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Being Transformed to Help Others Transform:
Exploring Spiritual Formation and the Life-Changing Power of *Lectio Divina*

A Research Portfolio
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Doctor of Ministry
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by

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ABSTRACT

This Research Portfolio explores the theme “Being Transformed to Help Others Transform: Exploring Spiritual Formation and The Life-Changing Power of *Lectio Divina*.” It encompasses the knowledge of God, self-awareness, and a transformative model to guide others on their path to Christlikeness. The author’s spiritual autobiography reveals God’s profound impact on his life, inspiring a ministry of reconciliation and growth in Christlikeness. The Model of Spiritual Formation postulates that nurturing mature Christians involves guiding them to embody Christ’s essence, engaging with diverse cultures, honing expertise, and multiplying their transformative influence. The Research Project rigorously tested a facet of this Model with a small group from a local community church in Scarborough, ON. The findings validate the effectiveness of *lectio divina* as an impactful tool for spiritual transformation.

Through this journey, *lectio divina* emerged as a formidable and indispensable practice in facilitating the spiritual formation of individuals, propelling them towards Christlikeness. This Research Portfolio uncovers new horizons of understanding and practical application, illuminating the path to profound spiritual growth and metamorphosis.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated with profound gratitude to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, who have lovingly saved, nurtured, and called me to serve Him and others.

I also dedicate it to my father, Roanh Dang Nguyen, who tenderly shared his fascinating life stories with me and encouraged me to continue learning.

Additionally, I dedicate this work to my wife, Huong Xuan Thi Nguyen, who has faithfully and affectionately journeyed with me on this incredible transformative adventure with Jesus. She has devotedly partnered with me in all aspects of my life and ministry.

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My gratitude extends to Mr. Pho C. Nguyen, my dedicated disciple. Every time we convened to study the Bible and discuss church ministries, his motivation spurred me on in my academic pursuits.

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GLOSSARY

Within the context of this research portfolio, the following terms are used with their respective definitions and meanings.

Spiritual Formation: Christian spiritual formation is an ongoing, transformative, Spirit- and human-led process that entails maturing in one's relationship with God, both as individuals and within the context of a community. It involves a fundamental change or the reformation of various aspects of life (Howard 2018, 14). This process emphasizes the integration of faith into all facets of life, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ (Howard 2018, 18). These facets can encompass interests, skills, shared experiences, and more. In the context of this Research Portfolio, I sought to explore "a transformation of our relationship with God," which means that participants strive to cultivate an interest in God, recognize God's interest in us, develop the skills to perceive and respond to God's invitations, and engage in a reciprocal sharing with God (Howard 2008, 231).

The Model of Spiritual Formation is defined as the ultimate goal or aim of the process of spiritual transformation in the context of this research, encompassing the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model. This exploration aimed to articulate Christ-Centeredness as its core attribute, surrounded by six other important attributes, including Cultural Relevance, Competence, and Coaching, along with the principles of Anyone, Anywhere, and Anytime.

A leader is someone who guides and influences others toward a common goal. Emphasizing the lifelong nature of leadership growth, Robert Clinton, a leadership expert, underscores the importance of a leader's character, relationships, and life experiences. Clinton defines a biblical leader, “a person with God-given capacity and God-given responsibility to influence a specific group of God’s people toward His purposes for the group” (Clinton 2012, 217).

Lectio divina is a process of slow, repetitive and meditative reading of a biblical text, allowing it to form the reader spiritually (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 19).

Lectio is the first movement of *lectio divina*, “a meditated reading, above all of the Bible, prolonged in contemplative prayer” (Pennington 1998, 157), requiring the full attention of the reader on each sentence, each phrase, each word (Mulholland 2000, 145).

Meditatio is the second movement of *lectio divina*, an act of “savouring, repeating, thinking about, or digesting the words so that they become personally meaningful and nourish us spiritually” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 19). *Meditatio* is a vital stage of *lectio divina*, enabling the reader to engage the Scripture on a personal and transformative level. This can include visualizing God speak to them through His words they are meditating on.

Oratio is the third movement of *lectio divina*, a prayerful conversation with God, “a loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace, and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants” (Dysinger 2009, 1).

Through this prayerful conversation, we might sense God invite us to obey one of His commands, claim one of His promises, nourish one of His virtues, or heed any of His warnings.

Contemplatio is the fourth movement in the practice of *lectio divina*, the silent and receptive period of rest in God's presence, allowing the heart to be rooted in the meditated Scripture and to be bonded with God.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

As a Vietnamese immigrant who arrived in Toronto, Canada four decades ago, my spiritual journey has been marked by transformation and a divine calling. From my baptism in 1984 to my enduring involvement in the Vietnamese church, and ultimately my service as an elder and pastor, my faith has profoundly shaped my life.

As I reflect on my life, I have come to realize that I have experienced both significant and minor interruptions. Some of these interruptions forced me to adapt or accept new circumstances, and at times, they were quite painful. In the midst of these unexpected disruptions, I often felt surprised and bewildered, unable to discern God's will in those moments. There were instances when I had to patiently wait for an extended period before grasping the true significance of these trials.

During these challenging times, I found solace in the words of James 1:2-4, which says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." I also reminded myself that goodness would ultimately emerge because I believed in the Lord's goodness.

After contemplating my life, I have come to the realization that I have been a man of action, rarely pausing for self-reflection. I have been busy serving myself, my family, and later, the church, always ready to assist others with their problems. It was not until I delved into the study of Spiritual Formation that I had the opportunity to truly introspect and draw closer to God. Most importantly, I had the time to comprehend the essence of my Spiritual Formation.

The memories of past difficulties and the blessings God bestowed upon me encouraged me to hold on steadfastly and wait patiently for better days. Here, I would like to share some of the significant interruptions, trials, disturbances, adversities, and troubles I have encountered.

While I was practicing my engineering skills and updating quality assurance in a manufacturing plant, I was discharged from my duties. Later on, in August 1990, two close Vietnamese friends and I decided to open a travel business to serve the growing Vietnamese community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Ontario. At that time, I had no clue about what God had planned for my life.

In 1992, a Christian friend introduced me to the owner of a private school who was interested in recruiting students from Vietnam. I began to incorporate recruiting services into my travel business for more revenue.

Then, in 1999, during one of my evening prayers, God suddenly prompted me to devote my life to Him and to build His kingdom instead of my own. I asked God what I should do with my existing business.

In 2002, during a church summer camp at a farm, God called me to serve Him as a pastor. This divine calling occurred while I stood in front of a small group of sheep grazing on a gentle hill at sunrise. At that moment, I was uncertain about hearing His call, so I prayed to God for further confirmation.

By the end of 2017, after returning from a trip to Australia, I had a feeling that the senior pastor did not want to continue working with me. Consequently, I made the decision to resign from my position as a pastor of discipleship after ten years of service.

During that time, a thought popped up in my mind: “How about pursuing a Doctor of Ministry study in Spiritual Formation?” My journey to discover how God has spiritually formed me throughout my life began. I completed my Master of Theological Studies in 2019 and embarked on the DMin program in 2020, right at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted the entire world.

Since I suspended my ministry in the church and closed down my business due to the Covid-19 lockdown, I had more free time and energy to focus on my studies. For many years prior to this change, ever since I answered God’s call, I found myself juggling multiple roles simultaneously: studying at Seminary, participating in ministries, serving as an elder, and later as a pastor, while also raising my family and managing my travel business.

In those earlier phases of my life, I could not grasp the bigger picture of God's plan for me; I simply went with the flow. The study of Spiritual Formation has been instrumental in helping me understand how God has shaped and transformed me throughout my life.

Christian spiritual formation is an ongoing, transformative journey led by the Spirit, with human participation. It involves maturing in one's relationship with God, both as an individual and within a community (Wilhoit 2008, 23). This process is not a one-time event, but a lifelong journey filled with a series of experiences, practices, and encounters that gradually mold and deepen a person's faith over time. The Christian's faith remains dynamic and adaptable, accommodating the various stages and seasons of an individual's life.

At its core, spiritual formation aims to help believers become mature in their relationship with God, becoming more Christ-like in character and cultivating a deeper intimacy with Him (Wilhoit 2008, 51). It involves the cultivation of virtues such as love, humility, compassion, and forgiveness, as well as the development of a Christ-centered worldview and outlook on life (Howard 2018, 6).

Spiritual formation encompasses both personal and communal aspects of faith (Wilhoit 2008, 23). While individual practices such as prayer, meditation, Scripture study, and contemplation are crucial, being part of a faith community, such as a church, provides opportunities for mutual encouragement, accountability, and shared spiritual growth. Indeed, the New Testament mentions the concept of "One Another" more than fifty times (e.g. Jn 13:34; Rom 12:10; 12:16; 1 Thes 5:11; etc.), underscoring the profound value of community in the spiritual development of believers.

Christian spiritual formation seeks to bridge the gap between one's faith and daily life. It refers to a fundamental change or the reformation of any area of

life (Howard 2018, 14). This process involves applying the teachings of Jesus and the gospel to all aspects of life, including relationships, interests, skills, work, decision-making, ethics, and social justice (Howard 2018, 18). This integration helps believers live out their faith authentically in the world.

Christ is the central figure in Christian spiritual formation. The goal is to become more like Christ, reflecting His character, values, and mission. The life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide the foundation and model for the spiritual formation process (Chan 1998, 15).

Since 2018, I have dedicated a significant amount of time to studying spiritual formation and engaging in introspection about my own spiritual journey. During this period, I diligently sought to make sense of the myriad of both significant and minor changes and interruptions that have occurred in my life. I earnestly implored the Holy Spirit to guide me in unveiling God's will and plan for my existence, a journey that began with my birth in Vietnam.

My life story commenced against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the remnants of French Colonialism in 1954. I grew up in a world torn by the conflict of differing ideologies and the struggle for supremacy among global superpowers throughout the 1950s to 1970s. I bore witness to the fall of South Vietnam and the subsequent unfolding of historical events. The intricate details of these experiences are chronicled in my spiritual autobiography.

The culmination of my first year in the Doctor of Ministry program revolved around a profound project: a deep introspection into my life. The objective was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how God has intricately

woven His influence into my existence, particularly in the realm of spirituality. Through the process of composing my spiritual autobiography, I aspired to fathom the underlying reasons behind the multitude of changes I have encountered throughout my life. Moreover, I aimed to grasp the grand design that God has ordained for my life journey since my inception, thereby motivating me to wholeheartedly collaborate with Him in fulfilling His intentions for my earthly pilgrimage.

Within the pages of my Spiritual Autobiography, I embarked on a reflective exploration of the transformative work that God has wrought in my life. This journey, intertwined with my ministry of reconciling unbelievers to Christ, unveiled a spiritual pathway to Christ that has not only guided me but has also equipped me to assist others on their spiritual journeys.

This project was instrumental in addressing two fundamental questions that had long puzzled me. Firstly, it helped me understand why God called me to His service after a hiatus of two decades from my initial encounter with Him, emphasizing that it was a journey of following Him for my sake, rather than expecting me to serve His people. Secondly, it shed light on God's calling for me to serve as a pastor, a vocation I had never envisaged, serving as the overarching theme of my Spiritual Autobiography.

When God called me to serve Him, initially as an elder and later as a pastor, I began to take on more responsibilities within the church administration. It was during this time that I started to notice certain issues coming to the surface. I witnessed problems within the churches, and I traced the origin of these

problems to a lack of teaching believers how to become Christ-like. The brokenness within the Body of Christ became evident to me.

When problems arose, I observed that people often lacked the courage to confront them, or if they did, they did not adhere to the principles outlined in God's word. Consequently, I had not seen yet a good example of reconciliation within the church. Conflicted individuals often ended up leaving the church in disappointment, and even if they stayed, they tended to quickly fade away after attending a few services. Witnessing these heart-wrenching circumstances in the church saddened me deeply.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be the light of the world and to manifest the love of Christ—beginning within our own hearts and radiating outward to our church community and beyond (see Matthew 5:14-16).

As mentioned earlier, I felt a deep sense of sadness when I witnessed the brokenness in the church. I wanted to know where to begin, what the most essential step was that I needed to take to contribute to the healing of the Body of Christ. It was during this quest that I came across a quote from Dallas Willard that shed light on a possible root cause of the church's challenges. Willard pointed out that, "for most of the twentieth century...the Christian churches have been distracted from the central task of teaching their people how to live the spiritual life in a way that brings them progressively to enjoy the character of Christ as their own" (Wilhoit 2008, 9). This quote inspired me, and I came to realize that a crucial task of the church is to guide believers in living a spiritual life that authentically reflects the character of Christ. This realization became the driving

force behind my desire to bring positive change to the church and to help believers grow in their spiritual journey.

As a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, I am grateful that it embraces the motto, "Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, Mission-focused." Consequently, I have dedicated myself to exploring and instilling Christ-centeredness as a transformative quality for believers.

I am thankful that I never felt compelled to completely abandon my faith when witnessing hate, anger, competition, dishonesty, manipulation, and so on in the church community. God has granted me the courage to remain within the community of believers, despite experiencing brokenness in our relationships. Together, we work diligently to reclaim our identity as children of God. We have experienced God's presence in our lives, and our mission is to share that love, joy, happiness, and hope with a broken world. Our primary focus is healing the body of Christ from its brokenness, as we recognize the need for personal transformation in order to help others in their own journeys of transformation.

Recognizing the need for a Model of Spiritual Formation, I created a detailed blueprint, utilizing technical language, to outline the characteristics we aim to instill in people. In 1995, God granted me a vision to develop young Vietnamese students who would be God-centered, love Vietnam, excel in High-Technology skills, and possess leadership abilities. Twenty years later, in 2015, after numerous trials and errors in my ministry, I revised the original model into something I called the "Four C's" and "Three A's."

During the second year, I embarked on an extensive exploration of the Model of Spiritual Formation, specifically delving into the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model. This exploration aimed to articulate its core attributes: being Christ-Centered, Culturally Relevant, Competent, and Coaching, along with the principles of Anyone, Anywhere, and Anytime. The Model demanded rigorous efforts in establishing solid biblical and theological foundations for each of its seven elements before being employed to shape missional Christians capable of impacting the world for Christ.

Additionally, I delved into four key elements of transformation: listening attentively to prepare believers' hearts, praying for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, teaching believers how to pray, and guiding them to understand their new identity in Christ. These key elements in relational ministry assist believers in their spiritual growth and transformation into Christlikeness—the ultimate goal of my Model of Spiritual Formation.

In the third year of my studies, the focal point was the Research Project, which delved into the theme of "transforming one's relationship with God." This concept explored the idea that participants could cultivate an interest in God, perceive God's interest in them, acquire the skills to recognize and respond to God's invitations, and foster a reciprocal sharing between themselves and God (Howard, 2008, 231).

Through my exploration of spiritual formation, I have come to understand that the essence of the spiritual life lies in embodying Christ-centeredness. This aspect is thoroughly examined in the third chapter of the Model of Spiritual

Formation. During the second year, I learned that *lectio divina*, a contemplative Bible reading method, holds significant importance and should be integrated into the curriculum for training Christians to become more Christ-like (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 73). Consequently, in my Research Portfolio, I chose to investigate how *lectio divina* aids Christians in experiencing a spiritual transformation towards Christ-centeredness, a central attribute of the Model of Spiritual Formation.

Therefore, a group of participants from a local community church in Scarborough was formed to engage in a nine-week study employing *lectio divina* to explore biblical verses related to their identity in Christ. The results of the study were nothing short of astonishing, as participants reported profound experiences, including a heightened intimacy with God and a deep-seated desire to live in alignment with His purpose.

As we conclude this introduction, we have glimpsed the profound impact of our exploration into intimacy with God through *lectio divina*. Now, let us turn the pages of my life's spiritual journey and venture into the second chapter of my autobiography. In the chapters that follow, I will share the intricate threads of faith, challenges, and divine encounters that have woven together to create the tapestry of my spiritual life. The journey continues, and I invite you to join me on this path of self-discovery, growth, and unwavering faith.

CHAPTER TWO:
NEVER DREAMED OF BEING A PASTOR:
A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I have attempted to write pieces of my spiritual journey in the past. For the first time, through the process of this autobiography, I was able to write a complete life story. I have always enjoyed engaging in my self-discovery. Recently, I reflected on my life as far back into my childhood as I could remember. I had several dreams: becoming a general in the army, a movie director, and an entrepreneur, among other things. I never dreamed of being a pastor, a servant of God. However, I have become one for fourteen years, serving in the Christian and Missionary Alliance. What have I done that led me to become a pastor? St. Paul says in Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” Through the writing of this autobiography, I was very eager to discover what those “all things” were in my life.

As I began writing this autobiography, I prayed to God for help looking inward and recollecting all the details of my past chronologically. I also needed the wisdom to understand my spiritual self, which transcends flesh and blood, and how God has pieced all those details together for the benefit of His kingdom, which has brought joy, happiness, and significance to my life as a pilgrim.

My Background

I was born on November 23, 1954, in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. Vietnam was divided into two parts, North and South Vietnam, at the 17th parallel, at the end of the Indochina War. The French colonists were defeated at the famous Dien Bien Phu battle on May 7, 1954. North Vietnam was supported by the Communist Bloc, influenced by the Soviet Union and China; South Vietnam was supported by the West, aided by the Americans. At that time, Vietnam enjoyed temporary peace after World War II and the war against the dominion of the French colonialists. That is why my parents named me Hoa, meaning “peace,” to commemorate the arrival of peace in my poor country.

Orphans Become Parents

My father was an orphan at eleven years old, living in a small village near Hanoi, the present capital of Vietnam. He survived during his teenage years thanks to his uncle’s support. He loved to learn, but was poor and could not afford to. After he had finished his daily chores, he went to the village teacher’s home, stood at the window, watched the class activities, and dreamed of sitting in the class. That was a dream that he could not achieve during his lifetime. Although he grew up without any education, he was a good, wise, and self-taught father who set a good example, seeking constant self-improvement and brave entrepreneurship by migrating to Saigon, South Vietnam and establishing his own business. He was also a loving and generous leader to his fellow villagers in

Saigon. With their cooperation, he built a community center for fellowship and Buddha worship in their new town.

When my mother was still little, her poor parents gave her up for adoption. She grew up in a village teacher's home. Following the common tradition of the time, she could not go to school because women were supposed to look after the household, bear and raise children, and have nothing to do with the outside world. Because her foster parents were poor, at age twelve, she had to make a living by selling vegetables (grown in the village) at the Hanoi market. She became tough to protect herself and survive among the "wolves" in a chaotic marketplace. Reflecting on how my mother grew up, I understand her and feel more compassion for her. I wish I had learned this earlier when my mother was alive and healthy. I would have changed my attitude toward my mother, treated her with personal care and deep understanding, and spoken to her more graciously. Sadly, it is too late now. My mother passed away at the age of ninety-six, three years ago.

As I reflected on these things and wrote them down, I paused to be silent and started questioning God. "What is the use of this painful exercise, O God?" God prompted me an answer, "Hoa, go and share your painful experience with people who still have their parents around."

A Child Who Lacked Maternal Care

In an old family photo that I have, there is a nursemaid holding me in her arms on one side, while my mother is sitting at the centre. Why did my nurse carry me in her arms instead of my mother?

Pondering over this photo from when I was a few months old, I remember that people laughed at me when they knew that I was breastfed by the woman in the photo but not by my mother. I never thought of asking my mother for an answer. I do not have a clue about it now. I forgot about that fact in my early life. However, when I reflect on these early years, I wonder how I can recall my distant past, buried under many layers of time, memories, and events. How can I recover memories of those formative years? In *Arc of the Arrow*, Carolly Erickson states:

In many ways, the richest and most influential time in any person's life is the time most difficult to remember: early childhood, the years from birth to about age seven. The imprint of these early years is indelible; a person's worldview, their understanding and expectations of others and of the divine are shaped by what they learn and observe during these years, and though their opinions may change later, their early grounding will always remain as a strong reinforcement or counterweight to their adult views (Erickson 1998, 74–75).

I remember little except standing inside my house and watching my nurse leave me forever when I was four. I felt so sad because I lost my “mother,” who had cared for me early on. Now I understand that those formative years are so crucial for a child. As Erickson describes, “The imprint of these early years is indelible” (Erickson 1998, 75). I understand that my parents had to work hard during that time since they had just moved their family and business to downtown Saigon.

Probably because of her own lack of nurturing growing up, my mother did not have milk to feed me or time to embrace me to show her love and tender care. Hence, I do not remember any cherished moments between us. I feel unfortunate.

I do have another brief memory from that season of my life. My mother was taking a nap on her wooden bed while I sat at the dinner table and read a French lesson about a tender mother, her love, and her care for her child. I felt a warm and loving feeling inundating my whole body. I fell in love with the mother in the story and aspired to have an intimate mother who embraced, caressed, and spoke to me with a sweet voice. Then I lifted my eyes to look at my mother, taking a nap on her bed a few feet away. I imagined the moment I would run to her, fall into her arms, and enjoy the intimacy between mother and child. Suddenly, when my mother rolled over, her heavy key chain fell hard on the wooden bed and woke her. When she saw me sitting quietly at the dinner table, she asked, "What are you doing there?" My mother believed that you could not sit without doing anything. Her voice brought me back to the reality of my life. I felt pained in my heart because the image of the tender mother I had dreamed of disappeared in a split second.

This experience demonstrates why I do not have a unique, warm relationship with my mother. When she was alive, I would do things for my mother out of responsibility, but not out of intimate love for her. Now I understand the truth expressed by Erickson, "their early grounding will always remain as strong reinforcement or counterweight to their adult views" (Erickson 1998, 75). That also explains why I failed many times to change how I treated my

mother. What happened between my mother and me in those early years developed its roots in my soul and acted as a counterweight against my effort to behave well toward her.

Years later, when I met my spiritual director, I told him about this experience with my mother. He told me the word “independent” popped up in his mind. “What does that mean?” I asked myself. “Why ‘independent’? Independent from what?” I would need to be patient to continue my journey of self-discovery until the end. Only then, hopefully, would I be able to fathom the will of God in my life.

Life Lessons from My Father

I feel I am closer to my father than to my mother. I know my parents truly loved and cared for my well-being. However, my father spent more time sharing his life experience with me.

My father was a person who loved and cared for needy people. Being an orphan at eleven, he came to live with his poor uncle's family in a small village near Hanoi. A few years later, he moved to Saigon and worked hard to build his new life. He managed to establish a good custom-tailor business in downtown Saigon. With a compassionate heart, he coordinated many charitable events through his non-profit association, raising funds to help the needy and less fortunate during the Vietnam War. He never looked down on them because he knew that he once had been like them not too long ago.

My father was a person with vision. His story about his early life living in the village with only two sets of clothes a year is precious to me. During the New Year festival in the village, because he came from a low-income family, he had a duty to serve food to people sitting at reserved tables, including some of his everyday friends and children of affluent families. He could not tolerate that shameful moment. Later on, he decided to find a way to change his life. As a child, he would visualize his future and draw on the mud floor the name of his future business; he planned for his future life somewhere out there, but not in his village, where he found no hope. Many questions about where to go and what to do to start a new life rushed back and forth through his mind day and night. Many years later, when he was about forty, he opened his business and named it with the exact name he had visualized long ago. The lesson I learned from my father's life is to dare to dream and pursue it with persistence.

My father was like a shepherd who loved caring for his sheep. During the first three days of the Lunar New Year in Vietnam, relatives visited each other, paid respect to their ancestors at their altar with burning incense, and wished one another good luck, health, and prosperity. My father, a chairperson of the association of his former villagers, drove me on his Vespa (Italian-made scooter) all around the city to visit his association members and wish them good luck in the new year. He wanted me to know and appreciate who they were. At that time, I felt bored when I had to go with him and learn to make acquaintances with adults. I had to sit and listen to their conversations, which did not interest me. I only valued those moments when I grew up.

By the grace of God, my father, with no formal education, grew up to be a person of integrity, and a true leader who loved and cared for people. I thank God for my father, who set a wonderful example for me and passed away as a Christian at age 89.

The Only Child Sent to a Catholic School

My parents struggled hard to survive and have a stable and prosperous life in the city. My parents managed to send all five of their children to school, but they could afford to send only me (their youngest boy) to a well-known Catholic school, LaSalle Taberd, from Kindergarten to Junior High in a French program. They thought the school had an excellent educational program and maintained good discipline and order. Many wealthy families also sent their children to this school. My parents took considerable risks in investing in my education. Even though the American influence was growing more prominent in our country at that time, the French influence was still lingering.

My parents dreamed of giving their children a better chance to advance in society. They relied upon the school to educate me because they did not have experience in education. However, I did not study hard because of the many temptations in the big city. I loved playing after school and driving around the city block on a bicycle after dinner. I loved to watch movies at the two nearby theatres. There was much fun for the kids living in downtown Saigon. I sneaked into the house close to bedtime, quickly brushed my teeth, washed myself, and went to bed to avoid facing my father. I did not set aside time to do my homework

and prepare for class the next day. Sometimes, during recess, I had to review my history or geography lessons, preparing for the oral test in the next class while other students were playing.

Since we worked, ate, rested, and slept in the wide-open house, I had difficulty organizing and disciplining myself. I just dragged on with my life until grade 9. I did not have summer vacation that year because I had failed during the school year; I had to catch up with my study during summertime and pass a test before the new school year started. Even though I had free time during the summer, I could not go anywhere outside of Saigon because of the war. It was perilous to venture out of the city into the countryside because the Vietcong (the Vietnamese communists) often tried to ambush civilians or officials, planting explosives on the side of the road and shooting at them. They induced fear and insecurity among the general populace, destabilizing South Vietnam's government.

I was like the prodigal son during this period, wasting my parents' time and resources. I wondered if it was a total waste for me or if it would have a deeper meaning that I had not yet discovered.

My First Prayer

Spiritually speaking, I learned a few things about the Bible and God in the Catholic school. Students ritually prayed the prayers ("Our Father" and "Hail Mary") before and at the end of each class. However, the first time that I asked God for help was during recess. Before running a race with my friends, I rushed

to the school chapel, knelt on the kneeler, and prayed to God for the power to run and win the race. I do not remember if I had ever prayed any other time to ask God for something. I trust that God values the very first prayer of a child who acknowledges God's presence, God's concern in his life and God's power in granting his simple request (I do not remember if I won the race or not). God does not care about how big the issue is. If one trusts in Him and comes to ask Him for help, He will answer the prayer (see Mat 7:7-8). That became my attitude, my early grounding in God that would always remain. In my present ministry, I usually pray with that kind of faith for people who come to me with issues concerning their health, finances, or business.

Entering University or Joining the Army

Even though my parents sent me for tutoring, I did not focus on studying until I reached grade 9. At that time, the war between the South and the North became fiercer daily. Young people who failed to enter university at age 18 had to join the army. Their future became grim; many would suffer amputation or death quickly. I thanked God for waking me up: I had to be diligent in my studies if I did not wish to die on the battlefield. I began to work hard at school. While studying grade 9 in the French program, I studied grade 10 at another high school in the Vietnamese program. I began to make my studies my highest priority. I severed my relationship with the Catholic school the following year.

When I graduated high school, my parents planned to send me to Canada to study at the University of Montreal. However, the government asked for a bribe

of ten thousand US dollars, because my two older brothers went abroad and did not return. In 1972, when I passed the exam to enter the Polytechnic University of Phu Tho (in Saigon, Vietnam) to study industrial engineering, my parents persuaded me to study at home instead.

Disappointed, I cruised along in my study. I made some new friends. My close friend and I usually went to watch a new movie or to the public swimming pool so I could teach him how to swim. Again, I did not pay much attention to studying in the first semester and only worked hard to catch up in the next. This kind of attitude did not help me to excel in the field of industrial engineering.

During that time, I became interested in the opposite sex and started dating. However, I did not have any intimate relationship. By late 1974, a young woman caught my attention while I was having lunch at a small restaurant near the university. I started to develop a serious relationship with her. One day closer to the end of April 1975, I brought her home to introduce her to my family. I found that the atmosphere was tense. My sister asked my girlfriend and me if we wanted to go to the United States. I did not know all the details about how to do so. I turned to my girlfriend and checked with her if she wanted to go or not. She was shocked at the proposal. Indeed, she could not have decided because she had not asked her parents for permission yet. A few hours later, my sister, my sister-in-law, and her three children went to the Tan Son Nhat Airport, waiting for the American planes to evacuate them and many others who had cooperated with the US government in Vietnam. This period marked the end of the Vietnam War.

