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Tyndale University College & Seminary

The Mid-Faith Crisis:
Introducing Evangelicals to the Dark Night of the Soul

A Research Portfolio
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by

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Research Portfolio Approval

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ABSTRACT

The mid-faith crisis is a qualitative shift in our faith experience as God weans us of the spiritual delights lavished upon us in the initial stages of faith and leads us on an inner journey of awareness, repentance, and surrender. This typically occurs in middle age and often in the midst of successful ministry, so it is often misdiagnosed as falling away from faith rather than progressing in faith. Such strong medicine is necessary because it addresses a serious affliction: the false self which has smuggled itself unseen into the Christian life and forms the great obstacle between us and God as well as us and those around us. Through the mid-faith crisis, God invites us to lay aside the false self and its tools for navigating life, accept who we really are, and to grow ever more into our identity as the beloved of the Father. While the mid-faith crisis is divinely initiated and sustained, there is room for human participation in the work.

This research portfolio explores the author's own mid-faith crisis, proposes a model for the phenomenon and reports the results of an action research project to develop and deliver a curriculum that introduces conservative Evangelicals to the mid-faith crisis. It concludes by identifying further potential development of the model and the curriculum.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

I had a spiritual formation class to teach that night, and I realized that it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. This came as quite a shock to me, as teaching was one of my favourite things to do. I never felt more alive and more used by God as when I put my spiritual gift of teaching into practice. And there was nothing that I loved to teach about more than spiritual formation. Yet here I was: actually dreading the thing that I loved to do the most.

The more I thought of it, the more I saw that it was the culmination of a long, slow spiral to this point. I was living my long-standing dream of being a missionary, teaching Christian spirituality at a seminary in Brazil. However, I wondered if I was really supposed to be there. Hadn't I just forced my way overseas, taking my legitimate call from God to be a teacher and trying to realize it in my time and my way, like how Abraham fathered Ishmael to fulfill God's promise? I told myself that God helps those who help themselves, but I always had a nagging doubt that I had grabbed for the steering wheel. My ministry appeared to be fruitful, but I wondered if God was achieving His goals in spite of my action rather than because of it.

At the same time, I felt exhausted. My wife's health was poor and care for my infant son was placing extra demands on my energy levels. These were already low due to my bivocational rhythm of working as a software developer as well as fulfilling my teaching role at the seminary. Unsurprisingly, my spiritual life felt anything but lively. I hardly ever prayed or read the Bible, and yet here I was teaching future pastors about spiritual formation. My indisposition to teach was as much about avoiding further hypocrisy as it was about burnout. I had kept on going to this point due to a stubborn refusal to quit. A message I had carried from my family of origin was that I was a quitter, so I grimly carried on doing my duty. But my eyes were as dead as my soul seemed to be. The promises of abundant life I would teach from John 10:10 seemed a cruel joke to me at that time.

I didn't realize it at the time, but this season of darkness was an invitation from God into a deeper life with Him. While I had achieved to a certain degree the outer life I desired – the right job, in the right place, doing the right things – my inner life could not support it. That was why it was tumbling around my ears. God was clearing the ground so a new, stronger foundation could be built. He was drawing me into a way of living based, not on the masks I wore or the lies I told myself, but on my true identity as the beloved child of the Father, one in whom Christ dwells and delights. The years that followed my ministry burnout were dark and difficult, and much of the time it felt like nothing much was happening at all. But all the while, the Holy Spirit was working unseen and when the fruit of this divine work was slowly revealed, it was glorious.

While this journey was deeply personal, it was not unique. It is the lived experience of too many people in conservative Evangelical churches today. It seems that whenever I speak with earnest believers from this tradition as a part of my ministry teaching and preaching about spiritual formation, they often admit to similar phenomena – often without any prompting on my part. They are sometimes cynical, sometimes despairing, and sometimes just longing for something more. I soon learned about developmental spirituality and identified that these dear saints were exhibiting many of the symptoms of the transition from the spirituality of the initial stages of faith to that of the later stages – a sort of mid-faith crisis. While this difficult season of faith can be mistaken as backsliding, it is actually a divine work of stripping away the false self and ushering the believer into their true self in Christ. The 16th century Spanish mystic John of the Cross poetically described this experience as the dark night of the soul and understood it as a necessary purgative step on the spiritual journey. Armed with this knowledge, I would always then be sure to include a word on this transition whenever I had a forum to teach on spiritual formation. If they could see their discomfort and doldrums as part of the pilgrimage of faith rather than a dead-end, it would bring some hope where there was only distress.

Even as my ministry was enriched by this concept, I felt like a bit of a fraud whenever I taught it. After all: where was my own crisis of faith? Was I simply teaching about something of which I had mere head-knowledge? It certainly felt that way. But people were being helped and no one ever raised the awkward question of my own experience with the phenomenon, so I carried on.

But I was soon to discover that my dark night of the soul was already underway – and had been so for almost two decades and reached its nadir in my missionary burnout.

When I entered the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale Seminary, I was hoping to develop further proficiency in my ministry of spiritual formation as well as to pick up a useful credential for future professional opportunities. But I encountered far more than that. In the first year, my spiritual autobiography identified certain long-standing patterns that I had not perceived before. At the same time, the requirement to meet with a spiritual director led to the discovery that I had been suffering from *acedia* for many years – a sort of spiritual despondency that saps its victim’s energy and motivation. Finally, the assignment to experiment with fixed-hour prayer for two months led me to extend the practice through the entire liturgical year. This was a salutary prescription for my *acedia* and it formed a trellis for other discoveries and spiritual practices. In the second year, the research for my model of spiritual formation opened my eyes further to the nature of my mid-faith crisis and uncovered paradigms and practices that would define the contours of my new experience of faith. In the third-year action research project, I developed a way to effectively bring this deepened (and far more personal) understanding of the mid-faith crisis to others in my Christian tradition.

This portfolio chronicles that journey into mid-faith crisis. In chapter 2 I will recount my spiritual autobiography, with particular emphasis on my own mid-faith crisis. I follow my journey through the four stages of faith: seeker,

student, servant and, finally, sojourner. Chapter 3 is an attempt to systematize and generalize that personal experience, drawing on the resources of Scripture, Church history and modern scholarship to develop a model of the mid-faith crisis phenomenon. This model explores four key questions about the mid-faith crisis: when it presents itself in the journey of faith, why it occurs, what it looks like and how we can participate in the work. Chapter 4 then describes my effort to disseminate that model by creating and refining a small group experience to introduce conservative Evangelicals to the mid-faith crisis. In that report, I document the cycle of continuous improvement by which I monitored the delivery of the curriculum and implemented improvements in the experience, with the help of key partners. I conclude this chronicle in chapter 5, summarizing the key discoveries I made on the way and exploring the future implications for myself and my ministry of spiritual formation.

A greater awareness of the mid-faith crisis provides a helpful corrective to the modern Evangelical tradition. Becoming more familiar with the dynamics of the mid-faith crisis and the journey from the false self to the true self tempers our triumphalism. It challenges the theology of glory that leads us to assume that the spiritual life is forever “up and to the right” (like the revenue chart for a successful business). Instead, knowledge of the mid-faith crisis helps us to re-appropriate some wonderful elements of our own tradition that these glittering visions have blinded us to, like the Puritans’ healthy self-suspicion (Packer 1990, 24) and the Holiness movement’s view of the spiritual life as a race, not up to glory but down to self-sacrificial service (Hurnard 2010, Location 2954).

CHAPTER 2:
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto 1

The mid-faith crisis is not merely an interesting religious phenomenon to me. I have experienced it from the inside as I passed through my own stages of faith. This is the story of that journey.

