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Tyndale University

Practicing Community:

Postures and Practices for Spiritual Formation

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

By
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Toronto, Canada
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ABSTRACT

This Research Portfolio explores the ministry of spiritual formation through the development of Practicing Communities (PCs) in Christian congregations. Aspects of individualism in my personal life and spiritual communities are reflected through a spiritual autobiography describing the effects of relational dynamics on my spiritual development from childhood onward. I explore the concept of communal spirituality using insights from theology, Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), psychology, and biblical studies. These insights provide a practice-based framework for developing PCs in Christian congregations. An autoethnography draws further insights from my experiences during a season of isolation from my spiritual community. Written through the lens of neurodiversity, this research offers a unique perspective on how specific postures shared within PCs help facilitate the integration and participation of individuals. I conclude by describing how the interaction of the practices and postures explored throughout this portfolio provides a more complete context for spiritual formation in the context of PCs and other spiritual communities.

DEDICATION

To my dad, Gerald Parish, for walking into the storm for all of us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Luisa, thank you for staying when you saw my weakest parts, walking with me through the storm, and remaining my home.

Annie, Josh, and Eileen (“Baby Sis”), thank you for hiking, wrestling, reading, laughing, and teaching me every day. You don’t need to be quite as quiet now—Daddy’s done writing for a bit.

Mom, thank you for gardening, cooking, reading, and playing with me for so many years. You taught me more than you realize just by being with me.

Ken, thank you for all the years you reminded me with words and actions that you’re my big brother and you’ll always be there for me.

Collin, thank you for being the kindest and most genuine man I know. You don’t go unnoticed.

Grandma, thank you for smiling at Anne and showing me the singing God.

The congregation of Cottam United Church, thank you for all the meals, music, and Sunday School classrooms where I was being profoundly formed.

Dan, thank you for walking the cottage road—our Emmaus. Jesus often surprised us there, didn’t he?

John, thank you for giving me a place in your school when I had no other place. You offered me far more than you realize.

Uriah, thank you for committing so much to me in the middle of your own transitions. I look forward to a long journey ahead.

Robin, thank you for countless hours editing my writing (and always having food ready on the table when I arrive.)

EPIGRAPH



“In quietness and trust is your strength.”

- Isaiah 30:15 (NIV)



“If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.”

- Ecclesiastes 11:3 (KJV)

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¹ Original Photo: “Solitary Tree on the Shore of Loch Etive, Highlands, Scotland, UK”
by Nadia Isakova

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BCP	Book of Common Prayer
DM	Declarative Memory
DMin	Doctor of Ministry
IPNB	Interpersonal Neurobiology
PC	Practicing Community
REB	Research Ethics Board
WM	Working Memory

GLOSSARY

Autism Spectrum Disorder: “A neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave” (National Institute of Mental Health 2023). ASD is often characterized by persistent struggles with social interactions, communication, and restrictive behaviours, including a strong reliance on routines (see American Psychiatric Association 2013, 50).

Community: A group of people interacting with each other through shared space, activity, and orientation in their lives.

Disorientation: “Anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death” (Brueggemann 2002, 8)

Home: The environments and relationships we regularly return to that allow us to rest and recover from life's challenges.

Interpersonal Neurobiology: An interdisciplinary field of research studying how “interactions with the environment, especially relationships with other people, directly shape the development of the brain’s structures and functions” (Siegel 2012, xii).

Mind: “The process that emerges from the distributed nervous system extending throughout the entire body, and also from the communication patterns that occur within relationships” (Siegel 2012, 3).

Place: “A center of meaning constructed by our experiences in the world” (Tuan 1975, 152). Places are points of interaction within, among, and between people and their environment, giving context to our lives.

Practicing Community: Small groups of approximately 8-12 people who gather within larger congregations to commit to shared practices that connect their lives to one another and Christ for spiritual formation.

Reorientation: “Turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God when joy breaks through the despair” (Brueggemann 2002, 9).

Spiritual Formation: The process of people being transformed together into the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through renewed relationships with God, one another, and the world around us.

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant revelations in my life has been that I am never really alone. There has never been, nor will there ever be, an isolated “I” that exists apart from people who have contributed from body, mind, and spirit to form my life in the world. Family, friends, congregations, colleagues, and even strangers have helped me realize the promise of Christ to his followers, “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you” (Jn. 14:18). They have helped me discover that Christ comes concretely into our lives through flesh and blood fashioned in God’s likeness to bear his image in the world (Gen. 1:26-27). While my life includes aspects of personal growth, it is in interpersonal community with others that the ‘God-in-community’ is most clearly known and experienced (Jn 17:20-23; 1Jn 1:3). Hall (2000, 413) reminds us that “the ontology of Jerusalem is a relational one: being means being-with; existence is co-existence. Reality is not to be glimpsed through examining individual entities or abstract universals but in the between-ness of all that is.”

If glimpsing the reality of God occurs through a communal lens, then experiencing that reality also occurs in the context of community. Bonhoeffer (1954, 19, 20) expounded on the richness of community while imprisoned and awaiting his death, “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. ...the companionship of a fellow

Christian is a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God.” Further, Bonhoeffer (1954, 20) adds:

But if there is so much blessing and joy even in a single encounter of brother with brother, how inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by God's will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians!...Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

The privileges of fellowship have coloured much of my life and spiritual formation, and its themes also fill the pages of this portfolio. Ironically, much of what follows was developed during seasons of isolation from others around me, first during the season of social distancing brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and then by a private season of isolation brought on by changes in my career and, in turn, the relationships connected with it. Perhaps it is fitting, however, that amid isolation, themes of community, belonging, and interpersonal transformation would carve out a more prominent place in my life during my years of doctoral studies at Tyndale University.

The primary objective of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at Tyndale University is to “provide stimulus and support for personal and professional growth leading to enhanced ministry and leadership” (Doctor of Ministry Handbook, Part 1 2023, 7). Further, the Spiritual Formation stream of the DMin program is committed “to personal spiritual growth and practice, to the academic study of spirituality, and to the ministry of spiritual formation” (Doctor of Ministry Handbook, Part 1 2023, 58). The three commitments to personal growth, academic study, and ministerial practice were carried out over my three

years of doctoral studies and captured in the major projects presented in this portfolio.

The first project, included in chapter 2, is a spiritual autobiography written during my first year of doctoral studies. At the time of writing, I was grieving the loss of my father, who died one year earlier. Part of my grieving process involved reflecting on how he and others represented God's faithful love to me in my childhood. Sometimes, it has taken the loss of key people in my life to remind me of their influence on my self-image and my image of God. Throughout my spiritual autobiography, I outline the role of relationships in my development and how my tendency to close off from others often hindered my spiritual formation. Conversely, when I became vulnerable and honest in my relationships, I experienced community with others where I received profound blessing and healing. I conclude by describing how the posture of receiving with open hands and a thankful heart frees me from the tight-fisted way of life that leads to sin (ref. Nouwen 1984).

Chapter 3 includes the initial model of spiritual formation developed during my second year of doctoral studies. For nearly two years leading up to its development, the global pandemic caused disruptions in the well-established rhythms and practices in my life. While these disruptions affected many facets of my life, I was especially struck by their impact on the church I helped pastor. As government restrictions prevented our congregation from gathering for a "Sunday morning experience" central to our ministry model, it became apparent that our emphasis on large-scale gatherings for spiritual formation would not suffice for

the season at hand. This prompted me to explore how small gatherings of Christians within large congregations can help foster spiritual formation. In my explorations, I discovered how interpersonal connections among people contribute to our development and enrich our spirituality. These discoveries came from a deeper understanding of biblical texts at the center of the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, to which I belong, and from a deeper understanding of human nature through the lenses of psychology, sociology, and neurobiology. My initial model of spiritual formation outlines how shared practices among small groups of believers help foster spiritual formation in the context of Christian communities, which I call “Practicing Communities” (PCs).

When it came time to examine my model through a field research project, my life took a sudden turn. During the weeks leading up to my third year of studies, my role as a pastor ended abruptly, leaving me without the spiritual community that I was part of for seven years. Within days of leaving my pastoral role, I received a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), prompting me to examine my life in transition through a lens of neurodiversity. Through the encouragement of a professor at Tyndale University, I designed my field research project as an autoethnographic study of my life in transition as an autistic adult. My research comprises chapter 4 of this portfolio. Through my analysis and reporting, I gained profound insights into my personal experience of community with others and how PCs can be structured to nurture the spiritual practices outlined in my initial model of spiritual formation. Chapter 5 combines the insights from my field research project and my initial model of spiritual formation

to produce a new model that consists of postures and practices for spiritual formation in the context of PCs.

John Calvin (2011, 35) suggests that true wisdom “consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” While I agree with this statement in principle, I prefer to reframe it through the experiences detailed in this portfolio. Whereas Calvin (2011, 36) speaks of the knowledge of God inducing “the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption,” I speak of God’s smile and gentleness at pivotal points in my life when inner poverty and infirmity were all I knew. This is partly connected with the awareness of my neurodiversity emerging throughout this portfolio. From early in life, I had a nagging sense that there was something different, perhaps even broken, about the way I encountered many people and environments around me. It would take 36 years of life, including two years of doctoral studies before the descriptor “autistic” was given to me. However, when I reflect on how ASD contributed to my unsettledness amid relationships and the “unbearable chaos” around me, I also see how God appeared to me with a quiet, gentle smile reassuring me that my Heavenly Father knows my deepest needs and meets them with the steadiness and calmness I have longed for. Knowing God’s smile has helped me realize my own belovedness and opened a space for me to receive and give love to him and others.

My longing for and experience of a place to call home has greatly influenced my personal, academic, and ministerial development chronicled throughout the chapters of this portfolio. In retrospect, it is unsurprising that a

desire to establish communities of inclusion, belonging, and rhythm sits at the heart of my writing. My desire to receive and extend the “privileges of fellowship” underlie the theories and practices of spiritual formation that developed over my years in the DMin program and will guide my ministry in the future (Bonhoeffer 1954, 20). But these revelations have not come easily. They have mostly emerged amid tumult within and around me—a feeling I liken to the chaos of a summer storm, where my story begins.

CHAPTER II:
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.”

- Ecclesiastes 11:3 (KJV)



There are many things in my life I have forgotten, but I will never forget the colour of the sky when my community was scattered.

It happened quickly. I was four years old and in the middle of a soccer field when a wall of clouds rolled like waves across the sky. That familiar place friends and neighbours gathered week after week was suddenly



overcome—by what? I did not know. I had never felt that sort of panic before. Evenings like this had been safe and consistent, like the lines painted around the field surrounding me. But now, something terrifying and new was happening. Lines were broken by a disorienting rush of parents pulling their children away to waiting cars. I was pulled away, too. I was terrified all the more by the urgency of my mother’s grip. She ran with me and my brother to our station wagon, leaving

our bikes behind for the storm. At least our family was together, I thought. But where was my dad? Had he not made it to the car?

I cannot tell you anything else that went through my mind on our drive home. I do not remember the rain-soaked dash from our station wagon to the front door or getting to the dry side of a window facing the stormy park. Something had overcome me and my community on that field, and though I was safely inside with my mom and brother, there was a change in my world. Chaos and disruption were now stinging realities in my life. Looking out my window, I saw grayness and wind tearing branches from trees, leaving them scattered on the ground.

Then I saw my dad. His arms were stretched out with a bike in each hand—my brother’s and mine—as he topped the hill nearing our house. His head was tilted forward and drenched in rain as he pushed against the wind. He walked with resolve. What foolishness! And yet, what love. That is the enduring impression I have carried for over 30 years.

If a single fallen tree can change the course of a river, then here is my tree—a summer storm. The river is my life finding its course between a new fear of chaos and the love of a Father who delights in restoring and returning what was lost. The sky has often called out to tell me life will scatter and fall—I must grasp what I can. But another voice has whispered to say, “Rest. Receive.” Learning to hear this voice has been a journey. This is my story.

Cottam

Near my hometown, there is a river called “beautiful.” Some rivers thunder. The Belle River whispers. It would go mostly unnoticed if not for a road and town that bear its name. When it reaches my



hometown, the Belle River is little more than a narrow stream carving through Essex County farmlands. Every now and then, a storm sweeps across the Great Lakes from Michigan or Ohio and stirs the quiet river until it floods the neighbouring crops. Those are the days I remember most: when I retreated into a second-story bedroom of a house planted squarely in the middle of Cottam, Ontario. All I wanted was for the summer heat to pass and, with it, the storms.

Cottam is a town of quiet streets where neighbours are known by their first names. A gentle rhythm there draws little attention from those who happen upon it en route to Windsor, Leamington or one of the few tourist attractions surrounding it. I did not think much of it then, but as I grow older, I think some of life’s greatest treasures can be found in places like that, places of steadiness and familiarity. It is a trap to overlook what is most common and close by. The most important places are those that make space to receive us rather than squeeze us out. And some of the most important words are those shared on quiet streets without being lost among too much noise. Often, God’s heart comes alive in those gentle, steady places of the world.

When I was young, Cottam's main street boasted little more than a gas station that changed names every few years alongside a pizzeria that did likewise. However, most things remained the same, like the small "Mini-Mart" faithfully churning out all the penny candy a boy could afford with the money earned from berry picking and the large United Church looming disproportionately tall over the town. Sometimes, with penny candies in hand, my friends and I biked past the church to the small 'pond park' where we could fish in the summer or play after-school shinny games in the winter. A wooden pavilion gave the park a place of shelter whenever rain invaded our fishing and enough warmth when snowy nights brought neighbours together for carols and cocoa. It seemed like every person in town gathered on those nights.



Another park sat across town from the pond. It was a much larger, sprawling park with half a dozen baseball diamonds and soccer fields, providing the town with a weekly dose of evening activity in the otherwise quiet atmosphere. I can still feel the anticipation of approaching that park and seeing familiar cars and faces gather to pass balls or share bleachers. At the entrance to that 'baseball park' was a single-story brick building that held one of the only things that, in my mind, rivalled the fields behind it. It was the Cottam Library, filled with shelves of books, that became another home for me. Very few Saturday mornings passed without a short bike ride down the hill from my house



to the library, where the librarian welcomed me among piles of books to help sort and shelf for hours. I felt a deep sense of comfort from those books, just like in the fields and streets outside. They were always there, week after week, waiting to receive

me and be received by me. And that helped make Cottam a true home.

Many places in Cottam became my home, but the house at 147 Talbot Street West was at the centre of it all. In a way that not everyone experiences, my childhood home was a stable and welcoming place, and in March 1987, I was blessed to be carried up to a second-story bedroom on Talbot Street to begin my journey in this world. My window overlooked the United Church across a grassy field that would one day provide countless adventures with brothers and friends. Beneath my window was a wooden garage where drums and guitars would one day fill my body and mind through music. The house itself was nothing spectacular. It was not like some of the houses I would visit where friends and I feared walking too loudly or leaving marks on the table. On any given night, the hustle of boys in a back corner room was welcome and nurtured. And the familiar faces of my parents and brothers gathered prompt at 5:00 PM around an old, marked-up table to eat and pray, “For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Amen.” This was my home, and it provided all that I really needed: a place of shelter, belonging, and rhythm that held me and my family together.

Family

My dad came from a large family, though I only ever met half of his siblings and never entirely understood why. The ones I knew lived in houses that smelled like cigarettes—a scent that still brings me a sense of home decades later. We gathered annually at Christmas with those who remained; as far as I remember, those were good times. As I grew older, I overheard stories of distant siblings who scattered for reasons a younger child would not understand. It can be a blessing of childhood to live blissfully unaware of a family's undercurrents. Even so, I suppose those currents are with me, and I am somehow in them.



My dad was a larger-than-life character. His humour bordered on the absurd, and his public persona made it clear, “I am here!” He coached my sports teams and woke early to drive me and my brothers to hockey practice, even after late nights drumming in a bar band, a skill he passed to me before I was old enough to stretch my leg to a kick drum. Of everything my dad gave me, nothing has served my life more than his gift of music. And I hope that somehow he knew that he had blessed me with something so deep and rich that it would open doors and pathways for the rest of my life.

Another gift that will always remain with me is his beaming smile. As far back as I recall, his proud, watery eyes and smile stood over me as I progressed

through music, sports, academics, and relationships. His smile remains with me as a defining image of his role in my life: a man overwhelmed with joy at the sight of his son. Although we shared a somewhat reserved intimacy, he was eager to give me and my brothers what he could, even if all he could muster was the affirmation of a smiling father. This was, as I came to realize, something he had not received in his own childhood. For a smile made from scratch, it was simply astonishing. However, it remains only in pictures now. My dad lies buried on Belle River Road, precisely where the river disappears on a map.

My mom was always, and still is, a pretty lady. Each spring, she and I planted a vegetable patch where she taught me to carve little trenches to lay seeds. She showed me how to wait patiently with a hose in hand until enough water soaked into the ground. I was surprised at how much watering it took for these little seeds to grow. Sometimes, on especially sunny days, my mom kept my brothers and me home from school because, as she said, “It is just too good to sit inside all day!” On rainy days, she read me my favourite set of Safety Books, and when the rain and wind really picked up, she picked up our Children’s Bibles and opened the stories of Jesus and the stormy sea. In a half-reading and half-praying voice, she declared the words of Jesus: “Be still!” I liked that, and she always knew I needed it. And when the storm calmed down, it felt good.

My mom was quieter than my dad in almost every way. She drank tea and read her Bible each morning in a corner chair. I can still imagine her almost saintly stillness as she read and prayed. It was as though every inch of her was letting go of one thing and making space for another. Like my dad’s smile, she

had to learn this solitude for herself. Her own life was anything but peaceful. Her wedding picture tells the story of a missing father who had died suddenly of a heart attack shortly before her wedding day. The picture shows my aunt Anne in full health years before a virus would attack her heart, causing severe, permanent brain damage. Another face in the picture shows hints of a growing depression that would take him away, for a time, to another hospital. Though happiness still colours the picture, I cannot look at it without imagining the changes and challenges that impacted my mom and her family throughout the decades. Photos like that whisper that even a smiling family may be close to tears. And even in the happiness of my childhood, I had already begun to wonder when the time would come to say goodbye to those around me.

I am thankful my parents chose home life over long hours of work. My childhood was spent in a constant rhythm of family dinners and weekend outings when we stuffed into our used Windstar for trips to parks and beaches around Essex County. It never bothered me that we ate tuna sandwiches with no-name granola bars because when our lunch was eaten, my hands went to work in dirt and rivers, carving new paths and trenches with my brothers. When we stayed close to home, my brothers and I ventured into the aptly named 'long grass' behind our house, where friends joined us to prop scraps of wood against cinder blocks for bike ramps or lean larger pieces together for an ever-growing fort. That place became a



near obsession of mine. It was one of the most interactive settings in my childhood, where friends met together around wood, dirt, and the odd cigarette, sharing stories, and imagining just how high our fort could become. That was also one of the places my older brother and I connected the most, though still in a rather reserved way. Perhaps it is common among brothers to be together while remaining somewhat guarded. That was the way of it for us, at least. Rarely did I muster the words “I love you” to my family, and hugs were rarely exchanged except with my mom (which seems to be the prerogative of mothers with sons). With nearly everyone else, I stayed close enough to feel like I belonged but distant enough that I didn’t feel pain when we had to say, “Goodbye.”

One exception does stand out in my memory. I do not recall what age we were, but I can describe exactly where my old brother and I sat, shuffling through hockey cards on the highest stairs of our house. We were alone when, without notice, my brother looked at me and said, “Corey, I want you to know that I’m your older brother, and I’m always going to be here if you need anything.” I had no response. And with that, we continued playing. It is strange how moments like this stick in your mind. I do not think we discussed it since; perhaps we didn’t need to. Those words took root in my heart, still whispering, “This is a place where you are safe, and you never need to be alone.”

Church

Of all my family’s outings, we never made plans on Sunday mornings. That was the day for church. Like water carving a river course over time, it is fascinating how life’s rhythms become deeply and profoundly etched into a

child's life and identity. Even now, decades after my rhythm of Sundays began, it is nearly impossible to imagine going without a weekly gathering with the people of God. From the week I was carried to my room on Talbot Street, my family walked the 200-meter stretch each Sunday from our door to the front pew of Cottam United Church. Perhaps more than anywhere else in my life, that was the place I first experienced what a Christian community looked like. There, on the creaking floors and wooden pews, we learned, sang, and clapped with neighbours before a breathy organ that sounded straight from heaven.



The Church was pieced together over a hundred years, which produced a maze of corridors perfect for hiding and seeking after Sunday services were complete. A winding staircase connected the sanctuary to a large basement, opening into an array of classrooms. Each room hosted Sunday School classes on weekends and Boy Scout meetings midweek. In the middle of the basement was a room showcasing a well-known painting of Jesus, who looked like my dad. One of my favourite family pictures shows the five Parishes huddled together in that basement with Jesus looking over us. And I think he was.

The basement led into a fellowship hall where lunches and dinners happened on what felt like a monthly basis. My favourite weeks were when my friends and I scooped too many chips onto our plates and fruit punch in our glasses to sit and eat with our family. Many of these friends lived only a short



walk down roads or alleyways from my house. And among our bike rides and fort-building enterprises outside of Sunday mornings, my fondest memories of them were on Sundays as we sat on square carpets and laughed hysterically

at cartoon cucumbers and tomatoes, teaching us what it means to be neighbours. Through the laughter and learning we shared, I found the reassurance that I belonged to an expansive home in the church comprised of pews, carpets, and alleyways.

There was also a constant stream of adults who reminded me in many ways that I belonged with them and God. Week by week and year by year, I ran down the winding stairs to classrooms of children and grown-ups, gluing popsicle sticks into crosses and turning pages in our *Good News Bibles*. Some weeks, when other families were away on vacation, I was alone with a teacher who still sat and spoke with me. I liked those mornings the most. Something about that undivided attention of a grown-up reassured me, even for a while. Years after leaving Cottam, I have revisited those creaking pews and rediscovered some of those same faces, now creased with a few more wrinkles but beaming with the same smile. Some things don't change, and some people don't leave—and this is good.

Back then, if you asked me what Church was all about, I would have said it was a place where neighbours came together to sing songs, learn Bible stories,

and eat together. Likewise, if you asked me who God was, I would have painted an image of a man who smiled and took time for me. He was living and active, and perhaps more than anything, he was never alone. I often imagined God at my window, ready to have fun in the world around us. He was also a protector, like some superhero that jumped fearlessly into action when chaos erupted. God was always there—never far off, never frowning, and together, we were never alone. I was at home with God and his people.

Fear

A subtle sense of fear lingered in me even among the people and places that became home to me in my childhood. Fear can exist subtly like that, allowing us to experience goodness while still haunting us with a deep dread, telling us, “This, too, will be lost.” Fear does not allow us to receive with thankful hearts but causes us to grab tightly to whatever is close at hand—whatever we can hold and control. For me, a lingering fear churned in me like that summer storm that scattered my community into chaos. “When will it happen next?” I thought. “When will the goodness shatter around me?” And the more I thought about people scattering from me, the more the fear of it held onto me and made me grasp tightly to them.

Of course, it was more than a summer storm that put fear in my heart. The currents of fear built steadily through my childhood. I recall an evening in early June of my kindergarten year when I walked to the edge of my family’s porch to overhear a conversation between my parents and a neighbour. With concerned voices, they spoke softly about my kindergarten teacher, who had become sick

with cancer. I didn't know what that word meant or why they looked worried, but it terrified me, and only weeks later, a new face welcomed me into class. It was then I learned that my teacher wasn't returning. Her death confirmed for me that the most nurturing people in my life could be taken without warning, even if they wanted to stay.

Other times, fear spoke subtly, like during our family visits to my grandma's house, who lived in the neighbouring town of Essex, Ontario. Our visits nearly always included a treasure hunt through her attic, where my brothers and I sorted through boxes of photos and memorabilia that told her story. We could spend hours trying on my grandpa's old army helmet and sifting through photos of my grandma clad in her British Army nurse's uniform. Among these treasures, however, I noticed an excess of boxes filled with odds and ends and extras of nearly everything in her house. "Grandma has a hard time getting rid of some things," I was told. Those boxes whispered to me as a child, "Holding on will keep you safe." I didn't yet grasp the full weight of holding on, nor could I comprehend how many of those boxes were somehow connected to deep trauma, like my grandma's childhood when the skies of England were filled with things far worse than a summer storm, threatening to destroy without notice. Or, the sudden loss of her husband, who was taken from her in a moment. Or, the illness of her daughter, whose life changed forever on an evening out with friends. Had I known then



what I do now, I might have considered her attic in a different light. And I might have seen that some fears are not inexplicable or always unreasonable. But the actions they evoke are often unhelpful. But a child sees only in part.

Singing

Like my mom, my grandmother wasn't loud or expressive. She had a way of simply going about life without much fanfare. She always walked where she could and ordered small portions of eggs and toast at local breakfast places. As I grew older and shared some of those walks and breakfasts, I learned to treasure not only the late-night movies and sleepovers at my grandma's house but also the conversations she had with me. She often shared stories about her childhood during wartime and her travels back and forth between Canada and England. The stories of the war were exciting, if not a touch unnerving at times, but she was also eager to share stories about God and the goodness of her life with him. The fact that my grandma had not given up on the possibility of goodness is a testament to how a heart can be formed even in the most difficult circumstances. Looking back, there is no explanation for her love except that it was birthed in her from a source beyond this world. How else does someone suffer so many storms and still become so loving and faithful? And how else does someone lose so much and still become a river of life to others? She was a living testament to the words of God, "In quietness and trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15 NRSV).

It wasn't until my teen years that I got a glimpse into the source of my grandma's heart. We were at a local breakfast restaurant in Essex when she steered the conversation to the scriptures. She had a lovely habit of doing that.

“Have you heard this before?” She asked as she quoted the words of Zephaniah 3:17 to me: “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” I hadn’t heard that passage before, and I sat for some time wondering about the image of a singing God. I thought that if these words were true and God really was singing over me, he probably was quite happy. As a musician, I knew the joy that came from making music, and if God really took the time to sing, it meant he was probably taking some joy in it. Even more, he was probably singing over others, too. And like a great composer, he was weaving all of us together into a masterpiece where each note had a special place. To lose even one of those notes, I thought, would be to lose the melodies and harmonies that make up the masterpiece. Of course, this meant I had a place in God’s song. The image of the singing God comforted me like a melody I had once known and loved but had somehow forgotten.