I could not imagine that only four months later, I would marry my girlfriend on September 16, 1975, when the Vietnamese living in South Vietnam were worrying about what would happen to them under the rule of the new Communist government.

God Showed Up in My Life

God comforted my miserable family when we were still living in Vietnam so that He could use me in the future ministry of healing and reconciliation. In his book *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, Evan B. Howard observes,

First, Christian transformation is a work of God... we can expect the divine loving Presence to be actively involved in the changes that occur as a community or individual grows into a relationship with God. We can expect God's personal self-communication toward us as persons and communities, a communication of knowledge, of feeling, of will. This self-communication comes as expression and as invitation, an invitation of grace, gospel, and Spirit. And it affects or transforms us just as communication between one person affects change in another (Howard 2008, 233–35).

Indeed, my story relates my experience with the marvelousness of God's grace that has followed me up to the present time and transformed me into a person He could utilize in His kingdom.

On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnam government lost the war to the North Vietnamese communists. In 1979, the new regime confiscated the properties of private enterprises in the South, including my parents' business. They interrogated my father and used techniques to induce his fear and fatigue. Finally, my father succumbed to their pressure, lost control, and fell into

depression. They also threatened to expel us from our home so we would have to move to the countryside, and they could take it over.

At that time, I was married with one child at age 25, lived at home with my parents, and was unemployed in a city ruled by an authoritarian government. When I saw my parents becoming powerless in that situation, I had to assume the leadership of my parents' household. I did not know what to do, what to plan and how to make the right decision since I was not ready yet for this dramatic time.

God allowed that challenging situation in my life to call me to Himself. Howard comments well, "Thus the trials of ordinary life contribute to our formation, whether it is a spiritual formation or not...a variety of difficulties in life: obstacles (like a Red sea), chastisements, tests, persecutions, 'thorns in the flesh,' temptations, and so on" (Howard 2008, 287). Our family lost the business and assets we relied upon for security for many years. Howard further comments, "[Difficulties] empty us of our self-sufficiency so that we are predisposed to receive from God" (Howard 2008, 287). Before I fully connected with God, I had been wandering in a "desert" searching for spiritual direction. Sometimes, I walked around the central market near my home, looking at the sky or the sidewalk. I was searching for an answer to my desperate situation. This was the beginning of my more intentional spiritual search.

I began my search for truth and salvation in Buddhism because my parents were devoted Buddhists and had built a pagoda right in Saigon for their fellow people to gather for worship and fellowship every month. Moreover, my mother had been a long-time medium since she was 12 years old. Therefore, I bought and

devoured Buddhist books and tried hard to practice their teachings. In addition, I visited fortune-tellers, palm readers, and tarot card readers for advice, and practiced transcendental meditation for a while. Still, I could not find peace, joy and hope for my future.

In his book *Weeds Among the Wheat*, Thomas Green wrote, “God is involved in human history” (Green 1984, 33). God did not leave me in a state of depression and hopelessness for long. He was involved in my life and had a plan to save me from the disastrous situation. At that time, I had a hobby of taking pictures. One day I brought a roll of film to a shop nearby for processing. A friendly owner saw me and soon recognized my depression. He quickly opened his drawer and pulled out a book with a black cover. He offered me a Bible (my first Bible) and told me to read it at home.

At home, I read it with passion. Amazingly, God caught my attention with His promises in Matthew 7:7, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you,” as well as Mark 11:24-25, “Therefore I tell you whatever you ask in prayer believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” Then, I wrote my goal, “Go to Canada,” on a note and stuck it on the wall before my desk so that we could rejoin my brothers, sisters, and their families living in Toronto.

I began to pray for that goal every day. When I read the Scripture, I felt like I had come home and met my Father in heaven. I had left Him for ten years

when I switched from a Catholic school to a secular one. When I prayed to God, I did not doubt His promise – “Ask and it will be given to you” – His presence, and His power. I believed he would one day bring my family to Canada as His promise was written in Mark 11:24. God gave me hope to endure hardship.

Before He answered my prayer, God taught me a lesson about loving and forgiving my enemy. Indeed, the Father’s word in Mark 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses,” challenged me. How could I forgive my enemy, the communist government, who had just destroyed my household and my welfare?

Later, I also received a letter from my oldest brother living in Toronto, who had not written to us for a long time. At the end of his letter, he urged me to forgive my enemy if I wanted to go to Canada. This bothered me for a while because I did not fathom the logic or the relationship between forgiving my enemy and receiving an answered prayer. I did not see anything wrong with me, but only the wicked actions of the regime, causing incredible resentment in my soul.

However, I decided to forgive them because God had commanded me to do so through His words and my brother’s letter. Indeed, as Henri Nouwen observes in his book *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*, “God speaks to us through the people who speak to us about the things of God” (Nouwen 2015, 65). This was my first lesson from God – “love your enemies” (Mat 5:44), and forgive their wrongdoings. It was a very challenging command for a brand-new

child of God. I did it because I had been “infected with divine love” – using Rob Reimer’s language (Reimer 2016, 125). That divine love and grace gave me the power to love and forgive my enemy. Indeed, Reimer rightly comments, “It is the mark of the Father on our lives” (Reimer 2016, 125). I thank God for graciously leaving a significant and impactful mark in my life, which continues to motivate my service to the Lord.

Indeed, God fulfilled His promise on my life when my family of four landed at Toronto Pearson Airport on May 29, 1981. This was the first time I experienced the meaning of, “Experiencing what God does with our obedience” (*Life et al.* 2005, 993). God had begun transforming me into a new person (see 2 Cor 5:17), which involves both God’s and humans’ work (Howard 2008, 233–35). I obeyed God’s command to forgive the regime for their wrongdoings against my family, and God facilitated our immigration to Canada.

In the next period of my life, from 1981 to 1999, God gradually transformed me more into His likeness by drawing me closer to Him and His body – His Church. Indeed, God continually equipped me with various skills (in reconciling, healing, and making disciples) to eventually help others transform while I was building my new life in a foreign land, Canada.

God was Faithful While I Was Not

From June 1981 to late 1984, I did not spend much time seeking Him earnestly, even though I always had a strong faith in God, our loving, caring, powerful, faithful, available Father in Heaven. Since we were new immigrants,

the need to survive in a new land was critical. I had to work hard very soon because I had only 20 dollars in my pocket when my family arrived in Toronto.

Occasionally, I came to God for help with my daily needs and got answered prayers. I had asked God to help me with my English so I could enter the University of Toronto for my graduate studies, earn some money to support my family while studying, and for a cheap rental home in a nice neighbourhood. Even though God was so gracious, I did not seek to understand more about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, His salvation, my sinfulness, or eternal life. I just devoted my effort to taking care of the here and now.

I did not consider that going to church on Sunday was important. Instead, I brought my family to see my friends. We went to parks or shopping malls together to play, eat, and chat. I attended church sporadically and sometimes came in at the end of the service. Occasionally I heard a sermon on Matthew 6:33, “Seek first the kingdom of God.” It had not caught my attention yet. My soul was like a soil full of thorns, as described in Luke 8:7, “And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.” The words of God were “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14).

I was lingering in “Stage 1,” as described by Hagberg and Guelich in their book *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, “... people enter into a relationship with God in one or two very different ways. Some come through a sense of awe, others out of a sense of need” (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 34). Indeed, when I was still in Vietnam, I came to God to resolve some of my

discomforts when our family was stripped of the means of making a living. When God amazingly helped us to move to Canada, I experienced an awesome God. By God's grace, He certainly did not leave me in Stage 1 for too long. One day my wife and I decided to join a church so that we could have a spiritual home to raise our two young children.

Loosely Connecting with His Community

When we first came to Toronto, my brother Peter introduced my family to Toronto Vietnamese Alliance Church the following Sunday. As mentioned earlier, we attended church sporadically. However, one day, we asked to become members of the church; we attended membership classes and participated in baptism by the end of December 1984. We moved to Stage 2, "The Life of Discipleship" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 67).

However, our motive for joining the church was to have a place to raise my family to learn about moral values in God, which are simple, straightforward, and easy for us to teach and guide our children. We also sought a caring and sharing community – a home where we felt loved, accepted, and that we belonged (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 55). We did not know that the church is a community of saints, "a community where Christ is present through the worship and breaking bread (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32)" (Chan 1998, 110).

Even though in the membership class I had learned about Christ, His incarnation, His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection, Christ was not central yet in my heart. In his book *Christ in the Tabernacle*, A. B. Simpson, the founder

of my Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, wrote, “Christ had been already provided, but man must feel the need of divine salvation by the experience of sin” (Simpson 1987, 12). Since I did not fathom how grave my depravity was and what penalty I would reap, I did not value the divine salvation of Christ, the Son of God. Because Christ was not my Lord, my life was, according to A. W. Tozer, “a nominal Christian life” and not “a life radiant with the light of His face” (Tozer 1993, 61).

I was also ignorant that, “Becoming a better Christian is not a matter of individual personal development. It is growing in the body with the other members. The ‘me and my God’ mentality is contrary to the essence of the Christian life” (Chan 1998, 110). Indeed, I came to the church for my benefit, not for the sake of others, at this point. Hence, even though I became a Christian and belonged to a church, I did not worship God faithfully every Sunday. I was not rooted yet in the love of Christ, and I could not experience how vast the love of Christ is when I was not well connected with the community of saints, His church, and His body (Eph 3:17).

The command of Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:37-39, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” was still foreign to my ears during this moment. Reflecting on where I was on the *Critical Journey*, I was halfway in Stage 2: I had strong and secure faith in God but had not yet learned about God (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 67).

Attending the University of Toronto

While working hard as a machine operator in an automotive manufacturing plant, I set a goal of attending the University of Toronto to obtain a master's degree in mechanical engineering. However, I did not know how and when to realize that dream. Because of the economy's downturn, I was laid off two times, and I helped my wife sell some favorite Vietnamese foods she made at home. One day, I delivered food to an old classmate from Vietnam who had also immigrated to Canada, and he convinced me to study at the University of Toronto with him.

I decided to join him in studying for my master's degree. However, I had to face two pressing challenges: first, I had to find a new place to live when I was unemployed with two little children; and second, I needed to find a way to make a living to raise my family. Immediately, I prayed to God for help. I wrote down my wish to move to a new place in a good neighbourhood on a specific date (July 15, 1983) before the beginning of the school year. Astonishingly, God made it happen exactly as I had wished. My family moved in on that date to the second floor of a duplex provided by Metro Housing in a nice middle-class area, excellent for my children's schooling. Furthermore, I earned some money as a teaching assistant.

I know that God loves me and is willing to answer my prayer. My wife says that I have the faith of a child (see Mat 18:3). God is a good, gracious, and powerful Father to me. Whenever I need anything, I run to Him and ask Him for help. God is my provider who gave me opportunities to earn money, gain my

education, buy a home, and open a business. He drew me closer to Him by His love and grace.

God Called Me to Commit to His Body

God walked closely with me to form me into a person He could use to help others transform in the future. The following story affirms one more time the truth of Nouwen's observation, "God speaks to us through the people who speak to us about the things of God" (Nouwen 2015, 65). One day, God used my oldest daughter to challenge me with a simple question, "Who are we, Dad?" I answered her quickly, "We are certainly Christians." She asked me next, "Why do we not attend church on Sundays?" At that time, I did not attend church regularly. That was a wake-up call for me. God used my daughter to remind me of my spiritual identity. I belonged to Christ and had not done the right thing – to worship and represent Him. Darrell L. Bock comments rightly, "My spiritual identity is that I now belong to and represent Him [Christ]" (Pettit 2008, 112). Commitment to Christ also required me to commit to the body of Christ, appreciate my relationship with His children and community, and faithfully represent Christ in the world.

The following Sunday, we committed to attend church regularly. Soon, we had to inform our close friends, whom we used to spend every Sunday with, about our decision. However, we hesitated to tell them about it because we feared hurting their feelings. When they finally knew about it, they were so upset and felt like they were losing us because they used to go with us to parks or beaches for

picnics, shopping malls, birthday parties, and so on. We had been undoubtedly busy on Sundays with those activities. It took our friends a while to get used to our new “normal.” Eventually, they decided to check with us before organizing any event. I agree with Bill Miller when he formulates, “Love must be a commitment in every season of life” (Pettit 2008, 169). We have kept that close relationship with our friends for the last thirty-eight years. We are also happy that our children and theirs have kept this spirit alive.

God Kept Me from Conforming to the World

I had just graduated from the University of Toronto when I committed to attending church regularly. I worked as a mechanical engineer in a manufacturing plant with an average salary when I was thirty-one. At that time, money was a significant issue for my family. After the day job, I had a part-time job maintaining gaming machines installed at different Vietnamese coffee shops in the West End of Toronto. My job was to keep those machines and collect money from them.

One day, the business owner replaced those machines with gambling machines that produced a much higher return for his investment. My income suddenly increased by the rate of 300 percent. Even though I did not spend much time with God and His Word, I knew I should not do certain things unpleasing to God. After two weeks, my conscience told me it was not a good job for me to continue. I was thinking about young Vietnamese immigrants, married or single, who came to those coffee shops to gamble and put their whole paychecks at risk.

In just a few minutes, they might have lost their food money for their families. I felt a sense of shame and guilt flooding my soul; I decided to quit that part-time job.

When I came home and told my wife about my decision, she felt sad because we had lost a good source for earning extra income. I explained why I quit and assured her that God, our provider, would give us another decent job with a better income. Thanks to God's grace and faithfulness, we got better jobs and incomes shortly after. God allowed me to experience the truth of Romans 12:2 (ESV), "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Reflecting on this event, even though the Holy Spirit dwelled in me, I did not know Him yet. I just believed in God and prayed to God for help, protection, and providence. I did not know how I could have that strong faith to say no to the temptation of easy money while my family was in need. A. B. Simpson answers, "Oh, let faith turn on the dynamo of heaven and the power of the Holy Spirit! This is the secret of victory over temptation and sin and all our spiritual enemies" (Simpson 1994, 88). Only when I was called to devote my life to God, I began to understand the truth that the Holy Spirit resides in whoever believes and receives Christ in one's life (see Acts 2:38). Indeed, the Holy Spirit gave me the confidence to say no to the temptation of immoral riches (1 Pt 1:1-2). Again, Simpson states, "The Holy Spirit defends us from the power of evil. A heart on

fire with God throws off a thousand temptations” (Simpson 1994, 322). I thank God for His grace in my life.

As I was about to see, God did not call me to Himself only to change my inner self but also to prepare me to serve Him in the future by allowing me to experience reconciliation in the workplace and church.

Trained to Reconcile in the Workplace

From 1986 to 1990, I worked as a Quality Assurance Manager in a manufacturing plant. One day, when my boss was walking around to check how things were going in the plant, he found a big pile of finished products lying on the shop floor that the customers had rejected. Rushing back to the front office with an aggressive and angry attitude, he approached me and yelled loudly, “Paul, you are a too nice guy!” Belonging to “the school of hard knocks,” he expected me to get very upset and chastise workers using harsh language to change the workers’ attitude toward producing quality products.

How did I respond to my boss at that moment? The image of Christ on the cross, mocked and persecuted by the Roman soldiers, suddenly appeared in my mind. Christ seemed to speak to me, “Forgive him because he does not know what he is doing” (see Lk 23:34). Instantly, I felt peaceful and showed no sign of trouble in my heart.

I kept quiet until every worker left the shop at the end of the day. When I saw my boss sitting at his desk, I knocked on the door of his office before I came in. Once I was in, I closed the door after me. With a calm voice, I explained how I

treated people; I respected and valued others and sought teamwork in resolving problems. After the conversation, we kept on working as usual the next day. Through this event, I learned how to face an insult and bring reconciliation to a workplace environment for the glory of God.

Twenty years after I had left the company, I had an opportunity to visit that company again. I reconnected with Mr. T.L., now the new president. I had interviewed, hired and trained him 22 years earlier. Mr. T.L. showed me around the company and explained that he treated his employees in a friendly, respectful way, as I had shown him when he was my apprentice.

This is one of many reasons for me to praise God and live for God faithfully. This story of forgiveness has a different nuance than when I had worked to forgive the Vietcong: this one involved forgiveness, reconciliation, and the creation of a new working environment, and the other in Vietnam involved one-sided forgiveness and no reconciliation yet. Reflecting on my life, I wonder if God would have predestined me for a ministry of reconciliation: I was born in 1954 when Vietnam enjoyed an ephemeral peace after a long battle with the French colonists; my parents named me Hoa (meaning peace); and God allowed me to experience forgiveness and reconciliation in my diverse life situations.

Global Travel Agency: More than a Place to Make a Living

I left the manufacturing plant at the beginning of 1990. A few months later, my two friends and I decided to open our own “Global Travel Agency” business in Toronto to do business with a more open Vietnam. This business has

lasted more than thirty years. Initially, I did not understand the will of God in this travel agency. Looking back, I see how God has formed me through many challenging situations in that milieu.

I have gained better knowledge about the Vietnamese living in Toronto and surrounding areas: their life, problems, dreams, and pasts full of drama. I have learned how to connect with them to help some of them deal with their life problems. I have developed a strong relationship with the Vietnamese community in Ontario. We donated scholarships to gifted Vietnamese students at the annual Lunar New Year festival organized by the Vietnamese communities.

Most importantly, God used this work to make me a new person with a godly character. Through time and trouble, I have changed how I treat my employees. I have become gentler in handling their mistakes, used better language to speak to them about their issues and become more patient when encountering a problem. I have asked friendly questions and sought understanding before devising a solution. A few of my employees have endured my weaknesses and have still worked with me. I have become more honest in my business dealings. When I was ordained in 2012, I invited my employees to attend the ceremony in the church and to witness to others the change in me.

Global Travel Agency was a business where I witnessed Christ to clients and representatives of different insurance and airline companies. I thank God for allowing me to share Christ with the world.

God's Word has the Power of Reconciliation in His Church

God was wonderful in training me and miraculously forming me. First, he wanted me to experience forgiveness for my sake – to relieve a burden in my heart (see Mk 11:25). Next, he led me to experience forgiveness and reconciliation between my employer and myself (see Lk 23:34). Next, God allowed me to experience how God's words helped to reconcile opposing parties within the body of Christ.

The incident happened in a church where I was an elder. There was an ongoing conflict between the senior pastor and the worship leader for many years. One took things easy and was flexible in time and planning; the other was organized, structured, and disciplined at home and church. The worship leader expected whoever served on her team to follow her example. Therefore, the conflicts between the senior pastor and the worship leader happened often.

This created stress in the church; consequently, the board of elders and deacons called a meeting to decide whether to dismiss the senior pastor. After a lengthy discussion, they decided to vote on the issue. The result was five against four approving his dismissal, which I did not support.

That day, I came home very disturbed and did not feel like eating dinner. I sat quietly in my office for a while. The Holy Spirit prompted me to look at the book *The Businessman's Bible*, which contains a unique feature called "Priority Profiles for Today's Workplace" by Charles F. Stanley (1989). I found the section on Wisdom interesting (Stanley 1989, 104–5). Indeed, I urgently needed wisdom

in making the right decision. Stanley uses James 3:17 to explain what characterizes God's wisdom. That verse opened my mind and convinced me that the decision was wrong.

Immediately, I called the elder who influenced the opposing side and asked him to read the above verse. Throughout the years, we remained friends even though sometimes we disagreed with one another on church issues ("we agree to disagree agreeably"). After pondering over it, he called the board members to reconvene the following Sunday to annul the decision. Hence, the senior pastor continued to serve the church for another three years, although the issue between him and the worship leader remained unresolved.

The church continued to operate without "a clear vision of what church is like that is 'one as we are one' (John 17:22) (Howard 2018, 163). Certainly, it could not "exercise a strong determination to see our congregation move forward in this area," (Howard 2018, 163) because it did not have strong and reliable leadership at the helm to keep the church in unity, peace and harmony.

Since I first encountered God in 1979, I have lived my life with God based on Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." I treated God as my life provider (I came to God when I needed help), who provided me opportunities to earn money, gain my education, buy a home, and open a business. He has showered abundant love and grace upon my life. Was this all that there was in life?

God Sanctified Me

In 1999, God changed my life during one of my evening prayers. He spoke to me with His word in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Eventually, I decided to put God and the things of God first on my list of priorities. Second, anything related to my family’s well-being. Last, my business (downgraded from the first place). I have valued and spent more time reading and studying the Scripture, aspired for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and learned more about how the church is organized and operated; I have explored what spiritual leadership is all about. I have tried to discover how to love, bless, heal, and encourage others. During that time, I found the following books have influenced my life: *Fresh Fire, Fresh Wind* by Jim Cymbala (1997), *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren (1995), and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey (1989).

Since then, I have rewritten my life mission. The goal of having a big home and owning many businesses has been replaced by living the Great Commandment (Mat 22:37-39) and the Great Commission (Mat 28:19-20). This new life mission has become the “one thing” (using St. Paul’s language in Phil 3:13) I have been doing.

My wife and I have chosen to live a life of bare necessity and simple abundance. We cut out the habit of walking around shopping malls on weekends, sitting in front of the television, or checking advertisements on different media outlets. Only the essential things are in our daily schedule. We take the courage to say “no” to many time-wasting issues. We have saved time and money for

building God's Kingdom. God has given us a ministry of seeking out God's lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7) and making the truth of God's word accessible to them for their salvation (Jn 8:32). Truly, Jesus has gradually become the Chief Executive Officer of my life; I am His servant.

In my travel business, I hired new employees and trained them to take over many of my responsibilities. I changed my attitude from controlling to trusting them. The general atmosphere in the office became more peaceful and more productive. I informed them of my new goal in life. I have continued to work with them in the business. They have given me full support in my endeavours for God. Therefore, I have more time to serve the Lord. I always thank God for reordering my life and helping me fit my secular work into my rule of life (Chan 1998, 190).

With God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, I reorganized and simplified my life into four primary tasks: spending my quality time with God, raising my family, serving the community, and running my business.

A Taste of Church Renewal

At my church, the conflict between the senior pastor and the worship leader erupted again. I tried to mediate between the two but failed. The worship leader left the church with her relatives, who had zealously served the church. That triggered the departure of another influential group of members. At the end of that year, the senior pastor also resigned from his position. What a somber atmosphere in the church!

I was ushered in as the chairperson of the board of Elders. Because I had had a chance to learn about the church's purpose, organization, and operation the previous year, I led a new, young, dynamic team of leaders sailing through the tough times. Our board of Elders decided to spend the first six months studying the Scripture, praying to God for one another and for the church. We spent more time bonding at a coffee table after prayer time in the church. We understood each other and cared for one another as our priority. We postponed any critical business discussion about the church until the general atmosphere of the meeting was uplifting.

Indeed, six months later, we felt safe to discuss the church's vision, mission, roles, goals and different ministries with our congregants. Our elders and deacons returned to study the foundations of our faith. We learned the meaning and the importance of membership in the church, how to practice some basic spiritual disciplines (studying the Scripture, praying, participating in small groups, worshiping, and giving), how to discover our spiritual gifts for serving, how to write our testimonies, and how to share our faith with others.

Indeed, everybody felt happy, joyful, and more energetic; we wanted to serve and bring new friends to the church. At the year end, we baptized fifteen new members. I thanked God for transforming me into a person of patience and attentiveness to God and others, and allowing me to participate in helping others transform and renewing the broken body of Christ.

Called to Serve

After I had committed my life to God, He called me to serve Him vocationally during a summer camp in 2002. The board of Elders organized the church camp at the Riverview Bible Camp and invited a guest speaker named Rev. Cam Le. The church just recovered from the departure of the senior pastor. This was the first time that the camp did not have a senior pastor at the helm. However, this year's camp would celebrate the church's recovery and the beginning of the healthy growth of the church for the next four consecutive years.

During this summer camp, God called me to become a pastor. I came to the campsite on Friday and slept in a cabin shared with my relative Roger. He woke me urgently early in the morning and told me everybody had awakened. When I rose and opened the cabin door, I discovered everybody was still sleeping. Everything was quiet. I thought, "Why did this guy wake me up?" Since I could not go back to sleep, I dressed up, picked up a Bible, and walked toward a little hill where the sheep were grazing in front of the barn.

The sun was rising slowly and radiating its beautiful light. I opened up the Bible randomly and stopped at 1 Peter 5:2, "Feed the flock of God; care for it willingly, not grudgingly; not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve the Lord" (TLB). Was God telling me to care for His sheep when my church lacked a spiritual leader since the former senior pastor's departure? The thought, "Take care of my sheep," repeated several times in my mind. I questioned God, "Who am I to care for your sheep?" I was just an elder without seminary training. I conversed with God and cried for a while. Then, I asked God

for another sign to confirm His calling upon my life. I did not tell anybody about this incident.

The following Monday, I returned to work and called the guest speaker to say goodbye and wish him “bon voyage.” At the end of my conversation with him, Rev. Le suddenly told me, “Paul, dare to take the next step.” I dropped the phone and pondered what I had just heard from Rev. Le. Did God answer my prayer? Because I was a doubter, I asked God for more signs of my calling.

During dinner time, a former missionary in Taiwan, Rev. Thu Nguyen, who was my friend, along with his wife, had a farewell dinner with us before returning to Taiwan after a year of home assignments. Amazingly, he earnestly urged me to go to seminary because he believed that I had a heart for serving God. Little did he know that I was studying my first course at the Canadian Theological Seminary - East, and I intended to quit as I could not catch up with the class. Nevertheless, God used my friend, Rev. Thu Nguyen, to encourage me. Incredibly, he did not know my heart's desire at that time, but it was clear that God knew.

The last message I received from God was from Dr. Miriam Charter, the seminary director. We invited her to have breakfast at our home. She asked me what ministry I was planning on. She laid out the courses I needed to take. Before she left, she announced that the seminary had a scholarship reserved for a Vietnamese student. I was the only one during that time. Therefore, she decided to give that scholarship to me. God used Dr. Charter to affirm His calling on my life. Indeed, I had decided to commit myself to study with all my effort even though I

had to handle many roles simultaneously – a business owner, the head of my household, a chairperson of the board of the Elders, and now a student.

I thank the Holy Spirit for putting the fire within me and sustaining it for the last twenty years. I have overcome many hurdles in my life. I have never regretted responding to God's calling.

What Ministry, Lord?

God answered this question in a fantastic way that caught me by surprise. He allowed me to be involved in and witness the encounter between God and the idol spirit (god) that controlled my mother for many years. As outlined earlier, my mother grew up in a foster home in Hanoi, Vietnam and had to work hard to earn a living at twelve. More importantly, she committed to the rituals and cultural practice of “Len Dong” (acting as a medium for different spirits), a prevalent practice in northern Vietnam, promoted and elevated by the government to be a cultural heritage of the country. She was faithful and devoted to her idols (gods) for over seventy years. The practitioners of “Len Dong” can welcome different spirits of deceased people or the past famous kings and queens of Vietnam. People seek those practitioners for advice on their future, marriage, business, etc. The practitioners have made sacred vows to be loyal to their gods until death. If they betray or do not worship their gods, they might suffer illness, lousy business luck, and even death. This practice is definitely against God's commandment in Deuteronomy 18:10-11, “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells

fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead.”

When my mother immigrated to Toronto in 1982, she worshiped her idols a few times a year until the late 1990s. After a falling out with the temple owner in Toronto, she returned to Vietnam every year to practice her “Len Dong.” She believed I had betrayed her because I did not follow her religion. She felt there was a spiritual gap between the two of us.

A Mystical Evening in 2002

My small group would meet at my sister’s home for Bible study. My mother also participated in that meeting but not with the same spirit. She condemned me in front of the group for “killing her” since my sister and I did not allow her to travel to Vietnam to worship her idols. If she betrayed them by not worshipping them, she believed she would be killed, as she vowed to be loyal to them until the end of her life. Since she was over 80 years old and weak, we believed she could not endure the strenuous dancing ritual of “Len Dong” during her worship.

