendentalist romantics, Pepper (202, 2002) writes:

For Wordsworth the mountains inspired spirituality and sacredness without specifically referring to the Christian God. For Ruskin and others, nature inspired the kind of awe and reverence traditionally reserved for God, reminding them of him. ... Thoreau considered that ‘in nature, not in the pomp and parade of the town, the individual may walk with the Builder of the universe.’

Muir (1898, 483) also writes,

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as fountains of life.

Of course, I resonate with each of these authors on different levels, but especially in their desire to connect at a deeper level with the Creator.

Some transcendentalist romantics however, would not identify with a divine Creator *per se*, preferring rather to adopt some form of pantheism. This is another area of limitation, which due to time and space, my portfolio has not explored in detail. Norman Geisler (1999, 580) writes that “According to pantheism, God ‘is all in all.’ God pervades all things, contains all things, subsumes all things, and is found within all things. ... The world is God, and God

is the world. But more precisely, in pantheism all is God, and God is all.”

Pantheism is thus dangerous on several levels. Firstly, seeing all of nature as God is a form of idolatry. Secondly, pantheism can imply that we ourselves “are God.” All of this has further implications, as to what we do with nature, or how we respond to it, if it is afforded the status of deity. In this sense, it minimizes and perhaps even removes our God-given role of ruling over creation as in Genesis 1:28. All the while, we are informed in Romans 1:20, that nature is simply a vehicle, albeit a beautiful one, for pointing us to knowing God the Creator.

Another natural practice which I make reference to in Chapters Two and Three called Shinrin-yoku (or forest-bathing), can similarly be confused, as a form of pantheism. Yet, while some practitioners of Shinrin-yoku do consider themselves to be pantheists (just like some transcendentalist romantics do), Shinrin-yoku itself, is a practice derived out of scientific research – especially with regards to the physiological and psychological benefits of trees.

As both transcendentalist romantics and practitioners of shinrin-yoku demonstrate however, it is all too easy for anyone who is attracted to nature and without knowledge of God, to begin to identify nature itself as God. This is all the more reason to promote an apologetic on the beauty of nature, because nature powerfully summons humanity to connect with its Creator (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:20).

Another theme which I have not had the space to explore, is the theme of being a pilgrim. While I write my spiritual-autobiography over three different

geographical settings – New Zealand, South Africa, and Chicago – I wish that I could explore the theme of pilgrimage more than I do. In itself, pilgrimage is an apt spiritual formational theme, incorporating sub-themes such as disorientation, places and spaces of pilgrimage, and journeying with God. This theme also includes many biblical precedents, such as the calling and journeying of Abraham.

Another related theme is cross-cultural experiences. I consider myself very blessed to have been exposed to a world of cultures, not only as I have resided in South Africa, but also in America – where I have had opportunity not only to interact with Americans, but also to interact with refugees and others of so many cultures. I wished I could explore this theme further. For one, I sometimes take it for granted that my readers will know and understand what I am talking about in reference to other cultures and their practices.

Also with regards to culture, I refer to the cultural practice of Shinrin-yoku in Chapter 3, which has become popular in the north-western suburbs of Chicago. Shinrin-yoku is a practice that originated from Japan, after the Japanese Government noted the positive physiological and psychological effects of simply being in a forest. While there is nothing inherently religious about this practice, I acknowledge that appropriating this practice into my research without any theological justification, is a form of weakness, that I initially did not think about. Suffice to say, God created forests to impart life to living creatures, including

humans. In Ezekiel 47:12b we see the Lord providing trees where “Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”

The reader might further assume through my research in chapters three and four, that I perceive positive emotions to be always good, and negative emotions to be always bad. Again, I wish to clarify that such is not the case. For example, a person who is facing danger from a wild animal, needs to rely on fear to motivate them towards safety. Further, too much happiness can result in delirium, or insensitivity. In my actual research, one of my participants experienced grief throughout the SNI process in response to the death of a family member. Such is right and necessary, and life presents numerous scenarios where so-called negative emotions are indeed crucial.

Overall, it is important to emphasize the necessity of emotional balance. Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014, 87) highlight this with regards to anxiety itself. They note for example that “too little anxiety suggests a situation that is boring and lacking in stimulation, effectively putting the mind into hibernation mode where attention, motivational priorities, and energy are shifted away from the current activity.” However, they further add, “Too much anxiety suggests a situation that can be overwhelming, effectively paralyzing a person.” Throughout my studies, my concern has been for those with the latter, who like myself have become overwhelmed, and even paralyzed on some levels, as they live out their lives. For further reading on the necessity of negative emotions however, I would

recommend reading An et al. (2017), Forgas (2010), Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014), and Oishi (2007).