Love

My grandma’s wall held pictures of the people she loved, many of whom I never had the chance to meet. Some of those pictures showed the face of a twenty-something girl with dark hair and no smile. The picture confused me for years before I finally dared to ask, “Who is that girl, and why is she so sad?” My grandma’s answer was gentle. It was her daughter, Anne, who had been hospitalized a decade earlier with a rare virus that led to severe brain damage. I was frightened at the thought that something so rare could alter the life of someone so close to me and something so uncontrolled could overtake us.

Shortly after that day, my grandma decided to bring me and my brother on a visit to the nursing home to meet Anne in person for the first time. I remember how bothered I was by the sounds and smells of the rooms and the residents who sometimes made strange noises and sporadic movements. I couldn't understand what was wrong with their bodies and minds, and I desperately wanted to leave. When we first arrived at my aunt's room, I was speechless and confused at what I saw. "What kind of home is this?" I wondered to myself. I felt uncomfortable surrounded by loud machines and staff walking quickly through doorways on their way to residents. So much was happening around me that I could not understand. But then, I saw my grandma. She walked calmly and stood at her daughter's bedside. Her hands stretched out to brush Anne's hair back as she spoke gently with a soft accent, "Hello, Anne." And in a moment, the room felt like a home. I soon learned that my grandma came to do this every day. The same rhythm of driving, brushing, smiling, whispering, and promising to return tomorrow. Every day, this child, well into her thirties, was visited, pampered, fed, and loved by a faithful mother.

If love had flesh and blood, it was there at Anne's bedside. And, if "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), I was unafraid for at least a moment. In the nursing home, I saw perfect love standing with a smile over perfect vulnerability. Even when that smile could not be returned, love remained unchanged. We are all made to receive such blessings—to see smiling faces around us and the words "You are good" spoken over us. The truth revealed to me in that nursing home, and so many other places in my childhood is that our

primary purpose is to open ourselves to God and each other and receive love with thankful hearts. And the most important prayer we can ever learn is the one spoken a thousand times around the old dinner table on Talbot Street: “For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Amen.” But, then again, fear makes us forget. The greatest downfalls of my life often came when I stopped receiving and began grasping at the people and things around me. Even in the face of my grandma’s love, fear made me wonder, “Could you really be loved like that?” Somehow, I didn’t think I could. And given all the places that received me and all the faces that smiled over me, I still felt like I could never trust love when chaos struck. “No, I can’t be loved like that,” I thought. “When my time of weakness comes, I will get up from that bed. I will make it so they can’t leave. Or else, I will leave first.”

Essex

My family bought my grandma’s house in Essex, Ontario, during my first year of high school. The familiar rooms and yard made my transition out of Cottam easier to manage. The house was full of memories attached to every



floorboard and doorway. And the same yard I had mowed on summer days now welcomed me as its permanent resident. On the other side of our fence, Arthur Avenue led downtown to a stretch of storefronts far outnumbering the lone gas station and pizzeria of my childhood. Turning northward at the downtown core

brings you to the railroad tracks, a local landmark cutting straight through town. A few hundred yards over the tracks brings you to one of the two reasons we moved to Essex: the local High School. That is where my brothers and I spent most of our daytimes throughout our teen years. I worked just hard enough to get passing grades between jokes with friends and car rides with cigarettes and punk music. Some of my closest friendships were built in smokers' pits and the backseats of cars as we left class to occupy our time with more interesting adventures than our teachers could offer. Thankfully, those friendships were only part of my story in high school. Several other friendships blossomed in a place on the other end of town, our new church.

Essex Gospel Tabernacle was the second reason our family moved to Essex. On a summer morning when the doors of Cottam United Church were closed for our pastor's annual vacation, we drove to Essex, where a family friend served as a pastor. It was a very different church than I was used to, with guitars and drums playing upbeat music and a pastor donning a Montreal Canadiens jersey for a sermon illustration. My brothers and I perked up at the liveliness of the service, and we were drawn to return the following week. More than just music and a hockey jersey captured our attention in Essex. Whereas Cub meetings and Sunday School classes drew me in as a child, the prospect of a mid-week youth group advertised in our weekly bulletin became one of the biggest draws. After just two weeks, our family made the decision that if Cottam United was the church for my childhood years, Essex Gospel Tabernacle would be the church of my teens.

The youth pastor, Phil, was one of the first people I connected with at our new church. I found out he liked punk music, and he found out that I was a drummer eager to make music with people. He invited me to their youth group, where teens came together with skits, loud music, and food. I don't recall how our first night of youth panned out, but I remember a generous welcome from some other teens who reminded me of the neighbourhood boys who helped make a home for us at Cottam United. Though we could barely see one another in the blacked-out, fog-filled youth room, we traded names and laughs while learning about Jesus.

I never minded being at Essex Gospel on Sundays, but I especially loved our time together at the Wednesday evening youth group called "Team Xtreme."

It helped that I knew how to play drums and guitar quite well already, and though I was deeply concerned about stepping onstage in front of my peers for the first time, the evening



finally came when Phil urged me onstage to play drums for the first time. I still don't know how he convinced me, but I walked up with my heart in my stomach and performed my best. I was scared and sweaty and probably didn't play my best, but somewhere during the song, I glanced up just long enough to see Phil smiling back at me from his keyboard. He was happy, and I was relieved. And there have been very few weeks since that night that I haven't been on some stage somewhere.

My first few years at Essex Gospel were a buzz of activities and new friendships. We played music together, built stages, went on campouts, and stayed awake for all-night youth events. Like my friends at high school, Phil and I drove with punk music blaring and fast food in hand, and I truly felt like I belonged. But, for me, one thing was lacking. The spiritual nurture from my childhood seemed to be all but replaced with a flurry of fun and activities in my youth. I didn't realize at the time how blessed it was to sit in small rooms with older Christians who talked with me about God. Now, my focus was caught up with peers and parties and, like many teen boys, pretty girls.

By that time in my life, I was deeply frightened that I was unattractive and destined to be overlooked by those wonderful creatures showing signs of adolescence. I began throwing myself into every prospective smile and affirmation that came my way from the youth girls. My efforts must have been rather obvious as, more than once, Phil or another leader took me aside to talk to me about "taming my affections." I often brushed them off and kept feeding my desires—a mistake that has been regrettable in my life many times. If there is one thing I would want to say squarely into the face of my teenage self, it would be this: "Guard your heart. Your love drifts far too easily through the shallow rivers of lust and momentary pleasure. And what you think will satisfy you will not." That is simple and applicable a hundred times over whenever a young boy discovers a deep need for the love and smile only God can ultimately provide.

Smiling

After two years at Essex Gospel, Phil moved away, and a new youth pastor came. I was crushed by the loss and frustrated with the new pastor. He didn't play music nearly as loud, nor did he turn the fog machine on during Wednesday nights. He was far more serious and cried when he sang worship songs. His name was Nathan, and if there is one thing that I remember about him was how much he prayed. In fact, I didn't know it until years later, but Nathan used to walk for hours in an upstairs room at Essex Gospel and pray for me. He told me this long after he stopped being my pastor. Even on weeks when I was a no-show because of a new girlfriend or a joyride with high school friends, Nathan walked back and forth and prayed that "greater things" would come into my life besides those I was clinging to. Eventually, his prayers unfolded in my life.

Sometimes, change happens quickly. On a weekend in my grade 10 year, when the summer trees changed to an array of autumn colours, our youth group travelled hours down the highway to a retreat in Guelph, Ontario. Nathan hired a small band for the retreat to give the youth musicians a weekend off from playing. I hated the idea of going as a bystander for the services, but I decided I would go along for a fun weekend with friends and, of course, flirting with the prettiest girl in the youth group. As the weekend approached and we were set to squeeze between bags on a rented school bus, I began to feel sluggish. I was getting sick. Very sick. As my body and mind slowly regressed, I was left with a last-minute decision to push through the discomfort or remain comfortably at home in my bed. By grace, I still got on the bus with a temperature rising and energy failing. I

was miserable, annoyed, feverish, and tired. A cloud hung over me, and I don't remember much of the retreat. I can't recall how many services, meals, and devotional times I sat through, feeling like I would topple over without warning. I can't recall what Nathan spoke about or the songs the hired band sang. But I will never forget where I stood when I saw God's smiling face.

I was in the back corner of a room filled with students and chairs. The band was playing, and their words floated past me. I stood still, full of fever and empty of energy when something compelled me to close my eyes. I did. And with my eyes closed, I saw something in front of me. I hadn't seen this before. It was a large stone statue like a Greek god sitting stoically on Olympus. It was extraordinarily large, with eyes fixed straight ahead and hands set calmly at its side. The statue reached higher than any cloud, and the thought came to me: "This is God."

I didn't know what to do. I was suddenly scared and confused, but at least I wasn't frozen in place. Unlike the statue, I was moving, and all I could think was, "If this is God, why isn't he moving? Why isn't He even looking?" I waited for a moment before deciding, "I will dance! I will get him to look at me!" And so, I began. At first, with only a wave of my arms, then a short leap. Then, my movements grew, and I began jumping and shouting until I was almost frantic. I pushed myself harder and louder with every effort to get this statue to look down at me. But nothing.

"Look at me! Do you see what I'm doing!?" I cried out. But nothing came. No movement. No change. No words or gestures or even the faintest sense that I

was seen. So, I stopped. I became still before the statue, and with that, I became quite sad. I felt tired, unnoticed, like a failure at the foot of this God. My eyes dropped to the ground, and my body went limp. My focus drifted back to reality, where wordless music swirled around me. But then, something captured my attention again and drew me back. It was the sound of stones cracking. In a flourish, I looked up again and saw something I had never seen before or had long since forgotten. The statue had come to life, the stone figure had broken open, and his face now looked at me with a smile. I began to weep, not only in my thoughts but in my flesh, as he looked at me with eyes as bright as the sun. It was a phenomenal light. His mouth opened like a great river, and I knew he was happy. And for quite some time, I was truly happy, too.

Changes

I felt happy seeing the face of God changing from stone to a smile, and after that evening, my own face seemed to be changing as well. My friends in my youth group were the first to see it. “Something happened in you, Corey,” a girl named Luisa told me. After the service ended, we stood outside the small chapel, where she added, “You look so happy.” I don’t remember what I said, but I remember feeling what she described: happiness. I laughed, smiled, and felt at home for the first time in quite a while. I felt like I could give away everything in my life, and it wouldn’t take a single ounce away from what I felt. That night, I smiled and laughed with big, gutsy laughs, making everyone in the room laugh along. I also cried with real tears that hadn’t come for many years. Like a river suddenly filled with a gush of living water, I had something flowing from inside

of me that night and in the days following. It felt like I was suddenly receiving from a source overflowing into the people around me. We were connected, receiving and giving from that smiling face of God.

Back home in Essex, I had a girlfriend who hadn't come on the retreat with me. She was only mildly interested in God at the time, though her interest, like mine, had been tied up with the cigarettes and punk music of our high school hallways. But now I was returning with the overwhelming feeling that there was something far better that could fulfill me. There really was a God who rose higher than the highest cloud, smiled as bright as the sun, and somehow poured straight into me. When I got back from the retreat, she was furious. "How can you just go away for a weekend and return like you don't even need me?" She asked. I understood her frustration, but I couldn't fake needing her or anything else in the same way I did before I saw God's smile. I had received more than enough, and after a short time, we went our separate ways: she remained among an array of fun and pleasure, and I devoted myself to many hours in my backyard where I read, prayed, and learned about the God who smiled at me.

Those were good days. The places inside me that were carved out for years in my childhood were slowly filling up again with peace like a river. It felt like God was there with me, breathing into every bit of my life and making everything new. He took the full measure of my life, relationships, music, creativity, and desire to learn and poured himself straight into them, bringing them to life in all sorts of new ways. There was now a purpose to my reading, joy in my music, a center to my friendships, and a fulfilling direction for my desires.

It was a time of peace—a profound wholeness. No longer was there an outer shell devoid of inner life. I felt like a whole person that could smile and live from within. I also began drawing closer to people in my Church. For the first time in a while, I had face-to-face conversations with my youth leaders that went beyond me goofing off or talking about girls. I even booked an afternoon meeting with our lead pastor, Brent, where I opened up about my experiences. Everyone was thrilled to know of my growth and offered good support. It had been a long time since I spoke with others about what was happening inside me.

Platforms

It was my youth pastor, Nathan, though, who became my mentor. Aside from his willingness to talk and devotion to praying for me in that upper room at Church, Nathan gave me two other things that would change my life: a book and a platform. I recall the day Nathan rang my doorbell on Arthur Street to deliver the first gift, a paperback copy of *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller (2003). There was nothing extraordinary about the exchange. He told me he had seen the book and



thought of me before handing it over and turning to leave. When I came inside, I first noticed a short inscription Nathan wrote jokingly on the inside cover: “To (Dr.) Corey.” I smiled at his little nod toward my love of reading, but the smile was joined by a strong satisfaction from that little inscription. I liked the title “Doctor Corey.” It made me feel wise and admirable,

and even as I read the book, the thought settled in me that I could be someone others admire.

The second gift Nathan gave me was a platform for speaking at church. Though I was already accustomed to playing drums and guitar for youth group gatherings and Sunday services, Nathan invited me to share a short message with my congregation on a chapter in *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren (2002). I remember the Sunday night when I, along with a handful of other students, walked wobbly-kneed up the two steps to the front platform on Essex Gospel Tabernacle to deliver what would be my first of many sermons throughout my life. I was terrified of public speaking, and I don't recall much of what I said. However, one moment stands out in my mind. Somewhere in my message, I said, "When all is said and done, we are saved by grace and not by feelings." I was about to move quickly to my next point when a loud voice thundered from the pews with an affirming "Amen!" that made me pause from my notes. "That felt good," I thought, hoping my growing smile wasn't too obvious. At the close of the service, my shaking knees changed to shaking hands as a congregation full of smiling faces surrounded me. I remember my parents and grandma standing close by when the parent of another youth approached me with a beaming smile, declaring, "Mighty man of God!" She wrapped me with a bear hug, and I couldn't have felt prouder. Mighty man of God. What a label to have. I really did feel mighty in that moment.

The resonance of that "Amen!" and the declaration over me after service stuck with me, and I was eager to feel it again. I had the assurance that what I was

experiencing and producing was approved and supported by others around me. I learned that even my life with God could be celebrated by others and could cause them to smile at me. This was not altogether wrong, and yet the gap between receiving blessings and grasping at approval was far narrower than I could have realized. In the presence of others' praise, the trap of pride is set quite easily, and even words intended to uplift can unwittingly feed the sinful longings within us. As someone whose deepest fear was the absence of others and whose answer to that fear was to become strong and unforgettable, the temptation to garner admiration now had my spiritual life as its target. In this way, even my life with God became a tool for security.

Disparity

Throughout my teen years, my devotion to God often vacillated between fervency in the presence of others at church and half-heartedness in my time alone. Undoubtedly, there were parts of me that reflected what my church called "holiness" and "victory over sin," but those were contrasted with the common distractions of teenage boyhood that draw minds and affections out of step with God. Moreover, those parts of me that seemed most holy and victorious were usually played out in front of other Christians. The strong emphasis in my church on personal holiness underscored my sense that others around me were doing just fine in their walk with God, and I ought to present myself likewise. This birthed a pattern of separating my innermost self from the external parts I allowed others to see. Privacy and publicity were at odds with one another as I was deeply convinced that revealing the private struggles in my life would only cause those

around me to scatter. So, I remained as I was, pursuing God with others in church but slowly drifting from him in the personal places of my life. I felt very much afraid and very much alone.

To be sure, my public experiences with God were a genuine part of me. There were real prayers and tears that flowed from me during those years, and while I rarely felt the same depth of love as on that youth retreat evening, I never misplaced the sense that God truly loved me and still smiled over me. And yet, more often than not, those spiritual experiences came on platforms and leadership roles that required me to perform and present myself before God and others in the most tiring ways. No matter how often well-crafted team training manuals and group devotions tried to remind me of “the heart of a leader,” the basic pattern of public performance and personal waywardness continued without much attention to the inner man. It is strange that amid all of it, there were very few times when people stopped me to ask how I was doing inside. It’s much easier to lie to a manual than a fellow man. I suppose even then, I would be quick to brush off their questions with some assurance that I was “fighting the good fight” before plunging into our next activity together (2 Timothy 4:7). There was a deadly secrecy that I learned I could get away with as long as the focus remained on my musical gifts and budding intelligence. What is also strange is why all the pomp and publicity appealed to me. After all, I was still the young man who had felt such peace and happiness in the smile of God in the furthest corner from a stage.

But the way of sin is subtle, slowly turning our gaze inward on ourselves instead of upward to the Father who gives us all we truly need. Likewise, sin turns

us away from those around us, luring us inward to build images that will be loved and cherished, offering the guise of shelter we long for. But, in truth, sin closes us to the gift of love. Instead of receiving, we take; we grasp; we earn; and, in the end, we require others to fill the emptiness inside ourselves. Sin ruins community, never allowing us to receive with thankful hearts but, instead, turning God and others into little more than supporting characters in our lives. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). In perfect love, he takes broken steps and faulty postures and weaves goodness into them. It is the sheer goodness of God that leads us to new paths—not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:9). He did this for me in at least two remarkable ways as I grew from adolescence into adulthood. The first was by giving me a vocation, and the second was by giving me a wife.

Vocation

After graduating high school, I enrolled at the University of Windsor to study Psychology and Philosophy. My dedication to schoolwork varied throughout my teen years, but my love of learning and desire to pursue academics continued growing. I remember the satisfying feeling of walking beside vine-covered buildings and settling into wood-laden lecture halls. Even more satisfying was the feeling among the stacks of the Leddy Library. The comfort of books had never left me since my days sitting at the Cottam Library among the familiar sights and smells of paper and ink, and now there I was, in the presence of countless books and noses pressed into them. I felt at home on campus and loved every second I spent in the almost pregnant atmosphere of higher education.

During my first year at the University of Windsor, I poured myself into studying human nature through textbooks and conversations with professors and fellow students. I took pride in discussing the works of Plato, Skinner, and Kant and unpacking their theories with others. Almost immediately, though, I began to get a deep sense that there was something more I was meant to do with my academic gifting. A growing restlessness told me there would be more than degrees and doctorates that would comprise my vocation in life. Regardless, I continued learning and achieving good success and respect among faculty and students.

At the same time, I continued my involvement with the church, mostly as a musician for Sunday services, youth rallies, and conferences across Essex County. Shifting between lecture halls and church stages became a regular flow for my life, and I still took great pride in



both. Each provided a dose of prestige and admiration in the eyes of those around me. Near the end of my first year in university, one set of admiring eyes asked me to sit in as a last-minute guitar player for a local leadership conference in Windsor. Given the short notice, I almost didn't go. But, in the end, the spot onstage and the free meals it would garner won out, and I carved out a Saturday to join a team of other musicians at Parkwood Gospel Temple in Windsor, ON. Joining teams on short notice was something I had done a hundred times before, and as I tucked into my bed on Friday night, I didn't have any reason to suspect

the next day would be any different. But then the voice came. Not an audible voice, but that inner sense when thoughts that aren't your own spring up and beckon you to pay attention. From somewhere beyond me, a vivid thought came to my mind: "Tomorrow, I want to tell you what you'll do with your life." And that was all I remember before drifting to sleep.

I woke up with the vague sense that something about that nighttime thought was worth attention, though I didn't know what it meant or even if something substantial was behind it. I went on with the day, which, to my disappointment, came and went like so many others before and after it—a crowd gathered, the band played, a speaker shared, and the crowd dispersed to breakout rooms and lunch tables. It felt like a familiar rinse and repeat of my years in church ministry. That is until the end came. Not just the end of the speaking or even the final worship set, but the end of the day as cables were wound up and guitar cases clicked shut. After packing up my gear and heading towards the door, I heard the voice of a man I had never met before and turned to see him running toward me from across the gymnasium.

"What's your name?" He asked. I answered, somewhat reluctant to get drawn into another conversation so close to my evening out.

"Corey, have you ever written music before?" the stranger asked.

I lied and said, "Once or twice. Why?"

His response was prompt and to the point. "Look," he said, "You've been on my mind all day. In every prayer time and worship time, I couldn't get you out

of my head. God wants me to tell you that you're supposed to write music for Him. Can I pray for you?" He did. And then he turned and walked away.

I was stunned but played it cool with him and others around me, all the while thinking, "My goodness, I'm not sure what to do with this!" I held it inside for a few days—the nighttime voice and the crystal-clear message given to me by the stranger in the gymnasium. Eventually, I brought it up with my parents, who suggested I meet with my pastor. With all of them, we talked through the situation, sought all the necessary advice, and prayed for weeks before I decided to take what the stranger said seriously. Of course, there remained the question of exactly what it would look like to follow the invitation of God. For that, I turned to the place I was most accustomed to going for wisdom, a book's pages.

The living room in our Essex home has an old fireplace flanked by waist-high bookshelves holding pictures and figurines and a selection of small books and Bibles that made their way home with my dad and me through the years of worship team practices and meetings. I decided it would be good to leaf through a few of them to see what insights they could offer me. One book bearing a title about "hearts" and "worship" that I've since forgotten drew me to pick it up and read. Not much about its contents resonated as especially new and insightful until my eyes landed on a single bolded sentence saying, "Worship songwriters need to become the church's theologians." It is strange to think, but that one phrase was all I needed to decide what path I would take to pursue the calling I received on that Saturday at Parkwood. What would have seemed like an impossible decision weeks earlier was now set before me like a road on a map. As far as I could see,

my path now involved the study of theology—a path I haven't left to this day. Within weeks, I left the University of Windsor and applied to Master's Bible College. My vocation was underway.

Marriage

Master's Bible College had an option for distance education facilitated by none other than Parkwood Gospel Temple in Windsor. The choice to stay home to study far outweighed the alternative of moving to downtown Toronto for a four-year program. Moreover, it meant staying home to work and renewing my commitment to ministry in Essex, where I still had strong relationships built throughout my teen years. Among these relationships was a special friendship I developed with a girl named Luisa, who was beautiful to me in every way. Looking back, I don't think there was a time when I didn't have some feelings for Luisa. Even amidst my on-and-off relationships with other girls in my teen years, there was always something in me that was entirely satisfied to be in the same room as her. And while I spent many weekends in late-night visits with her brothers, the highlight of my night came in the rare moments when the upstairs door creaked open, and a beautiful pair of feet descended, if only to ask us to quiet down. I always looked forward to hearing her familiar voice.

Thankfully, I had many times to hear that voice speak to me. Luisa was a singer on the worship teams at Essex Gospel and stood alongside me on youth leadership teams and platforms well into my young adult years. And after years of rubbing shoulders and slowly gaining access to each other's minds and hearts, I brought Luisa into a side classroom at our church to tell her how deeply I felt

drawn to her. She cried and then, to my utter surprise, told me the same. But then, to my greater surprise, she suddenly tensed up and insisted that we couldn't talk about it outside of that room yet. She had to "take care of something," she told me. She left abruptly and ran for the door. I didn't quite understand what had happened between us or what was happening inside her. Eventually, though, I learned that for me to be with Luisa was as easy as walking out my doorway and going to wherever she was, but for Luisa to be with me involved a far more complicated and painful form of leaving and going.

For now, though, I must leave that story as her words were left in the church classroom, unexplained. There is much to say about our joining together after that day, but most of that story belongs to my wife and her family and will be hers to tell as she wishes. It will suffice to say that our wedding pictures had many smiling faces, but many others choosing to be absent.



I can say that I experienced a significant rejection during the years Luisa and I joined together and began our marriage. For me, it was piercing and reawakened a world of fears that had not been touched for quite some time. Some of the core people with whom I had built relationships and community were suddenly gone. Even with Luisa beside me, I was cut deeply with pointed words and scoffing faces that had once smiled at me and called me friend. "Why wasn't I considered good enough?" I wondered with a swirling storm of emotion stirring

in me. Confused as I was, I took Luisa's hand in marriage and began life together, with neither of us fully aware of the impact the relational fallout was having on our hearts. Whereas a new wound was penetrating my heart, hers was being recut with a knife that had dragged repeatedly through her, carving pain that has never faded.

Pastorate

In the months leading to our wedding, Luisa and I had started an unpaid job as youth pastors at a small Church in Amherstburg, Ontario. I truly believe there is hardly a more picturesque town in the world. Located at the western shore of Essex County, Amherstburg famously boasts a centuries-old fort and battlefield from the War of 1812. I have often wondered what Canada would be like without the battles faced on those unassuming shores where the Detroit River feeds the Great Lake to the south. That river is wide and deep and carries ships with cargo and passengers. Two hundred years ago, it carried troops with gunpowder on conflicting sides of a great skirmish. The river was once a place for battle, and now it is the place of flowerbeds and ice cream parlours that hosted coffee-laden strolls in our first year of marriage.

My experiences in our new church at Amherstburg were brief but filled with the energy of newness as both our marriage and pastoral vocation began. At home, we explored the complexities of two lives merging into one while, at church, we experienced the joys of many lives interacting in the rhythms and practices of congregational life. So much was new to me in those days, but Luisa and I received one another as well as we could, and the congregation around us

provided a nurturing place to learn the dynamics of life together. Amherstburg was a good place. However, I was continually subduing the deep and conflicting feelings that had reawakened in me during our journey to marriage. On the outside, I was excited and passionate about our life and vocation together, but on the inside, I was angry, bitter, and hounded by the rejection of others. Perhaps more than anything, I was terrified that I wouldn't measure up as a husband, pastor, and person. Though everything around me was new, my response to these feelings was the same as always: I latched onto people relentlessly. I was infatuated with being accepted and admired by others who could prop me up and assure me that I was enough. In the name of "building a Christian community," my restless urge to be supported and praised by others was still my great undoing as my eagerness for success in ministry replaced my spiritual growth. I can imagine what my ministry looked like to others around me—humble and genuine—but inside me was hunger and desperation for smiles and approval.

Even so, God blessed me from the earliest days in Amherstburg. It amazes me how patiently God speaks, even when we take years to realize what is being whispered to us. His voice sometimes comes like a stick carried steadily down a river that washes ashore well downstream to be picked up and examined by its recipient. The Word of God came, but it took time for me to pick it up and receive it into my life. I recall the first preaching series given by my new pastor in Amherstburg. He brought the church through the *Bait of Satan* by John Bevere (1997). I do not recall what I picked up from his words then, but more than a decade later, after the full effect of bitterness wreaked havoc on my life, the same

book was preached by another pastor in an altogether new Church. Only then did I pick up the stick, now wet and full of life's residue, and see the words of God in their full measure. In the years between my first summer in Amherstburg and now, God's words weaved through rocks and trees that marked my life. And that has been my story through the years: learning to hear the voice of God whispering and nudging among the currents of life with others.