Seeker

The story begins in upstate New York, where I was born in 1973 to lapsed Catholic parents – my mother a French Canadian and my father an American of Irish and Italian descent. My brother and I were raised with no particular religious instruction. I was sent to the Vacation Bible School at the nearby Presbyterian church a few times, but my parents merely saw it as part of the well-rounded education and moral instruction necessary for functioning members of society. From what I recall, no lasting spiritual impact was made on me there. However, things did start happening in early 1990. During my junior year in high school, I attended an overnight conference for a school club. Packed in four to a room, I couldn't help but notice Derek Williams, another member of our club, reading his

Bible before bed. I was taken aback, as I didn't realize people actually read it anymore. What is more, I thought religious types were oddballs, but he definitely wasn't – he was a senior and one of the more popular guys at school (academic achiever, sporty, charismatic and good-looking).

Never one to leave a person in need (nor miss a chance to display my intellect), I took it upon myself to enlighten this poor, benighted rube and started making what I thought were slam-dunk objections to the Bible. Happily, instead of becoming offended or combative, he graciously engaged me in conversation, patiently countering each of my arguments with a plausible answer. Once I ran out of steam, he turned the tables on me. “If we were both to die tonight, I know I'm going to heaven. How about you?” he asked. I mumbled something about being a decent person so probably, yeah – but neither of us was convinced. Mercifully, he did not press me on my answer, and we went to bed. The next week, Derek stopped me in the school hall and gave me a copy of C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 1952a). “This might give you a better idea of what Christianity is all about,” he explained. Derek then retreated to the background of my life, and as far as I can remember we never had similar conversations again.

I'm not sure that I would recommend *Mere Christianity* to a 16-year-old, but it was the right thing for me at the time. It cut through the hazy view of Christianity I had cobbled together from TV and films and presented its essence completely and correctly. When I finished, I had developed an appreciation for Christianity and had a new-found intellectual respect for its adherents. But I didn't see what it had to do with me.

That connection came a few months later. I was in the doldrums, inhabiting one of the many dark periods of my teen years, when I met with another Christian acquaintance. This was an even more tenuous connection than Derek – a girl my age whose family hosted international students like mine did. Since she attended another high school, we had only met a handful of times and would only meet a few times more after that fateful day. Her father and my mother were both attending the same trade show in Baltimore, and I met her there. She opened with a harmless question, “How are you doing?” For some reason, that inquiry burst open the floodgates of emotion and I blurted out all that was troubling me and how I felt – and how tired I was of feeling that way. After speaking straight for what must have been a half hour or longer, I looked up to see what her response would be. She replied with a simple, “Have you thought of accepting Jesus into your life?” Again, her simple words went straight to my heart and I resonated like a fine Waterford crystal goblet. “I just read something about that!” I exclaimed. I concluded that my current situation was the result of running my life my way. Since God was perfect, I reasoned, letting Him run my life would make things go better. Not that I expected things to go perfectly – I was not so naïve as that – but I thought that His way was the path to the best possible life. So, I decided to follow Jesus – April 20th, 1990, at about 10 p.m. in a Baltimore hotel.

Sociologists like to attribute conversion to shifts in one’s social network.

In Rodney Stark’s study of converts to the Moonies, he discovered that

of all the people the Moonies encountered in their efforts to spread their faith, the only ones who joined were those whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their

attachments to nonmembers. In effect, conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members. (Stark 1996, 16-17)

However, this dynamic was not in play when I converted. When I recounted this story to my wife almost a decade later, she remarked how amazing it was that God reached down and plucked me out of agnosticism, without a single Christian among my family or social circle to influence me. The two people involved were very loose acquaintances who did not know one another and who had almost no contact with me after their key conversations. I've always seen it as a miracle and thanked the Father for His prevenient grace.

I didn't know much about following Jesus in those early days, but fortunately I knew two things: I had to read His word to understand what His way really was, and I needed to meet with other believers. Therefore, I soon equipped myself with a Bible, and the next Sunday I showed up at the nearest building with a cross on it. Thankfully, it was a mainstream Christian church and not a cult (Ballston Center Church, an Associate Reformed Presbyterian congregation in upstate New York). The first thing my new Lord taught me was that I was a sinner and needed to be saved, so I readily repented of my sin and, after some classes on basic Christianity, I was baptized. That event was a strange combination of wonder and disappointment. I invited my family and they came (much to my surprise and pleasure – more on that later), and I was delighted to declare my new faith to them and the congregation. However, the Presbyterians baptize by aspersion – sprinkling the candidates with water the way the Israelite

priests sanctified people by sprinkling them with blood. I was somewhat surprised that this was all there was to it. Today, I would baptize by immersion – not as a more Biblical mode but as a more richly experiential one. Nevertheless, I considered myself truly baptised.

Every new day brought a new discovery – I learned about the life of Jesus and His instructions on how to live. I was especially drawn to the teaching sections of the gospel of Matthew (I'll never know why we send seekers to John – Matthew's practical instruction always appealed to me more) and the second half of all Paul's letters (when he switched from being theological to teaching how to live). I devoured every sermon, soon filling the inside back cover of my new Bible with three-point notes. I ransacked the small church library, with *Jungle Pilot* (Hitt 2017) and *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Smith 1985) being early favorites.

My early growth wasn't merely intellectual, however. Within two weeks of my conversion I noticed that the explosive temper that had plagued my teen years had entirely evaporated. Many years later I learned from John of the Cross that new converts often experience miracles and great consolations to firmly establish them in the kingdom. This deliverance from my tempestuous explosions was my housewarming present from my new Lord.

As rich as my private exploration of the Way of Jesus was, it was connecting with others that bore some of the greatest fruit. I joined the youth group right away. A few months later, I learned that Young Life was seeking to open a chapter in my high school, and as a preliminary effort was establishing

Bible studies for students who were already Christians. After meeting for a year, these Campaigners groups would then form the nucleus of a Club meeting that our non-Christian friends would be invited to. My Campaigners group consisted of myself and the pastor's son, and we were led masterfully by Joe Paoella.

Joe was like a spiritual personal trainer. He guided us through several Bible study guides and encouraged us to memorize Scripture. He also demonstrated the importance of sharing our faith with those around us – especially our fellow students. This was an especially hard point of obedience for me, as I was painfully introverted and saw high school as an indignity to be suffered patiently until I could escape to university – preferably out-of-state. Most of these students had either actively bullied me or had passively looked on as I was bullied without interfering. I was therefore disinclined to show any kind of vulnerability before them, let alone do something as risky as share my faith. However, both what I was learning in my own Bible reading as well as Joe's patient tutelage showed me that keeping my faith to myself was not an option.

Thus challenged, I tentatively began to reach out to those around me. It was hard to emerge from my defensive shell, but God was gracious to infuse my halting obedience with the power of the Holy Spirit. One time, I noticed a girl I didn't know sitting curled up against the wall crying quietly. As I proceeded to walk by like I normally would – no sense borrowing trouble – I felt an inner voice prompt me to stop and care for her. Unsure exactly how to respond, I asked her if she was alright. She was taken aback by my concern and mumbled that she was fine as she dried her eyes. Unsure how to proceed, I simply gave her a big smile

and wished her a good day. I have no idea what impact I had on her, if any, but it was the first time I had been directed by my Lord and I walked on air the whole rest of that day!

Another episode occurred in the high school library. It was one of my favourite haunts, as I loved to read and I was safer from harassment there – it was not a popular hangout spot. One day, however, my sanctuary was invaded by three guys at the next table who started mocking me. I just wanted to hide, so I got up from where I was sitting and went to hide among the books in the stacks until they left. However, as I was scanning the book titles without really looking at them, I felt the Holy Spirit address me. I forget the exact instructions, but I was filled with boldness and confronted the guys directly but in love. I didn't call them out, but rather sat down and engaged them in civil conversation. Confused by the unexpected turn of events, they quickly made an excuse and left. For the first time, I had overcome bullying through the power of the Spirit, rather than hateful fists or a cutting word.