One final limitation that I wish to make reference to, is the curriculum nature of Chapter Two. If I had time to redo this chapter, I would choose to compile this chapter in a different format. Further, I would also like to explore a potential model that I allude to in Chapter Two for the practice of Resting Prayer. As I continue to reflect on this model, I can see how it might even be potentially applied to the SNI process itself, especially, if such could be practiced regularly. See the figure below:

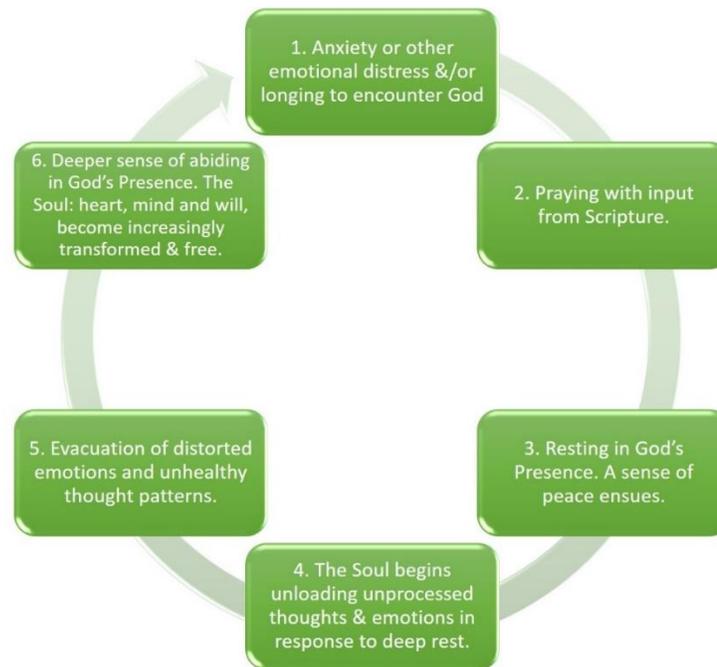


Figure 13. The process of resting prayer with SNI
Adapted from Thomas Keating (1994, 77).

The above model proposes that compromised emotional wellbeing, or simply a longing for God prompt us to encounter the Lord through the prayerful

meditation of Scripture, which can be done in a nature setting. The model proposes that with regular repetition of this practice – that is, encountering God through Scripture and being still in his presence – the soul begins to enter into a deeper rest with God (Matt. 11:28-29). As the soul finds restoration in God through rest (see Psalm 23:1-3), the soul also begins to unload, and further, evacuate distorted emotions and unhealthy thought patterns. What follows is a continued and deeper abiding in God’s presence, where there is increasing transformation and freedom. I believe that there could be benefits to exploring this model in more depth further, for spiritual formation.

As with the model above, I believe that my curriculum offers breadth and insight on a variety of topics and themes – related to the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing – but with additional time and research, it could also provide a spiritual formation model with greater depth and focus. I would appreciate the opportunity to explore the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing, in more depth and focus, in future research.

Overall, the four main themes which this portfolio focuses on, are anxiety, beauty, nature, and the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing (which include nature). Suffice to say, much of my life has been riddled with anxiety. As noted, I believe that this largely came about through negative social formation, especially in my younger formative years. Yet the Lord has continually used beauty to nurture positive formation in my life, including nature, people and even pain and struggle. I am reminded of the words in Ecclesiastes 3:11a, where

Solomon proclaims, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” Indeed, God uses all kinds of instruments to do his work of recreating beauty in humanity, and all of creation.

In addition to beauty and nature (of which there is a close-connection), the Lord has graciously shown me five different dimensions for spiritual formation and healing. I see healing (on many levels) as a necessary component of spiritual formation. But as explained earlier, such formation needs to happen at every level of our beings, and this can be aided greatly by through the additional dimensions of relationships and nature. Ultimately this great work of being formed into the image of Christ, is done in partnership, and primarily through the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23, NIV).

The question remains, “where to from here?” Firstly, I hope that my spiritual autobiography can offer encouragement for anyone, but especially Christians who are struggling with anxiety. Further my hope is that the curriculum provided in Chapter Two can offer the Christian community an additional resource for anxiety and nurture encounters with the Lord through the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. Lastly, I hope that the SNI practice can be adopted and even adapted into various ministry contexts, whereby the Christian community will increasingly find value in nature, especially as a vehicle to encounter the Lord, and receive his healing graces. For example, our church

community could be introduced to SNI as a valid prayer form. This is well fitting to our localized context, given the beautiful forests and other nature surrounding us. It might also influence future church architecture within our church context. Currently, our non-denominational church is fast outgrowing its current church-building. We are prayerfully evaluating various options to accommodate our growth, including a new church building. If our church was to go this direction, we could consider how to integrate nature into the architectural design, such as an interior courtyard with plants, adjacent to the sanctuary. Even if we do not build, we can still integrate nature more intentionally, into the church landscaping, which can facilitate outdoor encounters with God.