Bible

In the congregation at Amherstburg, a group of young adults spent summer evenings together sipping strong coffee and dipping bread in oil between laughter and storytelling. Luisa and I found our first real sense of 'home' among that group, devoting countless evenings to gathering, talking, eating, and praying together. On one summer evening, we planned to gather in a neighbouring town. Tired from a day at work, Luisa stayed home, which allowed me the freedom to make a quick stop at a Christian bookstore en route to our gathering. In the early evening, with the sun setting over the Detroit River, I pulled into Cameron's Bookstore and walked empty-handed among the shelves. After a few minutes of browsing and drinking in the familiar feeling of books, a sale sign drew my attention to a small stack of leatherbound Bibles. I do not remember whether it was an especially good price or if something else whispered for me to pick one up and buy it, but that is what I did. Empty-handed no longer, I walked out with my first English Standard Version of the Bible. Of course, I had owned many Bibles, but something about this particular leatherback gripped me from the first night I held it. Even as I arrived at the nearby cafe for my evening gathering, I vividly

remember unboxing and leafing through its pages. It was my first taste of a lifelong passion that was about to explode. Somehow, in some way, it was simply the time and place for *that* book to make its way into my life. And in the years following, it became my sole purpose to read and know it completely.

For the better part of a year, I did not go anywhere without that Bible. Some would call it an obsession, and perhaps it was, but I believed an obsession with something as profound as God's Word would benefit me.



And so, the pages of that Bible gradually filled with all kinds of annotations and underlines as I aggressively devoured its stories. I endlessly poured through book after book at home, church, and even on visits with family. Undoubtedly, the words of that book settled into my mind, and years later, I am often surprised by how easily they resurface when triggered by experiences around me. However, I eventually realized that there is a great difference between knowing the words of God and seeing them become flesh in our lives. Even as I read deeper and further through the pages of that Bible, my heart wavered between hearing the word and experiencing it in the fullness of my life with God and others.

The infatuation with taking and possessing remained a deep trap for me, even with the words of God in hand. I had all the potential of knowing God's word and letting my life be shaped, but my heart was nowhere near as touched as I would have let on. While I grazed on great quantities of God's word, I was falling deeper into a pattern of 'taking' and 'using' those words to build my

repertoire of knowledge. I became obsessed with filling up the pages of my Bible if only to build a structure of doctrines and teachings to use in my interactions with those around me. Further, I took pride in reading books and sermons with an especially sharp texture to them, believing that the boldness of their teaching proved their faithfulness to God's word. In simplest terms, the words given to be received with a humble and thankful heart became an impenetrable wall surrounding me. As my knowledge increased, so did the hardness of my words and postures with others. At best, I was a fountain of truth. At worst, I was a harsh judge, quick to correct and impose my vision of God's Word wherever I perceived differences of interpretations and convictions.

I thank God that our failed attempts at faithfulness do not limit His grace. He makes even our crooked intentions straight and our wayward notes part of a wonderful melody. I saw hints of this occasionally, even as I grew hard. In one case, a friend shared coffee with me as he spoke vulnerably about a transformation in his life. Only days earlier, he had "given himself to Jesus," as he put it, and for the first time, was not just 'taking' from God but learning to really love God and others. I had the sense he had opened himself up to something greater than himself, and it made me wonder about the patterns of my life. I was nowhere near the depth of vulnerability he showed me. Instead, I felt trapped in a shell I could hardly imagine breaking out of.

Annabelle

In the early summer of 2011, Luisa and I learned we were expecting our first baby girl. To be honest, I had no idea how I could make the transition into

fatherhood. I was already overcome with stress and anxiety and was suddenly thrown into a season requiring me to reorient my life around another human who would require my fullest potential of love. “Will I be able to stand with someone so vulnerable and dependant on me?” I wondered. The image of my grandma at Anne’s bedside often flooded my thoughts in those days. The soft and gentle love she gave at her daughter’s bedside seemed too far from the harsh and selfish heart growing inside me. I held those thoughts inside me, though, as the utter weight of becoming a father undid any remaining sense of adequacy or strength I had. I became terrified at the thought of failing as a parent. I imagine this is a common experience for parents welcoming a new child into their lives. When we welcome a child, we are no longer alone to live and act as we choose, but instead, we are brought into an entirely different rhythm of caring for and giving to a person who needs everything provided for them. Almost nothing is more self-emptying than the arrival of a human being who looks up at you in so many ways to say, “I need you.” At first, a baby can only receive.

Weeks before our baby was born, I messaged my dad to ask if he had any advice to offer me. I remember the words he wrote back, and I still hold them in my heart: “Corey, listen to your child when they cry. They’ll tell you what they need.” (Thank you, dad. That was all I needed to know.) The day finally came for our daughter to be born. We named her Annabelle after my aunt: “*Beautiful Grace.*” And, as her birth timed out, at the very same time that we were carrying her into her new home and saying “Welcome” to our child, our parents were forced to say “Goodbye” to theirs. We had taken a job in another community, so

Luisa, Annabelle, and I began our family life in Sudbury, ON, many hours away from home.

Sudbury

(Note: There is much about our years in Sudbury that is not easy to recall in writing. It's not so much that I struggle to understand the circumstances and implications of our time there, but many of the dynamics growing out of that season are too close for me to speak about openly. Perhaps a few hundred yards downstream, I will have the opportunity to look back and recount all that was stirring in my heart and relationships at that time. Now, I will say what I can.)

On a Sunday morning in late October, Luisa and I stood next to my mom and dad outside of a breakfast restaurant surrounded by rocks and wiping away the early snowfall of Northern Ontario. Only a month earlier, we were hired to join the New Sudbury Pentecostal Church staff as their Assistant Pastor. My parents had driven behind our moving truck the day before to help us settle into our new home and were about to make the return trip home to Essex. I remember it was a cold morning, and the air offered little warmth to my anxious heart. Luisa and I were glad to be there, but I wasn't prepared for the floods of emotions filling the coming season. More than any other emotion, though, I dreaded the moment I needed to say "Goodbye" to my parents. Questions turned over in my mind that added to my dread: "Will they cry?" I wondered, "How do I avoid eye contact if they do? What will I say? Should I try to hug my dad?" How strange all of that seems right now, and yet, there I was, as hard as the rocks around me and unable to break open in their presence. It didn't help that my parents cried when

they finally returned to their car. I suppose it would have been unfitting for them not to. Although, there I remained, dry-eyed and unmoving. I had mustered an awkward hug that I hoped would come and go quickly. But then, during our short embrace, the most unforgettable final words came from my dad. I will never forget what he said as he reluctantly backed away, bursting with tears.

“That’s it,” he said, “It’s done. It’s done.”

It’s done. I’m not entirely sure what he meant, but as he spoke, he waved his hands as though to push something away or close a door in front of him. I was closed as well. *It’s done.* Those were the last words before he got into his car and drove far away. They must have been some of the most difficult things he’s ever had to say. I wonder at those words even more now. Less than a decade later, he spoke other, far more painful words as he offered a final farewell to the one he loved in the last hour of his life. “I got this,” were the words he chose that last day before driving away again. Only, I wasn’t there to hear him.

After my parents left, Luisa and I returned to our new home to begin ministry in Sudbury. It was our second anniversary but the third move we made together. It wasn’t clear how profoundly affected I became by changing places in my life. Leaving home has never been easy, but leaving the people and places that offer me a sense of stability in the world has always led to a deep disorientation in me that, until recently, I struggled to understand. The seasons of my life that are most coloured by rest and growth have nearly always been underlaid with a certain consistency and familiarity in my relationships and surroundings. It is in “returning and rest” that I have most often found my place of salvation (Isa.

30:15). Without those familiar people and places to return to, I become anxious, tense, and fearful of the new places laid out before me.

In Sudbury, the tumult of leaving home and the deep anxieties of newfound fatherhood contributed to a nearly unceasing experience of inadequacy throughout our three years there. Granted, there were good experiences to be had there and good relationships established in my role as their pastor, but in any given moment, if my heart had been laid out for others to see, they would have seen loneliness and desperation looking back at them, screaming, “Am I enough for you? Will you still love me while I am weak?” For my part, I saw the rocks and perceived the hardness of everything around me. Compared with my childhood home of gentle slopes and sprawling fields, Sudbury was a place of edges and cliffs. Moreover, I know Luisa struggled more than I did. A new mother without her family lacks the familiar smiles and helping hands that make the transition to motherhood bearable. She fell into a deep and very understandable depression, often opening up to me about the nagging uncertainty she felt around the people she longed to trust and depend on. She felt alone. And, in many ways, so did I. Even with the responsibilities that drew me into constant connection with other people, I felt as homeless there as I ever had in my life.

The familiarity and consistency marking my childhood home and church felt like a distant memory. Now, I had to work to build something to stand on. In my personal and professional life, I was repeatedly reminded that people choose to come and go quite frequently, so I thought it was my task to bind them to me, make them love me, and earn their smiles. Far from the steady stream of love I

learned to receive as a child, I now felt like I was running from puddle to puddle, trying to fill up the deep places inside me. In childhood, my friends and neighbours called me by my first name, saw my first falls, and picked me up to bring me home again. Now, my adult home felt lonely and dangerous. The streets of my childhood hosted parades and bike rides. As an adult, potholed roads were passed over quickly for work and travel. It was quick and transient. My heart was becoming altogether unrooted, detached, and harder than I could imagine. Rarely did I sit still, and when I did, it was with head in hands, determined to try harder next week.

Trees

Through it all, God whispered to me, even in my anguish. Like before, it took years to notice how he spoke, but his theme now stands clear in my mind: “In quietness and trust shall be your strength” (Isa. 30:15)—quietness, stillness, and even weakness. These are not experiences to be shunned or wiped away, but the substance God uses to merge our lives with himself and those around us. One of his whispers came through a gift on the Sunday morning of my ordination with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. As I stood before my congregation to receive the certificate now hanging on my wall, my church board graciously handed me a large painting to commemorate the day. The



painting was blurry and grey, showing a rocky mountain covered in fog and mist creeping over a twisted and tormented tree in the foreground. Across the painting are the words of Isaiah 30:15, “In quietness and trust shall be your strength.” I will never forget the words of the board chair, an especially tall man whom I turned my eyes upwards to see. His eyes welled up with emotion as though his heart was pouring out of him. He smiled with one of the greatest smiles I can ever recall as he said the gentle words to me, “This picture is you, Corey.”

What an odd thing to say, and what an odd picture to be likened to. But God knows exactly what he meant, and now I also know exactly what he meant. As twisted and blurry as I often become, quietness and trust shall be my strength. By grace, there is one who is always enough, and though I haven’t always rested to hear His whispers, I am learning to do this now. There, in quietness and trust, with uncovered hearts and needful hands, grace flows to us like a river of perfect love to be received with thankful hearts.

Rivers

After only three years, we were called away from Sudbury, even as my heart remained in pieces yet to be brought together by that Master Healer. If the season of Sudbury wrenched my insides, the season after moving to our current home wrenched the world around me, including my family, in unimaginable ways. Two new children, Joshua and Eileen, have come into our lives, and one parent, my father, has been gone for years. The intricacies of those stories and their place in my life must wait for a time down the road. It will suffice to say that we are a family learning to love amid the storm, and we are here together.

In my new town, there is a river named “Grand.” Some rivers whisper all along. The Grand River whispers and roars but stays steady in its flow. Its rising and falling is always fitting to the land in which it runs faithfully on its course. By the time it reaches the middle of Fergus, Ontario, the water in the Grand is tumbling along quite fiercely over the drops and rocks in its way. Just a hundred yards before, you will see quite a different river, a gentle and quiet one. The river has many faces and many expressions. Yet, all of it—the roaring rapids and the gentle pools—flows from one source just north of Fergus at Dundalk, Ontario. As long as this carved-out trench in the middle of Elora-Fergus remains connected to those headwaters, the Grand River moves onward.

Sometimes, when I walk along the Grand, I think back on the gentle water of my childhood river. I am reminded that my life, like the river, has been formed in quiet and faithful places, and that is good. When I see the rushing waters of the Grand, it reminds me of how my life has run through unstable ground where rocks and fallen trees abound. In many cases, the water that once flowed peacefully around small mounds of dirt and stones now tumbles through difficult passage loss and change. But the river has been formed in places like that. And so have I.



It would be wrong to say that I don’t look back to my earlier days and long for a quiet place to resettle again. However, I also look around me now and

wonder about the ways God's heart is coming to life with a smile and a voice that I've longed to hear say, "Corey, I will give you enough. In quietness and trust is your strength." Even in seasons of unimagined disruption when fears and storms stir within and around me, the Spirit of God has lifted my eyes to see the Heavenly Father stand over me with a smile and welcome me to join his song in a new way with those around me. Below, in my stories of transformation and transition in my sense of identity and belonging, God has brought me into a new season during which I have, again, learned to pray the greatest prayer in my life: "For what I am about to receive, I am truly thankful. Amen."

CHAPTER III:
A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION ~ PRACTICING
COMMUNITIES

An audience gathers as musicians assemble, each one holding instruments of wood, strings, and brass. A cacophony of sound fills the room as breath and wind from instruments merge with the indistinct chatter of the audience. The unformed sound is more like chaos than the music that is to come. Now, another walks to a place between the musicians and the audience. Movement and chatter subside, hands and breath are ready, and focus turns to the centre of the platform, where the conductor signals for a solitary oboe to sound. The orchestra tunes together and conforms to the conductor's lead. What comes next is the masterpiece.

The orchestra illustrates certain qualities of interpersonal communities in which deep and mutual formation occurs. At first, the orchestra's unguided playing resembles chaos until the musicians are oriented around a common focus—a tuning, score, rhythm, and conductor. Only through common postures and practices does their music fully express their composer's intent. In the same way, when we orient ourselves around common postures and practices, we are formed together into the full expression of our Creator. Even while individual parts of the whole remain devoted to personal growth, it is only through a Christ-

conducted community with each other that we become a true masterpiece, the living expression of God's image on earth (see Gen. 1:26; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:17-18). Only then does the audience see and hear the mind of the composer inviting them to experience, and perhaps even join, his music.

Drawing the orchestra analogy into a Christian framework, we can imagine God as our 'composer.' He is the one who made all things according to His purposes and called humans to represent his image among all creation (Gen. 1:26; Rom 8:28-29). Such representation involves living in harmony with God and the people he created. When our lives become out of tune with God and those around us, God initiated the mission of drawing us back in harmony when he sent his Son to perfectly represent his vision for human life and restore us into a community transformed in his image (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:1-3; Eph. 1:20-21). A community whose lives are collectively reharmonized with God and each other is the clearest of God's image in the world (Jn 13:35; 17:20-23; 1Jn 1:3,7). Such a community draws others around them to see and hear the image of God expressed on earth. In his book *Theology for the Community of God*, Stanley Grenz (2000, 179) describes the image of God embodied in Christian community when he claims, "Only in fellowship with others can we show forth what God is like, for God is the community of love - the eternal relationship enjoyed by the Father and the Son" in communion with the Holy Spirit. Because of the profound relationality inherent to the trinitarian God—a theme explored below—our participation in relationships with God and each other is essential to our transformation in the image of God. Further, Grenz (2000, 179-180) suggests the

Church “has been given the responsibility and privilege of reflecting the very nature of the triune God” through our openness to each other and the world around us.

In this chapter, I present a model of spiritual formation that focuses on how transformation takes place in Christian community. I define community as a group of people interacting with each other through shared space, activity, and orientation in their lives. Christian community develops when those shared spaces, activities, and orientation are centred on Christ. Such communities become living expressions of God who fuel spiritual formation among its participants while also offering an invitation to those around us to come and join the divine relationship into which God invites all humanity. While the basic principles of this model are applicable across Christian traditions, it was developed within the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition to which I belong. Specifically, it was developed within a large congregation desiring to nurture spiritual formation among its members. The basis for this model comes from theological reflection on God’s nature and the ways human nature is depicted throughout scripture. These reflections are supported by insights into human nature from psychology, sociology, biblical studies, and personal experience. Together, these insights reveal how interpersonal connection is vital for human flourishing. My goal in presenting this model is to draw attention to the need for Christ-oriented communities that adopt certain structures and practices supporting positive formation among its members. I call these Practicing Communities (PCs)

and argue that they provide a necessary context for spiritual formation in Christian congregations.

At the forefront of this model, I show how our invitation to participate with Christ in the community of God (i.e. the Trinity) has implications for the structures and practices of PCs (see Eph. 2:6). Using the communal nature of God as a starting point, I put forth a vision for Christian community that faithfully represents the image of the God-in-relationship as we participate in renewed relationships with God and each other (Gen. 1:26-27). I outline how PCs can devote themselves to practices rooted in the life of Jesus and his earliest followers to orient their lives to Christ (see Lk. 24:30-32; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). The four practices I outline include (1) scriptural teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) “breaking of bread,” and (4) prayer (see Acts 2:42). Rooting PCs in practices drawn from the life of Christ gives my model its distinct Christian focus—it is not merely human formation, but formation in Christ where God’s image is most clearly restored in our lives. Moreover, through our shared devotion to Christ-oriented practices in community with one another, such restoration occurs, and we are reharmonized into a masterpiece expressing God’s image in the world. Reflecting on Christian mission, Michael Gorman (2015) claims this communal transformation is a significant aspect of becoming a living demonstration of the gospel to each other and those around us.

Spiritual Formation

One of the basic realities of our lives is that we are always being formed. From the moment our life begins, we develop through interactions with people

and environments around us (Siegel 2012, 1-9; Thompson 2010, 2-10, Chapter 3). Siegel (2012, xii), a pioneer in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), presents recent research in neuroscience revealing how “interactions with the environment, especially relationships with other people, directly shape the development of the brain’s structures and functions.” As such, not only are we always being formed, but we are formed through our relationships and experiences. When these formative experiences reach our innermost life (i.e. our spirit), we refer to it as our spiritual formation. Dallas Willard (2002, 2) describes spiritual formation as “the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite ‘form’ or character.” Spiritual formation becomes distinctly ‘Christian’ when it has Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the “definite ‘form’” after which our lives are shaped (Rom. 8:29).

Given the relational basis of human development in general and the relational implications of Christ’s sonship with the Father, we can say that Christian spiritual formation is the process of people being transformed together into the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through renewed relationships with God, one another, and the world around us. Spiritual formation is a process in the same way that all human formation occurs gradually over time (Siegel 2012, 3-5; Brown and Strawn 2012, 74). This process involves people who, among all Creation, are given the unique role of being God’s image bearers in the world (Gen. 1:26). Further, it is a transformative process because sin has tainted God’s image in us, requiring our transformation into restored image bearers once more. We are transformed in the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because

Christ is the exact representation of God and now lives as the head of a body, the church, that conforms to its head and fills the earth with his image (Heb. 1:1-3; Eph. 1:22-23). The scriptural imagery of a body forming under Christ, our head, strongly implies spiritual formation involves renewed relationships with God and one another within the church as we join in the transformation process (see Col. 1:15-18). Finally, the ever-expanding relationality of God, who extends his love to others, even moving and acting in response to the world he created, is reflected in us, his image bearers, whose relationship with the world compels us to act and respond in ways that foster Christlike formation within us (see Jn. 3:16). The impact of our relationship with the world around us is explored below. (See “Considering Human Development” in chapter 3 and in my autoethnography in chapter 5.)

Participation in Christ

As mentioned, Christian spiritual formation is focused on people being “conformed to the image of the Son” (Rom. 8:29) In the Gospel of John, a poignant view of such conformity is given through Jesus’ prayer that his followers would participate in the relationship he shared with the Father “before the world began” (Jn. 17:5; 21). In her exposition of Romans 8:29, Haley Goranson Jacob (2018, 2-3) places our participation in the life of Christ and the Father as the centrepiece of what it means to be conformed to the image of the Son. She argues that our spiritual union with Christ is the essential context where our transformation in the image of God occurs as we share in Christ’s communion with the Father (see also Fairbairn 2009, 10-11). Similarly, Gorman (2015, 9-10)

describes the goal of human existence as “participating now and forever, individually and corporately, in the very life and character of [God].” Our participation in the life and character of God is a central theme in the Orthodox Church’s doctrine of *theosis*, where it is understood that the incarnation and glorification of the Son of God draws humans into a restored communion with the Father through the indwelling Spirit of Christ. This doctrine is articulated in the work of St. Athanasius (1892, 159), who famously wrote, “The Word was made flesh in order to offer up this body for all, and that we, partaking of His Spirit, might be deified.” While Athanasius’ language may be unnerving to those who rightfully reject the notion that individuals are intrinsically transformed into divine beings, the heart of this doctrine suggests that, in Christ, humans are unified with God to “become by grace what God is by nature” (Hester 2001). Or, as Western theology commonly puts it: in Christ, we are sanctified and restored in the image of God through a renewed relationship with God.

The implications our relationship with God have on our daily life is often referred to as our “spirituality”—a concept defined succinctly by Sandage et al. (2020, 24) as our “ways of relating to the sacred.” Allister McGrath (1999, 1-4) describes the root of “spirituality” in the Hebrew *ruach*, referring to that which gives life and animation to a person. Spirituality, then, involves our relationship with that which gives us life and animates our being in the world (Gen. 2:7; Jn. 14:14-18; see also Albrecht and Howard 2014, 235). Through a Christian lens, spirituality refers to the ways our entire life is lived out “in relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit” (Conn 2000, “spirituality”). In this sense,

Christian spirituality involves multiple dimensions of life, including our private experiences with God (ex. Gen. 28:16; Rev. 1:10), but also our interpersonal experiences with people and environments around us. Both of these dimensions of spirituality, the private and the corporate, have implications for how our relationship with God is lived out with one another. For example, when we begin seeing others around us as co-participants in the life of God, we no longer understand our spirituality in individualistic terms but, instead, through communal terms where we, with Christ, our head, are experiencing and expressing the image of God with others in the world (Eph. 1:21-22). In this way, Christian spirituality involves a reversal of the individualism inherent to humankind's fall into sin (see Gen. 3). And even while aspects of spirituality remain a part of our lives as individuals, it is ultimately through a renewed 'life together' with other Spirit-breathed people that the fullness of Christian spirituality is experienced and the image of God is restored in us (Gen. 1:26, 2:18; Jn 13:35).

In their work on Christian spiritual formation, Robert Mulholland and Ruth Haley Barton (2016, 20) boldly claim, "There can be no wholeness in the image of Christ which is not incarnate in our relationships with others, both in the body of Christ and in the world." In this regard, models of spiritual formation seeking to draw people into conformity to Christ will inevitably encourage and facilitate participation in renewed relationships with others in the body of Christ. Such communal forms of spirituality fulfill the teaching of Christ to his disciples when he says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:28). We see this type of spirituality lived out

through the interpersonal relationships developing among Christ's followers who walked, talked, ate, prayed, and reflected together in the presence of the risen Christ (see Lk. 24:13-35; Acts 2:42). As we will now see, this type of spirituality is also evident at the heart of the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition taking shape in recent history.

Community and Pentecostal Spirituality

The Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition traces its roots to the biblical texts in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Pentecostal scholar Robert Menzies (2013, Kindle Location 286, 292) points to the Book of Acts as a basis for the Pentecostal tradition, "Pentecostals have always read the narrative of Acts, and particularly the account of the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), as a model for our lives. The stories of Acts are our stories ... [and] were written to serve as models for shaping [our] life and experience." At the basis of Pentecostal-Charismatic ecclesiology stands the narrative of Acts with a particular focus on the events surrounding the Day of Pentecost. To better understand the roots of Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, it helps to examine the early chapters of Acts, where the events of Pentecost unfolded. There, we notice the narrative beginning weeks before the Day of Pentecost when Jesus instructed his disciples to wait together for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4). Following his instruction, the disciples "constantly devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). After remaining together in prayer for many days, Acts 2:1-4 says:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided

tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Part of the significance of this text is found in the ‘togetherness’ of believers receiving the gift of God. Acts 2:1b says, “they were together in one place” when the Spirit was given to them, binding them together as a spiritual community (Rom.12:4-5; Eph 4:4-6).

Further, as people around them were drawn to the manifestations taking place among them, certain members of the community stood up to teach what was happening. Those who heard their words “were cut to the heart” and invited to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38). Three thousand people were brought into their new community and, together, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The narrative goes on to say that, “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:42, 46-47a). Throughout the narrative of Acts, we see examples of daily participation in a spiritual community united by their relationship with God’s Spirit. Specifically, the ‘Pentecostal narrative’ in Acts 1-2 describes far more than a climactic moment in the lives of believers. It also describes the ongoing experience of spiritual community among believers. Moreover, their community presents a prime example of spiritual formation at the roots of the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition. For the early church, spiritual

formation was an ongoing process of transformation through renewed relationships with God and each other as the body of Christ.

The Problem of Individualism

While the scriptural images of spiritual formation involve a distinct relationality with God and others in the church, we nonetheless live in a culture saturated by individualism that impacts our understanding and practice of spirituality. Pastor Jeremy Rios (2020, 179) argues that individualism is:

so deeply ingrained in the modern, Western concept of the self that imagining alternatives to it is prohibitively difficult. Individualism, in other words, has become the fundamental starting point which we (in the West) bring to bear on questions of faith, ecclesiology, and, by extension, spiritual formation.

These deeply ingrained patterns contribute to what Rios (2020, 177) calls a “latent individualism” underlying many models of spiritual formation today. The danger of this, he argues, is the distortion of genuine spirituality by casting our lives backwards into ourselves rather than drawing us outward to a life with God and each other. Rios points to various aspects of contemporary spirituality, including (1) an emphasis on personal experience of God as the central aspect of our life with God, (2) a growing detachment from the traditions of the Church in favour of novel forms of spirituality, and (3) a dualism that leads us to the separation of spirituality from the experiences of daily life. Similarly, Julie Gorman (2002, 42-5) describes the influence of individualism in contemporary church models by drawing attention to the way our preference for individual identity, power, freedom, and a competitive edge sidetracks our full participation in community with Christ and each other, and centres us, instead, on ourselves first. Like Rios,

she recognizes that we are enculturated by the individualism that bends our hearts towards self-focused, self-centred forms of spirituality. In Gorman's view, even our pursuit of holiness can be coloured by individualism insofar as the goal of our sanctification is a self-centred grasp at a higher, spiritual life. It was, we recall, an individual's grasp at godliness that invoked the first fall into sin (Gen. 3:5).