Everybody went to the kitchen table for fellowship when the Bible study ended. Meanwhile, I went to the washroom facing my mother’s bedroom. When I came out, I saw my mother entering her bedroom. Suddenly, I saw a great light come upon me and draw me into my mother’s room. Then, lifting my hands, I shouted at my mother. In my mind, it sounded like God used my voice to command the spirit to come out of my mother just as Jesus did to a man with an

unclean demon when He was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum (Lk 4:35-41). After I shouted in that loud voice, I felt the power dissipating from me; I became weak and wondered what had happened. My mother turned around, pointed her finger at me, and said, “I am not afraid of you.” Hearing the loud noise, my sister and my wife’s niece rushed in and led me out of my mother’s bedroom to the kitchen table. Sitting down with a pale face, I kept thinking about that strange experience I had had for the first time. After a while, my mother came out to meet us with a bright and welcoming face to apologize for any inconvenience she had caused. She was completely different from herself an hour earlier.

Reflecting on the incident, I have made a few observations. First, I firmly believe God is in control of everything (see Ps 47:8, Is 52:7, Jn 14:27). God has power above all (see Mt 19:26, Ps 147:5, Jer 32:17). God brings peace and joy to the one who loves Him, a peace beyond our understanding (Phil 4:7).

Second, God gradually led my mother back to Himself from that moment on. She received Christ without fear of being killed by her idol because she grasped the truth of the Word of God. The Word of God had power to set my mother free from the bondage of sin (Jn 8:31). In his book *Liberty in Jesus*, David Mitchell reaffirmed this truth: “According to the New Testament, the Word of God and power of the Holy Spirit are available for Christians to overcome and root out demon influence” (Mitchell 1999, 17). She professed her faith in Christ through her baptism in 2005. Miraculously, God reconciled me with my mother emotionally and spiritually. After all, she stopped criticizing me for not believing

in her former idol. My mother passed away in 2017 as a Christian at age 96.

Praise to the Lord Almighty, full of love, grace, and mercy!

Third, in my story, the bright light descending upon me revealed God's existence and dynamic power for uprooting the spirit hiding in my mother's soul for many years. I wonder if my experience is similar to Paul's on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:3). God changed Paul from a persecutor of the followers of Christ into the one who suffered for Christ and proclaimed the name of Jesus to "the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15, NIV).

Recently, God revealed the essence of that particular event in my life. I was able to put together the details of my life and figure out the big picture of God for me. That event was a turning point for my mother to leave behind her past and move on the road to reconciling with God fully. God answered my question about what specific ministry God wanted me to do. I fathom the truth in Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." God set me apart since I was a little child, kept me "independent" from my mother spiritually and emotionally, and kept me free from her spiritual influence so He could deliver my mother from her own bondage through me.

Transformed to Help Others Transform

Without experiencing the transformation process, it is hard for one to help others in their spiritual journey. Before God called me to serve in His church, he

had sanctified me, changed my heart, given me His mission, and equipped me with the skills necessary for ministering to the church.

As outlined earlier, for a span of two decades (1979 to 1999), I fervently sought God's blessings, anchoring myself to the assurance found in Matthew 7:7. Commencing my business venture in 1990, the majority of my efforts were dedicated to its growth. During this time, my attention was primarily directed towards nurturing my travel agency and tending to my family, often overshadowing my focus on God and spiritual matters even though He did answer many of my requests.

During one of my evening prayers, God challenged me with these questions: "Have you received enough of my blessings? Do you love me? Look at your daily schedule." I felt shameful with tears in my eyes and commanded to seek His kingdom first (Mt 6:33). Finally, I confessed to God, "Here I am. Use me as you wish." This was a special event in my spiritual journey: God has "reconciled" me to Himself or drawn me nearer to Him. I turned from following God for my benefit to following Him because of Him. I realized how much God has loved me and began to express my love and devotion to Him more openly without fear and hesitation. This echoes Howard's observation, "A transformation of relationship with God means that we grow interested in God, that we sense God's interest in us" (Howard 2008, 231). I changed my life priorities; I have spent more time studying God's words and doctrines; I have longed for the fullness of the Holy Spirit in my soul to direct my life to live for His glory (Howard 2018, 249).

In his book *Spiritual Theology*, Simon Chan observes, “The great Christian mystics never saw love as a private affair between Christ and the individual, but that the real measure of our love for Christ is our love for others” (Chan 1998, 100). Indeed, I felt God’s grace overflowing in me and wanted to share it with others. The growing intimacy between God and me changed my relationship with people. I began to experience the love of Christ, as shown in Luke 15:4-7, which has developed into a guiding principle for my ministry. I have become more caring for people, more sensitive to their needs, more gentle in my conversations, compassionate, reasonable, and understanding.

Because God has loved me so much, I am more willing to do His will (Mt 28:19-20). Indeed, for the last twenty years, by God’s grace, I have brought many lost sheep back to His pen with passion and, sometimes, with pain. The pain was caused by jealousy, gossip, duplicity, or betrayal of the trust of co-workers. God has given me a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

God had also trained me in problem-solving and relationship reconciling by getting me involved directly in dealing with corporate and personal conflicts when I was an elder and, later on, a pastor of discipleship at the GTA Vietnamese Community Church from 2008 to 2017.

The Ministry “Home for the Vietnamese Visa Students in GTA”

Howard rightly observes, “Each discipline contributes to the other as we together discuss how one is formed toward the beauty and excellency of God and how we, as providers of soul care, might practically facilitate this kind of

formation” (Howard 2008, 24). Back in 2014, I asked God to give me experience facilitating spiritual formation in young Vietnamese people. I believe God has answered my prayer by granting me a ministry that reaches out to students coming from Vietnam. By the grace of God and because of the Spiritual Formation program, I have had a chance to reflect on my ministry and have realized that it has resonated with some of Howard’s observations. I have applied some understanding of philosophy, psychology, and sociology, in addition to Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology, in spiritually growing young Vietnamese students.

In January 2016, my wife took early retirement while I kept working part-time for a living, devoting the rest of my time to serving the Lord and studying at the seminary. Furthermore, we are empty nesters since all our children are grown up and have families. Thanks to God’s grace, we have financial stability and a home easily accessible in Toronto. We have cooperated in various ministries throughout the years. Most importantly, both of us are passionate about reaching out to those students, and we believe that when people see how Christians live, they will come to Christ more easily. “The consistency of our walk with God speaks to the world,” rightly observes Howard (Howard 2008, 199).

Furthermore, we have tried to understand their physical and emotional needs and struggles when living in a foreign land without adequate family support and guidance. Some who have taken advantage of their newly found freedom from parental supervision have plunged into life with sex, drugs, and alcohol. They have wasted a large amount of money provided for their education in those

harmful activities. However, most of them from ordinary families have studied and worked hard on weekends to support themselves.

Therefore, we have launched a small group ministry, “Home for the Vietnamese Visa Students in GTA,” to provide a place for those students to come home on the weekends. In that homey environment, they are encouraged to love, respect, support, to be honest, and authentic to one another. They can also share their hurts and hang-ups with others, knowing their life stories will be confidential. They can eat, chat, share life, and learn life skills and relevant biblical principles in that second home. We create a community to build an intimate bond with them before leading them to connect with God through Jesus Christ (Howard 2008, 114).

Our goal is not only to lead them into receiving Christ in their life but also to be able to walk with them in the initial stage of their spiritual journey. That requires we have their trust when they see we genuinely love them with a compassionate heart and an empathetic listening ear. As they gradually experience the truthfulness in our relationship, they start opening up about their lives and telling us about their hurts, hang-ups, habits, and hope. Then we have a better chance to introduce them to Jesus and the truth of God’s Word, which can set them free and heal them holistically.

We also pray for them to be full of the Holy Spirit, helping them learn the foundational and systematic truth about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Some have experienced a changed life in Christ and have given a beautiful testimony about it. They understand the need to place Jesus at the center of their life; they

learn how to share their faith with friends and relatives with a relevant approach; they are encouraged to focus on studying to become competent in their future field of expertise; they learn how to lead, to mentor, to coach, and to train others in leadership skills. They are on the way to becoming missional leaders in enlarging the Kingdom of God (Howard 2008, 199).

Indeed, some who believed in Christ shared great testimonies about how the Holy Spirit has changed their lives, transferred them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, and began serving in the local church.

In addition, God led me to experience people delivered from evil oppression when I did not have any training in the field of deliverance. I accumulated practical knowledge about it by doing it and researching (reading) books about it and checking with different seasoned pastors and missionaries. I have been involved in spiritual warfare since 2002; and officially studied a course about it in May 2019, offered by Tyndale.

The Impact of Spiritual Direction on My Spiritual Formation

In the course of the Spiritual Formation study, especially during my spiritual direction training, I have deepened my commitment to reserving a space for God. I now make a conscious effort to spend regular devotional time with Him, utilizing the book *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*. This involves meditating on His words, resting in His presence, and actively listening to Him.

I am grateful for the honest observations of my spiritual director, particularly when he pointed out my inconsistency in maintaining regular time for God. His words, “Paul, you are consistent in your inconsistencies,” struck a chord with me and prompted a change in my attitude towards this spiritual practice. This shift has led me to engage more regularly in meditation on God’s word, self-examination, building intimacy with God, striving to become more Christ-like, understanding His plan for me, and being motivated to cooperate with Him in His work. Consequently, I have become more willing to share my faith with others and exhibit greater grace to those around me, mirroring the grace God has shown me.

My love for God has deepened, especially since I recognized His revelation to me during a dramatic period in Vietnam. His guidance through the words of the Bible has served as a guiding light in every major step of my life (Psalm 119:105).

Having experienced the transformative benefits of spiritual direction in my spiritual journey, I have incorporated regular meetings with my spiritual director every six weeks into my rule of life.

Lectio Divina: A Powerful Tool for Spiritual Transformation

During the second year of my DMin study, I discovered the profound significance of *lectio divina*, a contemplative Bible reading method that, according to Wilhoit and Howard (2012, 73), should be integrated into the

curriculum for training Christians to become more Christ-like. For a more in-depth explanation of this method of Bible reading, please refer to Appendix D. I have personally incorporated *lectio divina* into my devotional time, mentoring ministry, and spiritual direction practice. Through these experiences, I have observed its remarkable effectiveness in facilitating personal transformation by fostering a deeper connection with the Word. This is achieved through reading the same biblical passage at least three times, meditating on it, and resting in the presence of God. As a result, it cultivates a more intimate relationship with God.

Consequently, in my Research Portfolio, I chose to investigate how *lectio divina* contributes to the spiritual transformation of a group of Christians, guiding them towards Christ-centeredness—the ultimate goal of spiritual formation.

Summary

In this chapter, I shared my Spiritual Autobiography, a deeply introspective journey that traced my path from baptism in 1984 as a Vietnamese immigrant in Toronto, Canada, to answering God's call for my life. Over nearly four decades, I have witnessed God's grace guiding my trajectory, experiencing firsthand the intricate wonder of His divine plan. This chapter serves as a testament to God's transformative power, leading me to explore the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation in the next chapter. This Model is integral to my mission of nurturing and multiplying missional Christians, equipping them with unwavering faith, leadership skills, and cultural relevance to impact the world for Christ, as I have been transformed to do.

CHAPTER THREE:
MAKING DISCIPLES AMONG THE VIETNAMESE VISA
STUDENTS IN THE GTA: A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

In the last two decades, waves of Vietnamese students have been flooding many cities of the Western world, where the Vietnamese immigrants have well-established, noticeable and vibrant communities and churches. Christian leaders realize the need to reach out to those students, share the gospel with them and raise them as potential leaders for local churches and, possibly, to return as leaders to Vietnam soon. It is beneficial to the church to fulfill the Great Commission locally by welcoming those students – who are well-educated, open to new things, living away from home, and have spiritual, physical, and emotional needs – and sharing with them another side of the contemporary history of Vietnam for mutual understanding and reconciliation.

In the pursuit of spiritual formation, an essential consideration is the identification of a definitive end goal—a Model that serves as the blueprint for the finished product or the ultimate aim of the transformation process. This concept goes beyond perceiving the Model as a mere guide during the journey of spiritual formation; rather, it encapsulates the envisioned outcome, representing the culmination of the transformative process. Within the realms of theology of

ministry and spiritual formation, acknowledging the inherent mystery of God and the diverse pathways He employs to mold individuals into Christ-like beings is crucial.

In this exploration, I delve into the rationale behind my quest for a Model of Spiritual Formation. Initially conceived in 1995, the early model featured four key elements as its end-goal—God, Nationalism, High Technology, and Leadership Skills. However, through divine guidance manifested in practical ministries and training experiences, I underwent a transformative journey leading to the revision of the original 1995 model. The present Model, captured by the Four C's (Christ-Centered, Culturally Relevant, Competent, and Coaching) and the Three A's (Anyone, Anytime, and Anywhere), emerged as the refined representation of the desired endpoint in the process of spiritual formation.

Motivation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam, fell into the hand of the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong) on April 30, 1975. Soon, the new government confiscated most private enterprises, including my family's business. Even though I had obeyed the Lord to forgive the new government, I left my birthplace of Saigon for Canada on May 29, 1981, with hate, anger, and resentment still lingering in my heart. Once in Canada, I focused my time and energy on establishing my new life and hardly had time to think about or remember Vietnam.

However, one day in 1990, a sense of nostalgia flooded my mind and heart while preparing to go to work. Later, I recognized that the Viet Cong government and the country of Vietnam are two different entities. I can dislike the communist government, but I should not ignore the country and the mass of innocent, loving, hardworking, and peaceful people.

Soon, I quit my mechanical engineering career to open a travel agency serving the growing Vietnamese community in Toronto. I also decided to visit my native Vietnam after nine years of separation. Recently, I realized that God had paved the way for me to give the gift of forgiveness I received from Him (Smith 2010, 121). I felt more compassion for my war-torn country. A thought of how to rebuild Vietnam struck me. To rebuild it requires a generation of new leaders with integrity, a different mentality, and a new set of skills. Therefore, it led me to the goal of discovering a way of finding, growing, and nurturing those leaders.

An Early Model of Spiritual Formation (1995 Version)

In 1993, I went to Vietnam with the owner of a private school to start recruiting students from Vietnam to Toronto. Once they were here, I introduced them to the Toronto Vietnamese Alliance Church. Eventually, some of them became believers. At that time, I did not know about discipleship or any process of spiritual formation. I hoped those students could find comfort and support in the church community. Back then, I only knew the positive side of the church, where Christians are cultivating virtues “that promote trust in God and foster

social compassion” (Wilhoit 2008, 17). Indeed, the young adults in the church had worked hard to integrate those students into the new milieu.

In 1995, God granted me a vision for constructing a new generation of leaders for Vietnam, a time when I was still immature in my faith and self-centered. This vision unfolded as I contemplated my life's purpose, questioning whether it revolved around God or myself. I resonated with Peter Scazzero's insight: "Pray about God doing my will, not about me surrendering to His will" (Scazzero 2017, 23).

However, at that point, I failed to take any action based on that vision. Instead, I continued to pray to God, seeking His assistance in achieving my personal goal of becoming a successful business entrepreneur.

The model of formation that I envisioned possessed four key elements or characteristics that I sought to develop in the new people – they would be believers in God, love their country of Vietnam to serve its people (nationalism), master high technology to rebuild the country, and know how to lead others in developing the country into a strong, prosperous, loving, and well-developed one (see fig. 1). That image of a Christian believer is like an end goal for the whole church to coordinate all its functions and effort in fulfilling its mission as Avery Dulles observes, “Images are immensely important for the life of the Church – for its preaching, its liturgy, and its general *esprit de corps*” (Dulles 2002, 14). *Esprit de corps* means “the feelings, such as being proud and loyal, shared by members of a group of people” (Cambridge Dictionary).

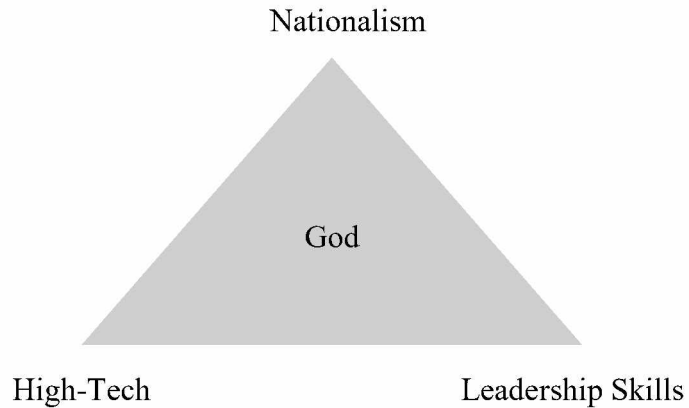


Fig. 1 Early Model of Spiritual Formation (1995)

However, I did not do anything about that vision until many years later because I spent most of my time growing my new business.

Forming a New Man for the Vision

In his book *Divine Conspiracy Continued*, Dallas Willard emphasizes the character building of leaders: “The first task of the individual spokespersons and professionals is to forge their own character, both in solitude and in communal fellowship and submission, in order to model, exemplify, teach, and guide others into the advanced ways of Jesus” (Willard 2014, 190). This is a prerequisite for becoming a teacher who will teach others to follow Christ. Paul told his disciples to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1). Paul sets a perfect example for pastors and leaders in the church today. How can leaders expect congregants to become like Christ if leaders do not follow Christ?

In 1999, God changed me from a person – who had spent twenty years following Christ at a distance and just coming to Christ to ask for things of the world – into a person who changed his life priorities and learned to dedicate his

life to serving God and His Church with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada.

In my Spiritual Autobiography, I explored a profoundly transformative moment when God challenged my love for Him during my evening prayers. This pivotal encounter spurred me to make a life-altering decision: shifting my focus from a self-centered existence to a Christ-centered one, from prioritizing “God for Me” to embracing “Me for God” (Matthew 6:33). Prior to this spiritual awakening, my priorities were ranked as follows: first, the growth of my business; second, the upbringing of my children; and third, my service to the church. However, after this powerful experience, serving God and His community took precedence, and my business endeavors receded to the background. Eventually, my primary focus became living out the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) and fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). As accurately articulated by Alan Roxburgh, this journey commences with a profound commitment to recognizing God's presence in the everyday contexts of our lives, where divine work is already in progress, reshaping our society and weaving the fabric of our communities. As devoted followers of Jesus, our role is to actively join in the ongoing work initiated by God (Roxburgh 2015, 6).

The commitment to conduct a simple life must be rooted in our inner being before it is manifested in our outward lifestyle. “Simplicity,” as Richard Foster observes, “is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle” (Smith 2009, 166). Cutting out the habit of walking around shopping malls on weekends is against the prevalent social norm. In his book *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship,*

Worldview and Cultural Practices, James K.A. Smith (2009) affirms that my posture against the ‘secular liturgies’ was correct. The ritual of shopping in malls every weekend is one of many cultural practices, seemingly “thin” but “thick practices that are identity-forming and telos-laden” (Smith 2009, 118). From the perspective of the Christian faith, the ultimate goal of “the secular liturgies (such as shopping at the mall, attending a football game, or taking part in ‘frosh week’ at university) will often constitute a malformation of our desires— aiming our heart away from the Creator to some aspect of the creation as if it were God” (Smith 2009, 118). A close friend of mine used to go to the same mall with her two little children every Sunday for many years. Many people consciously avoid church and its rituals but unconsciously practice secular liturgies, which lead them astray from the Creator.

In my family, only essential things are included in our daily schedule. We have taken the courage to say no to many time-wasting issues. We have saved time and money for building God’s kingdom. Eventually, God has given us a ministry of seeking out God’s lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7), inviting them to join the faith community, and helping them be set free by the truth of God’s word (Jn 8:32). Indeed, God has continually transformed me into a person who would help reconcile others to Him for their salvation, joy and peace.

The change in my inner being affected the change in my business environment. As I mentioned earlier, I have treated my colleagues with respect and allowed them space and freedom for choosing their ways to achieve their goals. A sense of harmony, peace and cooperation has prevailed in the office and

contributed to the company's revenue increase. Hence, with fewer worries about my business, I had more time to focus on learning about God and His business to serve Him better soon.

Then, God led me into different ministries to gain some experience. I saw how God delivered my mother from the spirit controlling her for over seventy years. I had a chance to apply the *Steps to Freedom in Christ* by Neil Anderson to free a few people from demonic influence. I participated in the process of renewing two local ethnic churches. Furthermore, I have helped new believers navigate their first steps as Christians.

In 2002, I stopped recruiting students when I received God's call to serve Him as a pastor. In 2011, God opened the way for me to reconnect with the Vietnamese visa students in Toronto. Eventually, some of them became Christians and joined the local church. Amazingly, God led a female student to my family, who had suffered from physical and mental abuse and codependency. Through caring for her, sharing the gospel of Christ with her, and teaching her the Scripture, we witnessed how God worked in her life, healed her from brokenness, and freed her from abusive relationships and unhealthy lifestyles. Then, she learned to pray, read, and meditate on God's Word. Eventually, she became a devoted Christian and a worship leader in the church. Indeed, Willard affirms, "The true character transformation begins...in the pure grace of God. However, action is also indispensable in making the Christian truly a different kind of person" (Willard 1990, 20). Indeed, it reminds us that St. Paul urged the

Christians in Philippi to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

Those events prompted me to update the 1995 model into what I call, “The Four C’s and Three A’s,” a signpost guiding me in ministering to new believers on their spiritual journey toward God and a Christ-centered life.

The Four C’s and Three A’s

The reasons for changing the old model of 1995 to this model of “Four C’s and Three A’s” came to me when I became more mature in Christ and experienced the meaning of being a faithful follower of Christ. This section will explore the details of the Four C’s – Christ-Centered, Culturally Relevant, Competent, Coaching; and the Three A’s – Anywhere, Anytime, Anyone. These are essential spiritual qualities of a Christian.

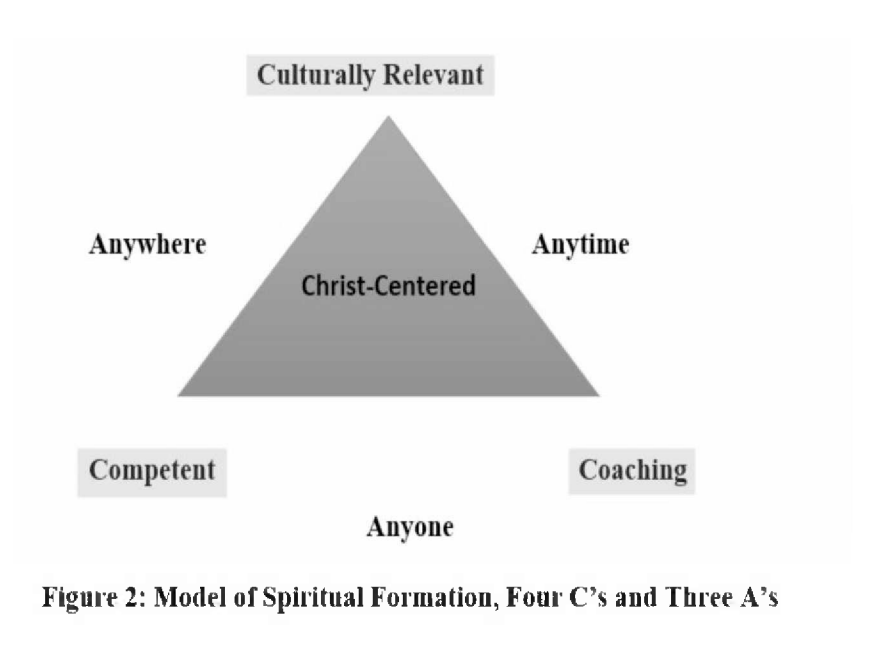


Figure 2: Model of Spiritual Formation, Four C’s and Three A’s

Christ-Centeredness

I changed my Model of Spiritual Formation from God-centeredness to Christ-centeredness in 2015. The following three points will explore the theology behind this change: humans were created in the image of God; humans disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden; and God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ to open the way for humans to reconcile to Himself.

God Created Humans in the Image of God

First, God created humans out of the dust, and they became alive because of God's inbreathing, and have the image and likeness of God. Second, God commissioned humans to the task of ruling over the earth. Third, God limited His communion and blessings upon humans to one critical condition.

The book of Genesis narrates how God created the universe. God spoke the whole world into existence (see Gn 1). Especially for humans, the book describes many vital details of the first humans God created. He formed Adam from dust: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gn 2:7). The breath of life, the Spirit of God "which at the beginning was received from God's inbreathing," made Adam alive (McGrath 2017, 328). Even though we were created out of dust (material), we became active and could relate to God because of His grace, the breath of life. Earlier, the Scripture says that God created humans in His image and likeness: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gn 1:26). To stress the importance of the image of

God, it repeats in the immediately following verse: “So God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gn 1:27). Humans were created differently from other created beings because they were living creatures in the image of God.

Our image of God cannot be our physical likeness to God since God is unseen. In his book *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Alister E. McGrath explains the meaning of the image of God in humankind by referencing Augustine: “Another approach during the patristic period interpreted the image of God in terms of human reason. Augustine’s point is that the central distinctive element of human nature is its God-given ability to relate to God. This makes them distinguish above all other created things” (McGrath 2017, 328). In her book *Christ is the Key*, Kathryn Tanner also affirms that “humans were made for a relationship with God, one perfected in Christ” (Gn 1:27 and 5:1) (Tanner 2010, 2). Tanner further comments, “It is simply the special relationship God chooses to have with them that distinguishes them from other creatures” (Tanner 2010, 2). Humans were created among living creatures, except in God’s image, to have a relationship with Him.

God created humans in His image to have a relationship with God, their Creator. Moreover, they were appointed to rule over the earth: “And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gn 1:27). God blessed them, particularly over other creatures, with “reason, free will, or the ability to rule over others as God does” (Tanner 2010, 1).

Hence, humans could fulfill His divine commission: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gn 1:28).

God created humans uniquely in His image, gave them a great responsibility to rule over the earth, and blessed them so they could fulfill their mission. However, God subjected them to a condition: “You [Adam and Eve] may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gn 2:16). Humans were exceptional in God’s eyes. However, they needed to obey the above command to prolong their relationship with God and enjoy His blessings.

The Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Genesis 3 tells us the story of the fall of our ancestors, Adam and Eve. One day, Eve conversed with the serpent at the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Even though she remembered God’s warning, she could not withstand the serpent’s twisted and cunning temptation, “You [Eve] will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gn 3:5). The serpent presented to Eve that God was not truthful; it was suggested that God was trying to control and limit her in understanding. Eve found the serpent’s idea true and tempting. She took the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, ate it, and shared it with her

husband, Adam (Gn 3:6). Indeed, they fell into Satan's trap and disobeyed God, who created them in His image.

As soon as they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, their eyes were opened; they knew they were naked (they felt guilty and ashamed), and they hid from the presence of the Lord. Genesis 3:16-18 relates how God penalized them for their disobedience: women suffered pain from childbearing and bringing forth children, and men worked hard on their land to have food to eat. Ultimately, they had to return to dust because they were formed from dust. Those consequences happened to their physical bodies.

After the Fall, they were driven out of the Garden of Eden (Gn 3:23-24). They were cut off from their relationship with God. It was broken or corrupted, and their sin has affected humanity; the apostle Paul observes in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Similarly, by referencing Augustine, McGrath comments that their sin, as a consequence of the Fall, has affected humanity universally, darkened and weakened the human mind, and rendered the sinner impossible to think clearly and especially understand spiritual truths and ideas (McGrath 2017, 331).

Although sinners might desire to return to God and seek spirituality, they do not know which pathway will lead them back to Him. Again, concerning Augustine, McGrath observes that he considers sinners "as being seriously ill and unable to diagnose their illness adequately, let alone cure it" (McGrath 2017, 331). Even if they know what is good to do, they are incapacitated to do it (Rom 7:18).

Because of the Fall of Adam and Eve, we all suffer from generational sin, which has rendered us seriously ill (an illness that cannot be cured by human agency). This sin has also rendered us powerless, holding us captive so we cannot escape it with our resources. It has also made us live in guilt and shame from one generation to another. Christ is the only solution to our human dilemma: His grace heals us, His incarnation and sacrifice break the power of sin, and His forgiveness and pardon erase the guilt in us (McGrath 2017, 331–32).

God So Loved the World by Sending His Son

McGrath explains the three following points to affirm that Jesus is the saviour of humanity, Jesus is worshiped, and Jesus reveals God to the world (McGrath 2017, 213–14).

Jesus is the Saviour of Humanity

Because God is good, gracious and full of mercy, He sent His Only Son, Jesus, to the world to open the way for us to be saved and reconciled with Him: “For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). God had to initiate the process of reconciliation with humanity because it is seriously ill, powerless to break free from sin, and hopeless to save itself.