Longer term, I plan to use (and possibly adapt) both the curriculum in Chapter Two and my research from Chapter Three in a variety of contexts. Firstly, I would like to explore and write further about various forms of contemplative prayer, which will include both Resting Prayer and SNI. I would also like to create virtual-nature devotionals using the SNI process. One of my participants remarked that she would regularly like to experience her devotional time with God in this way. A Christian psychotherapist has also told me that she would use such to assist her clients struggling with a variety of emotional distresses. It will be a joy to travel about our beautiful State to record video footage for this purpose. Additionally, I would like to utilize both chapters in both small group and spiritual retreat ministries.

Previously, I have desperately sought for places of spiritual retreat, especially during our season of pain and struggle in Chicago. Yet, I was not able to find such a place. I have further felt the frustrations of a spiritual director telling me I simply needed more faith, when I was experiencing various forms of chronic anxiety. What I needed at that point in time, was having a spiritual director who understood the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing, rather than to prescribe guilt over a perceived lack of faith. I suspect others face similar situations when they discuss their lack of emotional wellbeing with pastoral counselors and spiritual directors. Thus, I believe that a greater understanding of these five dimensions is not only desirable, but required, by all who minister to the souls of others.

A longer-term goal then, is to develop Shalom Wellness (which we have now restarted in Washington State) into a Retreat Center. This center will offer lodging, retreats and other opportunities for rest, revitalization and renewal in both small group and solitude formats. The center will also be focused on the five dimensions of spiritual formation and healing. That is, it will offer spiritual direction and pastoral counseling to cater to the soul and spirit, but it will also offer natural therapies such as chiropractic care, acupuncture and massage to cater to the needs of the body. There will be opportunities to cater to the social dimension through small group studies and retreats, but also offer opportunities for those who need a time to commune with God, and to heal, in solitude.

Finally, the Lord has further greatly blessed my family by bringing us “full-circle” back into a setting of beautiful nature. It has been long being my desire to utilize the final dimension of spiritual formation and healing, that is, the beauty of nature, to minister to souls. Hence, this Retreat Center will be situated in beautiful nature, which as the Belgic Confession proclaims, “is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity.”

Soli Deo Gloria!
May all my life be unto and reflect the glory of God.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Guide for Daily Resting Prayer

Opening Prayer:

Abba Father (you can address God using another name if preferred)

I honor and bless Your Name

You are my Lord, my God, my King

I draw near to you, seeking to rest in your Presence

As I do this, please protect me from hindrances of any kind

Let me experience your goodness, your peace and your joy

I deeply desire to see you, to be with you and to behold your beauty

Fill me afresh with your Spirit and let me truly rest in you

In Christ's Name, I pray, Amen.

Summary of Resting Prayer

Allow about 20 minutes of your time each day for the Resting Prayer practice.

1. **Read the Psalm of Thanksgiving.** You can read Psalm 95:1-7, Psalm 100, Psalm 105:1-5, or another Psalm of your choice. After reading the Psalm, next think about at least three things that you are thankful to the Lord for. Next offer up your thanks to God.
2. **Confession and Assurance:**
 - Quietly pray the words of Psalm 139:23-24
 - Linger in silence for a few moments and if the Lord brings anything to mind, to confess – offer this up to him, seeking his forgiveness.
 - Take assurance from 1 John 1:9 (NIV):
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
3. **Resting in God Through Scripture and Prayer**
 - **Read.** Simply read the passage the first time and then pause in silence for 1-2 minutes.
 - **Reflect.** Read the Scripture a second time and become more reflective – pausing in silence for 1-2 minutes after reading.
 - What words or phrases do you react or respond to?
 - Is God inviting you to engage with the text in some way?
 - Feel free to visualize yourself in the narrative
 - **Rest.** After reflectively reading the Scripture a third time, simply allow yourself to rest with the Lord as follows:
 - Select a word from the passage to continue resting in God for 12 minutes. If you are unsure about what word or phrase to choose, you can use a word or phrase from Appendix B.
 - **Lord's Prayer.** At the end of twelve minutes, say the Lord's Prayer (a traditional version of this is printed in the Week 1 Session).