Martin Luther (2017, 494-495) described the human heart as being so deeply curved in on itself that even the gifts that God would bestow to us are grasped and turned inward onto ourselves. Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern (2018, 271) expound on Luther's description of the human heart:

For Luther, our sinfulness takes the form of a fundamental self-concern, which means we are "curved in on ourselves" (*incurvatus in se*), as we turn inwards through the centripetal pressure of our self absorption. This "inturnedness" cuts us off not only from God, but also from other people and the world around us, and so has ethical as well as religious consequences, making it impossible for us to truly love the neighbour in the kind of selfless way that this love requires, as well as making it impossible for us to relate properly to God's creation.

The "inturnedness" of human hearts disorientates spirituality by turning us away from God and each other and focusing inward on ourselves, thus inhibiting our faithful representation of the profoundly communal God. This is why, as Catholic scholar Mark O'Keefe (1992, 85-94) suggests, a core aim of spiritual formation is the reorientation of the "fundamental option" of our hearts. According to O'Keefe, the restoration of God's image is not primarily about polishing up an individual's actions for good or evil but reorientating hearts to the life of Christ (see also Chan 1998, 60; Wilbourne 2016, 153-154). As demonstrated by the lives of the earliest followers of Jesus, when people "devote themselves together" to the way of Christ, they experience the transforming presence of God in ways far

beyond their own abilities. Like the orchestra whose common focus was on its conductor, a spiritual community oriented together to the life of Christ becomes the masterpiece for which they were created.

Individualism in Context

Examining our immediate contexts provides a concrete perspective on how elements of latent individualism play out in our spirituality. The intent of our examination is not to devalue the positive elements of our spiritual experiences but, instead, to bring awareness to individualistic tendencies that limit our experiences with God and consider correctives to enrich our lives together as a community. For example, while reflecting on the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, I note three tendencies in need of consideration and correction: (1) the pursuit of personal experience in Pentecostal-Charismatic worship, (2) the underprivileged role of ‘ordinary practices’ adopted into the lives of believers, and (3) the overemphasis on ‘personal holiness’ in the Christian life.

First, many have noticed the emphasis placed on personal experiences with God in contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality, especially as these experiences take place in weekly congregational gatherings (see Albrecht and Howard 2014, 237-244; McMahan 2004, 152-153). While there is merit to significant experiences with God in worship, Pentecostal scholar Simon Chan (1998, 48) describes how our “strain for continuous adventure” can lead believers away from an ongoing process of spiritual formation by drawing our attention to the ‘extra-ordinary’ rather than the ‘ordinary’ ways in which the Spirit forms our lives. Chan (1998, 49, 39) points to how enthusiasm in worship can eventually

overshadow the “ordinary walk of daily life” where continual and transformational union with Christ occurs. Chan argues that when centripetal experiences of praise and worship replace the centrifugal movement of the Spirit, we risk developing an individualized spirituality turned inward on each congregation member’s personal encounters with God. This can be seen in the language used to describe “how worship felt for us” during Sunday morning services. While an individual receiving comfort or encouragement from worship is not altogether wrong—Jesus does intend to comfort and encourage us—the prominence of personal experience all too easily leads to consumptive practices of church membership while disregarding the often self-giving, interpersonal practices of hospitality, teaching, fellowship, and prayer in the scriptures (see Acts 2:42).

Second, due in part to the emphasis on extraordinary experiences with God, the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition tends to underemphasize the role of ‘ordinary practices’ in the daily lives of believers (Chan 1999, 48-9). McMahan (2004, 152-3) recognizes that “Pentecostals and charismatics focus much of their activity within the worship setting of the church. Spirituality is frequently defined within the context of a church service more than a devotional closet.” Granted, as Daniel Albrecht and Evan Howard (2014, 243) note in their chapter on Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality, our spirituality involves a high degree of participation among adherents during Sunday morning gatherings, especially during praise and worship when spiritual gifts like glossolalia and prophecy are welcomed and encouraged or at the altar service as people minister to one another

in prayer. These valuable interpersonal experiences help form congregations together in the Spirit of Christ. However, it is less common for interpersonal, embodied practices to extend beyond Sundays into the daily lives of Pentecostal-Charismatics. Limiting our interpersonal practices to temporary experiences in larger congregational gatherings effectually omits the brunt of our formational context, for it is in the ‘dailiness’ of life that Christ taught his disciples, and it is there in the “mundane moments of daily life” that our deepest formation occurs (Wilhoit 2008, 31). William Stringfellow (1984, 22) affirms this holistic understanding of spirituality:

Whatever else may be affirmed about a spirituality which has a biblical precedent and style, spiritual maturity or spiritual fulfillment necessarily involves the *whole* person—body, mind and soul, place, relationships—in connection with the whole of creation throughout the era of time. Biblical spirituality encompasses the whole person in the totality of existence in the world, not some fragment or scrap or incident of a person.

When spirituality fails to intentionally involve all of life, including our relationships, environments, and rhythms of life, it not only propagates a privatized and individualized form of religion, but it also fails to underscore the bodily and communal qualities of human beings.

Third, when made an ultimate goal in and of itself, even the pursuit of personal holiness may lead believers into a path of individualism easily mistaken for Christlike devotion. This defining characteristic of Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality finds its roots in the Holiness movement beginning in 19th-century Methodism, which emphasized an inner work of grace in the believer that brought one into a deeper state of Christian living. Granted, the pursuit of holiness finds merit in the Scriptures, such as when God calls people to “be holy, for I am holy”

or when Jesus himself prayed, “I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth” (Lev. 11:44-45; Jn 17:19). However, we cannot overlook the way ‘personal holiness’ occurs through relationship with God and for relationship with each other. Holiness, as articulated in the scriptures, including those mentioned above, is primarily grounded in relational terms as believers grow in the likeness of God for the sake of others (see Jn. 17:19). With this in mind, there is reason to caution against such an emphasis on individuals growing in ‘personal holiness’ to the extent that such an endeavour may unwittingly de-empathize our growth together as the body of Christ. Once again, the orchestra analogy demonstrates the essential interactivity of believers who, only when harmonizing together, reflect the intentions of their composer. The most important step in growing in the holiness of God is joining together in loving relationships that reflect his being. Therefore, “as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,” we are called, above all, to “clothe [ourselves] with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12a, 14).

Acknowledging individualism in our contexts does not leave us without hope. Instead, it reminds us of what the process of transformation in the image of God requires, namely, a renewing of our lives through ongoing participation in the life of Christ with others in his body, the church. This takes place beyond Sunday morning experiences by involving ongoing interactions with one another. A prime example of communal spirituality is seen in the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his leadership of the Finkenwalde Seminary. Bonhoeffer (1954, 16, 122) stood against individualistic forms of Christian

spirituality of his day by encouraging his seminarians to devote themselves to “life together under the Word.” Through common practices such as meals, work, prayer, rest, conversation, and confession, Bonhoeffer presents a vision of communal spirituality reminiscent of the Church in the Book of Acts, a vision which continued beyond scriptural times through Church history to the present day in various traditions, including Monasticism and, in the past century, “New Monasticism” (see Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove 2012). In his writings, Bonhoeffer (2009, 211) offered a concrete framework for spiritual formation through relationships that formed believers into a living representation of “Christ existing as church-community.” Moreover, as we will see below, core elements, including relational consistency, attunement, and embodied practices, align remarkably well with current insights from the study of human nature and what makes for deep and lasting transformation in our lives.

Considering Human Development

An overarching problem with individualism and the models of spiritual formation exhibiting individualistic tendencies is not only that they lead us away from the way of life modelled by Jesus Christ and his followers in the New Testament, but they also ignore the basic mechanisms inherent to human nature. An underlying principle in the model I am presenting in this chapter is that God created humans with certain characteristics that He continues to work with for our transformation. With this in mind, a deeper understanding of human nature will enrich our understanding of spiritual formation that honours the “creaturely conditions” God gave us (Smith 2013, 33). Further, because Christ took on human

flesh to reveal the glorious image of God, we are right to imagine physical and tangible ways we are being transformed into that glorious image in our own humanness (see Jn. 1:14, 18). In the following pages, we will explore some basic tenets of human development through the lens of psychology and sociology and consider how these perspectives help inform spiritual formation.

Personality and Development

The interdisciplinary framework of IPNB emerged in the final decade of the 20th century when scholars brought together the fields of psychology, sociology, and neurobiology to demonstrate how the human mind forms in the context of experiences and interpersonal relationships. American psychologist, Louis Cozolino (2006, 19), defines IPNB as “the study of how we attach and grow and interconnect throughout life.” Specifically, he focuses on the formational effects relationships have on our brains “as an organ of adaptation that builds its structures through interactions with others” (Cozolino 2006, 19). Our brain’s adaptability is attributed to the one hundred trillion synaptic connections forming neural networks as hundreds of billions of neurons respond to stimuli in and between bodies. Certain brain networks, especially those of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, are vital to interpersonal human development as they guide our emotional, behavioural, and memory functions. The brain’s complex networks form a dynamic system in which continued and repeated stimuli via interpersonal and environmental experiences form and transform the deeply ingrained neural processes we call the “mind.”

Daniel Siegel (2012, 3), a pioneer in IPNB, defines the mind as “the process that emerges from the distributed nervous system extending throughout the entire body, and also from the communication patterns that occur within relationships.” His conception of the mind as an embodied and relational process emerging from the distributed nervous system in response to interpersonal relationships is central to the framework of IPNB. Understanding the mind as an “emerging process” implies the potential for neural networks to be transformed through new experiences: by engaging in renewed interpersonal encounters, our minds begin to “emerge” in new ways. Further, this holistic understanding of the human mind implies that we are more than thinking things, or “brains-on-a-stick,” as the philosopher James K.A. Smith (2016, 3) puts it. We do not simply “change our minds” via new ideas and information, as is sometimes suggested in some popular conceptions of human growth. Instead, the human mind develops through experiences and relationships with other minds over time. Thus, through renewing and repeating patterns of connecting with those around us, our neural networks transform and, with it, so do our minds.

Cozolino (2006, xv) deepens our appreciation for life together with others by suggesting a kind of “social brain” that forms in the interpersonal networks, or “social synapses,” between people. These social synapses occur in the space between people that binds them together into larger organisms of families, societies, and, in the Christian context, congregations. At these points of connection, energy and information pass between people, leading to synchronized

physiological and emotional development. Cozolino (2006, 11) describes our social nature by boldly asserting:

The individual neuron or a single human brain does not exist in nature. Without mutually stimulating interactions, people and neurons wither and die. In neurons this process is called apoptosis; in humans it is called depression, grief, and suicide. ... Thus, understanding the brain requires knowledge of the healthy, living brain embedded within a community of other brains.

Siegel (2006, 248) affirms this view, arguing that human growth and development occur “within one brain, or between brains.” From this view, we see our minds as more than individualistic processes housed within us. Instead, they are embedded within the communities and groups in which we live. Further, when viewed through the lens of Christianity, we can imagine how such a communal mind is orchestrated together under the watchful eye of our ‘masterful conductor.’

Though not writing from a Christian worldview, Cozolino’s and Siegel’s social conception of human nature bears resemblance to the relational dimensions of human life as envisioned in the creation accounts in Scripture. The prime example of this comes in Genesis 1:26, which says:

So God created humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Such relationality inherent to human nature is echoed in Genesis 2:18 when God speaks, concerning the first person, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” This is supported by the New Testament’s images of the “body of Christ” existing as a network of people formed together with “one mind” under “one head” (Col. 1:15-18; Phil. 2:2-4; Eph. 4:4-9).

Further, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, it is in our participation in the

“one body with many parts” that we are “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rom. 12:5, 3; see also Eph. 2:21-22; I Pet. 2:4-9).

The Developing Mind in Spiritual Formation

Given the Scripture’s description of our communal nature, it is not surprising that Christian scholars have engaged with the framework of IPNB to enrich their understanding of the Christian life. Further, because of God’s personal engagement with his creation, Christian reflection on IPNB brings the theory of human develop into an even greater participatory role in our lives. Like the analogy of the orchestra suggests, we are not merely neurological mechanisms interacting with each other, but we are living beings guided by a living person, Jesus Christ, who orients our lives together as representatives of our Creator. In this way, our formational journey is thoroughly personal and participatory as a community under Christ, and our participation in this community influences each other’s lives and the lives of those we interact with day by day.

Curt Thompson (2010; 2021), Warren Brown and Bradley Strawn (2012; 2020), and Jim Wilder (2020) are notable examples of theologians and psychologists who apply the principles of IPNB in their understanding of spiritual formation. Regarding the role of interpersonal connections during the earliest stages of our development, Thompson (2010, 112, 111) insists:

From the moment of birth, the infant brain seeks connection. It is like a miniature radar system, scanning the surrounding environment, searching for something – someone – to help bring coherence to its emerging sense of life. ... In essence, his brain begins to wire in according with his experiences. In fact, the nature of his relationships with his parents shapes the neural networks in a fashion that will have lifelong implications.

Though our minds develop quickly and substantially during the early years of life, interpersonal connections throughout our lifespan continually contribute to our formation and transformation by engaging us in experiences that renew our neural networks over time (Thompson 2010, 136). Thompson (2010, 65) refers to “Hebb’s axiom,” claiming, “neurons that fire together, wire together. In other words, neurons that repeatedly activate in a particular pattern are statistically more likely to fire in that same pattern the more they are activated.” Granted, this means that our past experiences impact our engagement with present realities. However, it also means that engaging in consistent and positive relationships in the present can help renew our minds by exposing us to new experiences that rewire our brains over time. Moreover, when those contexts are influenced by and oriented toward Christ, our minds become progressively renewed in “the image of the Son” (Rom. 8:29, 12:3).

Similarly, Brown and Strawn (2012, 74, 99) describe how the mind renews through consistent and positive relationships extending over periods of time. Like Thompson et al., they emphasize the interpersonal nature of human development, writing, “To be reformed, we have to experience new forms of embodied, real-time, social interactions” (Brown/Strawn 2012, 89). In their view, it is not enough to acquire information about God and his word or experience individual encounters with God periodically or momentarily. Instead, deep transformation comes through continual, practical experiences shared between and among people. Like Thompson, they argue that our transformational process becomes distinctly Christian as those practices and relationships are oriented by

our “desire for the things of Christ” (Brown and Strawn 2012, 117). This involves developing practices that help draw our attention and devotion to the life of Christ together with those around us. By consistently joining together at the “social synapses” of our congregations and devoting ourselves to practices that orient our minds and hearts toward Christ, we have the basic elements for a robust model of spiritual formation. The remainder of this chapter offers guidance for how congregations can intentionally nurture these relationships and practices.

Characteristics of Formative Communities

The previous section argued that human development in general, and spiritual formation in particular, involves interpersonal connections that influence our development and transformation across our lifespan. After examining the basic tenets of IPNB and examples of contemporary theologians engaging its principles in their models of spiritual formation, we can now explore implications for a communally based model of spiritual formation in our congregations. First, it is important to note that not all forms of interpersonal connection are equally impactful on us. Certain characteristics of formative communities provide a positive, enriching model of spiritual formation when adopted and nurtured by the church. These characteristics include (1) group size, (2) consistency over time, (3) relational attunement, (4) relational security, (5) shared narratives, (6) embodied practices, and (7) outward expression. These seven characteristics will be unpacked before further examining the role of embodied practices in orienting and anchoring Christian communities in the way of Christ.

Characteristic 1: Group Size

According to social sciences, there is a limit to the size of a group that can adequately nurture the interpersonal connections necessary for deep formation (BBC 2022). A well-known study by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar (Dunbar, and Sosis 2018) suggests that no more than 150 people can maintain a stable network of relationships together, tending to develop outside margins where members no longer experience close connections to one another. Dunbar examined various group sizes ranging to as little as five people, which are often considered our most intimate friends and family. Beyond this, he points to groups of 12 to 15 people as conducive to transformative experiences that foster each of the remaining characteristics (below). While there is no hard and fast rule to the exact number of members a group can reach before seeing diminishment in their commitment, vulnerability, and ability to share stories and physical practices, it is of interest to note that Dunbar's numbers align with some of the community sizes we see in the ministry of Jesus and the Church. Perhaps most obviously, this includes the 12 disciples, the 120 gathering at Pentecost, and the three close disciples who gathered with Jesus in the more intimate moments of his life. With this in mind, Christian congregations do well to encourage and equip smaller communities among their larger gatherings who will commit to spiritual formation together in more focused contexts. In addition, it will be helpful for even smaller gatherings of 3-5 people to form among communities to provide a context for deeper vulnerability and attunement (see below).

Characteristic 2: Consistency Over Time

IPNB emphasizes the impact of relational attachment in human development. It recognizes how attachment styles impact openness, vulnerability, and willingness to explore new contexts and ideas throughout life. Our experience of secure attachments impacts our ability to develop mutual openness with those around us, which, in turn, can impact our experience of stability amid the challenges of our lives. Our attachment styles are formed early in life through our experiences with our first caregivers. Even so, consistent interactions with safe and nurturing relationships later in life can impact our deeply ingrained relational styles, allowing us to engage more openly and vulnerably with God and each other (Brown and Strawn 2012, 94-8; Plass and Cofield 2014, 12-13; Thompson 2010, 109-111). This is vital to the sort of spiritual formation that aims not only at outer changes but also at the innermost transformation of the heart. Such commitment to consistent interactions can be seen in various points in the New Testament narrative, though perhaps most notably in the “day by day” devotion of the earliest Church to gather together in homes and temples to learn, eat, worship, and pray (Acts 2:42). Their example demonstrates the formational power of consistent encounters with people committed to nurturing one another.

Characteristic 3: Relational Attunement

Thompson (2021, 21) suggests deep within us is a core longing “to be seen, heard, and felt by one whom we sense desires to see us, hear us, and feel what we feel.” The prophet Jeremiah describes the assurance of being known

when God spoke to him, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5a). Thompson (2021, 21) expands on the experience of ‘being known’ into the sphere of human relationships, writing, “To have a conscious, embodied awareness of being known by God is a necessary feature of the life of loving God, and our awareness of being known by God is measured by the degree to which we are known by each other.” Wilder (2020, 28) argues:

Character formation flows out of these connections ... [as we] process these questions: Who is happy to see me here? What do I feel right now? Is there anyone here who understands me? How do I act like myself right now? What do my people do in this situation? The answers to these questions drive our character development.

Relational attunement means seeing, understanding, and accepting the mental and emotional states of others. In doing so, we offer each other a place to be seen and heard in a safe and nurturing environment. Through a neurobiological lens, relational attunement is transformational as it activates mirror neurons in our brains that enable us to perceive and engage empathetically with one another as we match (literally “mirror”) each other’s mental and emotional states. Such depth of community not only assures us we are not alone in our trials but also begins to alter and expand the neurocircuitry of the whole community as our minds synchronize and transform together. Furthermore, when like-mindedness involves attunement to “the things of the Spirit,” it fosters spiritual formation in tune with the mind of Christ (Rom. 5:8). This can be seen in the call to community in Philippians 2:2b-5, where Paul instructs:

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

We find this depth of relational attunement demonstrated by the fellowship of believers in the book of Acts, where “those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). In this way, the earliest Christian communities attuned to each other’s hearts and minds, leading them to deep transformation in tune with the mind of Christ.

Characteristic 4: Relational Security

The type of formative communities proposed in this chapter require secure relationships between people. When our relationships are characterized by insecurity and conflict, we become self-protective and closed off from others around us. Such relationships can leave us lonely and without the grounding necessary to open ourselves to new ideas and experiences that may seem threatening. Conversely, secure relationships provide a sense of grounding that prompts honesty and vulnerability, allowing us to be fully present and fully known in the transforming presence of God and each other. Hollingsworth (2008, 851) argues:

Safe, trust-evoking relational environments for communal spiritual practices are likely to open persons up to each other, themselves, and the sacred in such a way that (scientifically speaking) their neuroplastic processes may be activated in ways that encourage integration and (spiritually speaking) their entire selves may become more receptive to the sacred presence that the rite itself is believed to mediate.

The consistency and attunement described above foster secure relational environments over time. Such relationships take shape as we are continually reminded that we can be vulnerable, imperfect, and honest about ourselves without fear of rejection.

Characteristic 5: Shared Narratives

The stories we share with each other affect us deeply by engaging our minds with both the story *and* the storytellers among us. Brown and Strawn (2014, 82-83) state that when we listen to each other's stories, "[We] become engaged in a process of internally simulating the actions that constitute the story. We understand the narrative by imagining what it would be like if we were in the story!" In light of relational attunement, this becomes transformative for the storyteller as they experience attunement from others in their community. However, this also draws listeners into their story as their thoughts and emotions mirror what is being narrated. Cozolino (2006, 304) explains:

Because narratives require participation of multiple structures throughout the brain, they require us to combine, in conscious memory, our knowledge, sensations, feelings, and behaviors. In bringing together multiple functions from diverse neural networks, narratives provide the brain with a tool for both emotional and neural integration.

In a spiritual sense, we experience the transforming power of God's word being shared in a Christian community. Hearing the story of Jesus told and retold from scripture and each other's lives is a profoundly transformative practice. This is why Thompson (2021, 96) insists that spiritually oriented communities not only gather around postures and practices that form them in a general sense but, instead, they are "allowing their stories to be exposed to the biblical narrative revealed not just in our use of Scripture but in the 'truth-telling,' if you will, of other members of the group." We recall the primary point of orientation for the believers in Acts involved their devotion "to the apostles' teaching," which, as we will explore below, represents the corpus of teachings and narratives of the

Christian Scriptures. When the narratives of Scripture become integrated with our own narratives and confessional life, we experience a profound sense of participation in the life of God among us—the very context in which spiritual formation is rooted.

Characteristic 6: Embodied Practices

IPNB emphasizes a holistic understanding of human nature that involves physical experiences in the formational and transformational processes of the mind. This holistic understanding of human nature is vital for spiritual formation as it incorporates the “creaturely conditions” with which God made us (Smith 2013, 33). Describing a general view of embodied practices, Christine Pohl (2012, Kindle Location 111-127) insists that practices are activities “people do together over time to address fundamental human needs.” While every community shares some form of practice that holds it together, Christian communities adopt specific practices in response to the life of Christ and his invitation to join him in communion with God through the Spirit. Christian practices are connected to the life of Christ, whether through direct imitation of Christ and his first followers (ex. scripture reading, breaking bread, and prayer) or through other practices developed to draw us closer to Christ (ex. *Lectio Divina*, spiritual direction). In line with the sense of consistency described above, Pohl (2012, Kindle Location 96) suggests that deeply formational practices are often developed within the daily rhythms of life where “our lives are knit together not so much by intense feeling as by shared history, tasks, commitments, stories, and sacrifices.” This

implies that even the most ordinary and mundane practices shared among people are important to spiritual formation.

Much has been written in contemporary theological reflection about the physical qualities of spirituality and spiritual formation. An outstanding example of this is found in the writings of James K.A. Smith, who highlights the transformative influence of daily habits and embodied practices for the orientation of our hearts. He argues that our inner orientations are manifested in the “liturgies” and habits of daily life, which, in turn, further transform our hearts.

Smith (2013, 40) urges the Church to:

Reactivate and renew those liturgies, rituals, and disciplines that intentionally embody the story of the gospel and enact a vision of the coming kingdom of God in such a way that they’ll seep into our bones and become the background for our perceptions, the baseline for our dispositions, and the basis for our (often unthought) action in the world.

These liturgies (or ‘practices’) can be as simple as sharing meals, conversations, or other activities that engage one another in the consistent, attuned, and ‘storied’ experiences described above. Further, distinctly Christ-centred practices such as sharing communion, Scripture reading, prayer, and hospitality can have an even deeper transformative power for communities of Christians. They are not merely human practices but practices that intentionally engage us with the gospel story coming to life through the Christ and his Church, a story expressed for the world to see. Thompson (2021, 99) describes communal gatherings involving “liturgies, teaching, worship, and sacraments” as a “powerful reminder of the story in which we are living a story in which, as redeemed daughters and sons of God, we have been recommissioned to go forth and co-create new life and beauty in every domain of the world we occupy.”

Characteristic 7: Outward Expression

As Thompson suggested, the narratives we adopt and share within formative communities leads us to “go forth and co-create new life” in cooperation with God. Such activity is often referred to as the mission of the Church and is an essential element of our formative journey in community. In general, communities become stagnate when they exist as closed systems that remain detached from the larger contexts in which they live. In the same way our minds form through interaction with other minds, our communities form through our open interactions with those around us as we seek opportunities to express the image of God being formed in and among us. One of the outstanding qualities of Christian community throughout the scriptures is its ability to discern cultures and patterns of life that, in turn, shape the way God’s words and actions are expressed as the Spirit seeks new people and places where the life of God comes to dwell (see Acts 15-17). Further, it is important to understand our communal participation with Christ as an extension of the mission of God to us and the broader world.

The mission of God began when the Father sent the Spirit-endowed Son into the world to become the perfect image of God on earth and to reconcile the lost world to Himself. In turn, the Son imparted that same Spirit into human flesh so that all who are reconciled to God are now joined in the ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Cor. 5:11-21). In this way, there is no division between our “conformity to the image of the Son” and our participation in the mission of God. As John Colwell (2011, 85) claims regarding our life as missional communities,

“The world has no access to the gospel story other than as it is narrated in the life, worship, and proclamation of the Church. ... Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world.” By adopting the narratives of Christ among us and opening ourselves to the larger contexts in which we live, Christian communities become places where the missional heart of God is being formed and his image is faithfully expressed.