A third manifestation of the Holy Spirit came when I was speaking with my friend Julie. She came from a difficult family background and was sharing a recent painful episode with me. When I opened my mouth to offer some advice, some powerfully comforting and challenging words poured forth. When I finished, she remarked, "Whoa, that was deep." This echoed my own internal response exactly. Later, I read in Matthew 10:19 that Jesus taught His disciples that when they would be arrested by the authorities, "you will be given what to say." Those experiences of being spoken through have always come unexpectedly

and richly blessed those I was addressing. Every time has been a high honour and a humbling experience, and I long for the next time.

It was also at around this time that I discovered my gift for teaching. I had just re-read *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 1952a), and I was particularly taken with the chapter on pride. I arrived at the next youth group meeting with my well-worn copy and thrust it into the hands of Jason Lang (the adult volunteer leader), telling him how great the chapter had been and how the other teens in the group would benefit from his teaching it. He smiled benignly and said, “Sure, I could teach it. But I think it would be better coming from you. You do it. Next week.” I was terrified. Not only did I feel painfully shy, but I thought myself completely unqualified. After all, the other teens had been born into the church, while I was a Johnny-come lately who still couldn’t always find the selected passage in his Bible (especially if it was in that extended Jewish preface called the Old Testament). I tried to beg off, but he insisted: if the material was to be taught, it would have to be by me. I agonized with it over a few days, but then made my decision: the material was too good to keep to myself, so I was just going to have to do it.

Everyone knew something odd was up when Mr. Lang opened the devotional time in prayer as usual, but then broke tradition by sitting down and smiling at me. I nervously arose and, hiding behind my notes the whole time, explicated Lewis’s instruction on what pride was, how dangerous it was, and how to fight it. You could have heard a pin drop. Instead of the usual goofing around and (repeated) admonitions to pay attention, the group was dead silent. I was sure

I had bombed, and I was crushed that I had let my hero down by not representing him as well as he deserved. I scuttled back to my seat and the evening carried on. I went up to Mr. Lang afterwards and told him how badly I thought it went, as was evidenced by their silence. He assured me that I had done a good job, and their silence was simply due to their being unaccustomed to being addressed by one of their own number.

That was the start of a life-long practice of discovering a particularly powerful or interesting idea and wanting to share it with others. Whether in Sunday School or small group, Bible college classes or doctoral seminars, I happily grabbed a mic wherever one was on offer. Lewis once observed that, “we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation” (Lewis 1952a, 81). Similarly, I found teaching was the consummation of learning. If I ever were to stop learning (Lord, forbid it), I would no longer feel the desire to teach, and teaching the same thing over and over becomes tiresome to me; I want to go and learn something new and share that. When I later learned about spiritual gifts, it became quickly apparent that I had the gift of teaching – or perhaps more accurately a gift of learning whose overflow takes the form of teaching.

Unfortunately, it was not all peace and power in my first years as a Christ-follower. My parents grew steadily more opposed to my church activities as time went on. At first, they were pleased that I had acquired a taste for religion. In their eyes, church would be an encouragement in my moral development, a new circle for developing social skills and friendships, and an arena for volunteerism and

leadership development – all good things to equip me for life as a well-functioning member of society (and things that look good on a college application). My older brother had experienced a religious renewal of sorts at about the same age, which had faded in a year or two, so I'm sure they expected much of the same thing. It was just a good thing while it lasted, but simply a phase that I would invariably pass through on my journey.

However, services every Sunday morning became youth group on Sunday night, to which was added Bible study with Joe on Monday night. The parental encouragement evaporated and was soon replaced by comments on how, “too much of a good thing is bad, you know.” I insisted, explaining to them that if Jesus was the most important thing in the world, then there was no such thing as giving Him too much of my time. It was not an answer that allayed the fears of nervous parents. Fortunately, the pastor was a neighbor, and so they trusted that I wasn't being drawn into a cult. I further complicated things by being brash in my witness to them. I perpetrated more than one “drive-by prophecy” (Pohl 2012, 132), speaking into their lives without humility and love. Unfortunately, the offense I gave had less to do with the essential offense of the Gospel and more to do with my arrogance. I burnt relational bridges with my family in those days that I still haven't managed to rebuild, to my great sadness.

For many years as a new believer, I was envious of those who grew up in a Christian home. However, as time passed, and I got to know more and more young adults who grew up in Christian families, I realized that for all that I lacked with my non-Christian upbringing, there was one thing I had that few of them did.

I never doubted that my faith was real, and that it was my own. I never wondered if I would have been Buddhist had I grown up in a Buddhist family. My faith was such a break with my family of origin, that I owned it right from the start and never wondered if I had merely taken the easy option. I felt lost at times as to how to walk this road, but I never wondered if it was truly my own.

Student

I went to McGill University in Montreal, Canada, to study Civil Engineering. I chose this due to pragmatic factors, including my aptitude for math and science, the low tuition (10% of the cost of the American school I was also considering), and the fact that it was a field useful in missions but which my parents would be willing to pay for. I attended the nearby People's Church, which became a safe haven for me during the difficult first year at McGill. The educational experience itself was fairly positive, and I got on well with my neighbours in the dorm, but spiritually I was under fire. The typical dorm bull sessions were opening me to new ideas, and it seemed every week brought a new crisis of faith. I would corner the pastor after the Sunday service or the adult education class and pose to him my latest burning question. He was very gracious to me, mostly, I think, because he discerned that I was genuinely wanting to find an answer and was not just playing stump-the-pastor. I clearly remember about five crises in, as the familiar panic started to rise, saying to myself, "Every one of my previous doubts has been settled easily. Why not just give God the benefit of the doubt this time and only start panicking if the pastor doesn't have an answer?"

It was a major turning point, and I haven't experienced doubt the same way since. I have doubted, but I've always approached it with the same default posture of trust.

The pastor at People's also helped me in another key way. I had played Dungeons and Dragons for several years prior to my conversion, and I became convicted upon reading in Acts 19 how the converts of Ephesus burned their books of sorcery, despite their expense. I threw out my extensive collection of source books for the game, but always had a sense of worry about what demonic influences I might have opened myself up to. My first church didn't promote this idea – my demonology was derived entirely from Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* (Peretti 1986). Halloween every year was an especially uneasy time for me after I converted, but during my first year at McGill the terror became almost unmanageable. I turned again to the pastor, going so far as to book a counselling session with him during the week – no quick question after Sunday school was going to cut it this time. He took my concerns seriously but did not fan the flames of the fear by magnifying the power of Satan and his demons. Instead, he pointed out to me that Halloween was originally a holy day and that Satan was just puffing up his feathers on that day to distract me from the good things to celebrate. He completely allayed my fears and I never again worried about demonic oppression from my past.

When I returned home from that first semester at university, I couldn't wait to see my church family and friends. What a difference from the spiritual environment at school – instead of being assailed by doubts and fears, I enjoyed a

happy reunion with friends and mentors, where everyone knew me and I knew them. It was like being wrapped up in a warm blanket in front of a fire after coming in from the cold. As I returned to McGill in January, I mourned the loss of that comfort and faced the prospect of another semester with little fellowship and a constant struggle with dread. It was as though I had held my spiritual breath for 3 months, gulped down air over Christmas, and was about to hold my breath again for another quarter. Thankfully, the Lord stepped in and I felt challenged to do something about my situation. After all, only two years ago, I had no Christian friends, and in that short time (for me) I had managed to grow a network of relationships whose support I had just enjoyed. Surely, with God's help, I could do it again.

I returned to school with a mission – to build a Christian network for myself in Montreal. The first step was to make one good Christian friend, so I started praying each day that God would bring the right man along. Wandering into the engineering building later than usual, I bumped into an acquaintance leaving. I had met Lester Loud at a People's Church young adults' event but hadn't seen him since because I stopped going to those events. He was a fellow McGill student, but our paths had never crossed on campus because he was a graduate student who worked in the electrical engineering department and kept 9-to-5 hours, whereas I frequented the civil engineering quadrant of the building, hung out in undergraduate circles and had most of my classes in the morning. It was pure coincidence that we met within a week of my return to school in winter

– although I’ve found that God orchestrates such coincidences more often when I am praying for them.