Scriptures for the Ten Week Resting Prayer Program

Week 1

Day 1. Psalm 27:1-5
Day 2. Luke 15:11-24
Day 3. Isaiah 43:1-4
Day 4. Exodus 33:13-14
Day 5. Matthew 11:28-30
Day 6. Psalm 139:1-10
Sabbath (other devotional activity)

Week 2

Day 1. John 14:15-21
Day 2. Psalm 103:17-22
Day 3. Psalm 8
Day 4. John 15:1-12
Day 5. Psalm 77:1-12
Day 6. Exodus 14:10-14
Sabbath

Week 3

Day 1. Psalm 62:1-2
Day 2. 3 John 2
Day 3. Psalm 23
Day 4. Joshua 1:1-9
Day 5. Psalm 139:13-18
Day 6. Jeremiah 29:12-14
Sabbath

Week 4

Day 1. Romans 8:1-6
Day 2. Psalm 16
Day 3. Psalm 119:114-117
Day 4. Philippians 4:8-9
Day 5. Psalm 1:1-3
Day 6. Luke 10:25-28
Sabbath

Week 5

Day 1. Psalm 55:1-2,16-17,22
Day 2. 2 Timothy 1:6-12
Day 3. Psalm 27:7-14
Day 4. Psalm 109:21-31
Day 5. Psalm 131
Day 6. Psalm 50:1-2,14-15
Sabbath

Week 6

Day 1.1 John 1:1-7
Day 2. Psalm 34:1-8
Day 3. Zephaniah 3:17
Day 4. Hebrews 12:1-3
Day 5. Matthew 20:29-34
Day 6.2 Corinthians 2:14-15
Sabbath

Week 7

Day 1. Isaiah 54:10
Day 2. Luke 13:10-13
Day 3. Psalm 31:1-5
Day 4. John 16:33
Day 5. Romans 8:31-39
Day 6.1 Peter 5:6-9
Sabbath

Week 8

Day 1. Psalm 147:1-5
Day 2. Mark 2:1-12
Day 3. Jeremiah 17:7-14
Day 4. 2 Corinthians 1:2-7
Day 5. 1 Peter 1:3-6
Day 6. Isaiah 41:8-10
Sabbath

Week 9

Day 1. Psalm 103:1-5
Day 2. Isaiah 40:28-31
Day 3. Jeremiah 13:10-13
Day 4. Job 8:20-21
Day 5. Psalm 46
Day 6. Exodus 15:13
Sabbath

Week 10

Day 1. Psalm 118:26-29
Day 2. Galatians 5:13-14
Day 3. Ephesians 2:10
Day 4. Hebrews 6:9-11
Day 5. 1 Chronicles 16:23-31
Day 6. Philippians 1:2-11
Sabbath

Appendix B: Scripture for Resting Prayer

Many Scriptures can be used and personalized as you *Rest in God through Scripture and Prayer*. You can choose to focus on one or two words, or a slightly longer phrase. You may find it helpful to personalize various Scriptures, as you rest in the Lord. For example, Joel 2:13 can be personalized to God as, “I return to you,” “gracious and merciful,” or “I return to you for you are gracious and merciful.” Be aware of God’s Presence with you and in you, as you rest in this way.

Being Filled:

Living Water flow through me (John 7:38)

Holy Spirit fill me (Ephesians 5:18)

Source of Life in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:30)

Character of God:

Abba, Father (Romans 8:14-15; 2 Corinthians 6:18)

Comfort / Compassion (Isaiah 30:8; 2 Corinthians 1:3)

Faithful (Lamentations 3:23)

Giver of good gifts (James 1:17)

Good (Psalm 31:19)

Grace (James 4:6)

Love (Psalm 108:4; 1 John 3:1)

Merciful (Hebrews 4:16)

Delight:

I delight in you (Psalm 37:4)

The Lord delights in me (Zephaniah 3:17)

Drawing to God:

Jesus I come (Matthew 11:28)

I rest in you (Matthew 11:28)

I draw to you with confidence, by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19,22)

I draw near, as you draw near to me (James 4:8)

I return to you Lord, you are gracious and merciful. (Joel 2:13)

My Lord and my God (John 20:28)

Forgiveness:

You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate (Nehemiah 9:17)

God Answers:

God answers me (Jonah 2:2)

I call and you will answer (Jeremiah 33:3)

God’s Goodness:

You are good, your love endures forever (Psalm 100:5)

I receive good gifts from you (James 1:17)

You prosper me (Jeremiah 29:11)

You give me hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11)

Your unfailing love rests on me (Psalm 33:22)

God's Presence:

The majesty and magnificence of your presence! (Psalm 96:6)

There is fullness of joy in your presence (Psalm 16:11)

Healing:

By your wounds I am healed (Isaiah 53:5)

You heal me Lord (Exodus 15:26)

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18)

The Lord binds up my wounds (Psalm 147:3)

Immanuel:

God is with me (Matthew 1:23)

Immanuel (Matthew 1:23)

God is with me and mighty to save (Zephaniah 3:17)

God will never leave me nor forsake me (Deuteronomy 31:6)

Your everlasting arms are underneath me (Deuteronomy 33:27)

You are with me always (Matthew 28:20)

Light:

Jesus, the Light of Life (John 8:12)

Love:

Your love is being poured into me (Romans 5:5)

Nothing separates us from your love (Romans 8:38-39)

Peace and Rest in God:

I lie down in green pastures (Psalm 23:2)

He leads me by quiet waters (Psalm 23:2)

He restores my soul (Psalm 23:3)

You are with me (Psalm 23:4)

I am calmed and quieted myself in your embrace (Psalm 131:2)

My peace I give you (John 14:27)

Peace be with you (John 20:21)

The Lord quiets me with his love (Zephaniah 3:17)

I rest secure in God (Deuteronomy 33:12)

Peace of Christ is ruling my heart (Colossians 3:15)

Protection:

Whenever I'm afraid I will trust in you (Psalm 56:3)

God shields me all day long (Deuteronomy 33:12)

You are my helper, I will not be afraid (Hebrews 13:6)

Your rod and staff comfort me (Psalm 23:4)

I am strong and take heart in the Lord (Psalm 31:24)

The Lord is my stronghold, I will not be afraid (Psalm 27:1)

You strengthen and protect me from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

Praise and Worship:

Be exalted O God, above the Heavens (Psalm 57:11)

Let your glory be over all the earth (Psalm 57:11)

Read through the Psalms for many other options

**Appendix C:
Renewing the Mind Log**

Negative Thought	Promises of God's Word
<i>e.g., I can't do anything</i>	<i>Philippians 4:13. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength</i>
<i>e.g., I am ugly</i>	<i>In Genesis 1:31 God smiles as he calls me – with the rest of his creation “very good.” The Psalmist also declares “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” in Psalm 139:14</i>
<i>Write your negative thought here:</i>	<i>What Biblical Promise can you think of to replace your negative thought?</i>

**Appendix D:
Food Log**

Use the following log to record and monitor any mood(s) or feeling(s) that you experience after eating.

Day / Time	Food / Beverage	Quantity	Mood(s) / Feeling(s) Experienced
Sunday Time:			
Sunday Time:			
Sunday Time:			
Monday Time:			
Monday Time:			
Monday Time:			
Tuesday Time:			
Tuesday Time:			
Tuesday Time:			
Wednesday Time:			
Wednesday Time:			
Wednesday Time:			
Thursday Time:			
Thursday Time:			
Thursday Time:			
Friday Time:			
Friday Time:			
Friday Time:			
Saturday Time:			
Saturday Time:			
Saturday Time:			

**Appendix E:
Personal Narrative Process**

Feel free to make as many copies of this pages as are necessary for the group.

Use the following process of clarification to help guide this process:

1. Facilitator prays for the story-teller, and for group wisdom
 2. The person tells their story, including any aspects of anxiety
 3. What images or other things stand out for you, as the person tells their story?
-

4. How can you encourage the story-teller?
-

5. What aspects of this situation can be controlled? How do you think healing can be brought into this story? What strategies would you suggest for this?
-

6. What aspects of this situation cannot be controlled so easily? What coping strategies could you suggest?
-

7. What body (physical), soul (mind, heart/emotions, personality), spirit(ual) and relational therapies have helped you, as you have worked through your anxiety?
Could any of these possibly work in this instance?
-

8. Conclude the case-study by having any who are willing, to pray for the person.

Optional: Have the group lay their hands on the person's shoulder while praying, if the person and the group-members are comfortable doing this.

9. At the end of the session, hand in this sheet to the person who has been telling their story.

**Appendix F:
Letter to Prospective Participants**

Dear friend,

My name is Caleb Smith, and I am a student at Tyndale University College & Seminary, in Toronto, Canada. You are invited to participate in the following Doctor of Ministry research project, through Tyndale University College & Seminary:

**An Evaluation of Scripture and Nature Immersion as a Spiritual Practice,
for Promoting Positive Spiritual and Mood Formation**

The aim of this project is to explore whether Scripture immersion in a natural environment can be effective in connecting participants with God – while reducing stress and anxiety. This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval through the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale University College & Seminary, Toronto ON, Canada.

You may contact me or my professor, if you have any questions about this study. My telephone number is (630) 385-6222, and office number is (630) 665-2259. My email address is caleb@christcomyounity.com

My Professor is Dr. Mark Chapman, who is the Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Tyndale University College & Seminary. His phone number is +1 (416) 226-6620 ext.2208, and email address is mchapman@tyndale.ca.

Additionally, you can contact the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale University College & Seminary, at reb@tyndale.ca.

Procedure: If you consent to participating in this project, you will be asked to participate in four different activities using Scripture, natural, and virtual-natural environments. Two of these activities will be in a group situation, and two will be done on your own, in your own time. For each activity, you will be asked to fill in a questionnaire before and after, and then an additional brief questionnaire at the end of the project. Each group time will be followed by group discussion. I will also make an audio recording of these discussions for the purposes of accuracy, and will have someone taking photographs as another means of recording the overall experience.