Presenting a Model of Spiritual Formation

We defined spiritual formation as the lifelong process of people being transformed together in the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through renewed relationships with Christ and his body, the Church. We situated this process in ongoing participation in the life of God with Christ and in the Spirit (Eph. 2:6). We recognized the interpersonal implications of a life with Christ that ushers us into a community with others who are also “in Christ” and are being formed in his image (Rom. 8:29, 12:5; 2 Cor. 5:16-18; Eph. 2:5). In this way, our spiritual formation is not limited to an individualistic sphere but involves our ‘life together’ with others through interpersonal connections of bodies and minds joined by the Spirit of Christ (Eph. 4:16). Contemporary insights into the developing mind underscore this interpersonal dynamic of spiritual formation. In particular, we reviewed insights from the burgeoning field of IPNB, which emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in our physical and spiritual formation. Further, we pointed to seven characteristics of communities that most effectively support positive formation in us, including group size, consistency over time, relational attunement, relational security, shared narratives, embodied

practices, and outward expression. When such communities are oriented toward Christ with minds set on “the things of the Spirit,” they provide the context for holistic spiritual formation in the image of God. This highlights the need for participation in communities devoted to Christ-centered practices that help orient our minds toward Christ while providing the context for formative spirituality to take shape. With this established, I will present a model of spiritual formation for Christian congregations with a particular focus on the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition to which I belong.

A Model of Spiritual Formation: Practicing Communities

My spiritual formation model focuses on developing Practicing Communities (PCs) in the context of Christian congregations. For this model, PCs are defined as small groups of approximately 8-12 people who gather within larger congregations to commit to shared practices that connect their lives to one another and Christ for spiritual formation. In practical terms, PCs seek to develop consistency, relational attunement, relational security and shared narratives through a mutual commitment to Christian practices that orient our lives to the life of Christ. PCs intentionally adopt a relational view of the Christian life in accordance with the scriptures and scientific insights into human nature. Further, PCs engage a holistic view of spiritual formation by devoting themselves to spiritual and embodied practices modelled after the life of Christ. While some characteristics of PCs are not emphasized in all traditions of spirituality (including the Pentecostal-Charismatic in which my model is specifically designed), scriptural narratives compel us to consider how certain postures and practices can

enrich our current process of spiritual formation. With this established, I will first examine how my model is rooted in the life of Jesus and his followers in the Gospel of Luke and on the day of Pentecost.

Practicing Communities in Luke 24:15-35

Before unpacking the central text in which my model for PCs is grounded (i.e. Acts 2:42), it is important to recognize that the early church's model of spiritual formation was rooted in the life of Jesus Christ. The early believers modelled their gatherings and practices after their experiences with Christ, often adopting for themselves the same practices Jesus shared with them in his earthly ministry. A clear example of this is the connection between the core practices of the church following the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:42 and the story of the Emmaus Road in Luke 24:13-35. The story of the Emmaus Road includes four distinct scenes echoed in the church's practices in the book of Acts. These include: (1) two disciples discuss the ministry of Jesus with a 'stranger' (Jesus) who interprets the meaning of the scriptures for them as they walk together (Lk. 24:13-27), (2) the three gathering together at a table in one of the disciples' homes to share a meal (Lk. 24:28-29), (3) the 'stranger' (Jesus) breaking bread at the table, thus opening their eyes to see it was Christ seated with them (Lk. 24:30-31, 35), and (4) the disciples' mutual reflection on their inner experience from their encounter with Christ (Lk. 24:32). At the end of the story, the disciples turn back to Jerusalem to tell the others "what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Lk. 24:33-35).

Many scholars have noticed the connection between Jesus' "breaking of the bread" in Luke 24:30 and that of the church in Acts 2:42 (Laytham 2007; Matson 1995, 11; Robinson 1984, 491-492). Laytham (2007, 112) calls that particular scene "the hinge between Jesus' practice and the disciples'," which Luke uses to connect Jesus' actions at the Emmaus Road with the activity of the church in Acts 2:42. However, the hinge between the Emmaus narrative and Acts 2:42 includes more than just the breaking of bread. Luke's depictions of Jesus teaching the scriptures to the disciples, gathering for table fellowship in their home, breaking bread with them, and evoking inward reflection between them are all echoed in Acts 2:42 when the disciples "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." By performing these four practices with his disciples, Jesus provided a model for pursuing communion with God and each other. On the Emmaus Road, Jesus showed that spiritual formation involves more than just community with God, it includes community with people. Likewise, it involves more than just community among people, but also community with God. In this way, Jesus invited his disciples into a fuller understanding of spiritual formation through participation with God and each other, and this soon became the normative model in the church's daily life and mission in the book of Acts.

Practicing Communities in Acts 2:42





There are a variety of communal practices shared by the church throughout the book of Acts, including congregational prayer (Acts 1:14), worship (Acts 2:11), evangelism (Acts 3:11-26; 17:22-31), communal

discernment (Acts 15), and scriptural teaching (Acts 10:34-43; 20:18-35).

However, Acts 2:42, a description of the daily rhythms of believers following the day of Pentecost, offers a summary of the church's model of spiritual formation in its earliest stages. In Acts 2:42-47, we are told the community of new believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Here, we see the same four practices enacted by Jesus at the Emmaus Road, now adopted by the church. These practices include a continual devotion to (1) the apostles' teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) the breaking of bread, and (4) "the prayers." Together, they comprise the basic framework of communal spirituality in the book of Acts. Even as examples of miraculous spiritual outpourings, supernatural experiences, congregational teaching, and large-scale evangelistic efforts are presented in the book of Acts, these four practices mark the church's daily life and provide a foundational image of spiritual formation among believers.

Before describing each of the four practices in more detail, we begin by acknowledging that the basic posture of the Christian community at Pentecost was *devotion*. Acts 2:42a tells us the believers "devoted themselves" to the practices as a community. The word used here is προσκατερέω, which emphasizes the continued persistence of the disciples in their communities of faith (Schneider 1990, "προσκατερέω"). This underscores the need for intentionality in our life together as PCs. Without such devotion, the tendency toward individualism takes over, and even well-intentioned believers risk pursuing spirituality on their own terms instead of committing themselves to ongoing relationships with others in

their immediate contexts, the Church at large, and the broader communities where God places them.

 <p>Apostles' Teaching (Scripture, Jesus' words)</p>	<p>Fellowship (hospitality, shared experiences)</p> 
 <p>"Breaking of Bread" (symbols, communion)</p>	<p>"The Prayers" (common prayer, spontaneous prayer)</p> 

The first thing the believers devoted themselves

Figure 1 – The Apostles' Teaching

to was “the apostles’ teaching” (διδασκαλίαν τῶν ἀποστόλων) (Figure 1). Weiss (1990, “διδασκαλίαν”) describe the apostles’ teaching as “the firmly established tradition of instruction in the Church.” Stott (2007, 23) emphasizes the centrality of teaching for the believers, arguing, “those new Spirit-filled converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to neglect their intellect, despise theology or stop thinking. On the contrary, ‘they met constantly to hear the apostles teach.’” At this point, some scholars distinguish “the apostles teaching” from the evangelistic proclamations (κήρυγμα) made throughout Acts to those outside of the Christian community. Whatever we make of this distinction, the fact remains that the community of believers at Pentecost was continually devoted to the body of teaching that eventually became canonized in the Christian Scriptures. Furthermore, in light of Luke’s introductory statement to Acts 1:1, it is clear that the teaching carried on by the apostles was the same teachings begun by Jesus Christ. In this way, the community of believers devoted themselves to learning the Scripture in light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, which were now enlivened within them by the indwelling Spirit of God (see Lk. 24:25-27; Jn. 16:13).

The community of believers was also devoted to “fellowship” (κοινωνία) (Figure 2). This was more than mere amiability among people.





 <p>Apostles' Teaching (Scripture, Jesus' words)</p>	<p>Fellowship (hospitality, shared experiences)</p> 
 <p>"Breaking of Bread" (symbols, communion)</p>	<p>"The Prayers" (common prayer, spontaneous prayer)</p> 

Figure 2 - Fellowship

Instead, this represents a deep hospitality in which believers who were otherwise separated participated together in life with Christ (Willimon 1988, 40). When the Spirit reorients the innermost dispositions of people’s hearts, the pull towards individualism gives way to a renewed commitment to making space for God and each other in our lives. An ongoing commitment to hospitality is an essential practice for PCs who are being formed in the image of the God who first welcomed and made space for us in his own life (Lev. 19:33-34; Jn. 17:21). As we saw in Matthew 25:35, Jesus gives the striking depiction of believers’ love for others as a distinguishing sign that they are his disciples. When Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” he taught that tangible love is not mere symbolism but, instead, becomes our actual experience of loving Christ in our midst (Mt. 25:35). The writer of Acts goes on to describe the full measure of the church’s fellowship, noting “all who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). This provides an image of believers sharing all aspects of life together as the Spirit drew them into one body.

Following the model set by Jesus throughout his life, the church also devoted themselves to “the breaking of bread” (λάσει τοῦ ἄρτου)



Figure 3 – “Breaking of Bread”

(Figure 3). At the very least,

this involved shared meals around dinner tables in their homes where they “broke bread” amid fellowship, teaching, and prayer (Acts 2:46). For Jesus and the church, the table became a place of gathering across boundaries as people from diverse social classes, nationalities, and ages came together to meet their physical needs for sustenance and relationship. Even those outside of the faith found a place at tables with Jesus throughout his ministry, making table fellowship a central context of Jesus’ mission (see Fitch 2016, 47-48). Perhaps this is why Paul took such a stand when the Lord’s supper was distributed inordinately in Corinth—the table is a primary way the Church becomes the gospel to each other and the world (1 Cor. 11:17-34). This may also be why Jesus chose a table where bread was broken and shared among people to most poignantly represent his broken body that would one day reconcile all people to himself as the new, living body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). It is difficult to image how those who gathered at tables in their homes would have overlooked the significance of their broken bread as a way of remembering Christ’s presence among them. As such, when Christian communities gather together to break bread, we are reminded of our place

together in the life of Christ
and, together with others,
ushered into communion with
God.

Finally, Luke writes

that the believers were

devoted to “the prayers” (ταῖς προσευχαῖς) (Figure 4). Because of the inclusion of the article (ταῖς), some view the believers’ prayer in the formal sense, like the liturgical prayers described in Acts 3:1. Their position may stretch some contemporary traditions of spirituality to consider the place of set prayers in their life together as the church. Others view the practice of prayer in Acts 2:42 more generally to include the full spectrum of prayer—formal and informal—in the life of the believers. As a whole, the book of Acts describes believers in prayer in both senses, liturgically and spontaneously, during times of waiting on God (Acts 1:4), worship (Acts 3:1; 16:13), special need (Acts 4:29-30; 12:5), direction (Acts 9:11), and discernment (Acts 15). Christian communities were not just devoted to learning, fellowshiping, and breaking bread together, they were devoted to prayer as they continuously acknowledged God’s presence among them.

About the practices outlined above, Willimon (1988, 42) summarizes, “In all these [practices] of teaching, fellowship and sharing, breaking of bread, and praying, we see a well-rounded picture of the church, the marks of an authentic embodiment of the Spirit in the community’s life, a canon for the measurement of the church’s activity today.” Together, these practices provide the framework for



Figure 4 – “The Prayers”

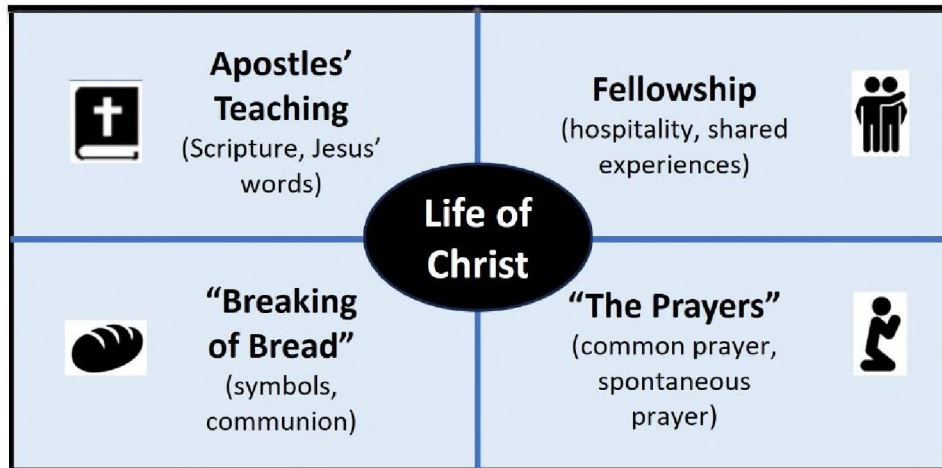


Figure 5 – Initial Model for Practicing Communities

PCs that continually devote themselves to the habits that form them together with Christ and each other. Notably, the book of Acts presents these practices with a breadth that invites readers to discern the specific forms these practices will take in their own time and place (Tanner 2002, Kindle Location 2651-2652). Even as we learn from the example of others in the church, whether contemporarily or historically, PCs are responsible for discerning how these practices will take shape in our current contexts. The need for such discernment enhances the participatory element of spiritual formation by requiring PCs to pay attention to the nuances inherent in our lives. These nuances will undoubtedly include the specific personalities of members in any given PC, even as our primary orientation remains toward the life of Christ, the one after whom our spirituality takes shape (Figure 5). In this way, PCs attune to the unique needs of its members while remaining centred on Christ, for “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:18). At the same time, as PCs participate in these

practices together, they remain attuned to the broad contexts in which they live, knowing that they are becoming an expression of God’s image within their particular context and creating a space for others to witness and participate in the life-giving community of God.

Practicing Communities in the Congregation

It is important to note that PCs do not exclude the valuable experiences of learning, worshiping, praying, and serving God and others in private or individual contexts. Recalling the analogy of the symphony, individual spiritual practices and personal development remain an essential aspect of communal formation as each participant personally prepares for their unique part in the ‘performance’ of the masterpiece. There is merit to personal practices outlined in various texts that focus on personal and congregational spiritual formation (see Foster 2018; Thompson 2014). Similarly, the disciplines of larger congregational gatherings are not excluded when the model of PCs is introduced. The larger, corporate experiences that are so central to the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition to which I belong have value and must remain as a valuable component of our spirituality. However, as argued throughout this chapter, the deeply formative experience of interpersonal relationships and embodied practices happens best in smaller communities within the congregation. Throughout the Church's history, the principle of *ecclesiola en ecclesia*, or “the little church within the church,” has provided an example of renewal in the lives of individual believers and the church as a whole (Kurian 2001, “ecclesiola”). These “little churches” aimed not to break from their congregations to create new movements in the church but, instead, to

remain planted as a life-giving presence within their church contexts. When communities like PCs form in the local church, they are not intended to pursue a new vision for church life but to participate more fully in devotion to God and become a demonstration of his image coming to life in the world (Willard 2002, 244-245). It is fitting for PCs to remain faithful to our congregations and for congregations to learn how to embrace the Spirit's work in diverse forms of gathering. In these ways, the Spirit is forming us together into the image of God by drawing us into communion with Christ and communion with one another. This is where participation with Christ is fully expressed and where we become places in the world where the image of God is formed.

CHAPTER IV: MINISTRY BASED RESEARCH

Spiritual formation is a lifelong process of transformation into the image of Christ. This process primarily takes place within the relationships and physical experiences that comprise our lives (Brown and Strawn 2012; Thompson 2010). Throughout our lives, we experience changes in our relationships and physical environments, which require us to discern and adapt to the new ways God is leading and forming us. In June 2022, I experienced significant changes in my personal and professional life that left me with a profound sense of disorientation when many of the familiar contexts for my spiritual formation were suddenly gone. I embraced the opportunity to enrich my understanding of spiritual formation by examining my experiences during the transition and reporting on them through autoethnographic research. One of the changes in my life during that time was a diagnosis of ASD, providing my research with a unique lens of neurodiversity. As such, this chapter presents an autoethnography about my spiritual journey through a time of significant change as an autistic adult when I was studying concepts of spiritual formation in the context of community.

Research Subject

This research is about my experiences during a season of transition. At the time of my research, I was a 35-year-old male studying spiritual formation at

Tyndale University in Toronto, Ontario. Until June 2022, I had served as a pastor in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada denomination for nearly fifteen years. My journey into pastoral ministry is narrated in the spiritual autobiography found in chapter 2. What is not included in my autobiography, however, is the fact that I am autistic. Only after stepping away from pastoral ministry for a season in 2022 did I get formally diagnosed with ASD and begin to discover the dynamics of autism in my life and relationships. The personal and interpersonal implications of my studies, relationships, and experiences with autism comprise the subject of this autoethnography.

The raw data used in my research included personal journals from a pivotal time in my transition between October and November of 2022. During those months, I experienced a substantial weight of emotion connected with my transition, giving significant insights for my research. That first set of journals focused primarily on my experiences of fixed-hour prayer—a practice I hypothesized would bring a sense of reorientation to my thoughts and feelings amid the instability in my life. In addition to examining journals that focused on my prayer practice, I also used journal entries from June 2022 to January 2023 to gain a broader scope of my life in the transition. Together, those journals function as the primary raw data for my research by tracking my thoughts, emotions, and experiences and offering insights into how practices and relationships impacted my sense of disorientation and reorientation throughout that period. However, it is important to note that my journal analysis also brought attention to my experiences within communities of people around me. These communal contexts

also became part of my observations and examinations throughout my research. Therefore, my research data includes journals, personal reflections, and communal contexts in which I engaged during my season of transition.

Ethics and Permissions

In preparation for this research, I received approval from the Tyndale University REB (Appendix A). I was mindful of ethical considerations throughout my research and writing. Because the experiences included in my journaling described relationships with others, I avoided using identifying descriptions of other people. As per the recommendations of the Tyndale University REB, I provided written letters to friends and family to inform them of my research and offer assurance of their anonymity. I also considered the potential for bias as I was the sole recorder and reporter of my daily experiences: whoever controls the narrative has the ability to interpret experiences through their lens. As such, I took steps to achieve objectivity by meeting with a close friend throughout my research. This person, whom I refer to as my “informant,” agreed to their involvement and will remain anonymous (Anderson 2006, 374).

Methodology

My research was conducted and presented as an autoethnography. Autoethnography is a research method used to “describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner. 2010, 1, 273). It integrates elements of autobiography and ethnography, allowing the researcher to write reflectively on

their own experiences and offer insights for a broader cultural context. Heewon Chang, Wanbura Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann Hernandez (2012, 18) describe autoethnography as “a research method that enables researchers to use data from their own life stories as situated in sociocultural contexts to gain an understanding of society through the unique lens of self.” This complex role of researcher and research subject is a characteristic of autoethnographies, offering the opportunity to “analyze [my] innermost thoughts, and personal information, topics that usually lie beyond the reach of other research methods” (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012, 18). This interplay between personal perspectives and contextual applications contributes to the “thick description” of my research topic (Geertz 1973, 5–6, 9–10).

Different branches of autoethnography have developed over the past decades. My research follows what Leon Anderson (2006) describes as “analytic autoethnography”. Anderson (2006, 378) describes five characteristics of an analytic autoethnography, including (1) the intersubjectivity of the researcher as both the subject and the performer of the study; (2) the narrative visibility of the researcher who remains clearly visible through the narratives being told; (3) analytic reflexivity, as the researcher ‘stands back’ from the data for the sake of analysis; (4) dialogue with informants beyond self to help promote reflexivity and honesty in their data; and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis of data that is refined and interpreted beyond simple narrative descriptions. Each of these elements is included in my research steps, outlined below.

Research Phases and Components

My research took place across two phases, the first involving data collection and analysis focusing on my prayer practices in October and November 2022. The second phase of data collection and analysis involved a broader focus on my overall experience of transition. These phases included four major components: (1) an eight-week practice of fixed-hour prayer and journaling, (2) an examination and analysis of journal entries from my eight-week prayer practice, (3) an examination and analysis of journals from June to December 2022, and (4) the compilation and presentation of data from my journals through data analysis and structured vignettes.

To help plan my research, I reviewed academic writing from my doctoral studies at Tyndale University and noted a recurring theme of ‘spiritual practice’ in many of my papers. In response to that initial documentary analysis, I planned to practice fixed-hour prayer using the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) for eight weeks between October and November 2022 and measure the impact on my life (Anglican Church in North America 2019). Specifically, I wanted to determine how effectual fixed-hour prayer would be for my sense of reorientation during a decidedly disorienting time. I chose the categories of *orientation*, *disorientation*, and *reorientation* with reference to Walter Brueggemann (2002), who uses these three categories to describe the basic shape of the Book of Psalms, a central component of fixed-hour prayer in the BCP. In general, Brueggemann (2002, 8-9) describes orientation as “seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing,” disorientation as “anguished seasons of hurt, alienation,

suffering, and death,” and reorientation as “turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God when joy breaks through the despair.” Because I was experiencing what could best be described as a significant disorientation, I wondered whether tracking with the psalms would help guide me into a state of reorientation in my thoughts, emotions, and overall sense of stability in my inner life.

To measure the effect of fixed-hour prayer in my life, I kept daily journals about my thoughts and emotions throughout my practice. Along with journaling, I met with my informant during and after my eight-week prayer practice to help me reflect aloud on my prayers and writing. When my eight-week prayer practice was complete, I analyzed my journals by compiling a chart and noting common themes and phrases that portrayed strong emotions related to the categories of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation outlined above (Savage and Presnell 2008, 123-4; Sensing 2012, 11). I expected to find some correlation between the psalmists’ exhibitions of reorientation and my own; that is, on days when the psalms led me to pray with gratitude and joy, I anticipated correlating feelings of reorientation in my life. As I describe below, this was not the case. However, there were indeed days during my prayer practice when I felt a strong sense of reorientation, and I became curious about what prompted those feelings.

My curiosity prompted me to involve a greater scope of journal writings in my research and broaden my analysis to include my day-to-day life experiences instead of just my daily prayer experiences. For this, I collected journals from earlier in my transitional period, beginning in June 2022 and reaching into

December 2022, and included those in a new data set. Using the principles of document analysis outlined above, I paid attention to poignant language and emotions tied to specific daily experiences, especially when I noticed strong shifts between orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Once again, I reflected with my informant during this process to help draw out meaning with a higher degree of objectivity.

Insights gained from the second data set were compiled into a narrative format using “structured vignettes” followed by a brief commentary about the event’s meaning for me and the broader context in which I live (Pitard 2019). Jayne Pitard (2019) describes her use of structured vignettes in an autoethnography about her role as a teacher, defining structured vignettes as a multi-layered depiction of an event, including 1) a description of context, 2) a short anecdote of the event, 3) the researcher’s emotional response, 4) reflexivity about their internal dialogue, 5) strategies developed through the event, and 6) conclusive comments (Pitard 2019, 1837). This type of narrative presentation not only helped me discover meaning in my experiences but also helped me artfully arrange my experience in ways that will engage readers in their own stories and reflections (Bochner and Ellis 2016). Granted, the very process of selecting experiences to report on involved considerable interpretation. Thus, many layers of reflection and interpretation coalesce to produce the narratives below. A section of conclusions provides summaries and applications to my research.

Research Limitations

As my research expanded beyond an initial eight-week phase to encompass a broader scope of data and analysis, I set limitations to what I could reasonably include in this autoethnography. For instance, I focused on first-person autobiographical writings found mostly in personal journals. Even where my journals pointed to other writings (e.g. my spiritual autobiography), they, too, were autobiographical. This limited my research to first-person accounts of my emotions and experiences without directly considering how others around me would have described the same experiences. In that regard, I limited my research to a distinctly ‘inner sense’ of orientation instead of seeking the ‘outer sense’ others around me may have given. One possible exception to this could be seen in my interactions with my informant. However, even then, our focus remained on my inner senses.

I also limited my research by focusing on the categories of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation described above (Brueggemann 2002, 8-9). Granted, these categories encompass many thoughts and emotions connected to my life during transition; however, they focus more on the ‘feelings’ within me instead of the more rationalistic ‘believing’ throughout my transition. At various times, what I believed differed from what I felt. In all cases, I measured my feelings and their associated experiences as the primary data for analysis. This was partly due to my growing conviction that our lives are shaped far more by our affections than rationalistic beliefs (Smith 2016, Chapter 1). Given the lack of

clarity in my life amid so many changes, there was far more substance to my emotional experiences than to my rationalistic holdings during that season.

Finally, as an adult with ASD, my research is “limited” through a personal lens of neurodiversity. However, adopting such a lens provides a valuable contribution to disability studies by enabling me to express a first-person account of a universal experience (i.e. life transitions) from a uniquely neurodiverse perspective (Kronstein 2017). Focusing my lens in this way shows the nuance inherent to diverse experiences of the world. It challenges readers to consider how they and others around them experience emotions and relationships in unique ways. In short, I hope readers will feel encouraged to reflect on their own lives while also considering how my experiences may help inform theirs, perhaps even informing the way they develop and practice spiritually formative community with those around them (Bochner 2022, 14).

Phase 1: Measuring the Effects of Fixed-Hour Prayer

Change is sometimes unpleasant, especially when it is thrust upon us without choice or warning. We rightly feel disoriented when the new and unknown disrupt our familiar relationships and rhythms of life. At the same time, change can open us to new horizons when we are able to navigate it well. Change can also alert us to aspects of our lives that need attention by opening our eyes to aspects of ourselves and the world around us we have yet to see. Whether providing new horizons for our life path or awakening us to new aspects of our growth, changes and transitions deserve special attention in our lifelong journey of spiritual formation. This realization came to a head in June 2022 when I

entered a season of change in my relationships, physical environments, and daily routines. This was largely due to a sudden and unforeseen departure from my role as a local church pastor. The changes wrought by my departure created a profound sense of disorientation in me as the familiarity and predictability associated with my church context were suddenly gone.

At various times during my season of change, I became overwhelmed with a sense of disorientation. I looked for that which could offer some sense of reorientation and hope for the future. One of the primary places to which I turned was the Christian Scriptures. In particular, I found solace in the psalms with their breadth of emotion that mirrored, at times, the disorientation I felt. Reflecting on the emotional breadth of the psalter, Calvin (1845, 19) writes,

Here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particulars in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.

Likewise, I was drawn to Scriptural narratives depicting people in deep despair being found and restored by God. The Emmaus story stood out as especially poignant for my life as I had spent considerable time with that text while developing my model of spiritual formation found in chapter 3 (see Lk. 24:13-35). In Luke 24:13-35, two disciples walk downcast away from the place they last encountered Jesus. Unbeknownst to the disciples, Jesus joined their journey and led them in a set of practices that soon became a normative model for spiritual formation in the earliest church (Lk. 24:13-25; Acts 2:42). As I walked my own “Emmaus road,” I began imagining how the practices shared between Jesus and his disciples might reorient me in ways similar to theirs.