According to the Old Testament, Jews believe only God can save them. However, early Christians affirmed that Jesus of Nazareth was their saviour. In the New Testament, Matthew records the story of the angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take

Mary (after she had conceived by the power of the Spirit) as his wife: “She [Mary] will bear a son, and you [Joseph] shall call His name Jesus for He will save His people [Jews] from their sins” (Mt 1:21). Therefore, Jesus is God (see John 1:1, 1:14, 8:58, 10:30; Isaiah 9:6).

The apostle Paul affirms that Jesus came to the world as a mediator between God and men to reconcile humanity to God by being God-man: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tm 2:5). Through Jesus, mercy extends to us without offending the eternal law of justice. The author of Hebrews further explains that Jesus, the righteous One without sin, suffered for our sins (the unrighteous humanity) by shedding His blood on the cross to forgive our sins (Heb 9:22). Jesus resurrected from the dead and became alive in the Spirit, mediating us to God, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit” (1 Pt 3:18).

Jesus is Worshiped

In the Jewish context, Jews worship only God. St. Paul also warns them not to worship creatures instead of the immortal God alone (Rom 1:23): “[they] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” In his letter to the Romans, he addresses Christians in Rome as the ones who call upon the Lord (Jesus) (Rom 1:3). This term “call upon the Lord,” the Old Testament formula for worshiping and adoring, appears in several places such as Genesis 4:26, 13:4; Psalm 105:1;

Jeremiah 10:25; Joel 2:32. Thus, Jesus is an object of worship and understood to function as God (McGrath 2017, 213).

Jesus Reveals God

The opening section of the fourth gospel includes the affirmation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Right at the beginning of his book, the apostle John strongly affirms the deity of Jesus, “the Word [Jesus] was God.”

Later in his book, John recorded the confession of Thomas (Jn 20:28) when he encountered Jesus and doubted His resurrection. When Jesus challenged Thomas to use his fingers and hands to touch Jesus’ hands and sides, Thomas asserted, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28).

Through the following statements, Jesus affirms that he is God Himself. Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). Since there is only one God, Jesus must be God. Furthermore, Jesus says, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him” (Jn 14:7). We know and see God because we know and see Jesus. Jesus reveals what God is like.

Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven” before healing (Mt 9:1-8, Mk 2:1-12, Lk 5:17-26). According to the Jewish belief, only God can forgive sin. Jesus claims He can forgive sin: He is God Himself (McGrath 2017, 212).

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul affirms, “He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him, all things were created

in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him” (Col 1:15-16). Again, St. Paul strengthens the idea that the glory of Christ is the image of God in 2 Corinthians 4:4: “In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” St. Paul also emphasizes that through Jesus Christ, all things and our humanity come into existence: “Yet for us, there is one God, the Father from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6). Jesus is God Himself.

Beyond St. Paul, the unknown author of the book of Hebrews also confirms that Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). He is our model, the perfect image of God. In another place, Jesus was addressed as God (McGrath 2017, 213): “But of the Son, he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom” (Heb 1:8).

Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Without Christ, we cannot come to God. Jesus opens the way for humans to reconcile with the Father and to recover the image of God through a Christ-like image, Christ-centered life.

Christ-Centered Life

Because of everything just discussed about Christ, it is apparent that Christ-centeredness must be the first and most important part of this Model. In other words, a believer has a Christ-centered life when Christ becomes the focal point of their life. Their aim will be attaining the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). To become Christ-centered, Christians undergo a transformation process. First, they receive the gift of salvation by faith in Christ alone; they sincerely repent their wrongdoings and eagerly seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit in their souls. They need to understand and live their new identities in Christ. They change their mind to the mind of Christ. They manifest Christ-like characters. Finally, they focus on fulfilling Christ’s Commission.

Salvation by Faith in Christ Alone

Salvation is an act of God who offers us the way of reconciliation with Him through the shed blood of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross, a propitiation for our sins (1 Cor 15:3-5, 1Jn 2:2). Hearing the gospel of Christ, we come to realize our depravity, our sins, and our penalty. When we feel convicted of our sin and desire to live a new life in Christ, we need to repent (Acts 2:38), commit to following Christ, and live a new life free from sin (Acts 13:39). This beginning of the process of salvation is conversion, whose nature is Trinitarian and Christocentric. This process involves God the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Regarding the Christocentric nature of conversion, Smith explains

that the heart of conversion is the encounter with Christ, and “conversion is the human response to the saving work of God through Christ” (Smith 2001, 16).

We need to comprehend that we cannot save ourselves by our pious work, charity work, or donation to pay for our sins; no other gods can save us except Christ. Jesus declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Only through Christ can we be free from the penalty of sin (Ti 3:5-7).

Repentance

Because of our human predicament and sinful nature, we cannot be in union with the Holy Christ without our repentance. Wilhoit notes, “Jesus invites us to repentance and to draw close to God and Himself” (Wilhoit 2008, 49). By His grace, Jesus came to call the sinners to repentance: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:32). Repentance (*metanoia*) means:

A change of mind, or the state of changing any or all of the elements composing one’s life: attitude, thoughts, and behaviours concerning the demands of God for right living; note that this state can refer to the foundational salvation event in Christ, or to on-going repentance in the Christian life (www.StepBible.org).

Wilhoit points out that repentance is crucial – a required course in the Scriptures (Lk 13:3-5). The act of repentance on Earth leads to jubilation in heaven (Lk 15:7, 10) and opens the door to welcome the kingdom of God (Mt 4:17) (Wilhoit 2008, 49). Our Christian life remains incomplete and unresolved without acknowledging and repenting of our hidden sins. Therefore, continuous repentance and sanctification are vital in our Christian journey, enabling us to mature fully in

Christ. Smith emphasizes that being complete in Christ entails comprehending the holiness of God, who calls us into fellowship with Himself as a triune being (Smith 2014, 29).

The Fullness of the Holy Spirit

The church must consider the Holy Spirit's important role in forming believers. Howard observes, "The very invitation to those who might become Christians asks them to welcome this Spirit...The Spirit is the key to the maintenance of relationship with God and formation into conformity with Christ's life and purposes" (Howard 2018, 71–72). Without the Holy Spirit, believers cannot be regenerated or born again or enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5-8) (Howard 2018, 72). The Holy Spirit will help them live a new, justified life in the presence of God, free from guilt and not falling into the trap of the devil's constant condemnation. St. Paul expressed his enjoyment at another place in the book of Philippians, "I can do all things thanks to God" (Phil 4:13).

Realizing the critical role of the Holy Spirit in our Christian walk, St. Paul urges us to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). In the book of Luke, Jesus promises to give His children the best gift, "So if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Lk 11:13). In John 14:16 and 14:26, he also promises to ask the Father to give us the Spirit of truth and comfort to be with us forever.

Belonging to the Community of God

Smith notices, “Personal maturity in Christ will be found in dynamic communion with the faith community” (Smith 2014, 29). When we believe in Christ, we become the children of God and brothers and sisters of one another. We only can learn and grow in how to love God and one another in the faith community, God’s household. The Scripture mentions the spirit of “one another” more than 50 times (see Jn 13:35, 15:12; Rom 12:10, 12:16, 14:13, 15:5; 1 Cor 12:25, etc.). It clearly shows Christians how to love, be loved, and bless and be blessed in the faith community, which shines God’s light on the world.

Living the New Identity in Christ

Furthermore, we can better understand our new identity as adopted children of our Father in heaven, our identity as Christians in formation since we enter into a sincere and full relationship with God, making its way into every area of our life (Howard 2018, 36). By the power of the Holy Spirit, our inner being changes (see 2 Cor 5:17, Rom 8:26, Phil 4:13, etc.). We no longer live as the prodigal son wandering in the world far from home. In the embrace of the holy, loving, merciful Father, we understand our Father has forgiven our sins and graciously restored our position as His beloved children. In God through Jesus Christ, we are justified, sanctified, and free in His kingdom. Nothing can hinder our path toward maturity in Christ. In union with Christ, the believer’s life and character (formerly under the influence of sin) are now transformed into the life and character of Christ in thoughts, behaviours, actions, and purpose of life.

Believers will enjoy the abundant life Jesus promises (Jn 10:10). In the community of the triune God, we will live a life full of joy, peace, security, acceptance, and eternal security. We can boldly claim, as Paul said, “I no longer live...but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Adopting the Mind of Christ

In union with Christ, we will live with the mind of Christ – His thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, actions, and purpose. Before conversion to Christ, we might have desired to conquer the world, build our positions, accumulate wealth and material possessions, get public notice, take advantage of privileges from our positions, and gain the power to influence, control, and manipulate other people. We might have loved attending important meetings and events of different societies and organizations. Popularity might have attracted our attention. When we become Christ-centered, we will “count all things as loss compared to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...I consider them rubbish” (Phil 3:8-9). We change our minds and with godly discernment “to test and approve” the will of God (Rom 12:2) (Howard 2018, 216).

Christ-Like Character

We gladly move all those P’s (passion, power, possession, properties, popularity, and so on) out of the throne of our life and reserve it for Christ alone. We seek the kingdom of God first instead of the world as before with confidence that Jesus and His Father have made provision for us (Mt 6:33) (Willard 1998, 212). Every day we wake up, we spend time with God and thank God for the gift

of breath and life. Sitting in silence and contemplation, we are open and listen to the voice of God. We meditate on His words, obey His commands, and stay on the path guided by the Holy Spirit. We change our minds and dedicate our lives to God (Rom 12:1-2). We love God and love our neighbours (Mt 22:37-39). We go and make disciples in all nations (Mt 28:19). We reorder our life to align them with the purpose of God. “This is an extension of Jesus’ emphasis on doing as a way of knowing the kingdom,” observes Willard (Willard 1998, 355).

Fulfilling Christ’s Commission

In Christ, our life will manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and will radiate the light of God to the world (Mt 5:14). In the community of faith, the Spirit will give believers different spiritual gifts for equipping the saints for the work of service, building up the body of Christ until we all attain maturity in Christ (Eph 4:12-13) (Howard 2018, 91). Christ-centered believers will live to fulfill the completion of Christ’s Commission with constant reliance on the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Jesus commands us to go and make disciples among nations. If Jesus is not in us, we can never fulfill His Great Commission. When He gives us a task, God knows what we can do and how we can do it. The Spirit of God will be in us (Mt 28:20) and work with us (Mk 16:20) to achieve His purpose on earth – to “put all things under His [Jesus’] feet and give Him [Jesus] as head over all things to the church” (Eph 1:22). The Spirit will guide us in approaching different cultures in the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In summary, our exploration of Christ-Centeredness, a pivotal component in the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation, has taken us from humanity's creation in the image of God to the theological ramifications of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. We have traced the path to the embodiment of God's love through the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ, who serves as both Savior and revealer of divine truths. At its core, this section has illuminated the essence of living a Christ-centered life, encompassing faith-based salvation, heartfelt repentance, empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and active participation within the community of believers. We have particularly emphasized the transformative journey towards adopting Christ's mindset and character, enabling individuals to authentically reflect His teachings in their daily lives. As we conclude this discussion on Christ-Centeredness, we must now transition to our next important element within the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation: Cultural Relevance.

Cultural Relevance

I will explain why I changed the term from "Nationalism" in my 1995 Model to "Cultural Relevance" in my current model. Then, I will explore a brief definition of the words "culture" and "relevance," as well as discuss the gospel of God to reconcile the world to Him throughout the ages, the Church mission, and my mission to reach out to the Vietnamese of different backgrounds (social, political and religious) in Toronto.

A Change from Nationalism to Cultural Relevancy

The characteristic “Nationalism” (of the 1995 model) was renamed “Culturally Relevant” to reflect the purpose of the gospel, which is for all nations, not only for any particular one. The idea of cultural relevance came to me from studying the Kairos course (by Living Springs International), rekindling the fire for the Great Commission in the heart of pastors (leaders) and offering them ways to transform the church into a missional one.

Definition of “Culture” and “Relevance”

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word “culture” as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social groups; *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.” It also defines “relevance” as, “relation to the matter at hand; or practical and especially social applicability.” How do we present the gospel of Jesus Christ (its nature is true and eternal) to different cultural groups so they can relate the value of the message to their daily lives or gospel living?

Gospel to the World

The gospel is the good news to save the world, reconcile people to God, and restore the image of God in humanity (eternal *telos*). In this section, I will explore Abraham’s mission, Jesus’ mission, and St. Paul’s mission.

Abraham's Mission

In the Old Testament, we read the narrative about God reaching out to human beings through Abram. Later, He changed his name to Abraham (Gn 17:5). God told Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 12:1-3). God has a clear purpose of blessing all the families of the earth through Abraham – all the families from different backgrounds and races and from one generation to another.

Jesus' Mission

In the New Testament, one can discover the story of God reaching out to humans through the gospel of Christ: Christ, God incarnate, died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day, appeared first to His disciples, then many people. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). It contains the ability to become a Christian and is the source of grace/energy needed to live a Christian life (Wilhoit 2008, 30).

Before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world [all races, all backgrounds] as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14). Before His ascension, he commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples

of all nations...” (Mt 28:19). The word “nations” means people, gentiles, and the heathen as distinguished from the Jews (“nations” Tyndale House, n.d.).

Christians must be faithful to the gospel that never changes through time and space. We need to contextualize the message so that it can engage the worldview of its hearers (Stetzer 2003, 20). The message of Christ is relevant to all cultures and all the time: to reconcile sinful human beings to God since “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10). A quote from Stetzer affirms very well:

God is a missionary God in this culture and every culture. His nature does not change with location. Therefore, a missionary posture should be the normal expression of the church at all times and places... the church must live that mission at all costs. A non-missional church misrepresents the true nature of the church... The concept of *missio Dei*, the mission of God, is the recognition that God is a sending God, and the church is sent. It is the most important mission in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that mission; the Holy Spirit is the power of that mission; the church is the instrument of that mission; and the culture is the context in which that mission occurs (Stetzer 2003, 22).

When we open our hearts to receive Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we also respond to the invitation of God to belong to His church and participate in His mission – making disciples in all nations not by our own power but of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus’ ministry, He prayed and went with His disciples from village to village to preach the good news about the kingdom of God, to heal and deliver people from demonic possession (Mt 9:37-38). Jesus ate at the house of a tax collector, Zacchaeus, whom His fellow people considered a sinner and despised (Lk 19:1-10). He defended a woman caught in adultery whose fellow people were about to stone her to death (Jn 8:1-11). He chose ordinary people without

education to be His disciples and build His church (Mt 4:18-22, 16:18). In His hometown of Nazareth, He boldly declared His purpose on earth to His people, "...to proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed..." (Lk 4:16-19). He also affirmed that "He was the very one through whom these blessings would come to them" (Jn 1:16, Eph 1:3) (Willard 1998, 120). Jesus amazingly and lovingly reached out to people of different social classes to save them.

Before His ascension, Jesus commanded His disciples to go and make disciples among all nations – all tribes of different cultures. In Acts 2, the world witnessed a miraculous manifestation of the Spirit of God that descended upon the first disciples of Jesus. The Spirit had empowered them to go and proclaim the good news. At first, they "began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4) to many people groups present in Jerusalem at the time so that they could understand God's message. The gospel is for everyone on the planet Earth until today. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us communicate the gospel in a most relevant, powerful, and effective way to touch people of all races who come through the church door.

God has called us to Himself through His only Son, Jesus, by His grace. We are His children (Jn 1:12), salt and light to the world (Mt 5:13-14). Since we have experienced the love and mercy of God, we should, in turn, go and tell the good news and share the love with the whole world to bring them back into the community of the triune God. We are to love even our enemies (Lk 6:35). Love is

the inclusive way of relating according to the Scripture (Chan 1998, 179). All unify to praise God Almighty, Creator of the universe, our Abba.

Jesus said, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18). Next, we explore how St. Paul brought the gospel to the world.

St. Paul’s Mission

St. Paul lived a missional life with a clear intention, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some” (1 Cor 9:19-22). He also urged us to live our daily life in such a way that would engage with unbelievers in order to save them, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved” (1 Cor 10:31-33). St. Paul lived his life with an ultimate goal: “Please everyone” so unbelievers can know and receive Christ to be saved. However, St. Paul strongly refuted any person who wanted to distort the gospel of Christ he had preached (see Gal 1:6-10). Christ-followers should seek to be culturally relevant in dealing with and approaching people to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The method or approach can be varied, but the message of the gospel of Christ can never change.

Stetzer comments about the cultural relevancy of the Apostle Paul when he spoke to the Athenians in Acts chapter 17: “He understood the Athenian position on reality; he understood an underlying spiritual interest; he looked for

positive points within their worldview; he encouraged them to find true fulfillment in Christ” (Stetzer 2003, 21). He further observes:

The book of Acts indicates that Paul approached Jews and Gentiles differently. He engaged them based on their culture and preunderstanding of gospel truths. With the Jews, Paul reasoned about the saving role of the Messiah and His resurrection (17:1-4). With the Gentiles, Paul’s reasoning was more foundational – addressing issues of resurrection, morality, and judgment. In all cases, the culture of the hearer impacted Paul’s evangelistic methods (Stetzer 2003, 21).

St. Paul approached different cultures with different evangelistic methods but proclaimed the same gospel of Christ Jesus, His saving role of the Messiah and His resurrection.

Jesus’ disciples asked Him when the end times would come. Jesus answered them: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mat 24:14). Near the end of His time on earth, Jesus strongly commanded His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Mat 28:19). Next, I will explore how the Church could be effective in carrying out Jesus’ Great Commission.

The Church’s Mission

To effectively fulfill the Great Commission, it is imperative for the Church to empower its members with a deep understanding of our present-day culture, as well as equip them with the essential methods and skills required to be impactful witnesses for Christ.

Knowing the Culture

What culture are we facing when attempting to reconcile people to God? We are in the era of postmodernism, relativism, individualism, and consumerism, of many isms. It poses a significant challenge for Christians reaching out to today's people. Regarding the challenge with postmodernism, it has an interesting and noticeable characteristic that Ed Stetzer observes in his book *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*. Postmoderns seek spirituality, but they do not come to institutional Christianity (Stetzer 2003, 47). In other words, we cannot assume that they will come to us to search for the truth. Christianity has lost the status of the preferred source of truth (Stetzer 2003, 113).

Therefore, Stetzer urges evangelicals to rethink new ways of reaching out to the postmodern world and not just use the same old methods. For example, every year, approaching Christmas, leaders of our ethnic Christian community gather to think about what to do, how to do it, and who the speaker will be for preaching the gospel. We used to search for an influential speaker who could attract the crowd to our churches. This pattern has been around for a few decades. We have seen the community losing interest in that method. The effect of those Christmas events was minimal: around ten seekers showed up among more than five hundred believers. However, we have not changed it yet.

In his book *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Alan J. Roxburgh affirms Stetzer's conclusion about the irrelevance of today's church through responses of a young social worker and an older executive to the question, "Where are they going to church?"

I do not go anywhere! It is not that I do not want to be part of a church community, but I just cannot connect with what happens in those places anymore. I will probably join a house church with some friends and see where that goes... At a wedding reception, I sat beside a woman in her fifties, an executive in a financial organization, who had been raised a Mennonite and attended church all her life. When I asked her that question, she looked at me with a pained expression and said she could not deal with the irrelevance of the church any longer (Roxburgh 2011, 8).

Through those conversations, Roxburgh has discovered how the church loses connection with people in the community. Those people are not against Christian life or church in general. They are longing for deeper involvement in gospel living. However, they cannot find it across a whole range of church systems (Roxburgh 2011, 8). People long for a deeper life, but the church can be shallow in its teaching. What has happened? Its spiritual leaders might not be mature enough; they might not stay close to their parishioners to sense their actual needs, or they might treat them as their spiritual babies.

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith points out another obstacle the church is facing, that the business community understands humans better than the church that our nature is “we are embodied, desiring creatures whose being-in-the-world is governed by the imagination” (Smith 2009, 101). Smith observes, “On one level, Victoria’s Secret is right where the church has been wrong.” Why is that? Smith continues, “Because the marketing industry— which promises an erotically charged transcendence through media that connects to our heart and imagination— is operating with a better, more creational, more incarnational, more holistic anthropology than much of the (evangelical) church” (Smith 2009, 101). They focus on our passion and desire, and they win our hearts. Meanwhile,

how does the church respond to that situation? Smith adds, “In other words, the church responds to the overwhelming cultural activation and formation of desire by trying to fill our head with ideas and beliefs” (Smith 2009, 101). It does not mean we do not persuade people with ideas, beliefs and doctrines. That will come later after people feel our love for them. We must approach people’s hearts first before their heads. That is also my approach to reaching out to Vietnamese of different backgrounds, which I will discuss later.

An Effective Witness for Christ

Mature believers will witness out of love and grace, not to win lost souls. They are willing and capable of listening to others with empathy and sincerity to understand the diverse culture and needs of those who need to hear the gospel. They know how to appropriate the gospel of love and hope to people’s situations. They manifest their love of Christ in a non-aggressive way. They are humble, gentle in their words, eager to give a hand and have compassionate hearts. As a result, non-believers are more open and respond more positively to the message of Christ.

With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christians will audaciously present the message of Christ to unbelievers, the truth containing the transforming and healing power. They focus on the message without being distracted by other things of the world and receive the power of Divine revelation (1 Cor 2:3-4). They are empowered to divinely apply the truth to specific circumstances and commit to a sound, saving, steadfast faith (Olford 1999, 68).

My Mission: Reaching Vietnamese of Different Backgrounds

Having lived in Toronto among the Vietnamese community for more than forty years, I have had many opportunities to connect with Vietnamese of various backgrounds. God has given me a mission, changed my heart, transformed my life, and prepared me to reach out to the Vietnamese, especially to students from different political and cultural regions of Vietnam.

For over a thousand years, Vietnamese have had a tradition of worshipping ancestors, blended with Buddhist values and the Old Chinese traditions (Confucianism, Taoism). For a thousand years, they fought to survive the invasion of China from the North. From the 17th century, they encountered French colonialism and their Catholic priests. Then the Evangelicals arrived in the early 20th century and became more robust when the Americans came to prevent the expansion of the Communists from the North. The Vietnam War started in the late 1950's and ended on April 30, 1975. Then the "boat people" movement exploded, with people seeking to start a new life elsewhere and, unfortunately, a few hundred thousand of them dying on the open sea after more than two million Vietnamese were killed during the War. Reg Reimer, a former missionary to Vietnam, wrote about the horrors of that war in his book *Vietnam's Christians: A Century of Growth in Adversity*:

The toll of human deaths, wounded and crippled bodies, forever-scarred spirits and souls, women deprived of husbands, children of fathers, and collateral social ills make war an evil that not only inflicts immeasurable immediate cost and pain, but also keeps on wreaking personal and societal havoc for years to come. All social institutions, including the church, in the midst of war, are heavily burdened and much depleted (Reg Reimer 2011, 40).

How can we reach out to the Vietnamese in these horrible contexts? Some people reject the offer of the gospel of Christ because they believe Christianity is a religion coming from the Western world and of the invaders – French Catholics and American Protestants. How can they believe in the religion of love brought over by the people who came to conquer, divide and destroy the land and the people and enslave them?

To proclaim the good news to them seems not practical. Christians must approach them with humility, love, care, and patience. Once they can feel our genuine love for them, they will gradually open their ears and hearts to listen to the gospel stories. We need to approach them through our hearts and hands before we use our heads to give reasons for our hope in Christ (1 Pt 3:15). Even though people profess their faith in Jesus Christ, they struggle to become wholly converted. When they are close to God and understand the Scripture better, the Holy Spirit will help them deal with many hidden issues.

By the grace of God, I have shared the Good News of Christ with Hanh (a pseudonym), a student from the city of Hanoi, North Vietnam. Hanh is an individualistic postmodern growing up in a Communist country with a free lifestyle who has become a devoted believer and was once a worship leader in a local Vietnamese church. Eventually, she became my adopted spiritual daughter. I had the honour of officiating her marriage in 2021.

NL, a Vietnamese former professor who graduated from Moscow, came to Christ when she was approaching her retirement age. She graduated with a PhD.

in linguistics in the former Soviet Union, was once a member of the Communist party and served in the Ministry of Education of Vietnam, was successful in the trading business, did not value poor people, and finally went bankrupt. After a couple of years of attending the local church and participating in the discipleship class, she has become a devoted Christian, willing to share her faith with others.

I also witnessed Christ to NCP, a South Vietnam Army veteran who spent a few years in re-education camps when the South Vietnam government collapsed in 1975. When he was released, he escaped by boat, settled in his new life in Toronto, and nourished anger and resentment toward the Vietnamese Communist government. I became his close friend and spiritual partner when I met him at a church celebration thirteen years ago. I have seen how God has changed him into a person who is more patient, peaceful, loving, teachable, and mature in Christ, and from a broken person into a Sunday school teacher.

We also opened our home to welcome Vietnamese visa students in Toronto on weekends to share our lives and the gospel of Jesus Christ with them. In our homey environment, they were encouraged to love, respect, support, and be honest and authentic to one another. They could eat, chat, share life, and learn life skills and relevant biblical principles in that second home. We created a community of genuine relationships before leading them into connecting with God through Jesus Christ (Howard 2008, 114). Some of them experienced changed lives in Christ and gave beautiful testimonies.

The aforementioned illustrations serve to demonstrate the applicability of my Model of Spiritual Formation among the Vietnamese individuals with whom I

have worked. However, you may wonder: Can this Model be effectively employed in a predominantly white church? Is it adaptable for use with migrant workers across diverse communities or with newly arrived Syrian immigrants?

As previously discussed, the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation are firmly grounded in solid biblical and theological foundations. This Model transcends cultural boundaries and can be utilized by individuals from any background. In the upcoming chapter of my Research Portfolio, I will elaborate on how God provided me with the opportunity to affirm this assertion within the multicultural context of Canada.

In summary, the concept of "cultural relevance" within the framework of the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation underscores the critical role of understanding and respecting cultural diversity when reaching out to different communities. By approaching individuals with Christ's love and patience, and by adapting outreach efforts to the specific cultural context, this element ensures a more effective and meaningful engagement with diverse audiences, ultimately contributing to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Competence

Competence is "the capability to do something well" (Cambridge Dictionary). I have changed the third element from "High Technology" in the 1995 model to "Competence" in the current model because not everyone has to become an expert in high technology. Back then, high technology was much needed since Vietnam just came out of a fierce and long war and had opened up

the country to welcome foreign investment for rebuilding and developing. Twenty years later, the Vietnamese students have different vocations and passions. Building a community, a society, or a country will require various kinds of expertise.

The students are encouraged to become competent and excellent in their chosen field (Col 3:23). They will have better opportunities to serve others and easy access to countries hostile to Christianity. Through their valuable service in those countries' business world, they have a better chance to share their testimonies about Christ with local people. Christian professionals can evangelize through their excellent work, clear thinking, positive attitudes, and good deeds. Competent Christian workers will manifest the light of Christ to the world and have better influence anywhere they are for the glory of God (Mt 5:16). Willard further comments on the light of God, "God gives them 'light' – truth, love, and power – that they might be the light for their surroundings" (Willard 1998, 125). They are competent in improving themselves in all facets of their personal life. They are competent in delivering a message to the world with God-given passion, power, and purpose (Olford 1999, 79).

Knowing Their Calling

Before these young Vietnamese students seek to perfect their skills, investing their time in doing something without checking if that is their calling, they will waste time and energy. They come to Canada with their family's support while living and studying costs very much. Therefore, we try to lead them into

discovering their calling (vocation) first. We realize that it is not an easy task for a new believer.

We suggest different tools to help them discover their callings, such as the Myers-Briggs Personality Test, the Enneagram, the True Colors, Grip-Birkman, and so on. We also use the S.H.A.P.E. from Saddleback to give them a rough picture of who they are before they begin to serve in the church environment – S standing for spiritual gifts, H for heart, A for abilities, P for personality and E for experiences (Warren 1995, 370). The book *Consider Your Calling* by Gordon Smith (2016) is also a good help for discovering our calling.

Focusing on Developing Christian Ethics

Our God created things beautifully and magnificently. We are children of an extraordinary God. We must do our best in any circumstances to show the light of God as St. Paul commanded us, “Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23). When Jesus was walking the earth, He did miraculous work, showing His perfection and excellence in whatever He did. Since we are His children, becoming excellent like our Father in Heaven in whatever we do is the right goal. That means we need to focus on building our character first. If we are Christians, we will aim to become Christ-centered and Christ-like in our thoughts, attitudes, behaviours, and actions (as mentioned earlier).