I had an immediate sense that this was the friend I was seeking – a sense that, in hindsight, I see as a prompting by the Holy Spirit. I greeted him enthusiastically and insisted that we have a meal together. He agreed, but I pressed for booking a time right then – I was afraid that it would never happen if we relied on a vague intention to meet. He was a bit taken aback but agreed. We shared a meal at his small apartment just up the street from the engineering school, during which I dove straight past the chit-chat, shared my story – especially how I had held my breath the previous semester – and asked him if he would be willing to meet weekly to read the Bible together. I’m sure I was coming on way too strong, but I was desperate, and the only model I had for forming Christian fellowship was in a Bible study with Joe and Adam. He graciously agreed to do so, and a wonderful friendship began to form. I would not have to hold my breath again, and I had learned a pattern of proactive engagement with Christian community that I’ve used throughout my life as I’ve moved from place to place around the world. Fellowship is an empty bucket: it doesn’t come already full; it only contains what you put into it.

In my second semester, I also joined the Canadian Army Reserve. Although I declined a US Air Force scholarship to Boston University, I had been working towards a military career for so long that I still had the desire to serve. I learned that, unlike in the States, Canadian reservists had no fixed period of enlistment. That is, one could muster out just about any time you liked. The

philosophy was that if you didn't want to be there, they didn't want you there either. The result was a small force of highly motivated personnel who were routinely tapped by the Regular Force (i.e., career military) to help them fulfill Canada's peacekeeping commitments. When I learned that Canadian Air Force reservists were not typically pilots (but rather filled other roles like ground crews), I enlisted in the Canadian Army reserve. I chose the Royal Montreal Regiment because I learned they were the toughest unit (unlike the Black Watch and Canadian Grenadier Guards – the other two English-speaking Army reserve units in Montreal – whose ceremonial roles affected the amount of real soldiering they did).

In my second year, I joined Lester at Westview Bible Church, an independent congregation on the west part of the island of Montreal. This, more than any other, was my home church during my university years. Some Sundays it took over two hours by public transit to get there – which was a bit hard to take in the Montreal winters – but the preaching and community was worth it to me. They had a vibrant young adults' ministry and Pastor Ross Hastings's sermons were exceptional. I still remember one in which he differentiated the Greco-Roman ideal of hero-leadership from the biblical model – something very helpful to me as a young leader in the military who had thus far been steeped in the hero approach.

While at Westview, I met Sean Jardine, an IT professional in his late 20s. We shared a lot of interests, including taking our faith seriously and a love for technology. I enjoyed his generous hospitality many times, and he never missed a

chance to fill an always-ravenous student with good food from his home country of Trinidad. I even did some casual work at the company where he worked, helping him with some low-skill IT tasks. He was a good friend and challenged my faith when, at times, it flagged.

When the time came to take my arts elective in my engineering degree, I selected a course from the Religious Studies faculty. Since I couldn't go to Bible college, I could do the next best thing and take a Synoptic Gospels course. I found myself sitting uncomfortably between two camps – the pierced, tattooed and colourfully-coifed youngsters my age from the Religious Studies faculty on one side, and the strait-laced, middle-aged, second-career pastoral trainees from the seminaries affiliated with the Montreal School of Theology on the other. My age and outlook matched the first group, but my confessional stance fit the other. Therefore, I sat in the middle (the two groups were literally divided, seating themselves on opposite sides of the classroom). The lecturer cheerfully adopted a neutral stance, where neither party could tell if he was on their side. During that semester, I learned a great deal about the historical-critical method and how to apply it to understanding the troublesome passages in the gospels. However, I paid a great price for those skills. For almost two years after, I could not open my Bible without falling into that analytical mode. My devotional reading of the Bible – fairly regular until that point – took a nose-dive, and it took years to get back to reading it as God's love letter to me. I had learned to master the text but had forgotten how to allow the text to master me.

In my final semester at McGill, I suffered my first major depressive episode. I had always had bouts of melancholy but never thought anything of it. Other times, I wasn't so much sad as unmotivated to do anything, even the things I usually loved to do. Today I recognize this as the classic sign of depression, but at the time I just chastised myself for being lazy and urged myself to get focused – usually unsuccessfully. But during my last few months at McGill there were days I couldn't get out of bed until noon. I had a capstone project with a team of classmates and often missed our meetings, resulting in a low peer-review grade. In fact, if it hadn't been for my friend Eric on the team – who covered his own work and some of mine as well – I probably wouldn't have passed at all. I wasn't even well enough to be frightened by what had come over me. All I wanted to do was avoid any responsibility or pressure. After graduating, I went back home to New York and slowly recovered over the summer.

After that summer I faced a decision point. I had been on a railroad up to that point – elementary school, middle school, high school, then university. Suddenly the railroad turned into a wide-open field. I could go anywhere and do anything; nothing made that more obvious than when September came around and I did not have anywhere in particular to go. Ever since a missionary from Mercy Ships did a presentation at my church in New York, I had a yearning to go into missions. I still had that yearning, but I had no idea how to bridge the gap from where I was to missionary service. My very limited research showed that most missionaries had to fundraise their monthly support, and I was very turned off by that prospect. Surely there was some way I could serve and earn a salary at the

same time? This lack of faith would plague much of my ministry career – the money question always had to be sorted out first before I would step out into something. I quickly learned that the few places that paid missionaries required more than just a degree – they wanted prior overseas experience.

I therefore set about to force my way overseas, one way or another. Through correspondence with a university buddy, Matt, who lived in Calgary, I learned of a non-profit that collected donations of medical equipment and other supplies and shipped them to needy places around the world. I worked out an unpaid internship where I would be housed and fed, so I packed up my old van (inherited from my parents) and drove across most of the continent. Unsurprisingly, the internship didn't pan out, but it did lead to a position with Waterworks Technologies, a small water treatment company based in Calgary that worked in a few locations around the world. I was shipped off in short order to Malaysia, where I began work designing and building small water treatment plants for factories. I had made it overseas!

However, the elation quickly faded. I had to work 6 days a week, as Saturday was a half-day due to Friday being a half-day to allow the Muslims to attend mosque. Only, since we were non-Muslim, we just worked all day Friday, and then Saturday afternoons to finish things up. I wasn't building water treatment systems to bring safe water to the poor – I was building systems to allow mega-corporations to meet water emissions standards. In fact, we even quoted on treating wastewater from a cigarette factory. Finally, even on my free Sundays, I never sought out a local church – mostly because I was too tired -- and

my one or two attempts to find an English-speaking congregation failed. While I enjoyed the people and their culture, I did not like the work at all. Worse still, my spiritual life was at an all-time low for lack of fellowship and neglect of my usual devotional practices.

Disappointed and burnt out, I looked for something to do back in North America. On my drive out to Calgary, I had stayed overnight with my friend Sean from Montreal, who had since moved to the Toronto area. He was working for an IT services company, running a team of technicians for a large desktop upgrade project for a big bank. He was dissatisfied with the quality of the team's work and offered me a position since we had worked well together in the past. I wasn't ready at the time, but I remembered his offer when things soured in Malaysia. I emailed him (still a pretty new thing in 1997) and discovered that the position was still open, so I flew back to Calgary and drove to Toronto.

I soon realized that I had grabbed at the first chance to go overseas and didn't have a real plan on how to engage in mission. Just being overseas wasn't enough – I needed to learn how to go about doing mission while I was there. Furthermore, I had to figure out how to stay spiritually vital while doing it. I returned to Canada with my tail between my legs, chastened but with the mission fire still burning in my chest.

In short order, I established myself in the West end of Toronto. Sean made it easy – I rented a room in his home, I worked for him, and I attended his church (a Plymouth Brethren church called Erindale Bible Chapel). One fringe benefit of the latter was that I met my future wife, Karen, there. A former missionary kid

who grew up in Brazil, she was as eager to get into missions as I was. She had done her bachelor's degree at Bethany College of Missions and was working for a few years in Canada to get to know her parent's home country before heading out into a life of missions herself.