Time required: Both group activities are expected to take about an hour, and the two activities on your own, will take about 20-30 minutes. All of this will take place over a period of two weeks.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time, and not forfeit any benefits outlined in this letter.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with this project. However, it is possible that you might feel some stress during any of the activities. Some of this project is conducted in a suburban park, and so you may experience allergies –

especially if you are prone to seasonal nature-related allergies. If any of these occur, please inform me promptly.

Benefits: While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy engaging in this project with others, or on your own. It is hoped that the projects will bring you peace and calm, while experiencing relationship with God. You will also be invited to participate in a ten-week church-based anxiety support group, following the completion of this project. This project is further intended to benefit churches, who wish to support their congregants who experience stress and anxiety.

Confidentiality/ Anonymity: Your name will be kept confidential in all writing related to this study. I will be the only person who will listen to the audio recordings. When I write about my research and conclusions, I will use codes and/or pseudonyms (made up names) for all participants, and describe any situations – that I refer to from conversations, or answers from the questionnaires – in general terms. In any situation where I may wish to include a personal quote from you, I will only do so, should I receive additional permission from you. In signing this agreement, you also agree to keep information supplied by other participants confidential.

Sharing the results: I plan to construct a written research report of what I have learnt, based on the questionnaires I receive, group discussion, and observation. This report will be submitted to my professor by the end of the term. The results of this project will also be shared in a voluntary group session, with all interested participants.

Publication: There is the possibility that I will publish this study, or refer to it in published writing in the future. In this event, I will continue to use pseudonyms (as described above) and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

Be sure that any questions you may have, are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

By signing below, you are agreeing to the following:

1. That you have read and understand all information in this consent letter
2. That you consent to being asked questions in the future
3. That you will participate in the activities described above, and agree to both group activities being recorded using an audio device.
4. You will provide me with information about any known allergies that you have.

Known allergies: _____

I consent to photographs of me being printed for research purposes (check box):

YES NO

_____. _____ . _____

(Participant Name) (Signature) (Date)

**Appendix G:
Confidentiality Agreement**

Project Title: An Evaluation of Using Scripture and Nature Immersion as A Spiritual Practice, For Promoting Positive Spiritual and Mood Formation

I, _____ are functioning in the following role(s) for the above-mentioned project:

_____ I hereby agree to:

1. keep all the research information recorded by me, or shared with me, confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., field-notes, photographs, audio-recordings, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., field-notes, photographs, audio-recordings, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., field-notes, photographs, audio-recordings, transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with the *Researcher*, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher* (e.g., field-notes, photographs, audio-recordings, transcripts).

(Participant Name)	(Signature)	(Date)
(Researcher's Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

**Appendix H:
Recommended Items to Bring to
Herrick Lake Forest Preserve**

Please consider bringing the following items with you, to Herrick Lake Forest Preserve:

1. Sunscreen
2. Water-bottle
3. Bug-spray
4. Any medication that you might need for allergies
5. Cellphone (please turn your cellphone off, or place on flight-mode, unless there is an emergency)
6. Clothing suitable for any possible cold weather, including any of the following: a hat, scarf, sweater, jacket.

Note: If the weather is bad, then we will reschedule our visit to Herrick Lake Forest Preserve.

Appendix I: Process for Scripture and Nature Immersion Experiences

1. Complete Questionnaire 1 before arriving at Herrick Lake Forest Reserve, or before participating in any Virtual-Nature exercises.
2. Meetup together and welcome by facilitator (For group settings)
3. TOI Process (Thanksgiving, Offloading, Immersion in Scripture and Nature)
 - 3.1. **Thanksgiving.** Read the following from Psalm 95:2a (ESV):¹
“Let us come into [God’s] presence with thanksgiving”
After reflecting on these words, write down 3-5 things that you are thankful for this morning:

- 3.2. **Offloading.** Look at the stone in your hand, with a cross in the middle. Touch it and notice any rough and smooth parts. Notice the weight of the stone. Next think about the things that weigh you down currently: all your worries, burdens and cares. Think about any wrongs which might be currently weighing you down. If you feel comfortable doing so, write down any of these in the space below:



Photo by Janine Smith (2017). Used with permission.

The stone represents all of your burdens, worries and cares. The cross in the middle of the stone, represents Jesus taking all of these for you, and bringing you wholeness on the cross.

In 1st Peter 5:7 (NIV), Scripture says to *“Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you.”* Close your eyes, and spend a few moments giving all your burdens to Jesus right now.