Furthermore, we can become more confident and trustworthy with our inner strength gained through our dependence on Christ. We can stand on our feet

(the quality of independence) and cooperate harmoniously (the quality of interdependence) with each other to build the kingdom of God. We also realize the need to multiply ourselves because the “harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Mt 9:37).

In summary, the "competence" aspect of the “Four C's” and “Three A's” Model of Spiritual Formation underscores the importance of individuals discovering their calling, developing expertise, and embracing Christian ethics. Competence in various skills is essential for collectively building the Kingdom of God, and this journey often involves coaching and mentorship to ensure growth and fulfillment of one's purpose.

Coaching

First, I need to explain why I have changed from “Leadership Skills” (in my 1995 model) to “Coaching” in the new model. Focusing on “Leadership Skills” is limited to developing one leader's talents and technical skills. To fulfill the Great Commission, we must learn to be leaders first and then coach emerging leaders. In his book *The Making of a Leader*, J. Robert Clinton observes,

A leader, as defined from a study of biblical leadership, and for whom we are interested in tracing leadership development, is a person (1) with God-given capacity and (2) with God-given responsibility to influence (3) a specific group of God's people (4) toward God's purposes for the group (Clinton 2018, 183).

In this section, I will argue that the leader must first be a mature believer. The leader needs to learn and serve in the spirit of servant leadership. The leader must

also learn and practice the habits mentioned in the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey.

An Effective Christian Leader

Being a Mature Believer in Christ

To become effective in the kingdom of God, a leader should seek to be a mature believer who places Christ at the center of his/her life – Christ-centered. In the previous section about Christ-centeredness, we can find details of such a Christian life. Once grounded in the love of Christ and committed to Christ, the leader will manifest the fruit of the Spirit in his/her life (Gal 5:22). Leaders know their calling and God’s purpose for the group of which God puts them in charge. The personal goal and the purpose of the group are to be aligned with the Great Commission of Christ, reaching out to people of different cultures in the most appropriate way, as discussed in the section on Cultural Relevancy above.

The leader is also competent in moving forward (under God’s guidance) with confidence and love, delivering what the leader has promised, directing, managing people in different projects and building communities for God’s glory. The leader is increasingly aware of him/herself and manages personal, family, and public life well. St. Paul elaborates detailed criteria for choosing leaders in ministry in 1 Timothy 3:1-7: they are “trustworthy...must be above reproach...must manage his [her] household well,” and so on. The leader remains competent by continually learning and equipping themselves in related fields of their expertise. Clinton observes, “Throughout a leader’s life, God works to

deepen character as well as to develop ministry skills” (Clinton 2018, 134).

Ministry flows out of being. Our being means who we are. Clinton further proposes foundational character development for an emerging leader by testing his/her integrity, obedience, and word checks (ability to receive words of truth from God) (Clinton 2018, 50-62).

Learning and Applying the Servant Leadership Principle

In the ministry of God’s kingdom, a leader should seek to master the spirit of servant leadership. We might ask what servant leadership is and where it came from. Willard comments that Robert Greenleaf was the first to coin the term “servant leadership”: “The servant leader is one who is a servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Willard 2014, 54). That attitude of a leader corresponds to what one can discover in the Scripture. Jesus, our Lord, sets for us an example of servant leadership:

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves (Lk 22:24-27).

A leader in the Kingdom of God leads by serving others, not seeking power or authority over others. Jesus’ disciples had learned that the one who serves is the greater one in Jesus’ eyes. That is God’s kingdom value. Jesus also said, “I am among you as the one who serves.” We must remind ourselves that if we are

faithful servants of God and His church, we should not go after position, power, and privilege. Often, we do not act as servants of the Lord but try to manipulate, control, and abuse finance, power, or people in His body. In Mark 10:44, the Word of God emphasizes, “Whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.” That is a challenging call to God’s servant to imitate the Son of Man in giving His life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). Leaders should also love others (followers) with sacrificial love. Clinton affirms all leaders should practice the overarching attitude of servant leadership modelled by our Lord Jesus: “There are, of course, values in the Bible concerning leadership ethics and styles, ends and means, and the overarching attitude of servant leadership that apply to all leaders” (Clinton 2018, 183).

Learning and Applying the Seven Habits

In my practice, I have found that learning and applying the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey will render leaders effective in directing and managing their personal, family, community, business, and workplace. I recommend this tool because the principles are valuable, lasting, common sense and related to biblical principles. I have studied and practiced these habits for more than twenty years. They have helped me manage different roles in my life: a Christian, a husband, a father, a businessperson, and later on, a minister. When God called me to serve as a pastor, I had to go to seminary while running my business, raising my children, and serving as an elder in the church. If

I did not use the tools offered in this book, I could never be able to arrive where I am today. Passionately, I have also shared this practice with others.

Coaching Emerging Leaders for Christ

I will first discuss the models of coaching/training by Jesus and Paul and emphasize the urgent need to coach emerging leaders for the tremendous work in God's kingdom.

Models of Coaching/Training by Jesus and Paul

It is fascinating to learn how Jesus trained His disciples. He chose twelve disciples to be with Him 24/7. They lived and ministered together. However, He invited three of His twelve disciples into more profound coaching – Peter, John, and James. Then, He chose Peter to build His church, as narrated in the book of Acts chapter 2. Jesus stayed close to His disciples and trained them for three years. Even though He left them afterward, He did not leave His disciples as orphans, as He had promised (see Jn 14:18). He did ask God the Father to send the Spirit of truth and comfort to be with/in them, to guide them and to work with them (Mt. 28:19, Mk 16:20).

Outside of Jesus, in the New Testament, there is no one quite like St. Paul who can serve as our guide in the training of other leaders for the kingdom of God. He set an example and called others to follow him when he said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Some leaders hesitate to apply Paul's statement to themselves because they want to be humble. I wonder if it is true humility or not. St. Paul also gave us a list of qualifications that served as

models integrating home with the community to guide us in selecting overseers for the church (1 Tm 3:1-13, Ti 1:5-16). The church should not overlook these qualifications to have people serve in the leadership position to avoid many unexpected conflicts and issues which might impede the healthy growth of the body of Christ. Evan Howard observes very well:

I believe we desperately need those who would take active (servant) leadership in families and households; we need those who will nurture not only the faith of the individual members but also the life and character of the household as a unit... We need models – the world needs models – of community at the basic level: in the home. God desires the formation of an expression of life together toward which the world can be attracted, as to an icon. This will not happen by accident. Parents and elders must take up the responsibility and lead households intentionally into Christ (Howard 2018, 243).

This is my guideline for choosing emerging leaders who lead and manage their families and households well to serve in the faith community.

Coaching Emerging Leaders Constantly

Church needs to focus more on training new leaders/laborers because the harvest is plentiful. There are not enough Christian workers to minister and witness for Christ (Mt 9:37). Jesus commands His followers to make disciples in all nations (Mt 28:18-20). A tremendous task requires many mature believers/leaders who are passionate and capable of training/multiplying emerging leaders for the kingdom. Since mature believers long for Christ's return, we need to focus on making disciples who make disciples in all nations: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come," declared Jesus (Mt 24:14).

According to the Joshua Project's data on world evangelism, there are a total of 17,440 distinct people groups. Among these groups, the gospel of Christ has not yet been shared with 7,414 unreached ones. Astonishingly, a significant 42.5% of the global population remains unaware of Jesus Christ's message, as cited in “Global Statistics | Joshua Project” (n.d.).

Regrettably, numerous churches today do not exhibit an overwhelming commitment to the mission of spreading the gospel. This is evident in the stark contrast between the relatively minimal budget allocated for missions and evangelism compared to the substantial funds directed towards the maintenance of church buildings and other administrative expenses.

This disparity implies that the conclusion of this age and the awaited return of Christ might still be distant. To hasten these events, it becomes crucial to shift our focus towards equipping and mentoring more leaders who can effectively disciple within the least reached people groups. By doing so, we can genuinely aspire to accelerate the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this section, we have explored the significance of coaching within the “Four C's” and “Three A's” Model of Spiritual Formation, emphasizing the development of effective Christian leaders who embody Christ-like character and integrate the principles of servant leadership, as emphasized by Dallas Willard in his quote, “Christian leaders must continually stress and model servant leadership qualities, and so that they are developed in others called to Christ-like leadership positions within every arena of public life. We must emphasize that this is a holy calling, a calling of being set aside or setting oneself aside for a special and

invaluable service” (Willard 2014, 76). These leaders, inspired by the coaching examples of Jesus and Paul, are committed to nurturing emerging leaders for Christ, guiding them on their spiritual and leadership journeys. They prioritize character development, competency enhancement, calling, and commitment as integral aspects of their coaching relationships, creating an environment that fosters growth and transformation.

Transitioning to the next discussion, we will delve into the concept of being a Christian anywhere, anytime, with anyone. This perspective, in line with Willard's insight, centers on the idea that living out one's faith should be a constant and adaptable presence in all aspects of life, transcending boundaries and engaging with people from diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

Being a “Three A’s” Christian

Incorporated into this Model of Spiritual Formation is a concept I refer to as the “Three A’s”: “Anywhere, Anytime, Anyone.” This concept emphasizes that Christians should embrace a life where Christ is the genuine Lord of their existence, fostering compassion for the lost, nurturing the competence to serve others, and mentoring emerging leaders. They are called to embody the spirit of the Four C’s—whether at home, within their community, or in the workplace—becoming Christians who are available anywhere, at any time, and for anyone. These individuals are not merely Sunday Christians, living secular lives during the rest of the week; instead, they are full-time Christians, maintaining unwavering commitment throughout every moment. They uphold a life of

integrity in both their private spaces and in the public eye, always prepared to share the gospel whenever the Spirit prompts them. They remain consistent, being the same people 24/7, exemplifying the role of light and salt in the world (Mt 5:13-14), present in the world but not of the world (Jn 17:16).

In other words, Christians rooted in Christ can stand firm in any circumstance. We are called to experience the love and grace of Christ in order to follow Christ for His sake, not ours. To be rooted in Christ, believers need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18), practice spiritual disciplines (time with God and His words, prayers, worship, fellowship, service/stewardship), and be aware of temptations in their life (e.g. power, prestige, position, possessions, idols, sexual attractions, etc.) and their behaviours at home, and in the workplace, which can prevent them from being effective Christians. Willard comments, “We must consider in fairly concrete terms what the kingdom of God looks like in our families, communities, neighbourhoods, corporations, and institutions, which together form the kingdoms of our world” (Willard 2014, 53).

In their private lives, individuals should remain vigilant against the negative influences of pornography, drugs, extramarital relationships, alcohol, inappropriate attractions, harmful curiosities, and deceptive online content. They should also prioritize respect for their spouses and children within the home setting. In the book of Ephesians, St. Paul imparts valuable lessons on managing anger (Eph 4:26), nurturing healthy spousal relationships (Eph 5:22-33), and avoiding harm to our children (Eph 6:4). It's essential to recognize that some people may appear pious while attending church on Sundays, yet behind closed

doors, they mistreat their spouses and children. Such behavior can lead to marital problems, divorce, and the erosion of faith within Christian families.

Christians at the workplace can be afraid of showing their identity as children of God; they may compromise and behave like secular co-workers. They can be afraid of being different or letting people know who they are. In the Scriptures, we can see some well-known persons who, sometimes, failed to live up to God's expectations. David, a man after God's heart, committed adultery with his general's wife and later murdered him (see 2 Sm 11:1-19). Peter denied Jesus three times because of his pride, lack of self-awareness, and fear of death when Jesus was arrested and interrogated (see Lk 22:54-62). Paul persecuted followers of Christ due to his lack of proper knowledge of Jesus (see Acts 8:1-3).

Has the church, a community of God's people, been training believers how to stand firm in the face of trials of life?

Over the past half-century or more, those congregations and denominations from the European migrations to the Americas have lived ever more deeply into a culture of radical individualism. We have become practiced at personalizing and psychologizing biblical stories for the purpose of self-help and generalized moral teaching for being good citizens. We lost sight of the story that runs through Scripture about God's actions in the world (Roxburgh 2015, 12).

Roxburgh points out the problems with teachings in our churches, which have been influenced by the culture of radical individualism of the European migrations to the Americas, which made us lose sight of God's purpose in the world.

We need to go back to square one, to the very beginning. The very purpose of our creation is for God and God alone. We have been lost from the

outset. God is searching for us to come home. Do we have new eyes to see and new ears to hear what God is doing? Just as Jesus recognized that the religious leaders of His time needed a fresh perspective to truly understand the events around them; He believed they needed to open their minds and hearts to see and hear beyond their preconceptions.

Similarly, in our current chaotic times, there is a call for the church to embrace a new way of existence. This call urges us to develop the ability to perceive and comprehend the divine actions taking place in our midst. The question remains: Are we capable of recognizing it (Roxburgh 2015, 9)?

In the words of Roxburgh, he highlights the transformative role of the Holy Spirit in our churches, emphasizing how it is leading us to rethink and reimagine our approach to following Jesus. Roxburgh compares the Spirit's influence to an underground stream, stirring up new relationships and pushing us to adopt unconventional ways of being God's people. He notes that these changes are occurring amidst significant societal shifts and challenges faced by church leaders. Despite these challenges, Roxburgh believes that the Spirit's disruptive influence offers a unique opportunity for growth and renewal, reminiscent of moments in Scripture and throughout history when God's future unfolded in unexpected ways (Roxburgh 2015, 8).

I propose a few simple steps to help both new and seasoned believers reconnect with God. The church should select mature believers who are willing to commit to what I call the “Four C's” and strive to become Christians who embody

the “Three A’s.” These committed individuals should be ready to walk alongside others, assisting them in their spiritual growth in Christ.

They should also learn to reflect on their personal journeys, recognizing how God has intervened in their lives. Additionally, they should contemplate how they responded to God's call when they committed to following Christ.

Furthermore, they should share the love of God with others, drawing from their own experiences of His presence and the fullness of the Spirit in their lives. This process will enable them to guide and inspire fellow believers on their spiritual journeys.

The apostle Paul is an excellent example of a life dedicated to mission after he met Jesus while he was on the way to Damascus, chasing after Christ’s followers. He dedicated the rest of his life to proclaiming the gospel in his three missions to many cities. At the end of his life, during his imprisonment, he had written many letters laying out theological foundations for the Christian faith today.

In my Christian and Missionary Alliance, Canada, we promote a Christian life which is “Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, and Mission-focused.” My burden has always been about how to make that goal real in our Christian life. Willard reminds us not only to cast a vision of God’s kingdom life but also to require each individual and each Christian institution to embark on the journey toward Christlikeness. Willard motivates Christian business people to seize opportunities to embody Christ’s life right in the marketplace, in their cubicles, at their desks, in

their boardrooms, at their counters, and during their work shifts (Willard 2014, 220).

In order to assist believers in their spiritual growth and transformation into Christlikeness—the ultimate goal—along with other additional attributes within the context of my ministry, the next discussion will illustrate one of the transformation processes: the process of transformation through relational ministry.

A Process of Transformation through Relational Ministry

In the sacred journey of spiritual growth and discipleship, the art of relational ministry emerges as a profound and transformative approach. This process is not merely an exchange of words; rather, it is a deeply intentional and relational endeavor aimed at nurturing the spiritual well-being of individuals. As we embark on this journey, we will explore a nuanced and iterative process characterized by four fundamental elements, each playing a pivotal role in laying the foundation for a meaningful and impactful connection.

Listening Well to Prepare the Believers' Hearts

The first cornerstone of this process is the art of listening—an ability that goes beyond mere hearing. The intention is to create an environment where hearts are prepared, and understanding is cultivated. Listening becomes an instrument to unlock the doors of trust and vulnerability, setting the stage for a genuine exchange of thoughts, concerns, and aspirations.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer comments, “The first service we owe to others, believers and non-believers alike, in the community of believers, is the ministry of listening to them” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 97). How should we listen? Bonhoeffer adds, “We should listen with the ears of God so that we may speak the Word of God” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 99). Often, we listen while our mind is preparing the next question to ask, and we are just ready to speak once the other party stops talking. We listen, but we do not always understand. Without love, grace, and patience, we tend to rush in giving counsel (our own wisdom) and in winning souls for Christ.

Listening to understand the unique contexts of their trials is crucial. People need true friends with listening ears and a loving heart. Listening is a therapeutic treatment for the broken life with an empty soul (Dirks 2013, 135). The Bible teaches us to be quick to listen and slow to speak (see Jas 1:19). With empathic listening, we gather essential information about them, which helps us understand how to relate and lead them into receiving Christ as their Savior for their sake, not ours. Eventually, this information will guide us in selecting appropriate means (practices and spiritual disciplines) and necessary components in their process of formation (Wilhoit and Howard 2020, 7).

Now, we turn to the next important characteristic that facilitators need to pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the main agent of transformation in Christ.

Praying for the Fullness of the Holy Spirit

Accompanying this attentive listening is the second element—prayer for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Recognizing the transformative power of divine intervention, we seek to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those we minister to. Through prayer, we anticipate a divine encounter. This encounter not only enlightens minds but also touches the deepest recesses of the heart, fostering a spiritual awakening.

As Howard rightly observes, “In this present age, the Holy Spirit is the chief initiator of our formation in Christ” (Howard 2018, 76). Similarly, Gordon Smith comments, “The Holy Spirit effects Christian conversion. It is the Holy Spirit who illumines the mind, convicts the heart of sin and enables the will to act in response to truth” (Smith 2001, 35). Smith further observes that in the community of faith, the mediator of religious experiences, “only the Spirit of God can bring about the spiritual renewal and regeneration in believers” (Smith 2001, 35).

Therefore, spiritual leaders should be filled with the Holy Spirit. This helps new believers understand that without the Spirit, they can never experience “all things new” in their life—an abundant life as Jesus promised (Jn 10:10). When they desire to experience that new life in the Spirit (Howard 2018, 105), I lay hands on them so they can receive the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:17). Smith also affirms that this practice is legitimate, “The church has always affirmed the value of a formal, intentional act, symbolized through the laying on of hands” (Smith 2001, 202).

The Spirit will reveal the truth of God’s word to them, cleanse them from past sins, and empower them to live a committed life in Christ and for Christ (Jn 16:7-11, 1Cor 2:10-12) (Howard 2018, 72–73).

In light of the transformative role of the Holy Spirit, my personal experience over the last twenty years aligns with these principles. I have helped unbelievers believe in Christ for their salvation, taught them Scripture, and consistently prayed for them to receive the Spirit.

Those three important words Salvation, Scripture and Spirit, represented by the letter S in the acrostic WISDOM created by Howard and Wilhoit, cannot be ignored in the process of Christian spiritual formation (Wilhoit and Howard 2020, 7). According to my experience, I find that spiritual leaders have not gone deep enough in explaining to their congregants the Scripture and the important role of the Holy Spirit in forming their new life in Christ. Therefore, believers can be spiritually weak and may not stand firm when facing trials of life.

When believers are inspired with the Holy Spirit, their communication with the Father will be enhanced.

Teaching Believers How to Pray

The third element adds a practical dimension to our journey—teaching individuals how to pray. Beyond the mere recitation of words, this aspect of the process aims to instill a profound understanding of prayer as a personal communion with the Divine. By providing guidance on the art of prayer, we

empower individuals to establish a direct and intimate connection with God, fostering a rich spiritual life.

When long-time or new believers are asked to pray in a small group, in church, or on any occasion, they often feel stupefied and withdrawn. Do they grasp the importance of prayer? Have they truly learned about prayer? They might have listened to numerous sermons on the topic but without putting it into practice. It is crucial for them to learn how to communicate with God as soon as they enter into communion with Him through Christ Jesus.

Simon Chan observes, “In prayer, one enters into a relationship with the Trinity, undergoes mortification, and grows in virtues. One becomes a practicing Christian by engaging in prayer. Prayers are the life signs of faith” (Chan 1998, 127). Encouraging them to practice praying is essential for becoming truly practicing Christians. They can approach God’s throne of grace anytime through the blood of Christ, where they can pour out their souls of loneliness, hurts, worries, and brokenness. They can seek God's help in their daily needs. Most importantly, when entering God’s presence with silence and humility, they will become more relaxed, forgiving, peaceful, and loving. Their inner being will undergo positive transformation (2Cor 5:17).

In addition, they will experience answered prayers, grow more intimate with God, trust Him more, and develop a greater desire to pray. Howard observes, “At a basic level, the aim of prayer is answered prayers” (Howard 2018, 141). Answered prayers serve as motivation for new believers in their initial steps of following Christ.

As facilitators, we need to practice praying to effectively teach others to pray. Without being disciples ourselves, we cannot make disciples.

Teaching Them the New Identity in Christ

Finally, the fourth element invites us to delve into the treasure trove of biblical truth. Through the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, we assist Christ's followers in embarking on a journey of meditating on Scripture. This involves focusing particularly on the profound truths about one's identity in Christ.

It is very critical to teach believers who they really are when they accept Christ in their life and are invited to enter the covenanted relationship with God (Howard 2018, 36) and his covenanted community. This long process can be done best with relational discipleship, to help them become mature in Christ. This difficult task requires patience, love, and grace from the leader. This also enables new believers to break free from their past hurts, bad habits, and hang-ups in their life.

Moreover, learning their new identity in Christ, such as being children of God through Jesus Christ, will help new believers consolidate their position in the family of God. In that relationship, they would feel more open and honest to God, and know that they are accepted by God through His grace, not by their good deeds. They gradually would understand their true value of being children of almighty and loving God. The precious blood of Jesus has redeemed them. They are highly esteemed in the family of God.

Believers receive assistance in addressing negative thoughts, irrational feelings, and habitual sins in their lives. "The Steps to Freedom in Christ" by Neil Anderson serves as a helpful guide through this process. As believers identify and accept the challenges they face, they also confront sins committed against them by others. Through this journey, they learn the art of forgiveness, embrace the belief that they are wholly forgiven and liberated in Christ, and attain righteousness in the presence of God.

In this secure relationship with God, believers find their lives both secure and significant. They can manage their present circumstances without undue worry about the future. Trusting in God, they lead a more peaceful life, confident that their future is in capable hands.

In conclusion, incorporating *lectio divina* into the transformative journey of understanding one's identity in Christ enriches the spiritual growth of believers. As individuals engage in the contemplative reading of Scripture, this ancient practice becomes a dynamic catalyst for a more profound internalization of the foundational truths about their identity in Christ. *Lectio divina* provides a sacred space where believers not only learn about their identity as children of God but also experience a deep, personal connection with these truths. The meditative and prayerful nature of *lectio divina* allows the Holy Spirit to illuminate and engrain these truths in the hearts and minds of believers. Through this intentional engagement with the Word of God, believers find a transformative pathway to a greater sense of self rooted in their identity in Christ, fostering a more authentic and vibrant relationship with God.

Furthermore, this section "A Process of Spiritual Transformation through Relational Ministry" outlines a systematic approach comprising four key elements. It begins with active listening to understand believers' concerns, followed by fervent prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance. The process then involves practical instruction on effective prayer techniques and concludes with teaching believers their new identity in Christ. This holistic approach aims to foster a deep, transformative connection between ministry leaders and believers, emphasizing both spiritual and practical aspects of the Christian journey.

Summary

In this chapter, I recount my spiritual journey, beginning with a vision from God in 1995, followed by my call to sanctification five years later, leading to my eventual role as a pastor in 2007. I revisited my old Spiritual Formation Model, breathed new life into it, and birthed the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model, firmly rooted in biblical and theological foundations. This model serves as a goal or aim to guide churches in disciple-making, especially significant in Toronto's diverse, multicultural context.

As the world converges on our doorstep, local mission becomes crucial. The challenge lies in helping believers experience transformed lives so they can confidently share Christ's gospel with their neighbors. Having meticulously developed the "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation and a process of transformation with four basic elements (e.g., listening, praying for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, teaching how to pray, and learning one's identity in

Christ with *lectio divina*), I embarked on a transformative journey during my second year in the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program, embracing the ancient practice of *lectio divina* as a tool to help bring the ideas of this model into practice.

In the upcoming chapter, I transition from theory to practice by launching a rigorous research project. This endeavor assesses *lectio divina*'s potency in fostering spiritual transformation within a close-knit Asian, English-speaking church community over nine weeks. Through intimate engagement with sacred texts and shared reflections, this chapter underscores my commitment to strengthening faith and growth dynamics, shedding light on *lectio divina*'s transformative power in real-world spiritual journeys.

CHAPTER FOUR:
RESEARCH PROJECT: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF *LECTIO*
***DIVINA* IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION AMONGST**
ASIAN CHRISTIANS

Introduction

In this research, I endeavored to explore how the contemplative Bible reading method known as *lectio divina* could assist Christians, with a particular focus on Asian Christians, in experiencing a deeper measure of God's love, peace, and purpose. This exploration aims to illuminate the path towards becoming more Christ-like. As previously mentioned, my introduction to *lectio divina* occurred during my second year in the DMin program. Experiencing a profound transformation through God's grace, I felt a strong desire to share the benefits of *lectio divina* with others, to guide them on a journey towards Christ-likeness as well.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of this research, I will begin by outlining the problem I identified within my church community, which served as the catalyst for this Research Project. Following that, I will delve into the details concerning my supervisor and the process involved in assembling this project.

Opportunity

During my four decades of involvement in the Vietnamese church community, serving as a member, an elder, and a pastor, I have observed a consistent lack of significant change in the lives of congregants. While they have devoted considerable time to studying Scripture in order to enhance their understanding of God, there has been relatively little emphasis on listening to God and applying His truths in practical ways. Consequently, their contribution to the mission advocated by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) in Canada, which promotes a vision of being "Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, and Mission-focused," has been limited.¹

This issue has driven me to explore alternative approaches aimed at helping Christians engage more deeply with Scripture and undergo spiritual transformation toward a greater Christ-centeredness. This concept lies at the heart of my "Four C's and Three A's Model of Spiritual Formation," as detailed in the preceding section.

Response

In the second year of my Spiritual Formation DMin, I encountered a method of contemplative Bible reading known as *lectio divina* in the Engaging Scripture course. I was eager to test this method when mentoring some of my

¹ Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, "Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, Mission-focused," accessed August 28, 2021, <http://www.cmacan.org>.

mentees and obtained some positive results – some mentees experienced changed lives. That motivated me to research the topic of this project, “Exploring the Role of *Lectio Divina* in Spiritual Formation Amongst Asian Christians.” In this study, I formed a focus group of eight participants (members of my local church). The group met for nine weeks to learn about *lectio* and practice it on six selected biblical passages related to their identity in Christ (see Appendix C). They wrote their reflections on the questions in a response card (Appendix E). Based on their responses, I organized, sorted, and coded them to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data. I looked for signs of change in their relationship with God. Did they experience God's love, peace, and purpose when spending time with God meditating on His words? Would this be a valuable tool to help disciples connect with the Four C's of my Model?

Through the research, *lectio* helped the participants slow down, rest, meditate on the Scripture, and strengthen their relationships with God. Some felt God's love and existence for the first time. Practicing *lectio* in a group setting also allowed them to experience how God and His words affected them personally and their faith in God. The research showed that people were more motivated to pursue God and to love one another.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

I was accountable to the senior pastor of the local community church in Scarborough, who saw the need to grow members into Christ-likeness and permitted me to form a focus group of church members to conduct the research. I

reported to the senior pastore the dates and times of the meetings, the progress of the study, and its outcome. To reduce the risk to the participants, I asked them to sign a covenant of safety and confidentiality (Appendix F). I kept all reports (their collected data and my interpretations) from them anonymous. I also asked them to record their responses (reflections) to open-ended pre-and post-questionnaires (Appendices A and B) as well as their answers to questions on a response card (Appendix E) after they studied and meditated on the selected passages. This approach reduced my personal biases because I did not have to rely on my note-taking during the project.

Context

As mentioned, I have lived among the Vietnamese community and Christian churches in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) since I came to Toronto in 1981. While operating my travel agency serving the Vietnamese in GTA and the surrounding area, I received God's call to serve Him and His church as a pastor in 2002.

During those years, I went through two major crises in two different Vietnamese churches in the GTA. I participated in many church meetings to resolve conflicts among members. Some were immature and lacked Christian theological and biblical foundations, principles, and values. They remained nominal Christians even though they had attended church for many years and participated in various church activities. They needed problem-solving skills

based on biblical principles. Their Christian lives manifested not much difference from unbelievers.