Once the dust had settled, I turned to the task of properly re-entering the mission field. I very quickly learned that any mission agency required at least a year of theological study. Once again unwilling to give up my regular salary, I looked for some option where I could study on evenings and weekends. Since I already had a bachelor's degree, I was encouraged to attend a seminary, and so I found myself at Tyndale Seminary. Although I only intended to do the minimum one year of study, I was deftly upsold into the new Modular MTS program. This had two things going for it: I only had to go on campus one night a week, yet I would complete the program in three years. Since this meant I could continue to work full-time (again that lack of faith with finances), I enrolled.

I was concerned about attending seminary. If a single Bible course put me into a devotional tailspin that took years to recover from, what would a whole degree – seventeen courses – do to me? I could be in deep trouble. But I needed to proceed. Not only was my own missions calling pushing me forward, my new fiancé was even more interested in missions than I was, so I had to get this done! So, with great trepidation, I enrolled in the program.

I showed up at Tyndale on a hot Monday night in August 1998 for a disagreeable orientation. The seminary had grown out of its new space and sometimes used the undergraduate classrooms in the old building, which had no

air conditioning. Ever since collapsing from heat exhaustion during a field exercise in the Army, I haven't handled heat very well. But that wasn't the real problem. The Modular MTS operated on a cohort system, in which all the students starting on a particular semester would work through the same seventeen courses sequentially together. The upside was that you could throw yourself entirely into each course as it came, as you would only work on one course at a time. The downside was that the program was a railroad, not a highway – you had no options and no electives. This wasn't too bad, as I didn't know anything about theology, and the few class titles I could understand were basically what I expected. But the very first class on the list was Elements of Christian Spirituality. What sort of namby-pamby, touchy-feely, navel-gazing nonsense was this? I came to seminary to learn the Bible, not some mystical garbage that was probably deeply compromised by New Age practices. But there was nothing for it – that was the program, take it or leave it. So I showed up for the first class, arms crossed, determined not to learn a thing.

My first hint that the course wasn't going to be what I expected was the professor. Donald Goertz was trained academically as a historian but had also worked as a missionary and pastor and had known great loss. In the Army, we would say that those few soldiers who had served in combat had seen the elephant. Donald had seen the elephant, in ministry, in life and in prayer. He spoke about life with God in a quiet, humble way that made it seem both marvelous and attainable. There was no bombast of the triumphalist and no deliberate vagueness of the guru; only an honest casting of a vision of what

relating to God could be and a patient instruction on the means of going about it. I was disarmed by this man's demeanour and found myself opening up to where he wanted to lead us.

Of the many things Professor Goertz taught us in that class, I was most profoundly impacted by two things. The first was a survey of the history of Christian spirituality. This opened my eyes to Christian spirituality as an academic field of study. I was immediately hooked for three reasons. First, it is primarily a historical discipline in its methodology, and I'd always enjoyed history. Second, being focused on how people live the Christian life, it was an applied discipline. I still had the heart of an engineer, and engineers use theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems. But the greatest reason was that the concerns I had entering the program were allayed. Here was a discipline that demanded all my analytical rigour, but which, by nature of the subject matter, forced you to keep close to the beating heart of the Christian faith. It was far harder for me to disconnect my head from my heart when studying prayer than when studying the redactive history of the book of Isaiah. I was reassured that seminary would not be the 'cemetery' for my faith that I feared it would be.

Even more fundamental than my attraction to the study of Christian spirituality was the self-discovery I made through the Myers-Briggs evaluation. As part of the Elements course, we all had to do the MBTI assessment and learn what our profile meant with the help of a facilitator. Two ground-breaking personal revelations came from this exercise. The first was that certain personality traits that I had long ago written off as character flaws were revealed to simply be

preferences that were neutral in and of themselves. My introversion was no longer mistaken for misanthropy, but merely the way I gain my energy. Furthermore, my intuition – which had long been denigrated in my family of origin as being flighty and having my head in the clouds – was validated as a how I perceived the world around me. To be sure, each of these preferences had their weaknesses that I needed to work on, but they were no longer entirely problematic. The liberation I felt as a result of this discovery is hard to overstate. The second revelation that came from this was that all four of my preferences – introversion, intuition, thinking and judging (INTJ) – were very strong, and Mulholland warned that it was vital to pay attention to one's shadow side (Mulholland 1993, 57-59). I became convicted that my faith was one-sidedly analytical, and I needed urgently to develop my feeling side.

After the initial course on Christian spirituality, there were some semester-long spiritual formation exercises. The first was journaling, which I struggled with for a whole year until it finally started to feel natural and pay dividends in the form of being able to plot the trajectory of God's recent work in my life. Second, was meeting monthly with a spiritual friend. Through these and other spiritual disciplines, God began to develop the feeling side of my faith. Particularly helpful in this regard was Jonathan Edwards's classic, *Religious Affections* (Edwards 1984). It was recommended by Professor Goertz in our Church History II class as a book that should be kept in a glass case at the back of every church with the instructions, "Break glass in case of revival." Intrigued by this endorsement, I picked up James Houston's paraphrase where, in part one, I

learned that “affections are the evidence of true religion” (Edwards 1984, 3). Beyond orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right behaviour), the Christian life also essentially consists of orthopathy (right feelings). Happily, I quickly discovered that I could not generate these feelings within myself, nor was I expected to. Just as obedience to the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is beyond the reach of human effort, but possible only with divine assistance, so too were Edwards’s religious affections purely a gift. There were, however, things I could do to intentionally place myself before God to be quickened – the spiritual disciplines.

Over the course of my studies, my heart began to soften and burn with a passion for God. There is no better evidence of that than the notice my new wife took of the change occurring within me. She often remarks today that she witnessed a remarkable growth in my sensitivity to the feelings of others, as well as a growing piety and zeal. I praise the Lord for this work within me, and even today I perceive a qualitative distinction between my Christian life prior to and after seminary.

The other course that had a significant impact on my life and faith was Dr. Jeff Greenman’s *Work, Vocation and Ministry*. Up to that point, I had always seen my secular work as merely a way of financing ministry. It also had some instrumental value as a venue for connecting with non-Christians for evangelism purposes, but that was about it. If I were relieved of the need for a paycheque, I would gladly have left the secular workforce and taken up full-time ministry. However, Dr. Greenman opened my eyes to a new way of looking at things.

Surveying the Scriptures, he showed us how ‘the Lord’s work’ was executed in all kinds of workplaces, not just at churches. For example, artists and parents imitate God’s creative work; mechanics and cooks participate in the Lord’s sustaining work; therapists and garbage collectors do redemptive work; teachers and cartoonists undertake revelatory work. So the work I did Mondays to Fridays had intrinsic value in and of itself, beyond any instrumental value it generated.

This gave me a new-found respect for my secular work and (the beginnings of) a model of how to do it to the glory of God; these were joined to my missions calling through my discovery of tentmaking. Taking its cue from how the Apostle Paul made tents (Acts 18:3), this movement in missions sought to use secular work as both an instrumental means of providing sustenance for the missionary and a point of contact with locals, as well as a way to supply benefits intrinsic to the work itself. The related field of bivocational ministry, which was what pastors not working overseas called working part-time outside of the church, supplied me with some further helpful ideas on how to do this well. By the end of it all, I was firmly convinced that intentionally bivocational ministry was for me.

Servant

When I graduated from Tyndale in the summer of 2001, I faced another decision point. My wife and I lacked any sort of geographical element in our missions calling. Having read too many missionary biographies, we had the impression that a real missions calling included a calling to a location – the more specific the better. However, we lacked any draw to a location – only the general

desire to serve overseas. After praying for a season revealed no guidance in that department, we decided to go to Brazil. After all, her parents were still in the field and needed help, and we figured that God would have an easier time steering a moving car rather than a parked one, so we went ahead. We joined her parents' mission and prepared to go.