Given my resonance with the psalter and the practices at Emmaus (i.e. what became daily practices of the early church), I decided to commit to a practice of fixed-hour prayer using the BCP, as it draws considerably from the psalter. My goal was not initially to situate my daily prayers in a research context; however, it occurred to me that measuring the effects of daily prayer in my life could enrich my journey of spiritual formation and my growing understanding of daily practices in the lives of others. As such, I designed the research methods described above to practice, record, analyze, and report on my experiences with fixed-hour prayer and its effects on my life in transition. Between October and November 2022, I recorded 53 journal entries focusing on my practice of fixed-hour prayer. I wrote my journals digitally, allowing me to perform simple data analyses, including day-by-day charting, counting prominent words and phrases, and examining the overall content of my journals over time. While I did not share my actual journal entries with my informant, I reflected with him on each step of my data analysis to encourage objectivity in my results.

Analysis 1: Day-by-Day Charting

My first step in analyzing my journals was to create a chart comparing readings and prayer foci with the thoughts and emotions that were apparent in me each day (see sample in Table 1). Because of the sheer breadth of Scripture readings included in the BCP's daily lectionary, I focused my analyses on the psalter each day. Next to each day's psalm(s), I included a summary of its/their main themes. Next, I included the categorization of "orientation," "disorientation," or "reorientation," as attributed to each psalm by Brueggemann.

Table 1: Sample from my “Prayer and Journal Comparison Chart”

	Theme of Psalm	Orientation of Psalm	Themes from my Journal
November 9 (Morning)			
Psalm 44	Lament; Help; Communal Need	Disoriented	I noticed how exhausted I felt trying to guess what people around me wanted and needed from me. I wrote a prayer asking for comfort. I was confused and tired.
Psalm 45	Marriage; Reconciliation	Reoriented	
Psalm 46	Defense; Gladness; Refreshing	Reoriented	
November 9 (Evening)			
Psalm 47	Creation; God’s Reign; Worship	Oriented	Overall, I felt disoriented .
Psalm 48	Greatness; God’s Rule; Trust	Oriented	
Psalm 49	Riches; Contemplating Life	Oriented	
November 10 (Morning)			
Psalm 50	Sacrifice; Obedience; Pride	Oriented/Disoriented	Incredibly, my family's blessing each night at dinner leapt into my mind during my morning prayer: "For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Amen."
Psalm 51	Confession; Restoration; Sin	Disoriented	
Psalm 52	Pride; Arrogance; Judgement	Oriented	
November 10 (Evening)			
Psalm 53	Rejecting God; Doubt; Pride	Disoriented	I didn’t know where it came from or how it was triggered in me, but I wrote about the profoundness of the prayer – “receiving and thanking”. Overall, I felt reoriented .
Psalm 54	Plea; Need; Enemies	Disoriented	
Psalm 55	Enemies; Attack; Trust in God	Disoriented	

	Theme of Psalm	Orientation of Psalm	Themes from my Journal
November 11 (Morning)			
Psalm 56	Deliverance; Trust; Protection	Disoriented	I was called by a local school to sit in for an absent teacher last minute. I decided to make my family's old dinner blessing into my guiding prayer for the morning: "For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Amen."
Psalm 57	Protection; Running; Fear	Disoriented	
Psalm 58	Judgement; Evil; Repayment	Oriented	
November 11 (Evening)			Overall, I felt reoriented .
Psalm 59	Taunting; Evildoers; Plea	Disoriented	
Psalm 60	Rejection; Need for God	Disoriented	
Psalm 61	Weakness; Leading; Guidance	Oriented	

Finally, I included a column summarizing the thoughts and feelings emerging in my daily prayer time. In this, I included my sense of "orientation," "disorientation," or "reorientation" as per Brueggemann's (2002, 8-9) definitions. The chart enabled me to examine correlations between how I prayed with the BCP and what sort of feelings I experienced through that prayer.

I hypothesized that the themes and sense of orientation of the daily psalms and prayers would affect my sense of orientation. However, after examining the completed chart, I found no apparent correlation between the daily prayer focus and the feelings recorded in my journals. My informant agreed that no obvious correlation existed. In fact, it seemed that sometimes, when I read and prayed through the most joyful and uplifting psalms, I felt the most discouraged and disoriented. Ironically, some of my most uplifting and reorienting journal entries

came on days when the BCP brought me through psalms of lament and suffering. Granted, this does not discount the effectiveness of the BCP or fixed-hour prayer as a valuable prayer practice; however, it demonstrates that the emotional content of my daily prayer practice was not directly showing up in my inner sense of orientation.

I looked more closely at the content of my journals to see if there were any other variables throughout the eight-week practice that correlated with my thoughts and emotions in prayer. Through this reanalysis, I noticed two variables that seemed to impact my prayers: (1) my experience of core relationships in the days prior, whether positive or negative and (2) my sense of stability and regularity in my physical environment. Predictability and familiarity were the primary factors influencing my sense of orientation in both cases. The times I experienced predictability and familiarity in my relationships and physical environments led to days when my prayers expressed hope and reorientation. Conversely, my prayers and inner life were far more disoriented in the days after I experienced unpredictability and disorder in my relationships and physical environment.

Analysis 2: Prominent Words and Phrases

Following my chart analysis, I performed a basic word count of my journal entries to see if any keywords and phrases stood out in my writing. I sensed that repeated words, while not necessarily indicative of core movements in my life, would reveal something about the thoughts and feelings I was returning to as I prayed and journaled. I completed this word count by importing my

journals into an online word cloud generator (www.worditout.com). The developers of WordItOut describe word clouds as “an image made of words that together resemble a cloudy shape.... The size of a word relates to how important it is, commonly how often that word appears in a text—its frequency” (de Groot 2023). By importing the complete text of my journals from October to November 2022, I could visualize the frequency of keywords and reflect on what they may be telling me. Once my journals were imported and an initial word count was produced, I eliminated incidental words and pronouns like “the,” “an,” “I,” and “and” to focus on those that held more weight and meaning. I also limited my word clouds to the top 25 words to make my analysis more pointed and manageable. Moreover, I repeated this process for each of the two months included in my prayer practice to measure how my language may have shifted from beginning to end. This process produced the following word clouds for October 2022 (Figure 6) and November 2022 (Figure 7). The completed word clouds were examined for possible meaning with the help of my informant.



Figure 6 - October’s Word Cloud



Figure 7 - November’s Word Cloud

The most frequently used words in my journals throughout October included “something” (25 times), “about” (19 times), “people” (18 times), “community” (16 times), and “more” (16 times). Most notably, the high frequency of the word “something” was significant to me. This partly concerns how I use that word in conversation with others. I reflected with my informant that I often used the word “something” while grasping for ideas and descriptions of things I was unsure about. For example, I say things like, “That word means something like...” or “There was something about that moment I can’t quite describe.” When considering my journal entries from October 2022, I notice some of the most disorienting thoughts and feelings from my time of transition. In short, there was a profound uncertainty about where I belonged, whom I could rely on, and what pathways may be set before me in the season ahead. In this regard, the word “something” represented a lingering sense of disorientation that remained throughout my first month of prayer.

The most frequently used words in November included “receive” (24 times), “please” (18 times), “vulnerability” (18 times), “Lord” (16 times), and “confessing” (15 times). The frequency of “receive” was significant; however, this had less to do with how I use the word in conversation with others and more with how I began using that word in prayer throughout that month. Reviewing my journal entries, I recalled the morning prayer of November 10th when a dinner prayer from my childhood suddenly appeared in my thoughts. The simple prayer was, “For what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. Amen.” Although I was still feeling a sense of lingering disorientation, that simple prayer

resonated, prompting me to open myself into a posture of receptivity and thankfulness. From that morning onward, the word “receive” was often repeated in my prayers and became a mantra in my daily life. I began to wonder what it could look like for me to open space in my life to receive people and experiences in new ways and to respond with thankfulness whenever I sensed someone or something coming into my life. The uncertain season of “something” was not entirely past, though I was beginning to develop a posture of “receiving” whatever was being placed before me. Remarkably, my journals confirmed that slowly, though not all at once, the overwhelming sense of disorientation filling my life gave way to reorientation as I practiced openness in my prayers and living.

Analysis 3: Overall Content and Shape

I performed a final examination of my journals by simply standing back and noticing any qualities my previous two analyses missed. Upon final examination, I arrived at two further insights, including (1) a shift in the content of my prayers and writing over time and (2) the shifting shape of my writing over time. Regarding content, October’s journals were characterized by themes of loneliness and despair that produced long and heartfelt prayers to God. October’s journals read as though I was writing to someone quite close to me and concerned for me. Notable phrases I found while reviewing October’s journals included, “I will commit to praying and reading, but I am utterly lonely,” “I need to be heard and spoken to by someone other than You, Lord,” “Why has no one else reached out to me?” “I am not sure who or what I am right now,” and “Relationships I

connected with may not pan out after all.” Further, October’s entries were relatively long, often taking up three or more paragraphs of 13-15 sentences on average. The language was raw and written in well-crafted sentences, as though I was taking time to articulate what was happening inside me. On the contrary, the overall mood in November’s journals was relatively peaceful and thankful. November’s journals were much shorter, with most entries taking up less than a paragraph of 4-6 sentences each. While the mood of my writing was more uplifting and hopeful, the language was less detailed, without the same attention to deep emotions or well-articulated thoughts.

As I contemplated my findings with my informant, we sensed that each month’s journals illustrated something important about my vulnerability to God during disorientation and reorientation. When all I had was God to turn to, my interior life was deeply attuned to that connection. Though my head and heart were not nearly as uplifted in October, I was entirely present in my times of reflection and prayer. Conversely, as I began reconnecting with new people and experiences around me, my thoughts and emotions sometimes drifted more easily to what was new and novel in my life. This resonated with Brueggemann (2003, 8), who describes seasons of “exile” as times of returning to God as he grows new hope within otherwise disoriented people. Brueggemann (2003, 8) insists:

Israel had a hint of the possibility of newness that perhaps could only happen [in exile]. Precisely in the context of landlessness, do the promises loom large. It is in the emptiness of Israel, exposed and without resources, that promises are received with power, that risks are run and hope is energizing.

It is little wonder that the psalter’s raw and emotional words of hopeless and lonely people became so central in my eight-week practice of prayer. It is in those

empty and hopeless seasons of our lives that the cry of the heart is most prominent and our hands learn to open to what we are about to receive. For this reason, the empty seasons are something to be truly thankful for.

Initial Conclusions and Further Research

After analyzing journals from my eight-week practice of fixed-hour prayer, I concluded that the actual content of the BCP, including the daily psalm readings, had little correlation to my sense of disorientation and reorientation. While there were clear shifts in my inner dispositions throughout the eight weeks, they were mostly related to factors beyond the mere reading of Scripture. These factors included (1) my overall posture toward God in prayer and (2) my overall posture toward people and experiences in daily life. As my posture “opened” to become more receptive to what was being placed before me, I sensed a growing peace. Further, even when I remained disoriented and hopeless, my prayers showed a marked rawness and eloquence that was lessened as I became more settled in daily life. These tensions in my prayer life and the influence of external factors on my sense of orientation made me wonder if there was more to be discovered if I broadened the scope of my research by reflecting on journals and experiences throughout my transition (see Research Phases and Components).

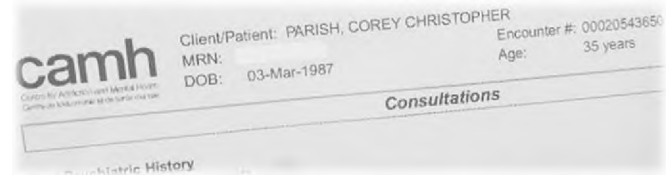
Phase 2: “I Am Corey, and I Am Here”: An Autoethnography

In what follows, I present findings from my secondary research through a series of structured vignettes, which are set apart in italics, accompanied by brief commentaries on pivotal experiences throughout my transition. As a whole, this

offers a greater image of the influences on my life and how relationships with God, people, and my environment influenced my journey through a season of disorientation.

“You have autism.”

“The psychologist confirmed it. She said it is probably not too severe



since you’ve managed to hold onto steady work and family life all these years.” The irony made me smirk. It was the first week of June and only a day since my job at the church ended. I listened as my family doctor described the diagnosis we had pursued for months. As she spoke, I had little doubt that the word “autism” fit tightly around me. People wondered how I responded after the call. Some asked with a level of concern, “Are you bothered by that label?” or, “Will this change anything between us?” While I appreciated their intent, I always answered, “No, this does not trouble me. I’m actually relieved.” I found comfort in that word: autism. It gave a name for my way of being in the world - the sense of chaos I often struggle with as words, lights, sounds, and people swirl around me and within me like an out-of-tune orchestra. It also gave a name for the lingering sense of “otherness” I feel when I can’t quite resonate with the social cues others seem to grasp so easily. And it pointed to my lifelong sense of having very few places in this world where I truly belong. The word “autism” gave a description, a reference, and a framework for understanding myself and my way

cf being here. And strangely enough, it came to me exactly when the world I knew began falling away.

The Unbearable Chaos

ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent struggles with social interactions, communication, and restrictive behaviours, including a strong reliance on routines contributing to difficulty managing disruption and uncertainty (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 50). Terese Jolliffe, Richard Lansdown, and Clive Robinson (1992) reflect on personal experience with ASD, insisting, “Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds, and sights. Set routines, times, particular routes, and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. Trying to keep everything the same reduces some of the terrible fear.” Among various characteristics of ASD, sensory perception disorder remains one of the most prevalent comorbidities experienced by those on the spectrum. Anywhere from 50-70% of people with ASD experience lowered sensory tolerance at some point in their lives that inhibits functioning and participation in community with others (Williams et al. 2021).

One of the earliest autism researchers, Leo Kahner (1943), reported sensory abnormalities in his analysis of autistic children, varying from fascination with visual stimuli to heightened sensitivity to music and sounds. In further research, these behaviours have been proven to continue across the lifespan of those with ASD (Leekam et al. 2007; Crane 2009). While the neurobiological causes of sensory hypersensitivity for those with ASD are still not entirely

understood, Marco et al. (2011) offer a review of research outlining differences in brainstem response and auditory cortex processing in those with ASD leading to hyper/hypo-sensitivities to sensory input (see also Williams et al. 2021). In short, diverse neurobiological factors cause many autistic people, like me, to experience sensory input differently than our non-autistic peers, often requiring great effort to live peacefully in what can feel like an unbearably chaotic world.

Reflecting on what Jolliffe and others say about the autistic mind, I vividly recall my own experiences of the world around me and how often my life is marked by a sort of retreat away from the unbearable chaos. It seems I exist with my eyes averted to the movements invading my periphery, my ears covered with headphones to filter voices and crinkles, and my body never too far from a door for when my fight turns to flight, and only an escape will suffice. As I imagine these things, I can also imagine the disappointment and confusion on others' faces when they view me as "too sensitive" or "too difficult" to tolerate. All of this contributes to the profound sense of 'otherness' that I and others with ASD feel. And truthfully, there are times when otherness is the most unbearable feeling.

ASD and 'Otherness'

The pervasiveness of autistic traits in an individual's life means every interpersonal and environmental encounter is affected by ASD. This causes more than just discomfort in overwhelming situations but profoundly impacts an individual's entire sense of self. Emily Williams (2020, 39) suggests, "The heart of the autistic experience is the sense of being 'other'." This can stem from the social and sensory challenges mentioned above, which, as Terra Vance (2022)

suggests in her personal reflection as a mother of an autistic child, evokes a common sense that “the world is not made for us.” Alarming as that thought may seem, the reality is that autistic minds are not wired the same as others who, though experiencing their share of hardships in the world, live and function within groups and systems that suit neurotypical brains far better. Even contemporary faith communities that boast slogans welcoming all types of people to gather in their midst often prove to be places of high intensity that overlook the diverse needs of neurodiverse individuals who need somewhere in the world they can be without the need to ‘mask’ or, in some cases, escape.

The experience of ‘otherness’ among the ASD community involves more than just our diverse way of being in the world. Ironically, some attempts to research and understand ‘the autistic brain’ lay the foundations for othering the very people it seeks to help. From the earliest days of ASD research, autistic individuals have risked losing a sense of intersubjectivity by being relegated to the place of research subject. When brains and bodies become commodities in the interest of research, identity can be lost, personality overlooked, and our place in community forfeited (Michael 2021). Sharing his experiences as a professor with ASD, Daniel Bowman (2021) describes the tendency of ASD research to fall into a “pathology paradigm” that seeks to describe autistic people in terms of our “disorder only and having little access to the complex gifts of neurodiversity and life on the spectrum.” Of course, a pathology paradigm implies that individuals are dealt with as cases instead of people. An alternative to the pathology paradigm is the pursuit of openness and receptivity, where diversity is given attention and

space is made for a multiplicity of stories and experiences comprising the whole community. Making such a space allows communities of people to “resist the cultural inscriptions that autism as a diagnosis suggests” (Yergeau 2018, 24). Largely, this is why I chose to tell my story through this research: I hope to find a place to be heard and received without being labelled or dismissed. I would like to say, “I am Corey, and I am here.”

“I am Corey, and I am here.”

That was all I could come up with. I was sharing a dinner table with professors and students at Tyndale University. It was late June 2022, and we gathered for an annual residency to reflect on our learning and look forward to our doctoral journey for the upcoming years. As for me, I had nowhere left to look. Earlier that month, I received the news that my time as a pastor was ending and, with it, the familiar relationships and rhythms I learned to rely on for seven years. Seven years of knowing ‘that place’ with ‘those people’ who met together in our special ways were suddenly gone. There I sat with diagnosis in hand and little else I was certain about. What would remain from the past? What would the future look like? Who would receive me and give me a place to exist and be known? And what would I do there? For the first time in quite a while, I did not have answers to some basic questions that orient our lives and shape our journeys. All I knew was, “I am Corey, and I am here.” Even then, I did not quite know what that meant.



Placed and Displaced

Months after my dinner table experience, I wondered what I meant by “I am Corey, and I am here.” What prompted me to claim that place for myself? And why did my underlying feeling of displacement sit so heavily on me? The idea of “place” is often strangely transparent to us. After all, nothing we do and nothing that happens to us is ever really “unplaced” (Casey 1997, 93). Inge (2001, 4) argues:

Our very existence as embodied beings means that at any given moment we will be in one particular place. We must have a place in which to stand - place is as necessary as food and air to us. The events that shape our lives happen in particular places, nothing we do or are, nothing that happens to us is unplaced.

Such uniqueness makes the concept of “place” notoriously difficult to define, and yet, it remains one of the most definitive aspects of who we are and who we become (Malpas 2012, 13). Attempts at a definition often reference the particular locations and relationships in which our being “takes place”. This phenomenological approach to “place” emphasizes the role of interaction within, among, and between people and their environment, giving context to our lives (Malpas 2012, 19-22). Yi-Fu Tuan (1975, 152), a pioneer in humanist geography, takes a similar approach, describing “place” as “a center of meaning constructed by our experiences in the world.” Moreover, because such experiences often involve interactions with other people, places become charged with personal stories, memories, and emotions that constitute “centers of meaning to individuals and to groups” (Tuan 1975, 153; see also Bachelard, 1969). Being ‘placed’ is to be in relationship with people and environments around us and being ‘displaced’

is to lack the essential qualities of relationality and physicality for which we were created (see Gen. 2:7, 21-23).

Granted, displacement can, for a time, stir up memories and emotions associated with our past experiences that may even bolster our sense of identity. Tuan (2004, 4) reminds us, “it is distance between self and place that allows the self to appreciate a place.” In such cases, familiar objects, stories, or people serve to re-ignite our memories and birth imagination and hope for being “placed” again. However, displacement also leaves us unstable and detached from the ground on which we once stood—the ground that holds us and ultimately forms us. Tuan likens “place” to a secure harbour in an unknown and unpredictable ocean. Being adrift from that harbour for too long without a sense of when or if we will return leads to disorientation like the one I experienced at the dinner table with colleagues.

All people knowingly or unknowingly long for the harbour of predictable places in their lives, and yet such longing can be especially deep for certain people who are predisposed to heightened distress when faced with unfamiliarity and unpredictability. Such is the case for people with ASD, characterized by a “lack of adaptability to new experiences and circumstances, with associated distress, that can be evoked by trivial changes to a familiar environment or in response to unanticipated events” (World Health Organization 2023). It is not just that people with ASD want consistency in our lives, but rather, we need it. Most of us possess a distinct “insistence on sameness” in routines and rhythms, which, when disrupted, wreaks havoc on our inner world (American Psychiatric

Association 2013, 50). In my own life, this comes as a response to the “unbearable chaos” described by Jolliffe (1992), who reminds us that, for people with ASD, “routines, times, particular routes, and rituals all help to get order” that reduces some of the fear associated with continually learning and *re-learning* our place in the world.

Exile and Return

The biblical theme of exile offers insight into how our experiences of displacement impact us and how God interacts with the displaced, offering hope to the hopeless. Beginning in June 2022, I began experiencing my own form of exile, prompting me to reach for almost anything I could return to, hold onto, and belong to. My earliest journals from that season are full of desperate prayers asking God to send messengers to comfort me and remind me that I belong somewhere. Sometimes, this happened through people around me, but as some of them drifted further away, I sought spiritual practices that would allow me to hear the voice of God’s people in the Scriptures and through fixed-hour prayer. This practice became important insofar as it kept me acquainted with the language and emotions of God’s people who experienced remarkably familiar experiences of disorientation in their lives (see above). However, they and I longed for a place to return to, where prayers, emotions, and hopes are situated in the rhythms of daily life. Even so, by continually praying with psalms and scriptures voicing the same longings as mine, I was reminded that seasons of exile and displacement are not only to be expected but actually beneficial to the journey of spiritual formation.

The experience of exile undergirds much of the biblical storyline, from the expulsion out of Eden in Genesis 3 to the various deportations of God's people, most notably the Babylonian Exile of 586 BCE, and through to the final scenes of Revelation 21-22. While the promise of return always accompanied those in exile, they nevertheless had to journey through the painful reality of displacement before re-placement (Gen. 3:23-24; 12:1-9; Mk. 10:29-31). Brueggemann (2003, 8) describes the intersection of the pain of exile and the hope of return:

But strangely, this "null point" [of exile] also became the context for Israel's most remarkable expression of faith, the lyrical celebration of God's faithfulness to exiles. Landlessness becomes the setting for the boldest gospel of newness (Isa 43:18-21; Jer 31:17-18; Ezek 37:5-6). Israel had a hint of the possibility of newness that perhaps could only happen there. Precisely in the context of landlessness, do the promises loom large. It is in the emptiness of Israel, exposed and without resources, that promises are received with power, that risks are run and hope is energizing.

Considering Brueggemann's words, I notice commonalities between my experiences throughout 2022 and those of God's people in exile. The intersections of exile characterized our journeys with return, fear with hope, and pain with promise. Perhaps more than anything, though, our journeys are described by the theme of homecoming, which pervades the biblical narrative from beginning to end and helps name one of the deepest longings of our lives: the longing for a place to call home.

“Find a place to call home...”

The words turned over in my mind as I drove northward on the Queen Elizabeth Way through Hamilton, Ontario. It was the end of August, and I had an evening alone in Niagara Falls, watching Marcy Playground perform music from

*my youth. Among the nostalgic melodies
and lyrics that poured over me, these
lyrics, tucked away in the bridge section of
“America,” touched a longing within me
(Wozniak 1999). A deep sense of*



*homelessness grew in me throughout the Summer of 2022. I had picked up a
temporary job that offered some predictability in my life, but even that had a shelf
life, constantly reminding me, “This still is not the place you will return to for
long.” I could only see unpredictability before me, and I was exhausted from the
weight of so many changes. So, I drove onward, unsure where my life would
merge again, like the lanes on a highway, at a place I could call “home”.*

Homeostasis

Our internal sense of stability relative to changes going on around us is called homeostasis. George Billman (2020), a physiologist at Ohio State University, suggests that the overall health and vitality of living organisms are determined by our ability to maintain homeostasis amid the ever-changing environments and relationships comprising our lives. He describes homeostasis as “a dynamic process that can change internal conditions as required to survive external challenges” (Billman 2020). The adaptive process our bodies undertake to achieve homeostasis is called allostasis, meaning “stability through change.” Allostasis involves physiological adaptations that prepare us to meet external changes and respond appropriately when those changes occur. Given the constancy of change in our lives, allostasis is normal and necessary to our ability

to form and function in the world. However, an overabundance of external changes over prolonged periods can produce an ‘allostatic load’ detrimental to our physical and mental health (Ganzel, Morris, and Wethington 2010; Armstrong 2019). Over time, an increased allostatic load leads to symptoms of exhaustion and burnout and can render us ineffective at engaging with new environments set before us. In such cases, familiar places and routines offer at least one resort for lessening our body’s allostatic load, thus allowing us to return to homeostasis once again. One of the names we give to the familiar places we return to for such relief is “home.”

Home and Away

The places we call “home” consist of environments and relationships we regularly return to that allow us to rest and recover from life's challenges. Compared with other places in our lives, the places we call home offer familiarity and predictability that holds, protects, and nurtures us. Tuan (1975, 154) suggests, “The primary meaning of home is nurturing shelter. It is the one place in which we can openly and comfortably admit our frailty and our bodily needs.” At home, we are known, and our most basic needs are met. Elsewhere, Tuan (1977, 6) describes home as the stable place from where we venture into new and otherwise overwhelming spaces around us. It is this delicate balance of “home” and “away” that our lives are brought into a stable form and function. Novelist Tom Robbins (1976), claims, “True stability results when presumed order and presumed disorder are in balance. A truly stable system expects the unexpected, is prepared

to be disrupted, waits to be transformed.” Likewise, Eric Dardel (1952, 56) describes how home helps realize new possibilities:

Before any choice, there is this place which we have not chosen, where the very foundation of our earthly existence and human condition establishes itself. We can change places, move, but this is still to look for a place, for this we need as a base to set down Being and to realize our possibilities—a here from which the world discloses itself, a there to which we can go.

Dardel’s balance of “here” and “there,” like Robbin’s balance of “order” and “disorder,” recognizes the way our home prepares us to engage openly and creatively among the vast possibilities in the world around us. Both “home” and “away” are necessary aspects of our lives. Remaining too long among familiar settings and relationships produces rigidity that limits our formation. Conversely, being too long away from the places we call home causes disorientation that disrupts our health and functionality in the world.