In 2019, when I resigned as an assistant pastor at a local Vietnamese church, my wife and I joined another ethnic church in Scarborough. God also opened the way for me to enter the Spiritual Formation DMin program at Tyndale University so I could continue to dig deeper in the field of spiritual transformation and build the biblical and theological foundations for my ministry, and especially for my “Four C’s” and “Three A’s” Model of Spiritual Formation (as explained earlier). The Christ-Centered element in this model is the first and most vital C in the four C’s – “Christ-Centered,” “Culturally-Relevant,” “Competent,” and “Coaching.” Experiencing God’s love, peace, and purpose will motivate us to seek a more profound relationship with God and gradually move toward greater Christ-centeredness; because of this, I wanted my research to focus on something that would draw participants deeper in this first C of my Model.

Initially, I contemplated forming a group of Vietnamese participants from various Vietnamese churches whose pastors I had known well. However, I soon realized that this would require these pastors to put in extra effort to identify suitable individuals for the study. These participants needed to be willing to commit to a nine-week study, possess proficiency in spoken and written English, and either be able to travel to our meeting place or be familiar with using Zoom for virtual sessions. Consequently, I decided to abandon this plan.

Another idea I explored was creating a focus group comprising Vietnamese students who frequently attended meetings at my home.

Unfortunately, this plan proved unfeasible due to several significant changes that occurred. The group of students disbanded during the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions. Some of them graduated and relocated for job opportunities, while others got married or returned to Vietnam to be with their families during lockdowns. Furthermore, in 2021, I sold my home, further complicating my ability to conduct the study.

However, by the grace of God, in the summer of 2022, I had the opportunity to discuss my research project with Reverend Lee. He graciously allowed me to organize a focus group consisting of church members for the study. We convened on Sundays after the service for a period of nine weeks. During this time, I taught the participants about *lectio divina* and guided them through its practice using six biblical passages. After a few weeks, I examined the effectiveness of this method in helping them feel a closer connection to God.

Initially, I harbored concerns about adapting to the new church environment, as I had been deeply involved in the Vietnamese church community for an extended period. The new church primarily comprises English-speaking Chinese members, which marked a significant departure from my previous experiences.

I anticipated some possible problems that I would have to face while conducting this research:

- Would the participants be willing to try a new Bible study method when engaging the Scripture?

- Would they meet for a short time without meals provided (in my experience, Vietnamese are used to having meals in their small group meetings)?
- Would they have enough time to make friends and feel comfortable sharing their deep feelings and thoughts?
- Would they have free time for this project out of their busy schedules - participating in nine meetings, reviewing the researcher's report, and giving feedback at least two times?
- Would I obtain the expected outcomes from this research?

To address my first concern, I introduced the contemplative method of reading the Scripture, *lectio divina*, and its benefits in helping participants build their more vital relationships with God in the first meeting. I invited them to ask any questions they had about this method.

My second concern was resolved when my senior pastor invited me to run the study in nine sessions (one hour and fifteen minutes each) shortly after Sunday service, together with other discipleship classes at the church simultaneously. After the meeting, the participants went home for lunch.

I introduced and explained the covenant (see Appendix F) to the group regarding my third concern. After reading and understanding it, participants were required to sign it and observe it to guarantee the smooth operation of the group during the study. This covenant aimed at promoting a safe, comfortable, friendly, and respectful space where participants could freely share their sincere

understanding and feelings. They also had time to introduce themselves to the group.

During each session, they had time to be quiet, meditate on the Scripture, and write down their reflections/responses to questions relating to God. They also had time to share their thoughts and pray for one another at the end of the meeting.

Finally, I thank God for giving me this group of people who were eager to learn, practice *lectio divina* and participate in all activities and requirements of the class. They have contributed to the outcomes of this research.

Background from Spiritual Autobiography and Spiritual Formation Model

In my Spiritual Autobiography, I wrote about how God intervened during my hardship in Vietnam in the late 1970's. God gave me hope with His words in Matthew 7:7 and Mark 11:24-25. I lived my life in Canada, resting firmly on those verses for twenty years living in Canada. During one of my evening prayers, God changed my life and gave me His word to live by – “seek first the Kingdom of God” (Mat 6:33). I changed my life’s priorities, focusing less on making money and more on studying the Scripture and the purpose of the church and praying more. In 2007, God called me to pastor His sheep. Then, God urged me to search for a pathway to help new believers experience their transformed lives more effectively, aiming “towards attaining the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature adulthood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

In 2015, I underwent a few changes in my life. I gained experience by forming and mentoring a group of Vietnamese Visa students in Toronto. When I became more mature in Christ and better understood the meaning of a faithful follower of Christ, I formulated a spiritual formation model named “Four C’s” and “Three A’s”. The “Four C’s” stand for characteristics that a new person in Christ possesses: Christ-centeredness, Cultural relevance, Competence, and Coaching. Followers of Christ will live out those characteristics Anywhere they go, with Anyone they meet, and at Anytime of the day (“Three A’s”). Helping new believers to grow spiritually mature in Christ has become my passion. My work in the Model of Spiritual Formation course focused on defining and supporting those characteristics with biblical and theological foundations.

The outcome of this research project demonstrated that *lectio divina* was an excellent method to use in small groups for discipleship, helping people become Christ-like, which is one of the key aspects of my Model. As Howard and Wilhoit observed, “*Lectio divina* is part of the curriculum to grow in Christlikeness” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 9). I became motivated to include *lectio divina* in my teaching, mentoring, and practice of spiritual direction. Furthermore, my focus on Christ-centeredness is relevant to my Christian and Missionary Alliance organization's purpose to encourage its members to become “Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, and Mission-focused.”

Other Course Materials

The book *The Transforming Power of Lectio Divina* by Maria Tasto (2014) was the participant's primary guide in experimenting with *lectio divina*. The author explains: "When we enter into the prayer of *lectio divina*, we are invited to be open to the mystery of God, to be willing to be surprised and to hear something we have never heard before or even envisioned. Then, as we let ourselves be shaped by the Word of God, we will be slowly transformed into a person fully alive, filled with the glory of God" (Tasto 2014, 11). *Lectio divina* is not only a method of slowly reading the Scripture but also preparing us to be shaped by the Word of God, to be transformed into a new being filled with the glory of God and enabling us to communicate with God in intimate prayers.

Before engaging the Scriptures, the participants needed to prepare their souls. The book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard J. Foster (1992) explains that praying the Jesus Prayer (Foster 1992, 122) (one of the focusing/centering prayers) is suitable for participants to recollect themselves until they are unified or whole (Foster 1992, 161). I practice the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," because it is "theologically and biblically sound, and contains core convictions of the gospel – Christ's incarnation, deity, and saving action" (Demarest 1999, 160). Participants also invited the Holy Spirit to pray within them (Foster 1992, 136) and then rested in the presence of God for a few minutes to "listen to the voice of God, which often speaks very softly" (Dysinger 2009, 1).

While sorting and coding the collected data from the study, I found that the book *Shaped by the Word* by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. (2000) was a good tool for helping me prepare data for analysis and interpretation. Chapter 5 provides the foundation for understanding the nature of information versus formation (Mulholland 2000, 47–60). Chapter 9 discusses “being” and “doing” (Mulholland 2000, 95-105). Based on these two chapters, I identified the four categories of doing, being, knowledge (information) and formation for analyzing and interpreting the participants’ pre-and post-questionnaires and their responses to *lectio* (Mulholland 2000, 95–108).

The book *Outrageous Love, Transforming Power* by Terry Wardle (2004) gave me a better understanding of the nature of a transformed life. We experience changed lives when we respond to the invitation of Christ’s call to become like Him (Wardle 2004, 22). Through and in Christ, we enter into a relationship with God and receive our new identity as the Father’s beloved children (Wardle 2004, 33). With the power of the Holy Spirit, we can spend quality time with God in a sacred space to meditate on the Scriptures, pray and live our daily lives in the presence of God, building more robust and more intimate relationships with our Father (Wardle 2004, 46).

The devotional *Who Am I in Christ* by Neil T. Anderson (2001) is simple, powerful, and effective in helping new believers to study, meditate on crucial verses about their new identity in Christ, and grow in Christlikeness. The book contains 36 lessons based on 36 biblical verses divided into three categories: love/acceptance, peace/security, and purpose/significance in Christ (Anderson

2001, 278). Due to the time constraint, I chose two verses/passages in each category for the study. Here are those six verses/passages:

- We feel accepted by God when we know we have been redeemed and forgiven our sins (Colossians 1:13-14) (Anderson 2001, 88).
- We are united with the Lord and one with Him in spirit (1 Corinthians 6:17) (Anderson 2001, 45).
- We feel assured when we know and believe that in Christ, all things work together for good (Romans 8:28-30) (Anderson 2001, 117).
- We have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7) (Anderson 2001, 161).
- We feel our life is significant when we know and believe we have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit (John 15:16, 17) (Anderson 2001, 199).
- We are ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-20) (Anderson 2001, 229).

The book *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* by Tim Sensing offers the following chapters that helped guide me in this project. Chapter 2 is about the good practice of a researcher (Sensing 2011, 31-49). Chapter 3 is about the nature of the data, its collection, analysis and presentation to the reader (Sensing 2011, 50-78). Chapter 4 discusses the tools and techniques for data collection and evaluation in research (Sensing 2011, 79-139). Chapter 6 explains how to take notes from the field or

exact recall a conversation in context (verbatim) (Sensing 2011, 180-193).

Finally, chapter 7 discusses data analysis, documentary analysis, coding data and interpretation (Sensing 2011, 194-211).

The book *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researcher* by Johnny Saldana (2021) helped me understand “codes and categories and their roles in qualitative data analysis” (Saldana 2021, 3) and “fundamental principles of coding” in chapter 1 (Saldana 2021, 3). Chapter 2 offered me “specific methods and techniques of coding qualitative data...data layout and formatting, code frequencies” (Saldana 2021, 25). From this chapter, I understood that my research data was inductively coded. A record of my emergent codes was recorded in “a separate file as a codebook – a compilation of the codes, sometimes accompanied with their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference” (Saldana 2021, 41). The section about Values Coding in Chapter 7 provided me with a technique to code data related to “cultural values and belief systems, identity...” (Saldana 2021, 168).

Field

The project occurred at my new home church from October 09, 2022, to December 04, 2022 (nine sessions of meeting in person at church). The participants were adults aged 18 to 68, members of the church, and Canadian professionals of Chinese (Cantonese) origin, working or retired, and living in the Greater Toronto Area.

In August 2022, the senior pastor invited me to teach a class on discipleship about any topic of my choice. I proposed the course “How to Experience Spiritual Transformation with *lectio divina*.” This class allowed me to build a deeper relationship with my new home church and prepare the way for carrying out my future research project. The course started on September 18 and ended on December 04, 2022.

Once I got the project's approval from the Review Ethics Board of Tyndale University on October 06, 2022, I explained the project to the existing students in the class. I asked them to join the focus group for the study. Eight who were very serious about learning and practicing *lectio divina* decided to participate in the project.

A brief snapshot of the participants, who are English-speaking Canadians of Chinese origin, is as follows:

- Participant 1 is a female in her 20s born in Canada and works as a nurse.
- Participant 2 is a female in her 60s who was born in Hong Kong, is a grandmother, and is a retired teacher in Toronto.
- Participant 3 is a male in his 30s who was born in Canada, works in the IT field, loves God, and serves in different ministries in the church.
- Participant 4 is a female in her 60s who was born in South America, works in the finance department of an educational institution, and actively serves in the church.

- Participant 5 is a female single in her 60s, born in Hong Kong, grew up in Canada, and is a retired social worker.

- Participant 6 is a male in his late 20s who was born in Canada, is a dance teacher, and is active in the church ministry.

- Participant 7 is a male in his mid-20s who was born in Canada, was an IT worker, and just got married; he was active in leading Bible study in his university years.

- Participant 8 is a female in her late 50s who studied in the United Kingdom and immigrated to Canada many years ago to serve as an administrator in a local church.

Scope and Limitations

This project explored how *lectio divina* helps Christians experience spiritual transformation – God’s love, peace and purpose. First, I created a safe and comfortable space for the participants. I taught them how to prepare their souls before engaging in the Scripture. I also taught them *lectio divina* and showed them how to utilize it to meditate on six selected biblical passages (see Appendix C) related to their new identity in Christ. Due to the ministry's time constraints, I chose to limit the number of passages to six. Based on their responses to pre-and post-questionnaires and questions in the response cards, I organized those data and coded them for analysis and interpretation.

Initially, this project focused on building the believers' vertical relationships with God, not their horizontal relationships with other believers, nor motivating them to serve others and go on a mission. However, based on the outcomes of this study, I realized that relationships with God and others cannot be separated. They are one: we are commanded to love God and love one another (Mt 22:37-39). When Christians are in love with God and one another, they will serve and live Christ's purpose naturally. However, I chose to limit myself from pursuing a possible theme of growing a missional community of believers. This would be outside of the scope of this project.

Methodology

To explore and understand thoughts, concepts, or people's experiences in a focus group with *lectio divina*, I used Participatory Action Research (P.A.R.). Since adopting the P.A.R. methodology, I have followed the principles of Patton (Sensing 2011, 58–59). I reserved the first three meetings to explain the Research Project's purpose: "Exploring the Role of *Lectio Divina* in Spiritual Formation Amongst Asian Christians." I allowed time for the participants to understand and question the purpose, methodology, and methods of carrying out this study.

I emphasized that participants in the process own the inquiry and that their participation is actual, not symbolic (Sensing 2011, 58). Furthermore, I noted that I was an inquiry facilitator/researcher, and all (the researcher and the participants) were coequal. I encouraged them to collaborate and support group cohesion and collective inquiry by abiding by the rules in their signed covenant of the focus

group (see Appendix F) (Sensing 2011, 58). I stressed the importance of treating one another with love, respect, and authenticity as brothers and sisters in Christ (Sensing 2011, 58). Since I was present during their meetings and alternatively participated in the two smaller groups (for sharing and praying), I discovered that everyone valued each other's perspectives, expertise, and work in these meetings.

In this research, the participants produced data by recording their responses on the response cards (see Appendix E) and answering the pre-and post-questionnaires (see Appendices A and B). They also collaborated with me in verifying all data collected, analyzing and interpreting them through email exchanges. They participated from the beginning to the end of the study.

Methods

At the group's first meeting, I introduced them to the purpose of the study, the collective covenant, the contemplative Bible study *lectio divina* and how we were going to conduct the study. They used this method to study six selected biblical passages (see Appendix C) in two small groups of four. In the groups, they prayed, meditated and recorded their reflections on the response cards (see Appendix E) I collected at each session's end. The participants also provided me with their answers to the open-ended pre-and post-questionnaire about their relationships with God before and after the study. Those answers were my primary data for analysis. The other supplementary data I gathered from the participants' emails were their comments on my observations and interpretations. Furthermore, I noted how they conducted themselves in their small groups,

interacted with each other, and showed their eagerness and seriousness in this project.

For data analysis, I went through the process of determining the preliminary codes, then the final codes (categories). Then, I put together those codes in a codebook. From those codes, I analyzed all the participants' responses. Finally, I interpreted the effect of doing *lectio divina* on the spirituality of each person or group. I emailed all the interpretations I had made to all participants for verification and evaluation. Then, I reviewed and incorporated their valid remarks in my final report. The participants and the senior pastor received the final report for their records.

Resources Used for Data Collection and Analysis

For Data Collection

I used two tools for data collection: open-ended questionnaires and response cards. The open-ended prequestionnaire (see Appendix A) helped me understand the status of participants' relationships with God before participating in the research. Participants answered the open-ended post-questionnaire (see Appendix B) to reflect on their relationship with God after the project. Sensing affirms the use of these types of questionnaires in P.A.R., "Most often, open-ended and informal questions are used in qualitative interviews and questionnaires" (Sensing 2011, 86). These questions are neutral and open-ended to allow interviewees the freedom to express their detailed and personalized

thoughts, views, and experiences without any confinement imposed by the interviewer (Sensing 2011, 89).

I also used the response card with guided questions for participants to record their reflections after meditating on the Scriptures (see Appendix E). The questions were taken from the book *The Transforming Power of Lectio Divina: How to Pray with Scripture* by Maria Tasto (2014):

1. After the first reading, does anything (a word, a phrase, or an idea) catch your attention? (Tasto 2014, 55).
2. After the second reading, notice what stirs within you as you repeat the word or phrase that catches your attention. What is God saying to you? (Tasto 2014, 55).
3. What is God's invitation to you after the third reading? (Tasto 2014, 56).

Supplementing the third question, I also employed the following questions from the book *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* by James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard (2012) to aid the participants in their reflections:

1. Is there a command to obey?
2. Is there a promise to claim?
3. Is there a virtue to cultivate?
4. Is there an image to savour?
5. Is there a warning to heed?

(Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 130).

For Data Analysis

To facilitate the analysis and interpretations of the participants' data, I followed the eight-step data reduction process proposed by Tesch:

1. Get a sense of the whole. Read all of the transcriptions carefully. Perhaps jot down some ideas as they come to mind.
2. Pick one document (one interview) – the most interesting, the shortest, the one on the top of the pile. Go through it, asking yourself, What is this about? Do not think about the substance of the information but rather its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin.
3. When you have completed this task for several informants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics. Form the topics into columns that might be arrayed as major topics, unique topics, and leftovers.
4. Now, take this list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and writes the codes next to the appropriate text segments. Try this preliminary organizing scheme to see whether new categories and codes emerge.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look to reduce your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between your categories to show interrelationships.
6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7. Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8. If necessary, recode your existing data.
(Sensing 2011, 204–5)

The book *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researcher* by Johnny

Saldana (2021) helped me to code my data in two stages: preliminary and final.

First, I had to learn what coding is. Sensing defines “coding...as a way to get a handle on the raw data so that it is more accessible for interpretation. Coding assigns units of meaning to descriptions, quotes, texts, etc.” (Sensing 2011, 203).

I used the inductive approach in initial coding since I did not have a preliminary list of codes. Saldana helped me understand the meaning of inductive coding by his observation, “Coding inductively is entering the analytic enterprise with as open a mind as possible – a ‘learn as you go’ approach that spontaneously creates original codes the first time data are reviewed” (Saldana 2021, 41).

Before coding the text, I read and re-read it several times and read it line by line to identify the particular words, phrases, or sentences that communicated “the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole” (Sensing 2011, 198-99).

To arrive at the final coding, I needed to define the meaning of “category” and how I moved from coding to category. Saldana helped me to understand that, “to codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize” (Saldana 2021, 13). In other words, it “combines different things to form a new whole...” (Saldana 2021, 13). In my case, I discovered my four categories from the book *Shaped by The Word* by Robert Mulholland (2000). They were “doing,” “being,” “knowledge (information),” and “formation.” In my project, “doing” was defined as all activities or things good Christians do, like attending church, reading the Scripture, participating in small groups, and so on (Mulholland 2000, 98). “Being” relates to participants’ feelings about their relationships with God (Mulholland 2000, 99). “Knowledge/information” concerns participants’ understanding of God through reading the Scripture and treating it as a text to master (Mulholland 2000, 54). “Formation” is related to Christians’ experience in spiritual formation when in-depth reading of a small portion of the text and letting it shape their being in the image of Christ (Mulholland 2000, 100).

From those categories, I could evaluate the participants’ relationships with God and their perspective change before and after the study. For example, see the pre-and post-questionnaires in Table 9, Appendix K. Before the study, the participant wrote, “God is omnipotent, righteous, and someone to be obeyed and

feared.” After the study, the participant expressed her attitude change toward God: “The whole experience becomes a joy, like meeting up with someone dear to me. God is my real Father.” The participant’s attitude toward God changed from fear of God and being apart from God to feeling more intimate with God and wanting to spend time with her Father. Indeed, Carl Savage suggests we look for the change in the participants’ stories (Savage et al. 2008, 124–25).

Those categories also served as a common ground for evaluating other participants’ relationships with God. That facilitated my conclusion about the effectiveness of *lectio divina* on spiritual transformation, particularly in helping Christians experience God’s love, peace and purpose.

I used emails to communicate with my participants for data verification and comments. I sent them their tables of pre- and post-questionnaires, tables summarizing all their responses to six studied biblical passages, and my initial observations and interpretations for each participant, which I expected them to review and send me their comments within two weeks. Finally, as a researcher/minister/active participant, I was the last to finalize the data evaluation and prepare the final report.

Reasons for Adopting These Strategies or Research Methods

This research topic explored the role of *lectio divina* in spiritual formation amongst Asian Christians. Because of the nature of this research, I chose qualitative over quantitative analysis to help me understand concepts, thoughts,

and experiences which could not be numerically quantified. This study showed me that *lectio divina* is a good tool for my ministry.

Initially, for collecting data, I had intended to take notes alone when the participants shared their thoughts after meditating on the selected passages. In retrospect, I could have improved at taking notes. I had also meant to ask a helper in the class to take notes for me. However, she was not able to participate in the study entirely. I had even thought of video recording every session. I could have replayed and transcribed those videos if I had adopted this data collection method.

In the end, creating a response card (see Appendix E) for collecting data saved me time and effort. At the end of each meeting, I collected all the participants' response cards and responses to pre-and post-questionnaires. Those data were summarized, categorized, interpreted, expressed in words, reviewed, and corrected by all parties involved in the project.

Since the project involved few people who participated in a focus group to do the study, the choice of participatory action research methodology and methods was appropriate for a ministry-based research project.

Phases and Timetable

To help me keep track of this project's many phases, coordinate the different tasks and people involved in the project, and remember the time frame for finishing each task, I put together all those elements in Table 1 as follows. It was adequate for me to keep myself on track and meet the deadline of this study.

Table 1. Major phases of the project with specific actions and dates

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Developing the Innovation (REB and Field Research Proposal)	Develop and identify supporting documents (items for Ethical Review)	July	Hoa (Paul)	A written report and review of drafts
	Review of other drafts	Aug. 12		
	Submitted REB for instructor review	Aug. 18	Hoa	Incorporated peer review and supporting documents on Moodle
	Submitted a final action research proposal	Aug. 22	Hoa	Written report
	Submitted REB application	Sept. 14	Hoa	Revised and incorporated the instructor's comments before submission
	Submit REB approval to the instructor.	Oct. 6	Hoa	On Moodle
	Final Report of FRP	Aug. 22	Hoa	Revised based on class sessions and residency peer reviews

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Intervention Meetings of the focus group	Conducted focus group	Oct. 16	Hoa and participants	Hoa explained the details of the study.
	Meeting 1			
	Meeting 2	Oct. 23	Hoa and participants	Hoa explained <i>Lectio Divina</i>
	Meeting 3	Oct. 30	All participants	As above
	Meeting 4	Nov. 06	All participants	They applied <i>Lectio</i> to two biblical passages.
	Meeting 5	Nov. 13	All participants	As above
	Meeting 6	Nov. 20	All participants	As above
	Progress Report Submitted	Oct. 31	Hoa	on progress and learned experiences
Gathering Post-Intervention Data	Meeting 7	Dec. 04	Hoa (Paul) and participants	Reflections shared
Analysis	Collection and classification of all data	Dec. 30	Hoa	Collected, sorted, and entered data in Excel.
	Compiling a table of pre- and post-questionnaire for analysis	Jan. 02	Hoa	Identified the spiritual change in participants (8)
	Writing observations for each participant	Jan 04/ 2023	Hoa	Wrote and sent
Interpretation	Coding data from participants	Jan 05-10	Hoa	Coded pre- and postquestionn

				aires, and response cards
	Revising codes and making a code book	Jan. 14	Hoa	
	Preparing a summary of coded responses, and interpretations for each participant	Jan. 15-17	Hoa	Hoa emailed the summary to each participant (individually) for confidentiality.
Reporting	Draft submitted for peer review	Jan 16, 2023	Hoa	Revised before submission for peer review
	Review your peers' Field Research Reports	Jan 20, 2023	Hoa	Read and annotated
	Feedback from participants on the summary report	By Feb. 02	All participants	By email
	Draft a written report for participants and the senior pastor to review	Mar 17, 2023	Hoa sent it to the pastor and participants.	By email
	Final written report (7500 to 10000 words)	April 03, 2023	Hoa	Review based on class and peer reviews before submission.

Ethics in Ministry-Based Research

Even though I was not holding any position in my new home church, I was a minister-at-large and still had a certain degree of power. Therefore, I had to deal with the issue of the power differential between researchers and participants. I explained the project's aim, objectives, and methodology. I ensured the participants understood my role as a researcher. I collected, analyzed, and interpreted their responses to *lectio divina* in this study. I emailed my findings to each participant for evaluation and comments. I incorporated any recommended changes in my report and emailed them the updated one. Since they were participants of this project, I respected them as my collaborators and sought not to exercise any power or authority over them. I also reminded myself that I needed to set aside my usual role of a minister (a leader) and wear my hat of a researcher, a facilitator, who did not teach or make disciples but helped the participants understand thoroughly what this research was about and be able to participate in it comfortably. To help me keep the line, the senior pastor was present in the focus group meetings and was a contact person if they had any concerns.

Furthermore, I provided them with an informed consent form (Appendix H). It also helped ensure that participants would respect one another during the study and pointed out that they could refrain from some components or the rest of the project.

I reserved the first meeting for the group to get to know each other and to raise any questions, concerns, or expectations after the participants had received and read the research proposal. I allowed enough time for the participants to feel

comfortable with the group and speak freely about their concerns or expectations. I tried to address them thoroughly before the project could proceed.

I divided the participants into two small groups so they could make friends with each other, have personal time to ponder the selected biblical passages (see Appendix C) and write their responses to the questions in the response card for each passage.

Findings

With the focus on the limited objective of this project, this section reports on what the researcher has found (findings), explains what the collected data means (interpretations), and then describes the project outcomes for his ministry.

Before the study, I collected the participants' responses to the pre-questionnaire; during the intervention, their responses to questions were in the response card when they used *lectio divina* to meditate on six biblical passages after each session. At the end of the intervention, I also collected their answers to the post-questionnaire.

Those data were organized into a data set for each participant, which consists of two tables. The first contains pre- and post-questionnaire responses (Table 9, Appendix I). Table 9 is an example of this type for Participant 1, including the second column for the coded responses and the third for the final codes (categories). The second table (Table 10) contains all answers to six biblical passages of Participant 1. To arrive at these final tabular forms, the researcher had

to organize, reorganize, sort, and re-sort the data, following the protocol in the section “Resources Used for Data Collection and Analysis.”

I followed the eight-step data reduction process proposed by Tesch, as mentioned earlier (Sensing 2011, 204–5). I took the responses to the pre- and post-questionnaire of the participant, went through them and asked myself, “What is this about?” After completing the task for several participants, I made a list of topics; I clustered together similar topics and formed them into rows. I continued to follow the instructions until I made a final decision on the abbreviation for each sub-category. Then, I classified those sub-categories (devotions, church, distant, and so on) under the four categories of doing, being, information, and formation, taken from the book *Shaped by the Word* by Mulholland (2000). Those are the codes used in Tables 3 to 7. For Table 8, the other set of codes was chosen based on the objective of this research, related to the effectiveness of *lectio divina* in helping Christians experience God. Please see the codebook (see Table 2) to describe the different codes used.

Codebook

The codebook (Table 2) is a compilation of all the codes and their descriptions, valid for analysis and interpretation of the collected data. It has two sets: (1) the first set of codes is used to describe the participant’s relationship with God before and after the Research Project (see Tables 3 to 7); (2) the second set of codes is used to describe the effectiveness of *lectio divina* (see Table 8).