3.3. Immersion

Scripture: While any Scripture has the ability to bring personal and spiritual wholeness – through an encounter with God – the following Scriptures have been selected, because of their focus on encountering and

¹ The facilitator will read any Scriptures during the group exercises.

worshipping God through rest; the beauty of nature; and God’s personal care of nature (including humans).

- **Study 1.1** (At Herrick Lake, with group). **Scripture: Psalm 65**
- **Study 1.2** (At Herrick Lake, on your own). **Scripture: Psalm 23**
- **Study 2.1** (At Christ Community Church, with group). **Scripture: Psalm 104:1-2,12,14,16,24,27,33-34**
- **Study 2.2** (Online, on your own). **Scripture: Psalm 145**

Follow the following process for reading Scripture. Feel free to take some deep breaths, and close your eyes to listen and reflect, if you are not reading:²

- **Read.** Slowly read the Scripture and then sit in silence for two minutes (or as long as you feel comfortable doing so).
- **Reflect.** Slowly read the Scripture again, but this time consider any invitation(s) that God might be giving you, through this Scripture. After the Scripture is read, reflect on any invitation(s) in silence, or simply savor the time of silence, for two minutes (or as long as you feel comfortable doing so).
- **Rest.** Slowly read the same Scripture a third time, and then rest in silence for two minutes (or as long as you feel comfortable doing so).

Nature: Following your time of immersion in Scripture, spend five minutes in nature.

- If you are engaging in a “Virtual Nature” experience, refer to the sheet called *Process for Virtual Nature Experience*.
- If you are at Herrick Lake Nature Park, consider any of the following:
 - Slowly breathe in the fresh air around you.
 - Slowly walk among the trees, or by the water.
 - Sit on a park bench and simply relax in nature.
 - Engage with your senses. What do you see, touch, smell, hear?
 - Spend time noticing and appreciating any of the following:
 - Big things – such as the grandeur of a tree
 - Small things – such as the shape of a leaf, or a bird, or butterfly
 - What beauty do you notice?
 - What colors and hues do you observe?
 - Lie on the grass, and look up at the trees, or the clouds.
 - While in nature, reflect on the Scripture that you have just read, and feel free to read and reflect on it several more times. How is God continuing to speak to you?

4. Complete Questionnaire 2 (and if relevant, rejoin the group for discussion)

² The facilitator will read any Scriptures during the group exercises.

Appendix J:
Process for Virtual-Nature Experience

1. Ensure that you have received a personal inhaler (with cedarwood essential oil) from the facilitator. If you find yourself reacting in any way to the essential oil, please refrain from inhaling.
2. Refer to the sheet *Process for Scripture and Nature Immersion Experiences* and work through this process.
3. When you get to the Nature Immersion section, your facilitator will play a nature video-clip of forest and water, with natural sounds (birds and water). If you are on your own, go to [web address] for this part of the exercise.
As you engage in this virtual-nature exercise, consider any of the following:
 - Breathe deeply and slowly.
 - Slowly breathe in the aroma from your personal inhaler 2-3 times.
 - Engage with your senses. What do you see, touch, smell, hear?
 - Spend time noticing and appreciating any of the following:
 - Big things – such as the grandeur of a tree
 - Small things – such as the shape of a leaf, or fern.
 - What beauty do you notice?
 - What colors and hues do you observe?
 - While watching the nature video-clip, reflect on the Scripture that you have just read, and is on the screen. How is God continuing to speak to you?
4. Complete Questionnaire 2.
5. After you have completed the final exercise for this project (Virtual Nature experience on your own), complete Questionnaire 3, and then hand in your questionnaires to your facilitator when you next see each other.

**Appendix K:
Pre- and Post- SNI Questionnaires**

Questionnaire 1

Please complete the following questionnaire, prior to each experience.

Please note that anything you write will be kept confidential. Please note however, that we will also explore these questions during the two group discussions, and you are welcome to provide additional input during this time, although you are under no obligation to do so.

If you need more space to write your answers, please feel free to use more paper.

- 1. A. 1. List or briefly describe any emotions, feelings or moods that you have been feeling today:**

- B. Explain below why you have chosen these words – include any situations or circumstances that might be affecting you currently:**

2. A. Check below how closely you sense God's Presence being with you currently

I do not sense God's Presence with me

I think God's Presence might be with me

I am somewhat aware of God's Presence with me

I am very aware of God's Presence with me

B. Explain below why you chose your answer:

3. A. Circle how much do you desire to worship God right now?

Not at all

Somewhat

Very close

As much as possible

B. Explain below why you think this way:

Questionnaire 2

Please complete the following questionnaire, after each experience.

Please note that anything you write will be kept confidential. Please note however, that we will also explore these questions during the two group discussions, and you are welcome to provide additional input during this time, although you are under no obligation to do so.

If you need more space to write your answers, please feel free to use more paper.