For some people, the balance of “home” and “away” is more difficult to achieve. Such is the case for those experiencing significant changes to the physical environments or relationships to which they were accustomed to returning. Whether through death, departures, or any number of other disruptions, when the familiar people and places of our lives are out of reach, our experience of home is interrupted. This is also the case for individuals with characteristics predisposing them to heightened stress amid unfamiliar environments. For example, people with ASD are characterized as having inherent adversity to changing environments, leading to increased rigidity in behaviours, routines, and “insistence on sameness” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 50). In some regards, such rigidity is related to hypersensitivity many people with ASD experience in a largely neurotypical world. Clinging to what is familiar provides

security from the possible stressors of new environments. However, research also suggests variations in working memory may inhibit people with ASD from developing internal adaptations necessary for experiencing homeostasis amid changing contexts (Bennetto et al. 1996; Hollander and Ferretti 2023). As people with ASD may struggle to recall and reapply ‘old rules’ to new situations, we tend to revert to established routines familiar to us (Hollander and Ferretti 2023). In these ways, characteristics associated with ASD increase our longing for “home,” especially when faced with new contexts.

As the summer of 2022 drew to a close, I was experiencing significant levels of stress related to the lack of familiar people and places in my life. Coincidentally, I was coming to terms with a diagnosis confirming the characteristics contributing to my adversity to such changes. My journals were filled with prayers and longings for a place I could return to—a place I could find rest, be known and received, and settle my life as I turned to new possibilities before me. I often wrote of a deep longing for people to come with words reminding me that I was loved and safe. As long as I lacked those reminders, I felt utterly alone and insecure. I needed to be reminded of these things again and again, as we all do.

“I can still see the coffee stain...”

My friend and I sat beneath pipe smoke and an October sky. I asked him about my old office at the church. We had spent many hours in that office before I left one last time the previous June. “What did they do with it?” I asked. He said it was empty except for a fold-out table for pc-p-up meetings. I imagined the books

and lamps set between walls filled with art, facts, each one telling stories from my life. I felt frustration rise in me as the psalmist's words came to mind, "We sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1). I could not return to that place where a coffee ring next to a rocking chair marked the home that opened to receive me each morning. "I can still see the old coffee stain," I thought, "and I can almost feel the cushions under me." After my friend left, I wanted to sketch my old office. The drawing was spontaneous, but it was comforting as I recalled more details of my corner chair and its surroundings. I snapped a picture of the sketch to show my friend, who replied with his own recollections of our visits there. This prompted me to add even more details to the sketch. The longer I sat with my drawing, and the longer I remembered my office, the more I was comforted.



Remembering

Our memories involve complex internal processes in which past experiences are brought into the present by re-engaging the same neural networks at play when our initial experience took place (Siegel 1999, 23-31). In this way, memory is, quite literally, the act of 're-minding' ourselves of past experiences by bringing them into our present state of mind. There are different types of memory, including working memory (WM), which involves short-term recollections, allowing us to perform daily tasks without losing focus on the long-term picture

of our lives. In large measure, WM functions like a background processor in our brains that enables us to consciously engage with the people and tasks before us. Conversely, declarative memory (DM) involves a more conscious recollection of facts and experiences in our lives. DM consists of semantic memory, the recollection of facts and knowledge, and episodic memory, the recollection of previous experiences. While each type of memory is important, episodic memory plays an important role in developing self-understanding and identity by helping us recall specific details of past experiences.

Research suggests a correlation between episodic memory and prospection—the mind’s ability to simulate what may occur in the future by recalling what has happened in the past—as each utilizes the same mental processes (Szpunar, Schacter, and Spreng, 2014; Schacter and Madore 2016). When we remember the past, our minds use the same processes to imagine and pre-map the future. The information and self-knowledge derived from past events give us a secure grounding from which we venture into novel situations. As such, our ability to imagine ourselves in future experiences contributes to our sense of stability, especially when faced with the disorienting effects of changing environments (Gilboa 2004). Not only does this emphasize the vital role of memory in our lives, but it also highlights the particular struggles novel situations present to people with diminished abilities to remember well. Such is the case for people with ASD, who tend to show impairments in their episodic memory. Suzanne Goh and Bradley Peterson (2012) present a body of research articulating that “individuals with ASD sometimes exhibit a pattern of superior performance

in tasks requiring rote memory but show impaired ability to utilize context and meaning in the service of memory.” These impairments may be traceable to divergences in hippocampal-prefrontal circuitry—the brain regions associated with long-term memory. Whatever the root causes may be, the resulting struggle to recall detailed episodes from one’s life impacts the stability of people with ASD when entering novel situations and environments. Thus, we depend all the more on memory aids, like conversation and images, to help us remember the past and move confidently into the future.

That October evening, when I visited my friend and sketched my old office, was far from an inconsequential moment in my journey through change. It held profound significance for my journey through the many changes in my life. On that porch, I was given the gift of a conversation that helped me remember a place I called home—a place that provided me with the rhythms and reception I needed each day to maintain stability in my life. Even while feeling the pain of losing that place, I was reminded of where I had been, what I had done, and who I was because of my experiences. Later, at my sketchpad, I experienced the comforting presence of that place again. In that picture, I saw familiar ground and remembered familiar faces that met me there. I saw a chair that welcomed me each day and a coffee stain that marked at least one place in the world I could call my home. Furthermore, until I was reminded of all this, I was in danger of forgetting. When we are in danger of forgetting, we find help from listening ears who hear our stories and reflect what they hear back to us. Furthermore, we are helped by sensory tools like images, sounds, and smells that remind us of where

we have been, for that offers a stable ground to remember who we are, what we have done, and where we are going next.

“Corey, we have a spot for you. Can you be here?”

I smiled each time I read those texts. They started the first week of November and continued steadily until Christmas. After a few weeks, they became so regular that I could set my clock by them – 6:45 AM, Monday to Friday; the same basic words came to me: “Corey, we have a spot for you. Can you be here?” They were from a school principal looking for an Educational Assistant in their classrooms. At first, I was willing, then, after a few weeks, I was eager, and now it is hard to imagine my life without the school. The classrooms and hallways became a primary place of rhythms and relationships in the final months of 2022. I had a place to return to day-by-day with a rhythm I was learning to depend on. I had a place my skills could be developed and used with people I could think about clearly and passionately. Moreover, I had a place my prayers could resonate with, and each morning prayer brought an opportunity to imagine where I might be and who I might interact with as I waited for another text from the principal. Then, a phone call came from the school board, saying, “Corey, we have a permanent spot for you in one of our schools. Can you be there?”



Making Space

One of the prominent themes in my journals throughout 2022 was my journey from disorientation to reorientation. Reflecting on when I felt most disoriented or reoriented, I noticed distinct correlations between those and my feelings of rejection or reception with people around me. In short, when I felt rejected, I tended to also feel displaced and discouraged. Conversely, when I felt received, I tended to also feel ‘at home’ and stabilized, even within new situations or surroundings. Central to my feelings of reorientation was the sense of predictability provided by people who consistently made space for me in their lives. This was provided variously by friends who made space in their schedules to visit me at my home, a local social service agency that made space for me on their outreach team, and as described above, schools that made space for me in their classrooms. These ‘open spaces’ not only provided me with concrete expectations to orient my thoughts and actions each day but also gave living contexts that grounded my spirituality as my prayers responded to and anticipated real-world experiences each new day.

Making space in our lives for those around us is central to the meaning of hospitality (Smither 2021, 3-4). In basic terms, hospitality means receiving another from the heart into our own dwelling place (Thompson 2012, 133). In doing so, we help each other find stable ground on which to set our lives and open ourselves to the world around us. Though our contemporary culture has largely associated hospitality with the food, travel, and decor industries, the true heart of hospitality involves “welcoming the stranger” by making space in our lives for

those who are otherwise displaced and forgotten. This is captured in the Greek term *philoxenia*, which combines the words love (*phileo*) and stranger (*xenia*) (Pohl 1999, Kindle Location 394-395). Even in Christian spirituality, hospitality is sometimes viewed as services provided by only some members of the church (1 Cor. 12:28). While it is true that some people have special gifts of service, every Christian is called to a life of hospitality in conformity to the image of Jesus, who made space for others throughout his life and ministry (Oden 2001, 30; see I Pet. 4:9-10; Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2). The Gospel of Luke gives particular focus to Jesus' hospitality, constantly showing him providing food (Lk. 9:10-17), extending forgiveness (Lk. 7:44-48), and sharing space with those who had otherwise been neglected by others (Lk. 5:27-32). Such hospitality became a defining characteristic of Jesus' followers, whom he taught to welcome others as he had first welcomed them (Rom 15:7). Jesus' followers demonstrated this daily as they "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47).

In Christian spirituality, hospitality is rooted in the life of God depicted throughout the scriptures, where we discover that God exists as a "sweet society of shared love for another" (Willard 2002, 184). The love shared between Father, Son, and Spirit reveals a thoroughly relational God who opens himself up to make and share space with others. We see God's openness most poignantly when Jesus Christ, a member of God's "sweet society," tells his followers, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will

come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (Jn 14:2-3).

Jesus’ words in John 14 echo a core theme of the scriptures in which God welcomes people into a renewed relationship with himself and each other by preparing a place for them to dwell together in community (see Jer 30:22; 31:1-25). Sometimes, this takes shape in physical places God prepares for his people (Gen. 2:15; Exod. 23:20; Lk. 22:12) while, at other times, the places God prepares are more abstract or spiritual (Jer. 30:22; Jn. 15:4; Heb. 11:16). In both cases, God demonstrates his hospitality by making space for people to dwell together with him. Willis and Clements (2017, 26) suggest that “the *entire* Bible is a story about God’s hospitality.” They describe the centrality of God’s pattern of making space and welcoming others into it, “The Bible begins with God making a home for humanity to dwell with Him in a garden and the Bible ends with God making a home for believers to dwell with Him in a city” (Willis and Clements 2017, 28). Further, God extends the act of making and filling space to the people made to reflect his image. The Old and New Testament writers give the same command to “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7; see also Lev. 19:33-34; Isa. 58:7). Making space in our lives for one another, including the strangers among us, is central to our conformity to the image of God (see Pohl 2012).

Receiving Space

God’s hospitality takes on a fuller form as he not only makes space for others but also gives himself into the spaces made for him. The Old Testament

shows God coming to dwell among people as they make space for him (see Exod. 40:34-35). It is remarkable that God's dwelling place extends beyond temples and structures built by human hands to include even the smallest places that are opened to receive him (Ezek. 36:27; Jn. 15:4-7; Acts 17:24-25). This is tangibly fulfilled in the life of Jesus, who not only made space for others but also allowed himself to be vulnerable and needful of the space others made for him, as shown in narratives of his birth and death (Lk 2:7, 23:50-6). Jesus expands our understanding of hospitality to include the dual postures of giving *and* receiving space with others (Palmer 1986, 69). Granted, such vulnerability is often difficult for us, especially in a culture that celebrates individuality and self-sufficiency. However, conforming to the image of Christ means growing in the full measure of hospitality as hosts *and* guests, and as makers *and* recipients of space.

Becoming a recipient of space from others was a starting point toward the reorientation I experienced in the later months of 2022. When an elementary school principal made space for me in their local school, it gave me daily opportunities to interact with others in a place I didn't need to prepare for myself. I was received as a guest in their rhythms and afforded the opportunity to extend that reception to staff and students around me. Further, that place and the people who gathered there provided me with a stable ground to reorient my thoughts, feelings, and prayers. Their influence on my prayer life was evidenced by my frequent mention in my journals of certain staff and students with whom I felt a particular connection. Most often, these were with students with exceptionalities involving social, academic, or physical limitations. In a way, I empathized with

their need and sought to make space for them in my heart and in the classroom settings we shared. Thus, my season of disorientation, with its particular root in displacement, led me to a point of deeper hospitality with others by helping me receive and give space to others. In this way, even my disorientation was key to God's reorientation in my life.

“I am Corey, and I am here.”

It was the spring of 2023, nearly a year after my transition began. Instead of driving to a church office each morning, I drove down a county road to a public school in a community nearby, nearly always repeating a simple prayer, “For what I am about to receive, may I be truly thankful. Amen.” Once I arrived, I entered the same doors, walked down the same halls, greeted familiar faces, and waited for bells and walkie-talkies to prompt me through the day. I often sat with students experiencing limitations in their lives and development. Mostly, they just needed a little more space, a little more time, and a friendly face to guide them through their day. And, if I am honest, I needed the same thing. This helped me to make space for them, physically and relationally, so they would find at least one place they knew they belonged. Together, we moved through our day, and at least for a while, I could say with a settled heart, “I am Corey, and I am here.”



Conclusions and Implications

My original research examined the impact of fixed-hour prayer during a season of disorientation in my life. When I examined journals written throughout that season, I noticed a few points of influence it had on my life. Primarily, fixed-hour prayer provided a regular rhythm of vulnerability and reflection with God. This was important for fostering a time of honest introspection where my unfiltered thoughts and emotions came to the surface each day. These became the raw data for understanding how deeply disoriented I became during my season of transition. Further, fixed-hour prayer exposed me to others in scripture who seemed to share the same types of thoughts and emotions in their own lives. Such exposure mostly occurred when reading the psalter each day. In the daily psalms, I felt a sense of empathy toward people who were often disoriented and lonely, bringing their deepest longings to God in prayer. I was able to share that space with them, and though it did not directly influence my sense of disorientation overall, it did help normalize my feelings and offered hope for the future. One of the basic implications of this first phase of research was that fixed-hour prayer offers a valuable point of interaction with God by giving us a consistent point of connection, especially when that connection involves vulnerability on our part. Further, it offers a connection point with others, perhaps most notably the scriptural authors exhibiting raw emotions and experiences related to ours. Continuing the practice of fixed-hour prayer will be an important element of my and other's spiritual formation journey.

Even so, the content of my journals showed little evidence that my prayer practice directly impacted my sense of disorientation and reorientation. This prompted me to examine other factors influencing my life. When I broadened the scope of my research to include journals recording everyday experiences throughout my season of transition, I discovered key insights about myself that may also be relevant to others as they experience similar seasons in their lives. Moreover, by examining my experiences through a lens of neurodiversity, I learned about the unique ways I and others with ASD experience changes in our lives. I also learned about the effects of certain relationships on our journey from disorientation to reorientation. While my research focused on my experiences as a person with ASD, they apply to a broad spectrum of people. The insights I drew from my research include:

1. *The disorienting effect of unforeseen changes can have in our lives* – This is especially true for people with certain characteristics and predispositions to routines and ‘sameness’ in their physical and relational environments. People who feel disoriented benefit from opportunities to express their feelings to others who will listen and attune to them.
2. *The effect of openness and vulnerability in our relationships with God and each other* – The fragility experienced in times of grief and loss can cause us to isolate ourselves from others. Having safe places to open up about our feelings provides for our core needs of being “safe, seen, soothed, and secure” (Thompson 2021, 21). Such vulnerability is difficult but moves us

into a deeper ‘heart-to-heart’ connection where true healing and transformation occur.

3. *The importance of ‘place’ in our sense of identity and stability* – Because the places in our lives are associated with stories, memories, and emotions that constitute our sense of identity, experiencing displacement, or a lack of ‘place,’ can lead to a sense of profound disorientation. Conversely, when we experience a strong sense of ‘place,’ we have stable ground to venture into new and unfamiliar situations. People who are experiencing displacement benefit from having somewhere they can belong and feel welcomed.
4. *The centrality of particular places we call ‘home’ in our lives* – Certain places and relationships become particularly important to us by their familiarity and consistency in our lives. We call these places ‘home’ and return to them regularly as a nurturing shelter. All people have a deep longing for a place to call home, but some people find it especially difficult when they become detached from their home base for too long. When people lack a place to call home, they benefit from being reminded they are loved by and safe with at least some people whom they can return to on a regular basis.
5. *The way memory grounds us in unfamiliar environments* – Information from past events gives us a secure grounding from which to venture into novel situations. Our memories help us imagine future experiences, making us more stable and confident when faced with new or changing

environments. All of us need help remembering, but some people have more difficulty recalling people, places, and experiences from their past. We benefit from conversations with others who share those experiences with us. We also benefit from activities that aid in recollecting past events, including sensory aids like drawings, sounds, and smells that help trigger our memory.

6. *The effects of hospitality in our lives* – Making and receiving space with one another is essential to our well-being. When we feel rejected and excluded, it negatively impacts our sense of stability. Similarly, when we feel received and included in another person's space, we tend to feel 'at home' and stabilized, even within new situations or surroundings. Such hospitality is central to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and characterizes those who follow after him. People benefit when space is made for them in other's lives. This also gives them an opportunity to make space for others and extend the gift of hospitality they first received.

Experiencing Community

After completing my original model of spiritual formation, I held high regard for spiritual practices that orient us toward the life of Christ by helping us participate in his life together as a community. This remains a central aspect of spiritual formation. However, I now see the need to emphasize the actual experience of community with others as we engage in Christian practices. The potential for PCs to become deeply transformative places in our lives, especially during disorienting seasons, rests on their ability to foster an environment where

people are secure, grounded, and challenged to step out into new vistas set before them. In this way, PCs become a place of home and mission for people on their journey of spiritual formation. In the next chapter of this portfolio, I will describe four postures derived from my research that support the practices of PCs. These postures include (1) attunement, (2) hospitality, (3) remembering, and (4) openness. These are also rooted in the experiences shared between Jesus and his first followers.

**CHAPTER V:
POSTURES OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN PRACTICING
COMMUNITIES**

The conductor moves, and the orchestra follows. His every gesture is noticed and reflected back through the players' hands and breaths. Their focus is not only on him but also on one another. While each responds to the conductor, they attune to those beside them, making space for each note. The audience hears familiar melodies they hummed to themselves a thousand times before, but these melodies sound different. More than notes strung together by a single hand or mouth, the music is full: nothing stands alone. The fullness comes as melodies rest gracefully on notes from fellow musicians. Each one is heard in relation to another—melody atop harmony, sound within sound. The conductor skillfully attends to each musician turned toward him, those whose melodies soar and those whose harmonies uphold them. Attentive audience members notice that the conductor often focuses on the latter group, for that is where the music sits and the full masterpiece forms.

Melodies are one of the most prominent aspects of music. They engage listeners by repeating sequences of notes and musical themes that they can sing or hum along with. Melodies also engage with other notes to build harmonies. Generally speaking, harmony consists of two or more notes overlying each other to form a cohesive whole. In the case of an orchestra, one instrument or

instrumental section may carry the prominent theme of a song while another instrument or section plays complementary notes to support and enhance the melodies. When these individual parts sound together, harmony is created. The same can be said for spiritual formation in a communal context. Some aspects of spiritual formation are more prominent than others. These include the spiritual practices outlined in chapter 3—scriptural teaching, fellowship, “breaking of bread,” and prayer (ref. Acts 2:42). However, a fuller expression of spiritual formation is found when these practices (the “melodies”) are situated within underlying contexts that, while less prominent at first glance, are essential to our transformative experiences with God and others around us.

In chapter 3, I focused much of my attention on how PCs devote themselves to the practices of teaching, fellowship, “breaking of bread,” and prayer in their lives together as a community. While experiencing a season of disruption in my daily rhythms and relationships, I learned that spiritual practices alone are insufficient for reorienting our lives to Christ. The model of PCs I presented requires an underlying context (a “harmony”) that supports and enhances our transforming experiences with God. In chapter 4, I presented an autoethnography describing and analyzing my experiences in and out of community with others. While my neurodiversity coloured my experiences, the principles emerging through my research apply to the broad scope of human nature inherent to us all. With this in mind, I present four basic postures that, when adopted and nurtured by PCs, support and enhance the spiritual practices in my initial model of spiritual formation. Because my initial model was rooted in

the encounter of Jesus with his disciples on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-35), I will return to that narrative to describe how the postures of (1) attunement, (2) hospitality, (3) remembering, and (4) openness are essential aspects of the spiritual formation in community with others.

Recounting the Emmaus Road

In Luke 24:13-35, two disciples walked on a road to Emmaus while they discussed the loss of their leader, Jesus, and the disintegration of their spiritual community in the days prior (vv. 13-14). As they walked, a stranger (Jesus) joined them, listened to their sorrow, and responded by interpreting the meaning of the scriptures concerning what had taken place among them (vv. 17-27). The disciples then opened their home to the stranger (Jesus) and invited him to share a meal (vv. 28-29). At the table, the stranger (Jesus) “took bread, blessed it, and broke it,” which reminded the disciples of similar experiences with Jesus during his earthly ministry (vv. 30-31, 35; ref. Mt. 14:19, 15:36; 26:26; Mk. 14:22). As they witnessed Jesus breaking bread, their eyes were opened to see it was Christ seated with them. The disciples spoke to each other about their “burning hearts” during their encounter with Christ before returning to the others who had also experienced the risen Christ (vv. 32-34).

On the Emmaus Road, Christ shares four prominent practices with his disciples: teaching, fellowship, “breaking of bread,” and prayer. However, when we read the story closely, we notice certain postures underlying each of these practices, allowing the disciples to fully engage with Christ and each other through attunement, hospitality, remembering, and openness. Moreover, apart

from these postures, the scene is decidedly incomplete and absent of the transforming experience of the practices taking place. In short, Jesus' practices do not stand alone but are situated within postures that, when taken together, provide a fuller context for the disciples' spiritual formation to occur. We will now examine these practices and postures in relation to each other.

Teaching and the Posture of Attunement

On the Emmaus Road, Jesus does not launch into his interpretation of scripture without first attuning to the thoughts and feelings of his disciples (Figure 8). Relational attunement involves seeing, understanding, and accepting the

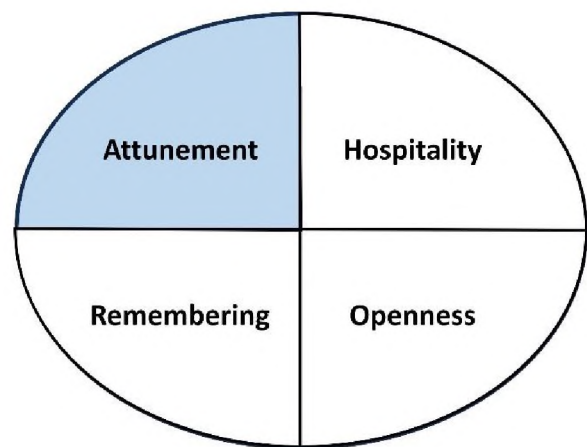


Figure 8 - Attunement

mental and emotional states of others. As we attune to one another, we provide a place to be seen and heard in a safe and nurturing environment. This has a way of opening our minds as learners when new ideas and experiences are placed before us through the practice of teaching. Further, through attunement, we are afforded insight into each other's current mindset, allowing us to teach what is relevant to the listeners. Thus, attunement has a dual effect of nurturing the student and the teacher. Jesus demonstrated attunement by asking, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" (Lk. 24:17) This established a moment of pause in the disciples and prompted one of them to open their hearts to Jesus (Lk.

24:17b-27). Jesus then spoke into their open hearts, “the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Lk. 24:27b).

Developing a similar posture of attunement in PCs can involve (1) being in each other’s presence during pivotal moments of our lives, (2) listening before we speak to others in the group, (3) asking questions about each other’s thoughts and feelings, (4) observing each other’s physical appearance and non-verbal communication, and (5) offering truth-filled insights relevant to those we are teaching. By adopting these and other essential aspects of attunement, PCs establish a relational basis on which teaching can reach members’ hearts.

Fellowship and the Posture of Hospitality

When Jesus finished his teaching, one of the disciples opened their home to him and made space at their table for their connection to continue. By making room for a stranger, they demonstrated the heart of hospitality (*philoxenia*) and took a vital step toward turning that

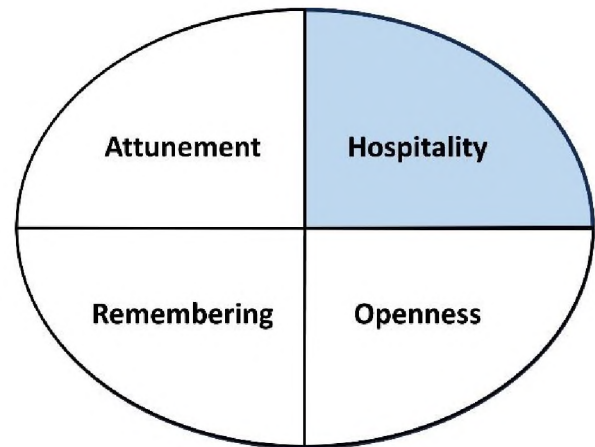


Figure 9 - Hospitality

stranger (Jesus) into a member of their spiritual community (Figure 9). Further, while becoming a guest at their table, Jesus also played the part of a host by inviting the disciples into his communion with God through the taking, blessing, and breaking of bread (Lk. 24:30). In John 6:56, Jesus makes the bold claim,

“Whoever eats [the bread that came down from heaven] ... remains in me, and I in them.” On the Emmaus Road, the disciples and Jesus entered a mutual posture of making space for one another, leading to deeper fellowship. The disciples did this by making physical space in their home for Jesus to share food, and Jesus did this by making space in his relationship with the Father for his disciples to share their communion.

PCs can develop a similar posture of mutual hospitality by (1) making space in their homes and at their tables for each other to share food together, (2) allowing each other to be guests and hosts at various points of interaction, (3) opening themselves relationally to one another by sharing thoughts and feelings comprising their inner person, (4) welcoming others to join their already existing relational bonds, and (5) receiving the presence of God among them through prayers and gestures acknowledging his invitation to participate in the heavenly community. By adopting these and other hospitable practices, PCs foster a place of welcome and belonging where genuine fellowship can occur.