Table 2. Coding Categories for this Research Project

Code	Description
Relationship with God	Codes related to the participant's relationship with God (see Tables 3 to 7)
Doing (category)	All activities Christians do as church members.
Devotions (sub-category)	Participants mention their spiritual routines (Bible study, devotional, praying, attending a small group, and so on) to describe their relationships with God.
Church (sub-category)	Participants mention attending church to illustrate their relationships with God.
To conform to Jesus (sub-category)	Christians are called to conform to Jesus, to be like Christ.
Holy living by the Spirit (sub-category)	Christians need the Holy Spirit's presence and power to live a holy (godly) life.
Being (category)	How do Christians feel when they are in a relationship with God?
Distant (inconsistent, stagnant) (sub-category)	Participants feel their relationships with God are distant, stagnant, or inconsistent.
Negative feelings about God (sub-category)	Participants feel God is strict or fearful.
Positive feelings about God (sub-category)	Participants feel God is loving, caring, or merciful.
Redeemed by Christ (sub-category)	Christians know Jesus redeemed and reconciled them to God out of His love.
Love for God (sub-category)	When they intensely experience God, they can express their love for God.
Intimate with God through spiritual practice (sub-category)	Christians have an intimate (close) relationship with God through reading, meditating and praying the scriptures.
Peaceful in God (sub-category)	When Christians truly understand and believe in their identity as children of God, they can feel peace and rest in God's presence.
Identity in Christ (sub-category)	God's child (Jn 1:12); a saint (Rom 12:13); a temple of the Spirit (1 Cor 6:19); an ambassador (2 Cor 5:17-20); a servant (Col 1:7, Rom 8:28-30)
Belong to a church (sub-category)	A Christian needs to belong to a community of believers.
Information (category)	Christians gather knowledge or information about God, like His truths and characters, and can argue convincingly for God but hardly experience life transformation.

Truths in the Scripture (sub-category)	Participants know the scriptures' teachings, truths and church doctrines.
God's mercy, love, forgiveness (sub-category)	Participants know God is loving, merciful, or forgiving.
Formation (category)	Even Christians have accumulated much information about God, but without being intimate with God, they hardly experience spiritual transformation.
Not living the truth (sub-category)	Participants know the truth but do not live by the truth.
Living in fear & anxiety (sub-category)	Participants know the truth but still live in fear and anxiety.
Christ's characteristics	In Christ, Christians will be transformed and display Christ's characteristics (the fruit of the Spirit [Gal 5:22]), like endurance, patience, or humility.
Change in attitude (sub-category)	In Christ, their attitudes will change: from fear to confidence, anxiety to peace.
<i>Lectio Divina</i> (category)	Following codes related to the effectiveness of <i>lectio divina</i> (see Table 8)
Centering prayers (sub-category)	Participants prepared their souls by praying the Jesus Prayer before the <i>lectio</i> .
Slow down and focus (sub-category)	Practicing <i>lectio</i> helps participants slow down to meditate on the Scripture.
Ponder and listen (sub-category)	To meditate and to hear God speak through the Scripture.
Apply the truth (sub-category)	God invited participants to apply what they heard from God through <i>lectio</i> .
More focus on the 'heart' (sub-category)	A shift from focusing on finding information about God to being with God.
Enhance relationship with God (sub-category)	Relationship with God becomes more intimate. Participants can describe their relationships with God in feeling terms.
Change attitude (sub-category)	Participants became aware of the need to change their attitude (to more patience, endurance or humility)
Share insights in a group (sub-category)	When participants practiced <i>lectio</i> in a small group, they shared their insights.
Need both Bible study and <i>lectio</i> (sub-category)	A participant raised the need to use Bible study and <i>lectio</i> to engage scriptures.

Table 3 summarizes all participants' coded responses to the pre-questionnaire. The boxes with “Y” (yes) means the participant did the action or felt that feeling; otherwise, the blank spot means the participant did not mention any action or feeling related to that sub-category in his/her response. For example, the “Y” (“Devotions”, from participant no. 2) indicates that participant no. 2 did devotions prior to the research project. Another example: “Y” (“Distant,” from participant no. 2) means the same person felt distant in their relationship with God. This rule is applied to Tables from 3 to 8.

Table 3. A summary of participants’ responses to the pre-questionnaire relating to their relationship with God before the Research Project

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Doing								
Devotions	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y
Church					Y			
Being								
Distant (inconsistent, stagnant)	Y	Y					Y	Y
Negative feelings about God	Y				Y		Y	Y
Positive feelings about God				Y	Y	Y		Y
Information								
Truths in the Scripture			Y			Y		
God’s mercy, love, forgiveness	Y		Y		Y			
Formation								
We are not living the truth			Y					
Living in fear & anxiety			Y					

As shown in Table 3, when asked about their relationship with God, six out of eight mentioned what they did in their Christian walk, like devotions, church attendance, or spiritual discipline practice. Four out of eight felt their relationships with God were distant, inconsistent, and stagnant. Four felt positive about their relationships with God using loving, caring, and merciful language. One said God was loving but strict. Two emphasized knowing the truths about God, and three knew God was merciful, loving, or forgiving.

Table 4 summarizes the eight participants’ responses to the post-questionnaire about their relationships with God after the intervention. In the category of doing, only Participant 8 responded positively to code Devotions. All eight participants’ positive responses clustered in the category of being. They felt connected to God, joyful, peaceful, or delightful in their relationships with God, which they began to value.

Table 4. A summary of participants’ responses to the post-questionnaire relating to their relationship with God after the Research Project

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Doing								
Devotions								Y
Being								
Connected to God	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	
Joyful/peaceful/delightful	Y					Y		
Value the relationship with God.	Y		Y		Y		Y	Y

Table 5 summarizes all participants’ responses to the question, “What is God saying to you?” when they meditated on the six passages. The results showed positive responses in the sub-categories: “Redeemed by Christ,” “To Conform to

Jesus,” and “Holy Living by the Spirit.” These three interwoven elements help Christians grow in their relationships with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Seven out of eight were well aware of the love of Christ who redeemed them and changed their minds to follow Him instead of the world when meditating on Colossians 1:3-14. When studying 1 Corinthians 6:17, 19-20 and Romans 8:28-30, five out of eight realized the purpose of their redeemed lives is to conform to Christ. Eight out of eight felt the need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a holy life pleasing to God.

Table 5. Summary of participants’ responses to the question: “What is God saying to you?”

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Doing								
To conform to Jesus		Y	Y	Y	Y			Y
Holy living by the Spirit	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Being								
Redeemed by Christ	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Intimate with God through spiritual practice	Y							
Positive feelings about God			Y			Y		
Love for God								
Peaceful in God	Y				Y			Y
Belong to a church								Y
Formation								
Christ’s characteristics	Y							
Change in attitude			Y			Y		Y

Table 6 shows how they responded to God’s message and received any of God’s commands they needed to obey. Eight out of eight responded to the call to rely upon the Holy Spirit for holy living; four also realized they needed to live their lives conforming to Christ. Two of these four further identified some of

Christ’s characteristics that God invited them to work on, like endurance, patience, or humility. The participants indicated that they understood they could not conform to Christ, to be like Christ (in His characteristics) without relying upon the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Only one (participant no. 5) expressed a connection with the call to love God, and was also the one who had the most number of Y’s. This participant was motivated to rely on the Holy Spirit for holy living and for conforming to Christ and Christ-likeness, and felt positive in his/her relationship with God. The participant no. 2 also felt uplift in one’s relationship with the Father and responded to God’s invitation to conform to Jesus and rely upon the Holy Spirit for holy living.

Participants 1 and 7 were reminded to rely upon the Holy Spirit for holy living and practice spiritual disciplines to maintain intimacy with God. However, Participant 7 was prompted with two additional commands: to conform to Christ and experience God’s love, care and mercy.

Table 6. Summary of participants’ responses to any God’s command to obey

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Doing								
To conform to Jesus		Y			Y	Y	Y	
Holy living by the Spirit	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Being								
Intimate with God through spiritual practice	Y						Y	
Positive feelings about God		Y			Y		Y	
Love for God					Y			
Formation								
Christ’s characters					Y	Y		

In Table 7, seven out of eight participants realized they were the temple of the Spirit. This was consistent with the findings in Table 5 (eight felt God’s message to them was to live their lives for God) and Table 6 (eight felt God invited them to live that life). Indeed, they were drawing nearer to God through listening to His call and responding to it. I found two of them even aware of the task of being representatives of God in reaching out to others with the gospel (being ambassadors for Christ in the ministry of reconciliation). Participant 6 sensed their three identities in Christ: a saint, a temple of the Spirit, and a servant to serve others in the Body of Christ or outside the church walls.

Table 7. Summary of participants’ awareness of their identities in Christ

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
God’s Child					Y			
Saint						Y		
Temple of the Spirit	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Ambassador	Y			Y				
Servant						Y		Y

Table 8 summarizes participants’ responses to preparing their souls using centering prayers, especially praying the Jesus prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide the meeting, and resting in the presence of God before *lectio*. Their experiences with the intervention clustered around feeling calmed and focused (four out of eight), listening to the Word of God (five out of eight), focusing more on the “heart” (four out of eight), applying the truth in their lives, and so on.

Table 8. Summary of participants’ spiritual experiences with *lectio divina*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Centering prayers (i.e. Jesus Prayer) help		Y	Y		Y			
<i>Lectio</i> helps								
Slow down & focus		Y		Y	Y	Y		
Ponder & listen	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Apply the truth	Y		Y		Y		Y	
More focus on the ‘heart.’	Y			Y	Y	Y		
Enhance relationship with God/Jesus/Holy Spirit.	Y	Y			Y			
Change attitude		Y						
Other topics								
Sharing insights in a group		Y						Y
Need both Bible study and <i>lectio</i>				Y				

Analysis and Interpretation

Based on these codes, I grouped the participants’ coded responses (see Tables 3-8) and used the following questions to guide my analysis and interpretation:

- Did the participants feel loved, peaceful/safe, and meaningful in their relationships with God?
- Did they realize any aspects of their identity in Christ?
- How would they respond to God’s love and grace for them?
- Was *lectio divina* effective in helping them experience spiritual transformation?

The data in Table 3 suggested that the participants' "doings" in the church and knowledge about God and the Bible were not enough to help them positively experience God, even though they are necessary practices in the Christian life. Noticeably, Participant 3 loved God, studied the Scripture seriously, and knew its truths but still lived in fear and anxiety. Although the participant knew the right information, the relationship with God was not what it could be.

In Table 4, the shift from "doing" to "being" was noticeable after the study. Participants developed their feelings and their hearts for God. They felt more connected to God and to His church since most have attended church regularly. In Table 3 above, when the participants responded to the pre-questionnaire, six out of eight did say yes to "Devotions," demonstrating that they engaged in regular devotional time. But the data shows that only one said yes the same thing in Table 4. It does not necessarily mean that the rest did not value devotional time. After this study, one participant wrote well in response to the post-questionnaire: "I have learned a more practical way to study the Bible. I love to do devotionals. I feel excited to study the Bible using *lectio divina* because I feel directly connected to the Holy Trinity."

Regarding Table 5, as mentioned earlier, these three interconnected elements – "Redeemed by Christ," "To Conform to Jesus," and "Holy Living by the Spirit" – play a crucial role in fostering Christians' growth in their relationships with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It's worth delving deeper into the intricate connection between these three sub-categories. Notably, five out of eight participants resonated with the message of "Conforming to Jesus," while all

eight acknowledged the imperative of "Holy Living by the Spirit." To conform to Jesus, it was evident that all participants recognized the necessity of leading a sanctified life, relying on the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul underscores our complete dependence on the Holy Spirit for living out our Christian faith when he penned the words, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Moving on, seven out of eight participants were reminded of their redemption by Christ. Christ's sacrifice on the cross served to redeem them from the death penalty of their sins, transforming them into devoted followers of Christ who lead lives dedicated to God in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Among these seven individuals, Participant no. 1 received an additional divine instruction from God, urging them to engage in spiritual disciplines that would facilitate intimacy with God and aid in emulating the characteristics of Christ. In this group, Participant no. 8 was prompted to "Belong to a Church" as an additional step beyond being "Redeemed by Christ."

Returning to Table 5, their responses in the sub-categories of "Positive Feelings about God," "Peacefulness in God," and "Change in Attitude" were in harmony with the overall state of the participants' spirituality. They expressed a profound sense of God's love for them and responded affirmatively to His call to lead holy lives, striving to resemble Christ in character.

Referring to Table 6, all participants became aware of the need for the Holy Spirit to be fully present to empower them to live a new life in Christ. St. Paul wrote, "I [St. Paul] can do all things through Him [Jesus, Spirit] who

strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). He gave full credit to the presence and the power of the Spirit in his life. He urges us to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). The Spirit empowers us to be rooted in Christ and His love (Eph 3:16-19). Hence, Christians would be transformed into new people, more conforming to Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and manifesting more of His characteristics in their lives (Gal 5:22). Through relying upon the Holy Spirit, participants were brought closer to God the Father.

In Table 7, only one mentioned their identity as a God’s child. Does that mean the rest of them did not know that they were children of God? Referring back to Table 5, I found that they responded that they believed that Jesus redeemed them; they indeed became children of God and could call God Father. The teachings and preaching in the church might have to remind people of this critical identity.

Moreover, one participant identified herself as a servant. What does that mean? Participant 8 might have been spiritually mature, grown through the stage of a spiritual child and sanctified. Now, she just focused on being a servant of God. Looking back at her context, I realized she is a mature person devoted to meditating on the Scripture, a soul friend of others, and a dedicated servant in the church. This is possibly why she focused on the identity of being a servant of the Lord and nothing else.

In Table 8, the results showed positive participant responses to preparing their souls, minds, and hearts before *lectio*, like preparing the soil carefully before sowing the seeds – God’s words, allowing them to permeate people’s inner souls

and change their perspectives of lives, interests, and purposes. In this way, the words of God had a better chance to affect their hearts and help the people feel and understand God's heart. People responded more favourably to that love and gradually became closer to God.

Table 8 also revealed two other topics: "sharing insights in a group" and "need both Bible study and *lectio*." Two participants experienced the usefulness of listening to insights sharing in the context of a community. They saw how powerful God's words were. The exact words conveyed different messages to each individual. They could better understand the Scripture's depth, the perspectives of each person in the group, and their strengths and weaknesses. In a safe space of a small group, they could share and listen to one another and pray for one another. One participant confessed she drew nearer to God through hearing others share their stories. *Lectio* is suitable for personal and group meditation in this study.

Participant 4 pointed out an important idea: the need for different Bible study methods – the usual way of reading and analyzing the Scripture, and this contemplative method *lectio divina*. We need both to complement one another in building up Christians with solid theological and biblical knowledge, strengthening their relationship with God for spiritual transformation, and hence becoming eager to live out the gospel of Christ and serve inside and outside of the church.

All participants agreed that *lectio divina* helped them experience the community of saints and became amazed at the same Word of God, conveying

different messages individually and relevantly; after meditating, they shared in the small group what God had spoken to them. They also prayed for each other at the end of the meeting. They not only engaged with God through His words but also with their fellow saints in Christ. Indeed, they felt closer to God and one another.

To conclude this section on interpretations, based on the raw data sets of each participant, I drew out some of their noticeable quotes after the study. Participants expressed their feelings of God's love: "God is my real Father" (see Table 9, Post-questionnaire); Participant 5 observed, "I am forgiven. I have a new life to move on;" Participant 2 felt renewed, "God speaks to me when I study His word, and he uses fellow brothers and sisters to guide me back to His light." Beyond my expectation, I was delighted to see an active and committed church member decide to give Jesus complete control of her life from now on. Jesus is now both her Savior and Lord.

Outcomes

Transforming lives has always been my passion for ministry because God has transformed me. Through my study in the DMin program of Spiritual Formation, I have encountered a classical method of engaging the Scripture, *lectio divina*, an effective tool to help Christians experience spiritual transformation, as highly recommended by theologians and professors. Therefore, I was motivated to do this research project to test its effectiveness in my local church.

In this section, I will present my results concerning the participants; next, I will share the possible benefits to my local church, and to the Eastern District of

the Christian and Missionary Alliance, where I am serving; and finally, what it means for my ministry of discipleship and spiritual direction.

Concerning the Participants

First, considering the participants' responses to the prequestionnaire, I could not find any terms relating to intimacy, happiness, joy, love, acceptance, safety, and significance to describe their relationships with God. Instead, they shared what they did in their time with God, or they participated in the church's life. Indeed, they knew they were in a relationship with their loving heavenly Father and Jesus, but they did not express how God had loved them and, in return, how they could manifest their love to God.

In the book *Shaped by the Word*, Robert Mulholland (2000) observes that Christians must balance being and doing. Both are important, "but the focus, the primary element, is being. This is what we see in the Great Commandment" (Mulholland 2000, 98). When asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Mat 22:39, ESV).

Furthermore, in His story with the two sisters, Martha and Mary, Jesus defended Mary in response to her sister Martha's complaint, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). Jesus emphasized being with Him first before doing anything for Him

later. Before Jesus' ascension, He commanded His disciples to go and make disciples among nations (Mat. 28:19). From what I have witnessed, some Christians showed their spiritual immaturity when facing conflicts in church or at home. They might have been caught up in the busyness with their families, work and church at the expense of being with God, which is essential to forming our Christian life.

Second, I realized the participants needed more knowledge and trust in the Holy Spirit to direct their lives. Even being very active in serving the church, Christians might do everything, relying upon their own effort. They are unaware of or ignore the presence of the Spirit in their lives. They might need to be reminded regularly that once they received and believed in Jesus Christ, they have the Holy Spirit in their souls (see Eph 1:13-14). In the book *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, Evan B. Howard observes, "the Spirit of God (contributes) to the formation of a people... Unfortunately, God's people repeatedly failed to welcome the Spirit... The Spirit is the key to the maintenance of relationship with God and formation into conformity with Christ's life and purpose" (Howard 2018, 71). Therefore, I instructed this study's participants to practice inviting the Holy Spirit to lead their meditation on the Scripture and their daily lives.

Third, in a short period, participants who meditated on only six biblical passages within a safe community reported experiencing joy and peace in their relationships with God and others. Prior to engaging in *lectio*, participants familiarized themselves with the Covenant of the Focus Group (see Appendix F) and committed to creating a safe space for everyone in the group. This

commitment allowed each participant in the meeting to openly share their thoughts, pains, fears, anxieties, and spiritual struggles without the fear of judgment or criticism. Reflecting on the words of God and expressing their emotions enabled them to address issues such as pain, emotional turmoil, and various struggles. Within the secure environment of a small group, participants were even able to offer prayers for one another after sharing and listening (refer to Tables 4, 5, and 8).

Fourth, it is encouraging to notice that all participants realized at least one of the different names of their identity in Christ. The majority of them knew they were the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, a concern that emerged from my research was that only one mentioned their identity as a child of God (Table 7); the first critical identity when people open their hearts to receive and believe in Christ. They are called the children of God (Jn 1:12), belong to the community of saints, and are loved and secure in God's embrace. They are entitled to call God "Abba" (Gal 4:6). Being a child of God is our eternal identity. Terry Wardle emphasizes, "Our identity as God's beloved is all we will ever need." He further comments, "The people of Christ are to be transformed, and the foundation of that radical work rests in the reality that we belong to God. There is no longer a need to strive, grab, please people, or compete to find a place at the table" (Wardle 2004, 38). We must remind Christians of this essential identity (beloved children of God) and encourage them to live more simply, spend quality time and build meaningful relationships with their Father God.

Fifth, I observed that all the participants experienced a specific spiritual transformation. They felt the love, safety, and purpose of God. They became motivated to spend regular time with God. They knew their spirituality (spiritual self-awareness) and realized God used the precise words to convey different messages to each of them. Moreover, in a small group context, witnessing God's actions in other people's lives also impacted their faith. They began to value God's community when they pondered over the words, listened to God and one another, and prayed (see Table 8). Hence, their relationships with God and others became strengthened.

Sixth, the participants found the benefits of *lectio divina*, motivating them to set aside their precious time for God and dig deep into His words. The project demonstrated that *lectio divina* was an effective tool for growing Christians into Christlikeness. "Consequently, when reading Scripture in an attitude of prayer, our reading of Scripture becomes simply one more form of intimate communication with God. Moreover, this, in turn, results in the transformation of our lives," rightly observe Wilhoit and Howard (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 109). Indeed, when the participants employed *lectio* in meditating on the Scripture, they allowed God's word to shape their lives, became more articulate in their prayers and became more expressive in manifesting their intimate love to God.

Seventh, the participants recognized the importance of three stages in preparing their souls before the *lectio*: helping them to calm down and focus on God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The three stages consist of praying the Jesus prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to lead the session, and resting in the presence of

God for a moment. The theological foundations of these practices can be found in My Rule of *Lectio Divina* (Appendix D).

Potential Benefits to My Local Church

Would this initiative bring about any advantages for the church? I am interested in presenting the concept to my senior pastor of providing training to all key leaders within the church (including small group leaders) in the use of *lectio divina* as an alternative to traditional Bible study. This approach would help nurture our members into becoming holistic Christians who can effectively harness both analytical and creative faculties, deepen their love for God and others, and wholeheartedly embrace their role as ambassadors of Christ. Additionally, it would prove valuable to educate leaders and the congregation on incorporating *lectio divina* as an additional tool for engaging with Scripture during various church gatherings – be it small group sessions, worship team meetings, or gatherings of elders and deacons, and more.

The senior pastor of my home church really liked how *lectio divina* helped people change their lives. He wished more people, fifty instead of just eight, could have joined the *lectio divina* class. After that, he asked me to lead another class about being better followers of faith, and I could pick the topic. I chose "Strengthening Our Souls Together." In this class, we learned how to connect with God through *lectio divina* and also how to be closer to others in the church by sharing our spiritual journeys. It's like a journey for our hearts and our community, all inspired by *lectio divina*.

Furthermore, I hope that the results of this project provide the leadership of the church with fresh details about the spiritual health, strengths, and weaknesses of church members and hence, contribute to the plan for preaching, teaching, and organizing for growing the church in the relationships with God and one another, and their spiritual maturity (Christ-likeness) and commitment to making disciples.

Introducing *Lectio Divina* to Churches in the District

I also plan to introduce this research and its results to the leaders of the Eastern District of Christian and Missionary Alliance Canada (C&MA), where I am licensed as a minister-at-large. C&MA has promoted the motto “Christ-Centered, Spirit-Empowered, Mission-Focused” for the last few years across denominational churches. I have obtained an excellent tool, *lectio divina*, to help promote Christlikeness in the District. I will ask for opportunities to present this tool to different churches in the District and invite their interest in getting trained in implementing *lectio divina* church-wide for their members’ spiritual growth.

Beneficial to My Ministry

For my ministry of discipleship, the result of this project provided me with another effective tool to help my disciples, directees, or mentees engage the words of God meditatively, prayerfully, and contemplatively so that they become more Christlike in their thoughts, attitudes, words, and works. Hopefully, they might become Christians who love God and others and commit themselves to making disciples who make disciples for the glory of the Triune God.

Lastly, the results of this study nullified all the concerns mentioned in the context section. The participants were willing to study *lectio divina*, follow the instructions closely, cooperate in the group, fully participate in the meetings, devote themselves to writing responses to all questionnaires, reviewing the report, and giving feedback.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to several individuals who played significant roles during my academic journey. I extend my heartfelt thanks to many professors, especially Dr. D. Sherbino, who generously admitted me into the program and meticulously corrected my work, providing invaluable insights and guidance.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my colleagues, one of whom gifted me a precious book that greatly aided my studies in *lectio divina*, demonstrating their unwavering support and encouragement.

As I reached the final stage of my study, I am profoundly thankful for my advisor, who dedicated substantial time to review my paper and offered numerous constructive comments. These insights were instrumental in shaping my final paper. Additionally, I am appreciative of the librarian, who went above and beyond to assist me when circumstances prevented me from visiting the library.

Despite commencing my program during the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am pleased to report that I successfully completed my studies with joy and happiness. The lockdown measures undoubtedly had a profound impact on society as a whole, but they did not deter me from achieving

my academic goals. I am also grateful to the school for their unwavering efforts in supporting students and helping us attain our educational objectives.

Reflecting on my three years in the Doctor of Ministry program in Spiritual Formation, I have gained a deep understanding of what Spiritual Formation entails. Here are a few key takeaways from the three distinct projects I undertook during this program:

1. Writing my Spiritual Autobiography
2. Developing my Model of Spiritual Formation
3. Evaluating the effectiveness of *lectio divina* through my Research Project in facilitating spiritual transformation for others.

When I explored writing my Spiritual Autobiography, I became more aware of God's presence and purpose in my life, and why God kept me "independent" (prompted by my spiritual director Don Crow) from my mother since I was a baby. My parents sent me to a Catholic school, even though my family practiced Buddhism. My father built a pagoda to worship Buddha, while my mother has practiced mediumship since she was 12 years old.

I have become more committed to spend regular devotional time with God, understood His plan for me and cooperated with Him in His work. I am now more willing to share God with others, and I am more gracious to others because God has shown me His grace. My love for God has deepened since I realized that He revealed Himself to me during a dramatic period in Vietnam. He guided me through His words in the Bible, and His words have been a guiding light in every major step of my life (Psalm 119:105).

In this program of Spiritual Formation, and through the study of spiritual autobiography, I have come to recognize God's hand and plan in my life more clearly. God has provided me with opportunities to work with young Vietnamese visa students, particularly in the field of recruiting. I have been passionate about bringing them to Christ because I firmly believe that having Christ in their lives will be transformative for them.

In 1995, I received a vision from God about the type of character young Vietnamese individuals should cultivate—centered on God, filled with love for their country, equipped with high-tech expertise, and possessing leadership skills. My dream is that through these young people, the kingdom of God will one day thrive and spread throughout Vietnam. With that vision in mind, I have endeavored to instill these virtues in the hearts of the young people God has led to me. I came to realize that I could not have acted on this vision until He called me to Himself. Before His divine calling, God blessed me with numerous experiences of His grace, love, and providence throughout my life. Once I committed to following Him, He continued to transform me, paving the way for me to attend Seminary and enabling me to serve Him as a pastor. Eventually, He re-shaped my inner self, molding me into a new person ready to fulfill the vision He had bestowed upon me.

God has transformed and equipped me to help others grow into Christlikeness. Over the course of ten years as a pastor of discipleship at a local church, I guided individuals on their spiritual journeys. I assisted them in developing faith in Christ, taught them the fundamentals of Christianity, and

prepared them for baptism. Then, my wife and I continued to support them in learning spiritual disciplines and strengthening their biblical foundations, enabling them to mature in their spiritual journeys.

Through various experiences and a deeper exploration of theology, I felt compelled, during my Doctor of Ministry (DMin) studies, to revisit an older model from 1995. I subsequently revised it into what I now refer to as the "Four C's" and the "Three A's" Model of Spiritual Formation. As explained earlier, the term "Model" in my theology of ministry signifies a goal or aim of spiritual formation. In the realm of Christian spiritual formation, a model represents an ongoing, transformative process guided by both the Holy Spirit and human agency. It involves maturing in one's relationship with God, both on an individual level and within the context of a community.

My Model of Spiritual Formation is centered on Christ, culturally relevant, emphasizes competence, and provides coaching opportunities for anyone, anytime, anywhere.

During my study of the Model of Spiritual Formation, I faced the challenge of delving deeply into Scripture and theology to establish the foundations for my "Four C's" and "Three A's" Model. This goal not only made me more proficient but also solidified my knowledge of Scripture and theology, enabling me to confidently explain the rationale behind this Model and share it with others. As I continue to learn, this Model might change again in the future.

In my third year of my Doctor of Ministry study, I have learned how to conduct research methodically from start to finish. My studies have encompassed

Participatory Action Research, ethical considerations in research, practical experience in planning, organizing focus groups, and performing and reporting research results. This knowledge has become an indispensable tool in my ministry, allowing me to test new ideas and approaches before implementing them within the larger congregation. Utilizing these skills adds a professional and trustworthy dimension to my ministry.

Through my Research Project, I have gained confidence in a newly discovered tool: *lectio divina*, which I have used to help others transform into Christlikeness. When I introduced this tool to a group of Asian Christians at my home church, it fostered strong relationships with God and facilitated visible inner transformation. Participants exhibited positive results in becoming renewed individuals. During the study, participants were instructed to prepare their souls by following specific steps before engaging in *lectio divina*. These steps included praying the Jesus prayer, seeking the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and spending time resting in the presence of God. A detailed explanation of this practice can be found in the appendix C. After this initial preparation, they used *lectio divina* to meditate on biblical verses related to their identity in Christ.

At the outset of this research, I did not initially intend to engage with individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds beyond the Vietnamese community. However, it became evident that a higher purpose was at play, as unforeseen opportunities emerged. In 2019, when my wife and I transferred our church membership to another local ethnic community church, a non-Vietnamese congregation, a new chapter began in my spiritual journey. It was during my

pursuit of the DMin study and the undertaking of this Research Project that my new home church afforded me the chance to conduct my research.