Neither of us were big on deputation (what missionaries call fundraising, which felt at the time like asking people who work for a living to give you some of their hard-earned money so you can swan about in an exotic locale), but for different reasons. I was embarrassed to beg – especially without a proper missions calling story – and reluctant to rely on others remembering to give every month. Furthermore, I was convinced that the tentmaking model of missions was best. Karen's reason was more spiritual – her parents belonged to the Müller school of missions finance and never asked for funds.¹ She had grown up seeing God supply miraculously time and time again for her parents, so she thought that was just how it worked. With this antipathy firmly in place, we informed our church's mission board that we were heading overseas for two years and asked them to support us in prayer while we were gone. Lacking Müller's faith, I fervently hoped they would read between the lines and send the occasional cheque, too. I looked for a software job when I arrived in Brazil and found one at MindQuest, a

¹ George Müller ran an orphanage in 19th century Bristol, England for decades – raising over 10,000 orphans – and established more than 100 schools (Christianity.com 2010). He did all this never once asking for money, instead receiving unsolicited donations of money or goods – sometimes mere minutes ahead of the need.

business education firm that localized training materials from English-speaking business schools for the Brazilian market.

Working full time limited my church work, as did my poor language ability, so all I really did on that front was start a spiritual formation group for English-speaking missionaries from several different mission agencies working in the city. It was a rich experience of fellowship, and we made some life-long friends there. Meanwhile, Karen took up her ministry where she had left off and enjoyed the work. But I struggled. The spiritual formation group was invigorating, and the software work was good overall, but living at the mission base and the limited work I did there were hard for me. This was mostly due to my selfishness – not wanting to participate in the life of the community when I got home after a long day of work. Furthermore, I was resentful of being an appendage – I was known as Karen’s husband, or even Andy’s son-in-law. I found it a hard shadow to live under, despite his always being respectful of me. I chafed under the conditions there and found a way to cut my term short by a few months. Deeply disappointed in myself, and once again despairing of how my foray into missions had gone, I returned to Canada in 2003, shamefully thankful to be home.

After being back in Canada for a few months, I reflected on my time in Brazil. I noticed that, of everything I studied at seminary, spiritual formation was the material I found myself using again and again while in Brazil. I also hungered for further transformation, as it had become clear from my less-than-stellar finish that I needed a lot more maturing. I returned to Tyndale part-time and enrolled in every spiritual formation class they offered over a four-year period. I also took

some related courses in the form of an advanced theology course on soteriology, two courses on education, and a stint as a student research assistant for Dr.

Greenman. I was a sponge whose thirst could not be slaked.

All of these established a much more solid foundation for my spiritual formation ministry – and my own spiritual formation, as well! However, the greatest single impact was my 10-month long spiritual direction practicum under Dr. Duncan Westwood. It was a perfect fit for me in three ways. First, Duncan was cross trained as a psychotherapist and a spiritual director, so he had a broad knowledge of all forms of soul care, and he worked at the Missionary Health Institute in Toronto, so he understood the world of missions very well indeed. Second, the course was largely self-directed. With Duncan's help, I was expected to produce a personalized reading plan for the practicum. I got to read as much as I wanted on what I wanted, under the careful tutelage of an expert. It was like I had died and gone to heaven. Finally, as a practicum, the other mode of learning was to actually do some spiritual direction under Duncan's supervision. This fed my inner engineer, who wanted to use all this wonderful knowledge I had been accumulating to help people practically.

I was paired with another student, and we met as a group one week and alone with Duncan the following week. I was intimidated, as she and Duncan were both the quiet, contemplative types who had filled most of the spiritual formation classes I took after my return from Brazil. I am shy, but once I get comfortable, I enjoy laughing and cracking jokes. That somehow didn't seem appropriate – not in keeping with the *gravitas* of what we were studying. I also

discovered along the way that I did not pick up on the emotional wavelength that my fellow students seemed to be aware of, and no one else seemed to have the kinds of questions my analytical mind ceaselessly kicked up. So I was quite withdrawn at the start of the practicum.

One day, Duncan had enough and cornered me like a rat (in Christian love, of course). In one of our role-playing exercises, he laid out a scenario where someone wanted help in learning how to pray. I desperately hoped he would call on my far more qualified classmate, for whom prayer seemed like a native language. For me, prayer remained a challenge, and all my efforts were qualified successes at best and dismal silences at worst. But he turned to me and asked, “Tom, what would you do?” I had the integrity to throw up my hands, confessing the sham of my participation in a course on spiritual direction when my own prayer life was so weak. He smiled, and gently prodded me to provide an answer anyway. Despairing, I cast aside my ill-fitting contemplative mask and simply laid out how I would teach the person a number of different ways to pray and then see which one of them was the best fit for their personality and stage of faith. It wasn’t the spiritual approach; it was just plain old instruction. How pedestrian, how cognitive. Settling back into his chair with a broad smile, he announced that I was rabbinic, and urged me to practice that style of direction. I sputtered my objections, but he assured me that the Church needed me to direct with integrity, instead of aping some other style of which there were already many practitioners. My classmate, who had recovered her composure after the initial shock of this outpouring from her erstwhile mute colleague, graciously shared how, as a piano

teacher, she could never teach playing by ear. It came naturally to her, so she struggled with teaching someone to do it. However, she had always found arpeggios difficult – so she knew a dozen ways to teach them. She encouraged me not to be afraid of leading someone into prayer, as my struggle had led me to acquire a great deal of knowledge about how to overcome obstacles in it. I left class that day walking on air, experiencing a confidence, freedom and validation that has never left me.

After completing the practicum, I was convinced that the Lord's call on my life was to be a teacher and mentor – a rabbinic director. To further prepare myself for that role in an academic context, I sought out a research master's degree in spiritual formation. At the time, those programs were still thin on the ground, especially in Canada, so I settled on an MA in Church History at McMaster Divinity School. I had learned that there were two approaches to training in spiritual formation. The first was from a clinical psychotherapy perspective, while the other was from a historical perspective. All programs had both elements, but one tended to be the orienting posture. Tyndale's approach was historical, and I loved it, so a history degree was next door to a spiritual formation degree. However, I made sure to always take a spiritual formation slant on every piece of work I did, including my thesis itself. I had heard Professor Victor Shepherd refer to the English Puritans as “diagnosticians without peer of the human heart” (Shepherd 2002, track 8), so I wanted to explore their perspective on a spiritual formation topic. I soon found it in Thomas Brooks's *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Brooks 1968); my topic would be the English

Puritan theology and practice of spiritual warfare. While my supervisor, Dr. Gord Heath, was an enthusiastic supporter of my work, some of the other faculty were not so sure. Later, in my oral defense, one of them asked me in disbelief, “Do you believe Satan is active in this way in the world?” After 15 years of fighting temptation, I simply answered, “Yes.” He was startled into silence.

With my MA coursework done and the thesis underway, my wife and I felt ready to return to minister in Brazil. Only this time, we would do it right. First, we switched mission agencies. On our first term, we worked with the same mission as Karen’s parents, but there were two points of incompatibility with the Brazilian office. First, they didn’t understand why I was a tentmaking missionary when I had a permanent visa to Brazil. While the mission did use tentmaking, it was mostly to gain access to creative access nations (i.e., countries that don’t issue missionary visas but do allow other kinds of expatriate workers). Second, they were transitioning from being a field to a base, so they had shifted their strategic focus to church-planting ministry in the Amazon and overseas. As a result, they had few missionaries in theological education (which was my interest), so I would be a team of one – if they even accepted me to return. As a result, we connected with some good friends from our old missionary small group – Terry and Simone Lockyer – who were working in theological education, and asked if their mission (Latin Link) would be willing to accept us. They eagerly welcomed us aboard and connected us with Latin America Mission (LAM), their sending partner in Canada.

One small but vital event occurred as part of joining LAM. As is typical during placement of long-term missionaries, they had us do a psychological battery. It was discovered that I had low energy, and for the first time I was diagnosed with depression. I had never suspected that my low motivation at times was anything more than a lack of character, but the more I learned about depression the more I realized that the diagnosis fit. While I did not go on an antidepressant, I did work out with Karen a set of mood and behavioural red flags that would help to identify when I needed to pay particular attention to self-care. This didn't always work, as will become clear.