Breaking of Bread and the Posture of Remembering

Another posture represented throughout the Emmaus Road narrative was that of remembering (Figure 10). In part, this took place as the disciples were “talking with each other about all these things that had happened” (Lk. 24:14). Through conversation about things past, the disciples opened themselves to the memories that would be transformed by Jesus when he “interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Lk. 24:26b). Their memories were also

prompted by physical symbols exchanged among them. When Jesus took, blessed, and broke bread at the table, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Lk. 24:31a). These symbols triggered past experiences and ushered them

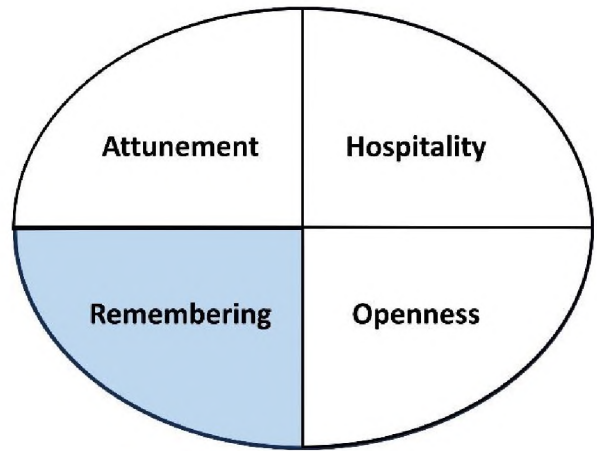


Figure 10 - Remembering

into the present by re-engaging

the disciples’ minds with the same sights, sounds, smells, and feelings at play when Jesus broke bread at tables with them throughout his ministry. Later, in the writings of Paul, the posture of remembering through shared symbols is represented in his description of the Lord’s Supper: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 12:23-24). As such, nearly the entire narrative of the Emmaus Road embodied the posture of remembering through stories and symbols that are then reframed in the transforming presence of Jesus.

PCs can foster a posture of remembering similar to that of Jesus and his disciples by (1) sharing stories with one another about spiritually formative experiences in the past, (2) identifying core aspects present in those experiences, including imagery, smells, tastes, and tactile feelings, (3) discerning ways of

symbolizing those aspects through repeatable, embodied practices, (4) and adopting the symbols given by Jesus to his disciples for remembering his story (e.g. breaking bread and baptism). By assuming a posture of remembering, PCs help each other draw their formative experiences into the present to be transformed in the presence of Christ.

Prayer and the Posture of Openness

The final posture we will examine in the Emmaus Road narrative is openness (Figure 11). Throughout their encounter, Jesus and his disciples demonstrated an increasing openness in their interactions with each other and God. First, we see the disciples begin to open

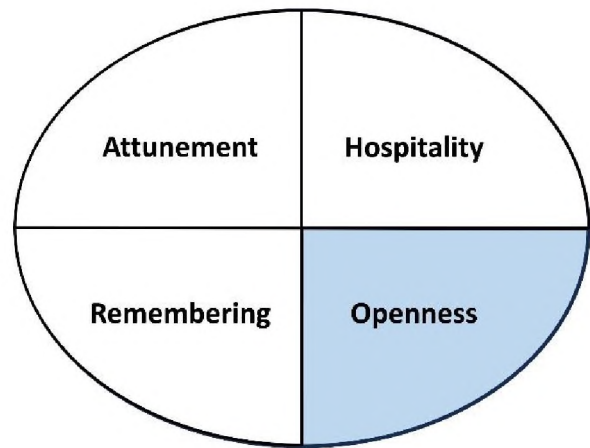


Figure 11 - Openness

up with one another and Jesus about the sorrowful events that took place in the days prior (Lk. 24:14-17). The fragility experienced in times of grief and loss can tempt us to isolate ourselves from others. However, opening up about our feelings in secure relationships offers a place where our core needs of feeling “safe, seen, soothed, and secure” are met (Thompson 2021, 21). Such vulnerability moves us beyond ‘face-to-face’ interactions with others into a deeper ‘heart-to-heart’ connection where true healing and transformation occur. The same can be said about our openness with God. Joel 2:12-13 says:

Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
and relenting from punishment.

By rending our hearts in the presence of a gracious and merciful God, we open ourselves to his blessing (see Joel 2:13-14). The posture of opening ourselves in the presence of God to receive his blessing is central to the practice of prayer. Jesus used words and actions to show this posture to his disciples by taking bread, blessing it, and then breaking it (Lk. 24:30). Through those words and actions, the disciples became aware of Christ's presence, which, in turn, prompted them to open further with one another about their burning hearts (Lk. 24:32). There is no better posture for prayer than that which is seen in the disciple's home on the Emmaus Road where hearts opened to each other and God, enabling a spiritually formative interaction among Christ and his disciples (see Williams 2016, 8-9).

PCs can nurture a posture of openness by (1) creating a safe place for genuine thoughts and emotions to be shared among people, (2) extending empathy to one another, especially during difficult times, (3) reminding each other of the gentleness and mercy of God and his willingness to bless those who "rend their hearts" before him (Joel 2:13b), (4) enacting verbal and physical gestures to represent their openness to God, and (5) reflecting with one another about their inner experiences while engaging with God. By nurturing a posture of openness, PCs provide a prayerful environment where formative encounters with God can consistently take place.

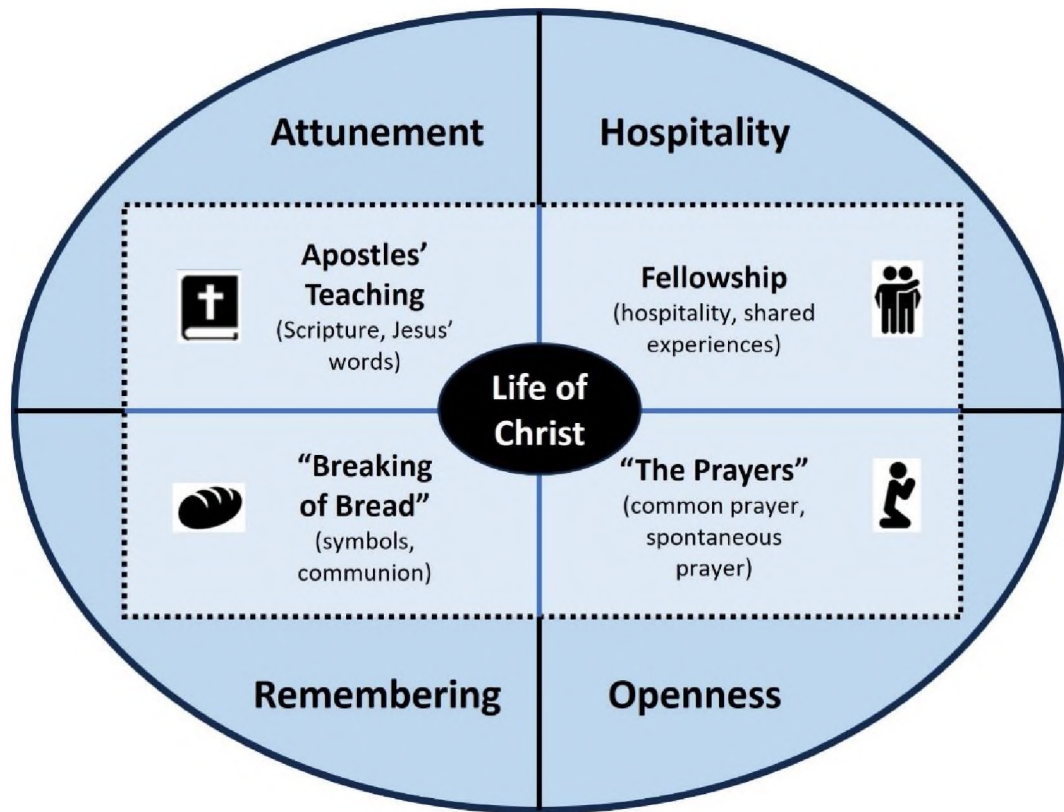


Figure 12 – Model of Spiritual Formation for Practicing Communities

Joining Practices and Postures

By examining the postures underlying the spiritual practices found in the Emmaus Road story, we can see how they support and enrich the model of spiritual formation presented in chapter 3. When taken together, the spiritual practices and communal postures described in my initial model and this chapter provide a more complete model of spiritual formation in the context of PCs (Figure 12). Further, it is important to note that each of the postures outlined above acts as a context for all the spiritual practices, and in turn, each of the spiritual practices helps foster and nurture each of the postures. For example, a

hospitable posture does more than support fellowship; it also supports and enriches (1) teaching by making space for conversations and interactions to occur, (2) “breaking of bread” by welcoming people to share symbols together, and (3) prayer by making space in our lives for God and others to engage one another. Likewise, a posture of attunement supports and enriches (1) fellowship by creating a safe environment for people to gather, (2) “breaking of bread” by paying attention to others sharing the symbols of Christ together, and (3) prayer by encouraging attentiveness and openness to God and one another. Much like the orchestra that shares common practices and postures to form together into the masterful expression of their composer, the postures and practices outlined throughout this portfolio interact with one another to help usher believers into formative experiences with God and each other where their lives are formed. This provides the context for spiritual formation: the lifelong process of people being transformed together in the image of God through renewed relationships with Christ and his body, the church.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION AND APPLICATIONS

As noted in my Introduction, the DMin in Spiritual Formation at Tyndale University is committed “to personal spiritual growth and practice, to the academic study of spirituality, and to the ministry of spiritual formation.” These three commitments were achieved throughout my three years of DMin studies and are presented in this portfolio in the following ways. In Chapter 2, I presented my spiritual autobiography, outlining how my place in community with others influenced my growing image of God. At the start of my autobiography, I recalled vivid images of relationships with people and places in my hometown that, while relatively small and quiet in comparison to my contexts later in life, provided a rich experience of communal spirituality that helped me know God in very personal ways. However, I also described the undercurrent of insecurity that rippled through my life, tempting me to hold onto people for fear that those I loved would be taken from me. My insecurity also prompted me to withdraw from people and close myself off for fear that others would see my weaknesses and push me away. In both cases, my posture of fear and withdrawal impacted how I experienced relationships that would otherwise be formative in my life. When I grasped tightly to people, I no longer experienced the blessing of simply receiving

love, and when I withdrew from people, I lacked the intimacy necessary for healthy development and spiritual formation.

These themes remained hidden within me when I began writing my initial model of spiritual formation, comprising Chapter 3 of this portfolio. Even so, the deep longing for communal structures of spiritual formation led me to study the communal nature of God and how our participation in that community influences Christian spirituality. Through my study, I was reminded that the communal nature of God is expressed through the relationality of human beings created in his image (Gen. 1:26-27). This insight is upheld through recent research in the field of IPNB, which, as noted, explores “how we attach and grow and interconnect throughout life.” IPNB offered a lens for understanding spiritual formation in communal contexts by highlighting the physical realities underlying human development and their resonance with interpersonal relationships at the heart of Jesus’ and the church’s ministry in scripture. Insights from IPNB and other research in social and biblical studies helped me frame my initial model of PCs where the participants devote themselves to shared practices derived from the life of Christ and his disciples. Namely, these included scriptural teaching, fellowship, the “breaking of bread,” and prayer (see Lk. 24:13-35; Acts 2:42). By rooting these practices in the life of Christ, this model provides a guide for PCs engaging in Christian spiritual formation.

My initial model of spiritual formation was enriched during a season of significant changes in my personal and professional life. Losing the familiar relationships and rhythms with which I lived for seven years prompted me to

examine my experiences through an autoethnography (see chapter 4). My research was conducted through a personal lens of neurodiversity, providing another opportunity to merge personal growth with academic study. By rigorously examining my experiences and engaging them with other research in ASD, human geography (i.e. my study of “place” and “home”), neurobiology (i.e. my study of memory), and biblical studies, I presented a body of research that helped resituate my initial study of spiritual formation in a more robust context for PCs. This new context emerges as PCs nurture attunement, hospitality, remembering, and openness among their members and extending to others in their congregation and broader community. Such hospitality enables PCs to become secure places where people can find a ‘home’ where they can settle and be reoriented in the transforming presence of God and each other. Chapter 5 described the interactions between postures and practices that, when harmonized together, produce a much fuller model of spiritual formation than I had initially designed. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach I took showed how bridging academic study with personal stories and spirituality offers more complete insights into the themes of spiritual formation. Overall, future study and practice in spiritual formation will benefit from such interdisciplinary approaches.

Growth in my self-knowledge, understanding of human development and spiritual formation, and postures for communal ministry in church congregations and other contexts have had a significant impact on how I engage with God and others every day. I am more aware of my and others’ need for rhythms and routines that help stabilize us during disorienting seasons. In my case, the

experience of neurodiversity carries a significant amount of shame and guilt from often feeling like I am ‘not the way I am supposed to be.’ However, an increased understanding of the neurobiological mechanisms at play in ASD helps me feel more at home in my body and helps me extend that same assurance to others. Learning to communicate my struggles and allowing space for others to do the same fosters mutual vulnerability that deepens connections and opens us to spiritually formative experiences with God and each other. Rather than attempting to present better versions of ourselves to God and people, I have learned that simply standing before him as we are, even in our weakness, is enough to render a smile from our Heavenly Father.

General Applications

My research is applicable in Christian congregations needing a model for developing small group ministries. The model presented in chapters 3 and 5 invite others to discern how the practices of teaching, fellowship, “breaking of bread,” and prayer will look in their context. By rooting these practices in the life of Christ and the church in scriptures, I allow others the freedom to explore the many varieties of practical expressions the elements of PCs take in Christ’s and the church’s life together. Further, by describing the basic postures underlying these practices, it allows others the freedom to discern how attunement, hospitality, remembering, and openness will take shape in their personal relationships. Each PC will combine unique individuals bringing stories, experiences, and personal characteristics into their community, thus, each PC will

need to wonder together about the particular shape of practices and postures among themselves.

Throughout my research, I demonstrate a process of self-reflection that others can adopt for discovering and telling their own stories. I encourage others to “let your life speak. ... Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent” (Palmer 2000, 3). Whether or not others commit to the depth of research presented in this portfolio, the journey of self-discovery renders valuable insights into God’s work in each individual’s life, and this will enrich each other’s lives as we make space to listen and attune to what God is saying through each of us. Williams (2016, 9) sets forth a vision of mutual openness as we learn to ask, “What is Jesus Christ giving me [through the people around me] here and now?” By discovering and offering their story to others, individuals contribute to the full expression of God’s image in community. Moreover, as caregivers and community members adopt the postures described in chapter 5 of this portfolio, they help make space for stories to be told. As we have seen, this provides the necessary context for positive growth and development in each other.

Personal Applications

Regarding my personal vocation, my career has shifted once again to include pastoring in a local church and working for a social service agency. In both contexts, my understanding of interpersonal relationships compels me to have deeper empathy for others, especially as they exhibit unhealthy patterns in their lives. I see people through a far more holistic lens than before my DMin

studies and consider how the postures described in chapter 5 help establish trusting relationships in which congregants and clients feel “safe, seen, soothed, and secure.” The final model of spiritual formation presented in chapter 5 gives me a framework for establishing a more robust small group ministry in my current congregation. While my congregation has had a loose model for small groups in the past, my model ushers in new perspectives for groups to consider when they develop rhythms of life together. It also offers a concrete framework for new believers to understand the communal nature of God and the church. Appendix B offers a handbook for developing “Community Groups” in my congregation. These Community Groups are modeled after the general framework for PCs in my portfolio. After completing my DMin research, the leadership of my congregation decided to experiment with and apply the principles of PCs in our curriculum for spiritual formation. Further research within my congregation will explore how my model will take shape in the lived experiences of PCs. Appendix C offers a narrative account of how one such Community Group is already forming and functioning in my congregation.

I am still invited to local schools to serve as an EA occasionally. When I enter those places, I am mindful of students’ need for the same postures of attunement, hospitality, remembering, and openness to help them through their day. After reflecting deeply on my own experiences, I find it helpful to offer students and teachers glimpses into my life story by opening up personal experiences with ASD and isolation. This opens up dialogue with people who want to share their stories more vulnerably. By making a space where

vulnerability is demonstrated and welcomed, I help people find a place to belong. In June 2023,, I was afforded an opportunity to present an account of my experiences in the school system at an academic conference at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. At that conference, I interacted with other scholars and parents who shared personal stories and insights from their experiences of inclusion, belonging, and identity in real-world situations similar to mine. Overall, the experience of researching and writing this portfolio has given me the basis for nurturing community with others and helping them establish and engage in deeply formative relationships.

Future Research and Exploration

My understanding of the themes presented in this portfolio remains incomplete and requires future research and exploration. First, additional research into the field of IPNB will assist in further development of my theoretical and practical knowledge of human development in interpersonal contexts. My portfolio presented a working knowledge of IPNB and the processes involved with our developing minds. However, a more detailed understanding of neurobiology and the mechanisms involved with human development will allow me to recognize and respond to nuances in my and others' lives. Specifically, I will benefit from further exploration into how emotions are formed and impact our ability to connect within relationships. While I presented an ideal image of people connecting with one another and with God, I suspect complex factors promote or inhibit such interpersonal connections. By examining the role of

emotions in our relationships, I will have a deeper appreciation for how PCs can attune and respond to one another in diverse emotional states.

Second, my portfolio introduced the field of ASD and disabilities studies, which emerged at the close of the 20th century as a way of making space for research and reflection on the experiences of people with disabilities (Cooreman-Guittin and van Ommen 2022, 1; see also Swinton 2010, “Disability Theology”). Because of the diversity of experiences of people with disabilities, the field of disability studies, with its off-shoot of disability theology, is complex and deserving of continual exploration. My autoethnography in chapter 4 is a valuable contribution to this field. Still, ongoing research is necessary to allow additional voices and stories to enrich our understanding of spiritual formation in the context of Christian community. I will prioritize pursuing more research in this field to allow my current understanding of human experience to be challenged and stretched by others whose experiences differ from mine. In general, assuming an open and hospitable posture in our life together as a community will necessarily involve continual openness to diverse people, including the disabled among us.

Finally, my model will benefit from further exploring how our images of God are formed through life experiences and, in turn, inform our relationships with others. We do not enter community as a blank slate but as people with preexisting images of God that influence our postures toward him and others. As a spiritual director, I am aware of the impact our image of God has on our emotions, thoughts, and actions, including those we share with others. I suspect there will be a need to integrate deeper spiritual reflection into the lives of PCs.

This may involve the practice of group spiritual direction when such resources are available. Even so, the heart of my model remains the same: the establishment and nurture of interpersonal connections in which communal spirituality is emphasized and people are formed together through mutual participation in the life of Christ. In such relationships, the Spirit forms us together in the image of God by drawing us into communion with Christ and each other. That is the heart of spiritual formation, and it is how we will become places in the world where the image of God is coming to life.

APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A: TYNDALE UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL**



***Certificate of Ethics Review Clearance for
Research Involving Human Subjects***

Primary Investigator:	Corey Parish
Faculty Supervisor:	Doctor of Ministry
REB File Number:	2022-00018
Title of Project:	Praying in the Storm: An Autoethnography Examining the Impact of Fixed-Hour Prayer in a Disorienting Season of Life

Status of Approval

- Approved**
- Revisions Required**
- Denied**

September 26, 2022

Chair, Research Ethics Board

Date

**APPENDIX B: A HANDBOOK FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS
AT GRACE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, FERGUS, ONTARIO**

Used with permission from Grace Christian Fellowship, Fergus, Ontario.





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Welcome to Grace!

We are a church centred on the beautiful God we find in Jesus.

One of the beautiful things we find in Jesus is his love for relationships. Jesus invites us into relationships with God and each other because he knows that is where we grow and learn the most.





At Grace, one way we grow in relationships is through our **Community Groups.**



What are Community Groups?

Community Groups are groups of 8-12 people who **gather, learn, reflect, and pray** together outside of our Sunday morning worship.



 Gather	Learn 
 Reflect	Pray 

Gather

Community Groups get together at homes, dinner tables, parks, coffee shops, or walking trails throughout our community.

Community Groups become hospitable by making space for each other in their lives.

Learn

Community Groups learn by studying scriptures, reading books, listening to sermons, or discussing podcasts together.

Community Groups attune to each other's thoughts and questions so they can learn best together.

Reflect

Community Groups reflect on their lives by sharing stories or symbols that remind each other of their experiences with Jesus. Sometimes, groups take communion together as a way of remembering Jesus.

Community Groups learn to remember Jesus and their stories with him.

Pray

Community Groups pray by sharing prayer requests or holding prayer meetings. Sometimes they follow prayer books, sing songs, or fast together.

Community Groups open themselves to God and his presence among them.

Planning Your Community Group

As you join with a Community Group, you will discuss how your group will:



Gather
with Hospitable
Lives



Learn
with Attuned
Minds



Reflect
with Stories and
Symbols



Pray
with Open Hearts

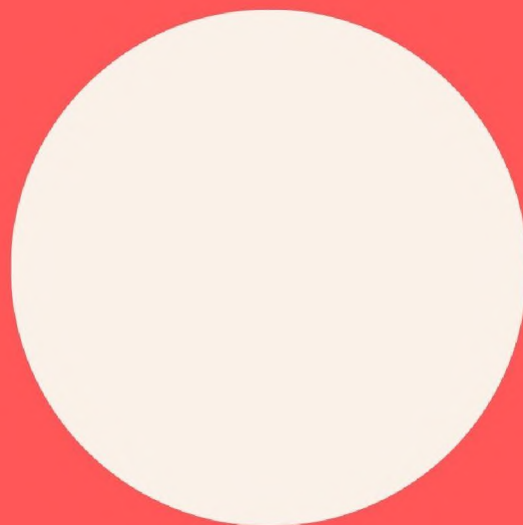
Luke 24 & Acts 2

Jesus and his disciples gathered, learned, reflected, and prayed together throughout their lives. We find powerful examples of this in Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 2:42.

As a group, read Luke 24 and Acts 2 and discuss how you will gather, learn, reflect, and pray together as a group.

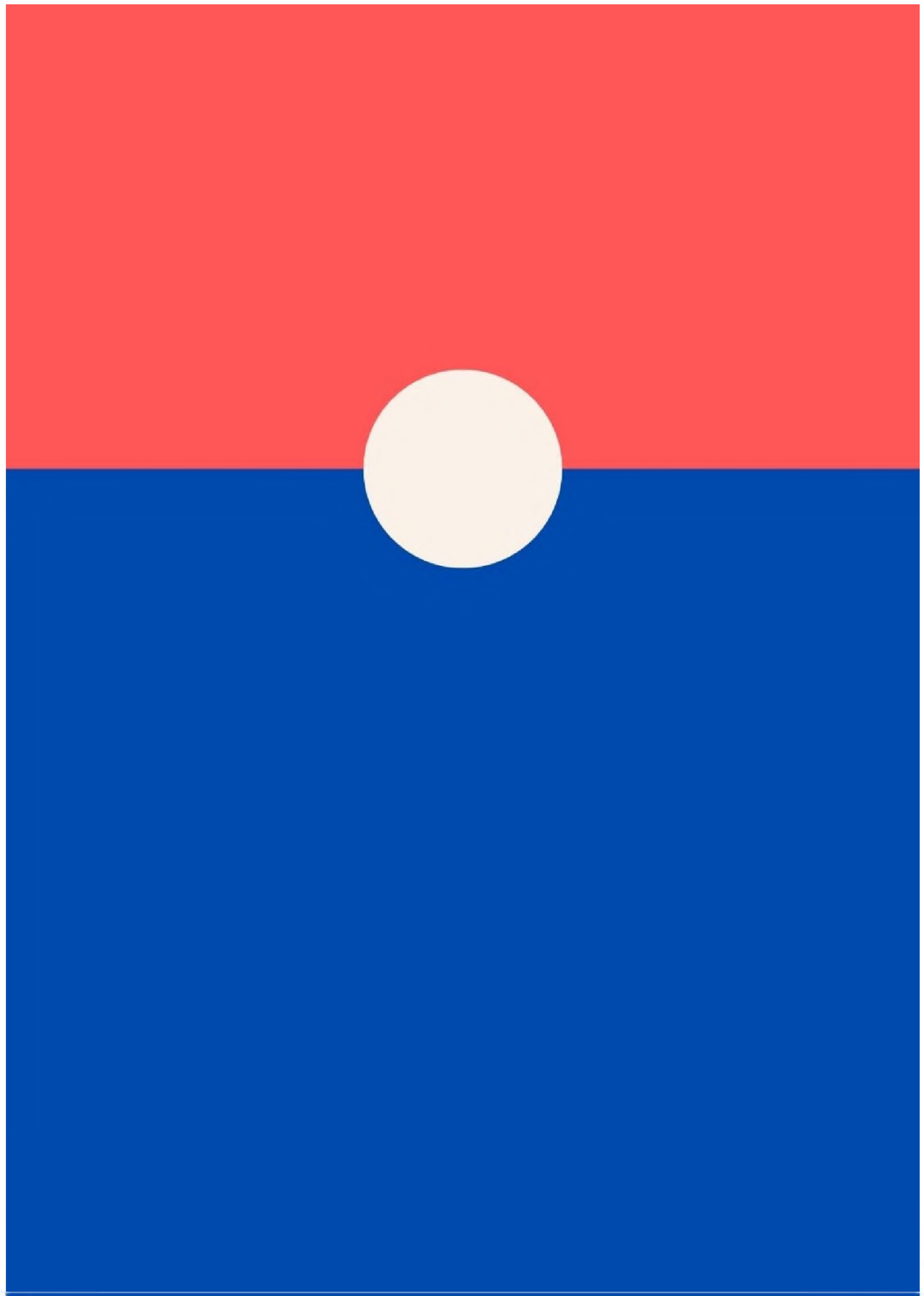
Consider other examples from the life of Jesus that inspire you. You can expect guidance throughout the year to nurture your lives as a group.





**Please contact us for guidance on
connecting with a Community
Group or planning a new group.**

info@igrace.ca



APPENDIX C: AN EVENING WITH MY COMMUNITY GROUP

I walked to the familiar doorway of a congregation member as another member of our Community Group pulled up behind me. It was 6:50 PM when we were greeted by the homeowner and group leader, who welcomed us to a table filled with appetizers and coffee. After pouring our cups and filling our plates, we found seats on couches and chairs forming a circle in the living room, although the seating arrangement soon shifted when our leader mentioned a health concern of a new member yet to arrive. His thoughtfulness set the tone for the type of attentiveness that would mark our gatherings. By 7:15 PM, the leader opened with prayer before asking for a volunteer to begin sharing. Earlier that week, he asked us to bring a small object that symbolized our life with God and, one by one, we began displaying objects and sharing our stories to the group. Each symbol was rich with meaning and evoked curiosity and questions about one another's experiences with God. At 8:00 PM, the sharing was complete, and we turned our attention to the first of a four-week sermon series on the life of Jesus. We passed fill-in-the-blank pages around the circle, and we quieted ourselves for the sermon. The teaching was simple but engaging for all of us. We laughed and learned for 30 minutes before the leader paused the sermon for the night. He asked for prayer requests that the group could hold in our hearts. Among health concerns, relationship struggles, and a pending due date for a pregnant group member, our prayer list filled up and we committed to pray and check in with one another before our next meeting. At 9:00 PM, I left as some group members remained longer to visit. My evening with my Community Group was complete.

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