This journey has been profoundly transformative. For nearly four decades, my testimony for Jesus was confined within the Vietnamese community. However, this study has facilitated a remarkable breakthrough for me, emphasizing that Jesus transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries, embracing all.

Filled with gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose, I now pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, granting me the courage and wisdom to connect with diverse ethnic groups throughout the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, and Canada. My heart brims with a desire to share the Model (Goal/Aim) of Spiritual Formation, encapsulated by the “Four C’s” and “Three A’s.” This Model (Goal/Aim) nurtures individuals in Christlikeness, Cultural Relevance, Competence, and Coaching, empowering them to become missional leaders who embody their faith Anywhere, Anytime, and with Anyone.

Furthermore, in reflecting on this research, I eagerly anticipate sharing the practice of *lectio divina*—a contemplative method of Bible study that serves as a reliable tool for nurturing Christians in their journey towards Christlikeness. I am eager to explore the efficacy of other spiritual disciplines as well. The transformative power of *lectio divina* has been revealed, and I yearn to delve into practices such as the prayer of examen, fasting, prayer for healing and deliverance, worship, small group participation, charitable giving, serving, and proclaiming the good news. Each of these disciplines holds the potential to

deepen the spiritual transformation experienced by believers on their journey with God.

Looking back, if I had a chance to do this research again, I might have chosen to focus on the impact of group spiritual direction and *lectio divina* in the transformation of believers. This decision stems from my positive experience with these two practices, which I taught in a discipleship class at my church in the beginning of 2023.

Looking ahead, I envision a new direction for research. A comprehensive study could focus on effectively integrating the key elements of the “Four C’s” and “Three A’s” Model into the programming and coordination of all church functions and activities. This approach would lead to a unified vision for building up Christians in every aspect of their lives, fostering spiritual growth, and impactful leadership development. Moreover, the research could explore the definition of the church's mission and the roles within it, with clearly defined tasks and specific goals, all working in harmony to achieve the ultimate purpose: raising Christians who are Christ-centered, culturally relevant, competent in their respective fields, and capable of coaching and mentoring emerging leaders wherever they may go, live, or work.

I would like to conclude this work by sharing a fresh story that happened during my vacation in April 2023, illustrating the theme of my divine transformation to help others transform. The story begins with Ms. Hanh's newfound faith in God (Hanh is a pseudonym). Little did I know that God had a plan in store for me. After five years of dedicated studies at Tyndale University,

where I completed my Master of Theological Studies and continued my Doctor of Ministry program, I decided it was time to revisit my home country, Vietnam—a place I had not seen in 18 years. Initially, my intention was merely to relax, reconnect with friends, and explore the sights, with no thoughts of engaging in ministry. However, it soon became evident that God had other intentions.

On the first Sunday in Hanoi, our newfound friend, Annette (a pseudonym), whom we had met back in September 2022 in Ottawa, invited us to attend a church on the outskirts of Hanoi. Following the service, a couple who were friends of Annette's invited us to visit their home in Bac Ninh, a city located 50 kilometers from Hanoi.

During our visit, I expressed my interest in hearing the famous folklore songs of the Bac Ninh region, and in response, our hosts arranged for a talented local singer to perform for us. This opportunity allowed us to strike up a friendship with her. As our conversations unfolded, I gradually came to understand her life circumstances and her need for spiritual guidance. With care and patience, I helped her overcome the cultural and religious barriers prevalent in the region that had previously kept her from embracing Christ. Eventually, she accepted our invitation to open her heart and pray to receive Christ into her life. Later, we were blessed to witness the miraculous healing of her grandson through our prayers, who had suffered blindness from Post-Covid 19 syndrome. Later, she shared a photo of herself, along with her friend Annette, taken after her baptism in Hanoi.

God has granted me the privilege of living out my Christian faith wherever I go, allowing me to share Christ's love with anyone I encounter. This journey has been transformative, not only for those I have met but also for myself, as God continually molds me to help others grow in their Christ-like character.

Indeed, my pursuit of the Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation has been a profound and enlightening journey, showcasing the power of Christ's message to transcend cultural divides. With a renewed sense of purpose and a clear vision for the future, I stand ready to continue walking alongside individuals from diverse backgrounds. My aim is to foster spiritual growth and multiply Spirit-filled leaders, empowering them to make a positive impact on the world for Christ's sake.

May this work serve as an inspiration for others to join in embracing and sharing Christ's love with all, as we collectively strive to become living examples of the transformative power of God's grace in a world that yearns for unity, understanding, hope, and redemption.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Pre-Questionnaire

1. Can you describe your current relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?

Appendix B

Post-Questionnaire

1- How do you feel about your relationship with God after participating in this project?

2- How would you describe your experience with *lectio divina* when engaging scriptures?

Appendix C

Selected Biblical Verses for Studying

- 1- Colossians 1:13-14
- 2- 1 Corinthians 6:17
- 3- Romans 8:28-30
- 4- 2 Timothy 1:7.
- 5- John 15:16, 17
- 6- 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Appendix D

Rule of *Lectio Divina*

(Nguyen, Hoa 2021)

Introduction

Amid Christian communities, I often hear people talk about how to grow in Christlikeness. It seems an urgent cry in stagnant churches with plenty of nominal Christians whose lives fall short of being light and salt in the world. Dallas Willard observes, "... for most of the twentieth century...the Christian churches have been distracted from the central task of teaching their people how to live the spiritual life in a way that brings them progressively to enjoy the character of Christ as their own" (Wilhoit 2008, 9). To move back into the abundant and fruitful Christian life, James C. Wilhoit and Evan Howard offer us one of the solutions, "*Lectio Divina* is part of the curriculum to grow in Christlikeness" (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 73). In this essay, I will explore *lectio divina*, how it helps us grow in Christlikeness, and how we can practice it.

***Lectio Divina*, an Effective Tool for Engaging Scriptures**

Lectio divina is a way of engaging Scriptures, which have existed for thousands of years. The practice had been sidelined by the Enlightenment way of critical thinking, with emphasis on the mind. They treat the Word of God as an object for study; they become the master of the Word instead of being their

servant. In that way, they draw information from reading the text without letting it transform them into new beings with Christ-like characters. Richard Peace notices, “As we move out of the Enlightenment way of thinking ...into the Postmodern era, with its emphasis on the whole person, there is a growing desire to know the Bible in more than just a cognitive way” (Peace 2015, 12).

Lectio divina is a “process of formational reading that emphasizes a slow dwelling with the text” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012b, 168). Similarly, in the article “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*,” Fr. Luke Dysinger explains that *lectio divina* is “a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God” (Dysinger 2009, 1). We read the text slowly and pray it in a contemplative mode. We immerse ourselves in the Word, which can transform us into Christlikeness and unite us with God. Reading the Word of God is not like reading just one of the books (a history or storybook). Indeed, it is not casual reading. In the book *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, Mariano Magrassi explains that the ancients saw God’s mysterious presence when they approached the text. For them, “the text breathes” (using Paul Claudel’s language). Magrassi comments beautifully, “Scripture is God present who speaks to me. When I hear His words, it is as if I can see His mouth. More precisely, when I go beyond the letter of Scripture to its spirit, I encounter the living Christ. He is present to explain His Word, gradually revealed to the eyes of faith (Magrassi 1998, 21–22).

Then, how should we prepare ourselves before engaging the Scriptures to experience what Magrassi has described? I propose three stages of self-preparation before we begin the process of *lectio divina*: praying the Jesus Prayer, welcoming the Holy Spirit, and stepping into silence before God.

The Jesus Prayer

Praying the Jesus Prayer is excellent for preparing our soul to listen to Christ, who explains His Word. The Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” is one of the centering prayers of simplicity practiced by Christians for centuries. I practice the Jesus Prayer because it is “theologically and biblically sound, and contains core convictions of the gospel – Christ’s incarnation, deity, and saving action” (Demarest 1999, 160).

It helps us focus on Jesus and God whom we worship. In the book *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, Bruce A. Demarest comments:

It gathers the dispersed and fragmented heart into God. A divided heart – one pulled this way and that by competing desires, drives, and demands, as if by an unruly team of horses – is an obstacle to experiencing God’s presence and peace. The purpose of the prayer of the heart is to open believers to the reality of God so that He may speak to core issues of our lives (Demarest 1999, 159).

In my ministry, I have seen new believers pray the Jesus Prayer and become open to God. Jesus touches their soul, lifts them, and gives them a unique

perspective, wisdom, courage, and power in facing their trials of life. Gradually, God has changed their inner beings. They become new in Christ.

When we pray, “Have mercy on me, a sinner,” we acknowledge that we are sinners longing for God’s mercy and forgiveness of our sins. Naturally, we approach the Word of God with humility, receptivity, and “openness to hear, to receive, to respond, to be a servant of the Word rather than a master of the text” (Mulholland 2000, 54). We are the “word” spoken into existence by God, and we allow our “word” to be shaped by the Word of God into wholeness (Mulholland 2000, 37).

We pray the Jesus Prayer in tandem with our breathing in and out. Why do we need the practice of breathing? This practice helps our mind focus on our breath, a sacred gift God gave and shared with all breathing beings (Kraegel 2020, 21). This generates a sense of peace and harmony among created beings without fear of conflicts and struggles. We will grow in our self-awareness and our thankfulness to God for life in each of our breaths. Deep breathing also helps relax our muscles and brings us a sense of calmness (Kraegel 2020, 17). Irene Kraegel urges Christians to “enter the practice of mindfulness with confidence, knowing that the discipline of present moment awareness is grounded in a long tradition of Christian contemplation through the centuries” (Kraegel 2020, 50).

The Holy Spirit

In reading the Word of God, we cannot ignore the critical role of the Holy Spirit because it is the Spirit of truth, leading us to all truths of God. Wilhoit and

Howard observe, “The Holy Spirit is particularly associated with communicating to us the heart and mind of God...The Holy Spirit is active through our encounter with Scripture, revealing God within us.” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 46).

Because the Holy Spirit is the third person in the community of the Triune God, He knows the heart and mind of God; He will help us in our weakness by interceding for us (Ro 8:26). We should revere and worship the Holy Spirit and eagerly pray to God for that special gift and for filling us with the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Silence

When we pray centering prayer together with breath prayer, invoke the fullness of the Holy Spirit with acknowledgment of His presence in guiding us to the truth of the Word of God, we can step into silence before our Father God full of love, grace, and power. We are deeply aware of God’s presence with us. God commands, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). We must be silent to “listen to the voice of God, which often speaks very softly” (Dysinger 2009, 1). Dysinger further comments, “To hear someone speaking softly, we must learn to be silent. We must learn to love silence.” In today’s world, people surround themselves with all sorts of noises anywhere they go and are. People seem to get used to the noisy ambience when they have a brief moment to stand still in the presence of God during worship. “We first quiet down to hear God’s word to us. This is the first step of Lectio” (Dysinger 2009, 1).

Lectio

Lectio is a slow and careful reading of the text, and requires the full attention of the reader on each sentence, each phrase, and each word, as Mulholland explains:

You read the text slowly and carefully, with full attention to each sentence, each phrase, and each word. When you have completed the passage, perhaps reading it through several times, you focus on God and become still, listening for God to speak to you. You might pray, "Lord, what are you saying to me here?" Then seek to be still and listen. If you find your thoughts wandering, return to the text, reread it, and still yourself once more to listen (Mulholland 2000, 145).

Reading the Scripture is like listening to God speaking to us. We hear with a posture of reverence, silence, and awe. Dysinger notices, "We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally, not loudly, but intimately" (Dysinger 2009, 1). Again, *lectio* is the first movement of *lectio Divina*, "a meditated reading, above all of the Bible, prolonged in contemplative prayer" (Pennington 1998, 157).

Meditatio

Meditatio is the second movement, savouring, repeating, thinking about, digesting the text, or "ruminating" on it, with mindfulness under God's guidance. Irene Kraegel explains Christian mindfulness as "pure and simple, accompanied by an explicit naming of God as the source of all things observed through the

practice. When we practice Christian mindfulness, we name the resulting feelings of wondering and awe worship. We point our feelings of gratitude toward our Creator” (Kraegel 2020, 49). This practice helps us experience God’s work and healing in the world. Kraegel notices that this practice, combined with the Christian faith, will become “a faith-based spiritual discipline for cultivating a connection to God’s presence” (Kraegel 2020, 50).

In other words, Dysinger comments that meditation is to memorize the text “while gently repeating it to ourselves, allowing it to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, and our desire. Through meditation, we allow God’s word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels” (Dysinger 2009, 1). When meditating with heartfelt prayers and inviting the Holy Spirit, believers will contact the deeper meaning of the Scriptures and experience transformation in their lives (Studzinski 2010, 46–47).

Oratio

Oratio is the third movement, an act of praying the Scriptures, praying to God for understanding, crying out to God, or listening for His voice. It is “a loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace; and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants” (Dysinger 2009, 1). He further comments, “In this oratio, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the Word of God” (Dysinger 2009, 1). We are willing to

open to God, receive His Word spoken to us, and allow it to permeate our inner being freely and change it into Christlikeness.

Mulholland further emphasizes the critical role of prayer in the whole process of *lectio divina*. He comments, “Prayer should infuse the whole practice of our spiritual reading of scripture: prayer that enlivens the essential attitudes of approach, prayer that activates the spiritual discipline of reading, prayer that keeps us open and receptive to encounter with the living Word, prayer that consecrates us to obedient response to God” (Mulholland 2000, 143–44).

Contemplatio

Contemplatio is the fourth movement, the practice of focusing our inmost being by fixing the eyes of the inner man on God Himself (Demarest 1999, 159). In other words, contemplatio is resting in God’s presence (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 171–72). Dysinger adds, “We simply rest in the presence of the One who has used His word as a means of inviting us to accept His transforming embrace... There are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. We let go of our own words and enjoy the experience of being in the presence of God.” (Dysinger 2009, 1). The gospel’s narrative about two sisters, Martha and Mary, illustrates this point well. Martha was busy with serving; Mary sat at the feet of Jesus (Lk 10:38-42). Martha demanded that Jesus command Mary to help her. To Martha’s surprise, Jesus commended Mary for “choosing the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” That good portion is to spend time silently in the presence of God incarnate.

Practicing the approach of *lectio divina* will open us to encounter God through His Word, the living Word of God. That encounter will call for our response, which “should not take place simply at the rational, cognitive, intellectual level. The address by God calls for a response in the daily dynamics of our being and doing. This means that our encounter with the Word, our address by God, must be carried into the details of our daily lives” (Mulholland 2000, 151). The first change in our life starts with our choice to replace our perception of the world with God’s view.

Rule of *Lectio Divina*

Based on the above understanding of *lectio divina*, I have devised a rule for practicing it for my guidance. It comprises four stages or movements:

1- Pray the focusing prayer, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me,” timing with gentle breathing in and out a few times (Peace 1998, 19). Then the group leader will pray for the Holy Spirit to guide the session. Wilhoit and Howard rightly observe, “the Spirit of Christ is the primary former” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 24). This is to remind us that the role of leadership or techniques is essential but is secondary to the part of the Holy Spirit.

2- Read the passage three times slowly and meditatively. After each reading, we will pause, meditate, share our thoughts in one or two sentences, and allow a few moments of silence so that what we heard may sink deeper within. Here are the three suggested questions to help our thinking after each reading.

- Does anything (a word, a phrase, or an idea) catch our attention after the first reading?
- Notice what stirs within us as we repeat the word or phrase that catches our attention. What is God saying?
- What is God's invitation after the third reading? Consider asking ourselves the following:
 - Is there a command to obey?
 - Is there a promise to claim?
 - Is there a virtue to cultivate?
 - Is there an image to savour?
 - Is there a warning to heed?
 (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 130)

3- Pray to the Holy Spirit for the power to apply whatever we have received from the practice.

4- Spend some time contemplating God before ending the meeting.

For believers with little knowledge of the Scripture, we encourage them to read before and after the verse in focus and explain any questions that participants might have about the text if we can.

The simple and easy method of *lectio divina*, designed by the Catholic bishops in South Africa, which has been used widely among new communities of Christians, offers me an alternative way to practice Lectio, which consists of seven steps (Vest 1993, 94)::

- 1- We invite the Lord.
- 2- We read the text.
- 3- We pick out words and meditate on them.
- 4- We let God speak to us in silence.
- 5- We share what we have heard in our hearts.
- 6- We discuss a sense of what we are called to do.
- 7- We pray together spontaneously.

Conclusion

I took *lectio divina* seriously only when I studied this course. I have used this method for my devotion, disciples, and a small group of fellow pastors every Tuesday. I have seen lives change when reading the Scriptures slowly, meditatively, and contemplatively. My fellow pastors have started falling in love with *lectio*. My disciples have discovered that they understand better, remember, and can apply what they have learned daily. Before, in the small Bible study groups, they studied the Bible by analyzing it, discussing it, and finding facts about it. They handled the text as an object for learning, not as a living Word of God spoken to them. Now they have *lectio divina*, an alternative way of engaging Scriptures for information (head knowledge) and life change.

Therefore, I commit to using my rule of *lectio divina* in my daily devotion or with others, trusting that this method will bring life transformation in others and me. I also pray that the Holy Spirit will provide me with ways to share this method with churches in my Vietnamese community needing a more vibrant, spiritual renewal.

Appendix E

Response Card: A Data Gathering Instrument

Date: _____ Your Initial: _____ Passage: _____

After the first reading, does anything (a word, a phrase, or an idea) catch your attention (Tasto 2014, 55)? (Please write your response)

*After the second reading, notice what stirs within you as you repeat the word or phrase that catches your attention. **What is God saying to you** (Tasto 2014, 55)? (Please write your response in **one or two sentences**)*

*After the third reading, **what is God's invitation to you?** (Tasto 2014, 56) Consider asking yourselves the following questions taken from Wilhoit and Howard (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 130):*

- Is there a command to obey?

- Is there a promise to claim?

- Is there a virtue to cultivate?

- Is there an image to savour?

- Is there a warning to heed?

The research data will be kept anonymous and confidential.

Appendix F

Covenant of the Focus Group

We encourage the participants of the focus group to commit to this covenant with details as follows:

- To attend it regularly unless a genuine emergency arises (attendance).
- To pray for the group at home, review the past session and write in their journals what has affected their lives as disciples of Jesus, then read and meditate on the verses for the next meeting (preparation).
- To enter enthusiastically into group discussion, experiences, and sharing (participation)
- To pray for the focus group members and their time together. They will make prayer a priority (prayer).
- To keep confidential what was said during group sessions (confidentiality).
- To be forthright and truthful in what they say (honesty).
- To be candid with others appropriately, allowing others to be open in ways relevant to them (openness).
- Judge no one, not to give advice, or not to criticize (respect).
- To care for the needs of others (care) (Peace 1998, 10).

Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G

Information Letter for Research into Spiritual Transformation

Dear friends in Christ,

As a member of the church and a minister-at-large of the Eastern District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Canada, I invite you to participate in this research project which will be conducted at our church as part of my studies as a Doctor of Ministry student at Tyndale Seminary. I will be the facilitator of the project, as well as a fellow participant in it. All those who choose to be involved will also be allowed to help shape the project and interpret the results.

The research project “*Lectio divina* Helps Christians Experience Spiritual Transformation” has been reviewed and has received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board. It will be performed through a focus group of eight members of the church. The expected duration of the project’s research phase is from October 1-December 04, 2022. In December 2022, your help will be appreciated in interpreting the data generated from the research.

Christians have been attending church and participating in its activities and programs for a long time; however, they might not have yet experienced intimacy with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this research aims to study how *lectio divina*, a contemplative Bible study method, can help Christians experience their spiritual transformation. How would they feel about their relationship with God after participating in this project? How would they describe their experience with *lectio divina* when engaging scriptures?

To answer these questions, participants will use *lectio* to study selected Bible verses related to our identity in Christ. Then they can share their understanding, feelings, and stories of their relationship with God. Three tools will be used to collect these stories at the beginning and end of the research: pre- and post-questionnaires, answers in the response cards and participation in a focus group. The data gathered throughout the study will be used to write the final report.

What are the risks and benefits of participating in this research? The one foreseeable risk is the embarrassment or guilt we may feel as we share our faithfulness with God. This should be alleviated when we remember, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:23) and “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn 1:9). In the spirit of love and acceptance of Christ Jesus, we will take turn to share our deep inner self for understanding, healing and

praying without judgment, criticism, and with confidentiality (as stated in the covenant).

Anticipated benefits for those who participate in this research project include spiritual growth in our relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, harmonious relationships with other people, and caring service to the needy for the glory of God.

I will maintain the confidentiality of all information shared. All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office or password-protected desktop computer. As stipulated in the covenant, all the participants in the research project also agree to keep confidential all sharing in the focus group. While elements of our personal stories may be included in the final written report, no names or other identifying information will be included. This report will be placed in the Tyndale Library as part of my project portfolio. All research participants who would like to have a copy will have one, as well as the congregation.

You know that total anonymity is impossible in a small, intimate congregation. Church members will know who participates in the research project. Additionally, church members may be able to identify the participants in the final written report based on familiarity with their stories. All aspects of your story will be excluded from the last word you are comfortable with.

Participation in this research project is voluntary. You are also free to discontinue your involvement in the research at any time without consequence and withdraw any of your data from the study.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me, Rev. (Paul) Hoa D. Nguyen, either via my cell phone _____ or mail _____ or simply in person by appointment. You may also direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of the Tyndale Research Ethics Board at Tyndale University at reb@tyndale.ca. You are also welcome to contact my research supervisor, Dr. Mark Chapman, Professor of Research Methods, at Tyndale University, via email (mchapman@tyndale.ca) or office phone (416-226-6620, Ext. 2208).

Thank you for considering participation in this research project. Grace and peace be with you,

Rev. (Paul) Hoa D. Nguyen

Appendix H

Research Study Consent Form

1. I have read and understood the attached “Information Letter for Research into How *Lectio Divina* Helps Christians Experience Spiritual Transformation.”
2. I will engage in a research exercise of studying the Bible using *lectio divina* in a focus group. I will be asked to share my story of spiritual transformation via a questionnaire and in a group setting. Observational notes will also be taken at each weekly group meeting.
3. I permit my data to be used in the written report, knowing it will not be included if I am uncomfortable.
4. I understand that every effort will be made to safeguard the confidentiality of data and personal information. I further understand that complete anonymity will not be possible due to the intimate nature of the congregation/ministry.
5. I understand the risks and benefits of the proposed study.
6. I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary, that I am not waiving any legal rights, and that I may withdraw at any time without consequence.
7. I am aware that I may direct any future questions to Rev. (Paul) Hoa Nguyen, either via his mobile phone _____ or email _____ or in person by appointment. I may also direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of the Tyndale Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary at reb@tyndale.ca. I also welcome to contact his supervisor, Dr. Mark Chapman, Professor of Research Methods, Tyndale Seminary, via email (mchapman@tyndale.ca) or office phone (416-226-6620, Ext. 2208).

I have read the above statements, understood the relevant information, and freely consent to participate in this study by joining the focus group at the church.

My Full Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix I

A Sample of a Participant's Data Collection

A participant's data collection includes:

- Their responses to the prequestionnaire with coding (table 9)
- Their responses to the postquestionnaire with coding (table 9)
- A summary of all their responses to six biblical passages, taken from the response cards (see Appendix E) of each participant (table 10)
- Their coded responses to the question: What is God saying to you? (GS) (table 11)
- Their coded responses to God's invitation: Is there a command to obey? (GI-C) (table 12)

Table 9. Participant no. 1's coded responses to pre-and post-questionnaires

Pre-questionnaire	Codes	Categories
Can you describe your current relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?		
God is omnipotent, righteous, and someone to be ¹ obeyed and feared.	¹ negative about God	Being
I understood that Jesus came down to die for my sins, so ² I must be 'good' and not 'waste' his effort!	² own effort	Doing
I also understood that the Holy Spirit is in me to help me ³ walk the straight and narrow path toward God.	³ own effort	Doing
All these are in my head intellectually. Once in a while, I feel close to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, ⁴ but most of the time, they look after me; ⁵ I do not have the intimacy I would like to develop.	⁴ God's characters	Formation
The best way I can describe my relationship with all three persons of the trinity is like that of a child who is in boarding school. ⁵ She knows she has loving parents who care for and provide for her every need, but the closeness is missing because of a little intimate relationship.	⁵ distant	being

Post-questionnaire	Codes	Categories
<p>1- How do you feel about your relationship with God after participating in this project?</p> <p>The whole experience becomes a ¹joy, like meeting up with someone dear to me (God's encounter). God is ²my real Father (not an abstract being I intellectually believed in). I feel like I engage in ³two-way communication when doing <i>lectio</i>.</p> <p>My relationship with God deepened. Now I know how to interact with the Holy Trinity. I pray that I will obey the command to continue this exciting journey with ⁴<i>lectio</i>, which will help me build a much deeper, joyous, and meaningful relationship with God.</p> <p>2- How would you describe your experience with <i>lectio divina</i> when engaging scriptures?</p> <p>I have learned a more ⁵practical way to study the Bible. I ⁶love to do devotionals. I feel ⁷excited to study the Bible using <i>lectio divina</i> because I ⁸feel directly connected to the Holy Trinity. ⁹Following the steps, I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, often hear a message, feel the strength of a command, the power of a vision, or the comfort of the Father's love.</p>	<p>¹joyful</p> <p>²connected to God</p> <p>³<i>lectio</i>: ponder and listen</p> <p>⁴<i>lectio</i>: enhance the relationship with God</p> <p>⁵<i>lectio</i>: apply the truth</p> <p>⁶<i>lectio</i>: ponder and listen</p> <p>⁷<i>lectio</i>: more focus on the 'heart.'</p> <p>⁸value the relationship with God</p>	<p>Being</p> <p>Being</p> <p>Lectio</p> <p>Lectio</p> <p>Lectio</p> <p>Lectio</p> <p>Lectio</p> <p>lectio</p>

Table 10. An example of a summary of participant’s answers to six passages was collected from six response cards (RC1-6). RC1: response card no. 1 collects all participant’s responses to the study of the first passage. (I): words, phrases, or ideas; (GS): What is God saying to you? ; (GI-C): A command to obey; (GI-P): A promise to claim; (GI-V): A virtue to cultivate; (GI-I): An image to savour; (GI-W): A warning to heed; (ID): Identity in Christ

Partner	RC1	RC2	RC3	RC4	RC5	RC6
1- (I)	Knowledge	Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit	for good	not of fear but power, love, and self-	God chose me to bear fruit, not me	Reconciled
2- (GS)	Read and learn the Bible; live a holy life with patience and	Since God redeemed me at a great price, I will let the Spirit	All will be good if I love God and follow His will.	It is very comforting that God has given me all I need to live a righteous life	Because God chose me, I had better make good of this	God reconciled me through Christ and forgave my sins.
3- (GI-C)	Read the word for wisdom	Live a good life.			to bear fruit	I need to maintain a relations
4- (GI-P)			Follow, obey, and do not worry.	The Holy Spirit gives me courage, power,	God will support me to do his will (to bear	
5- (GI-V)	living a life pleasing to God with endurance, patience	Talk to the Holy Spirit daily, who empowers me to live a	Trust God			

Partner	RC1	RC2	RC3	RC4	RC5	RC6
6- (GI-I)	From darkness to light	I will desire to live a good and righteous life that God has		God is all I need		I am an ambassador for Christ.
7- (GI-						
8- (ID)		A temple of the Holy Spirit				Ambassador for Christ

Table 11. An example of a summary of participant’s responses to the question, “What is God saying to you?” when doing a *lectio* on six biblical passages (1st row). The 2nd row is their codes

Read and learn the Bible; live a holy life with patience and	Since God redeemed me at a great price, I will let the Spirit lead me	All will be good if I love God and follow His will.	It is very comforting that God has given me all I need to live a	Because God chose me, I had better make good of this privilege	God reconciled me through Christ and forgave my sins. I
Intimate with God through spiritual practices and being formed in	Holy living by the Spirit	Love for God	Peaceful in God	Redeemed by Christ	Holy living by the Spirit

Table 12. An example of a summary of the participant’s responses to “any God’s command to obey” when doing *lectio* on six biblical passages (1st row) and their codes (2nd row)

Read the word for wisdom.	Live a good life.			to bear fruit	I need to maintain a relationship with
Intimate with God through spiritual	Holy living by the Spirit			Holy living by the Spirit	Redeemed by Christ

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