A second change we made during this mission term was that we would actively seek support. The limited financial support we had the last time meant that we had little prayer and emotional support as well. Our church had wished us well, but never followed up with us to see how we were doing, and we likewise didn't feel the need to keep them up-to-date on our activities. This time, we would try to get half of our livelihood from support and the rest from my tentmaking work. This would also allow me to spend more time in teaching ministry, as opposed to simply teaching on evenings and weekends – or, as I liked to call it, in the corners. We never did quite reach that 50/50 goal (I was no more enamoured of deputation than I was the first time around), but there was enough support to achieve my goal of only working half-time.

Re-trained, re-aligned, and re-provisioned, we were ready to return to Brazil in 2008. We initially returned to Karen's parents' ministry in Belo Horizonte because I needed some time to get my Portuguese up to a level where I

could teach. I had worked in Portuguese on our short-term posting, but teaching requires a higher level of language mastery. I could have worked through translation, but that is awkward, a logistical challenge, and never quite comes out right. I believe that even with bad grammar and a poor vocabulary, it is better to teach yourself than to work through a translator. This was especially hard for me, though, as I knew how poorly I was expressing myself. My words, a reliable tool for so long in ensuring that my audience had just the right impression of me, had been taken away, and I was smarting. However, it was like the spiritual discipline of silence, where we set aside the words we so often use for projecting the image we think will get us the affirmation or respect we crave. It did me good.

I had a chance to teach at a satellite campus that a seminary had planted in our neighborhood. I taught Church History to an eager set of a dozen or so young students who were preparing for pastoral work in the church. We had a great time together, and we all laughed as I stumbled my way through. Karen helped a lot, sitting in the front row and helping me as I would search for a word. Sometimes the students themselves – many of whom had studied some English – would join in the game of guessing what Tom was trying to say. I'm not sure what they learned, but it was a great time of encouragement and equipping for me.

After that first year, we were put in contact, through Latin Link, with a seminary in Curitiba in the south of Brazil. Our friends Terry and Simone had moved there to work at another seminary at the other end of town, so we were eager to work close to them. Terry even joined me for the interview with the director of Fidelis Bible College, a wonderful man named Arthur Dück. He had

done his PhD at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School under Paul Hiebert, so he spoke English fluently. However, I only discovered this later, as he only spoke Portuguese during the interview and adopted his most stoic visage (and as a Russian Mennonite, it was a good one). He explained that the school had taken on a foreign missionary teacher before and it hadn't worked out well. As a result, when we offered for me to work at little to no cost, he insisted on paying the going rate for his teachers. That way, he explained, they could afford to replace me if I didn't work out and would not be tempted to keep me on just because I was cheap. With a gulp, I returned to Belo to pack up our things and drive down to Curitiba.

During the process of moving to Curitiba, we got some interesting news. At the age of 40, Karen was expecting! We had been trying for years so we had largely given up on that dream, as it didn't seem to be God's plan for us. But just when we were least expecting it, God sent us a very welcome surprise. Unfortunately, as with many pregnant mothers at that age, Karen had some health complications. Her blood pressure rose dangerously as the pregnancy progressed, and after some worrying early tests she was confined to bed rest. Even worse, the transfer of our insurance from one state to another meant that any medical costs were not covered. Worried about what might happen if there were further difficulties, we decided to return to Canada for the actual delivery.

Liam was delivered three weeks early by emergency C-section on May 3, 2010, at Joseph Brant Hospital in Burlington, Ontario, when an ultrasound showed that the umbilical cord had become wrapped around his throat. Despite

some initial challenges learning to breastfeed, he was perfectly healthy and happy. Unfortunately, Karen was not. The normally lengthy recovery from a C-section was complicated by her high blood pressure, so despite her willingness to help there wasn't much she could physically do beyond feeding him. I have an overdeveloped sense of duty, so I grimly took on the many new responsibilities, terrified I would do something wrong and break the baby. Within a week, on the morning of our first outing as a family, I had a breakdown, curled up on the hall floor, as I was crippled by the thought of everything that had to happen to get the whole travelling roadshow out the door and to the restaurant. It was a disturbing new manifestation of my depression, and while I soon rallied, it would happen again in the future.

We returned to Brazil when Liam was 5 weeks old and I got settled into my new roles as a father and instructor at Fidelis. It was a challenge to prepare entirely new courses in Portuguese, but I enjoyed it and the students were great. I was especially pleased by their warm welcome, as it was a Russian Mennonite school and I was anything but. I even feared that my former military service (and my lack of shame over it) would be frowned upon, but I had no reason to be concerned. Arthur was a very supportive boss, and he was delighted to have a 'designated non-Mennonite' on the faculty. He also paid me the best compliment I received during my entire time in Brazil. When I asked him one day if there still was a legitimate place in Brazil for foreign missionaries, he replied, "There's always a place, if they're humble like you."

Sojourner

But I was sinking. While I was growing in proficiency, my energy levels were waning. Karen's health got better, but her continued high blood pressure and the twin constraints of breastfeeding and limited Brazilian pharmacology meant that her medicine left her in a fog most of the time. We later learned that she also suffered from sleep apnea, where her breath would stop dozens of times every hour as she slept. This meant she never got any real rest, even if she spent the right amount of time asleep – which she didn't anyway as a nursing mom of a child who didn't sleep through the night until he was 2. The need to keep up my software work for at least 20 hours a week left me breathless on a billable hour treadmill, unable to take time off for holidays or sick days, as there would be a direct and immediate impact on our income (entrepreneurs and hourly workers everywhere know whereof I speak).

The most visible sign of my low energy levels was nearly quitting my MA. I had finished the course work before leaving for Brazil, so I was finishing my research while overseas. However, when the time came to start writing, I was unable to find any extra reserves to tackle the writing. I began to consider discarding my thesis – after all, I was already engaged in the ministry I wanted without an MA. Fortunately, both Karen and Arthur saw through my rationalizations and encouraged me to persevere.

More telling than my reluctance to finish my thesis was my mental retreat into survival mode. I performed all the necessary duties for life – household chores, care for Liam's physical needs, software work, teaching – but was not

living. I finally realized how bad the situation had become when I hit one of the depressive red flags I had established with Karen. I normally loved to teach, but I reached a point where I derived no pleasure from it. When I found myself wishing that the next semester would bring a reduced course load, or better yet no teaching at all, I knew I was in trouble. After all, what was the point of being in Brazil if I was doing little or no teaching. After some hard conversations as a couple (neither of us wanted to give up), I tearfully submitted my resignation to Arthur and prepared to return to Canada.

We landed in Toronto a few weeks before Christmas 2012. I managed to get a job back at the software company where I worked before we left for Brazil, so our short-term financial needs were met. Soon, Karen was put on better medicine for her blood pressure and she started using a special machine to help her breathe at night. Liam was also sleeping through the night consistently, which helped significantly. It was a very long, very slow recovery, but each month was slightly better than the month before. By the summer, we felt well enough to go see a therapist at MHI (my old spiritual direction mentor, Duncan) for further suggestions on how to recover from our burnout. We reported that we were starting to feel the clouds lift, but he cautioned us not to presume on our recovery. He was right. I felt up to running a small group at our church in the fall, but it became a grind and I did not lead the planned sequel in the winter. My cup of burnout was slowly draining, but it was still too full.

By the fall of 2014, however, I was well enough to start thinking about the future. We turned to God and asked Him what He had for us next. Returning to

missions in Brazil (or some other location overseas) didn't seem to be the next step, as evidenced by our ambivalence and a lack of inner impulse some call a witness of the Spirit. So we started looking for ministry opportunities in Canada. I remained firmly convinced of my calling to teaching and mentoring ministry, so I considered three types of opportunities: the academic route (teaching at a Bible College or the like), the para-church route (a discipleship ministry like Navigators or a spiritual formation organization like Renovaré), or the church route (a pastor of small groups, Christian education, or discipleship). One significant shift was that I no longer felt the explicit call to be bivocational. I was tired of splitting my focus between secular work and church work (although I remained firmly convinced that both were Kingdom work). I wanted to focus on one thing and throw myself fully into it, and I was less strongly attached to my software work.