1. **A. List or briefly describe any emotions, feelings or moods that you are feeling as a result of this experience:**

B. Explain below why you have chosen these words – include any situations or circumstances that might be affecting you currently:

C. Did you detect any change in your emotions, feelings or moods, following your experience with Scripture and Nature Immersion? Please explain below:

2. **A. Check below how closely you sense God's Presence being with you currently**

___ I do not sense God's Presence with me

___ I think God's Presence might be with me

___ I am somewhat aware of God's Presence with me

___ I am very aware of God's Presence with me

B. Explain below why you chose your answer:

3. A. Circle how much do you desire to worship God right now?

Not at all Somewhat Very close As much as possible

B. Explain below why you think this way:

4. Describe your experience, as you spent time in Scripture. Consider the following:

- What did you find meaningful from this experience?

- How did you encounter God through this experience?

- Did you sense God speaking to you in any way through this experience, and if so, how?

5. Describe your experience, as you spent time in Nature. Consider the following:

- What did you find meaningful from this experience?

- How did you encounter God through this experience?

- Did you sense God speaking to you in any way through this experience, and if so, how?

Questionnaire 3

Please only complete this questionnaire after you have completed all four exercises (two at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve, and two virtual-nature exercises).

1. A. Did you prefer your experiences at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve, or in a “virtual-nature” environment?

B. Please explain why you think this is the case:

2. A. Did you prefer the exercise at Herrick Lake Forest Preserve in a group setting, or own your own? Please place a check below:

In a group setting

On my own

B. Please explain why you think this is the case:

3. A. Did you prefer the virtual-natural exercise in a group setting, or own your own? Please check a box below:

In a group setting

On my own

B. Please explain why you think this is the case:

**Appendix L:
Definitions and Interpretation of Codes
Used in Figures and Tables**

The following section provides definitions and sub-codes for figures and tables, where my research may need further explanation or interpretation.

The following positive and negative emotions were coded in consultation with a licensed counselor and a licensed psychotherapist.

Table 17. Coded list of emotions, derived from Datasets 1-4

Emotions	Code	Code Compiled from the Following Emotions Reported
Positive	Calm	Calm, centered, content, peaceful, relaxed, rested, serene, settled, steady, still.
	Comforted	Care, comforted, loved, soothed, warm.
	Encouraged	Encouraged, exhorted, reassured.
	Goodness	Abundance, blessed, goodness, provision.
	In Awe	Beauty, in awe, wonder.
	Joyful	Happy, joyful, uplifted.
	Liberated	Carefree, escape, liberated, lighter, relieved.
Negative	Renewed	Eager, excited, hopeful, inspired, motivated, ready, refreshed, renewed mind, positive outlook, purpose.
	Anxious	Afraid, anxious, concerned, fearful, mind-racing, nervous, overwhelmed, stressed, uncertain, uneasy, worried.
	Melancholic	Blah, mundane, melancholic, numb, sad, sorrowful.
	Fatigued	Fatigued, hungry, rushed, struggling, tired.
	Inadequate	Inadequate, loss of self-control, people-pleasing, self-doubt, unaccomplished.
	Agitated	Agitated, antsy, frustrated, upset.
	Purposeless	Directionless, purposeless.

Table 18. Coded list of situational worries or concerns, from Dataset 1

Code	Code Compiled from the Following Situational Worries or Concerns Reported
Job	Relating to any of the following: job dissatisfaction, unemployment, a new job, or certification requirements of an existing job.
Relationship(s)	Includes poor or dissatisfactory relationships with friends and family.
Busyness	Related to general business in work, including ministry.
Finances	Concern about having enough money to make ends meet.
Future	Worry about the future, or death.
Health	Related to personal or family health concerns.
Life Transition(s)	Refers to expectations of upcoming changes, or new experiences of changes happening, such as a change in church setting, or graduation from schooling.

Table 19. God’s divine attribute, from Dataset 3

Code	Code Compiled from the Following Divine Attributes Reported
God’s Beauty	God’s light (as revealed in creation), God’s diversity (as revealed in creation), God’s glory (as revealed in creation).
God’s Care	God’s compassion, God’s love, God’s provision.
God’s Guidance	God’s clarity, God’s direction, God’s guidance.
God’s Power	Used to describe God’s power shown in various aspects of creation.
God’s Reassurance	A sense that God is Listening, God’s Reassurance, God’s Salvation (which a participant was reassured of through SNI)

Table 20. Favorable responses, from Dataset 3

Code	Code Compiled from the Following Favorable Responses Reported
Awe	Awe
Gratitude	Appreciation, Gratitude, Praise, Thanksgiving
Reverence	Reverence
Stillness	Still or Stillness
Trust	Faith, Hope, Surrender, Trust

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