After searching for four months, I found a solid ministry lead. I learned from a friend of mine who was a pastor in the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada that their denominational school, Emmanuel Bible College in Kitchener, was looking for someone to run Expedition, their gap-year discipleship and missions program. Unfortunately, it was a part-time role so I would have to resume the divided life I was trying to leave, and I was initially skeptical about how truly formational an academic program could be. When I went to the interview, I was pleasantly surprised; the program was very free-formed and not locked to a classroom at all. I was selected and I started, in May of 2015, to prepare for the Fall 2015 session.

The students were a joy. They gelled well, after the usual breaking-in period, and were a “pleasing aroma of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15) on the YWAM team they worked with in Jamaica. Uniquely in the program’s history, the entire team decided to stay for the regular academic winter semester as part of the Expedition Plus program. It was a great success, but I felt that I had little to do with it. I just lined up some good training and experiences for them; the team did all the real work.

However, the good times did not last. I was hoping to run Expedition twice a year, in the summer and the fall. However, the recruitment team and I were unsuccessful in assembling a team for the summer, so I sadly had to cancel it. When it became clear in the spring that there wasn’t enough enrollment to run a Fall Expedition either, I decided to resign in May 2016. I left, first of all, because I didn’t want to sit on my hands for a year, all the while drawing a salary from a school that was already short of money. But I also reviewed how the program went and I realized that I only had 40 contact hours of training, teaching, or mentoring in the entire year. I knew that the role was an administrative position but spending less than 5% of my time in my areas of gifting was simply not enough.

Instead of resuming full-time work in software, I decided to keep to part-time in software to keep a window open for ministry. I didn’t find another ministry position, so at the end of June I decided to help out at our church, Tapestry, as an associate pastor of spiritual formation and mission. When I left EBC, it seemed providential that I could help with the pastoral work at Tapestry

at no cost to them, while at the same time continuing to build my ministry resume to prepare for the day when that next ministry opportunity opened up.

Another career positioning move I made was to enroll in the Doctor of Ministry program in Spiritual Formation at Tyndale Seminary. I knew that whatever my next position would be, it would have a strong teaching and mentoring emphasis and be focused in the area I loved so much: spiritual formation. Therefore, a practical doctorate in that field seemed like another great way to wait on the Lord without merely waiting around. My part-time work hours helped make time for my studies, and it was incredibly vivifying to be part of a learning community once again.

Even more enlivening was the partial fast I took on. I had felt for years that I needed to lose weight and improve my health, but I never had the energy to take up the challenging tasks of dieting or exercising. I had developed an unhealthy use of food to self-medicate, so I was eating too much of the wrong stuff, especially at the worst time of day – late at night. However, on September 10th of 2016 I had the sudden impulse to see how little I could eat without becoming truly hungry. Much to my surprise, I found that I could get by on much less while still remaining healthy. Following the model of the Desert Fathers, my fast was not an absolute fast, but rather an exercise in stopping just short of satiation. I was eating slightly less than I wanted, both in terms of quantity and quality. In actual fact, the quality was quite high from a nutritional point of view; it was just that I would avoid the epicurean extras I craved, like frying, sauces, or breading. The first day went well, so I continued the second, and then a third.

Soon it was a week and then a month. I never felt deprived during this partial fast, and only very rarely did I need to engage my willpower to maintain it. So not only was it divinely initiated, it was divinely sustained. I felt as though I was being carried along on a current of asceticism to which I merely needed to surrender.

After about six weeks, I discovered that, for the first time in years, I had an abundance of energy and motivation to do things. Before the fast, after I would put my son to bed, I would force myself to do an hour of schoolwork before exhaustedly plopping myself in front of the television or a novel I had read many times before. This sort of low-quality leisure was never re-creative, and so I was stuck in a negative feedback loop of mild depression that acted like a chronic, emotional low-grade fever. Now, I found myself easily able to work for two hours straight, and then to have enough energy to do other kinds of rewarding reading, like devotional classics or reading outside of my course requirements. My energy levels had been so low for so long, that I had given up hope that they would ever recover and would only be this way or worse as I continued to age. I resigned myself to the fact that only in my new resurrection body would I have energy like I had in my early thirties. I also noticed that I hadn't had a cold since I started my fast. I usually had some cold every four to six weeks, but as weeks stretched into months my good health held up. Even when my son would bring home a cold from school that my wife then caught, I remained strangely immune. Then I found that I was losing weight. By Epiphany – four months later – I had lost fifty pounds and was looking for ways to increase my caloric intake so I could maintain my weight.

Even more important than these emotional and physical changes were the spiritual ones. I was developing a non-idolatrous relationship with food; I no longer ate to anesthetize the pains of life. Even better, rather than replacing one addiction with another, I was learning to turn to God in times of stress and loneliness. I also discovered that certain vices I had long struggled with in vain had lost their power and were now easy to avoid. Furthermore, virtues that I had long struggled to adopt were coming easy. Most significantly, I was living from a sense of abundance, rather than a feeling of scarcity which had long dominated my life and expressed itself in a defensive, entitled and ungenerous spirit.

My fast ended on Good Friday 2017 with a bout of binge eating that took me completely by surprise. Since that time, I have experienced cycles of fasting and binge eating. I was shocked at the power of the compulsion to overeat; it had never felt this strong before my fast first began. However, I soon realized that I had never invited my body to the table of my spiritual formation, and now that it had a seat it was expressing its own fallenness. As disturbing as it was, I was encouraged by this development as it meant the body's previously hidden woundedness was now brought to the surface to be healed. When I first went to seminary, the right and left sides of my brain were brought into greater harmony as I grew more connected to my emotional side. This horizontal integration was now being matched by what Siegel calls a vertical integration of my united mind with my body (Siegel 2010, 72). I was learning to listen to it and what it revealed about my spirit.

At the start of 2017, I noticed another new dynamic. I was teaching a small group on spiritual formation and had started a regimen of visiting all the families in my church (following Richard Baxter's example). I found that when I spoke, the Holy Spirit would speak through me, to great effect. This was not an unfamiliar experience for me, but what had been a once-a-quarter phenomenon was happening multiple times in a meeting – at *every* meeting. It was as though the fruit of the Spirit I was experiencing was now being joined by gifts of the Spirit. Hungering for more, I started reading on deeper life experiences, revival and healing. If streams of living water were being pouring out, I wanted to turn my face up and open my mouth wide.

It's not clear whether this sense of abundance and spiritual power were the result of the fast I had been given or some other factor. Causality is not only difficult to establish in the realm of the spirit, the search for it can be dangerous, as it tempts you to attribute the effect to something you have done, thereby reducing the fruit of the Spirit to the outcome of some technique or other. In my case, two other influences were in play, concurrent with my fast, that might explain some or most of the outcomes I was enjoying. One of the assignments for a doctoral course on spiritual disciplines was to practice fixed-hour prayer, which I dutifully started at Advent and continued until the end of January. At first, I was concerned that I was merely saying my prayers, as most of the time I felt nothing as I read the office out loud. I started to introduce pauses for meditating on the meaning of the words, so I could really get into it and make the prayers my own – as evidenced by a stirring in my abdomen! I was making my feelings the measure

of the efficacy of the discipline – a classic mistake. The problem was revealed to me when I listened to a series of lectures on spiritual formation by John Coe (Coe 2010). There I learned that in the dark night of the soul God often withdraws the consolations one experiences from spiritual disciplines in order to refine us and highlight our tendency to attribute spiritual causality to our own efforts. That was exactly what had been happening, so I started taking comfort in the fact that I felt nothing most of the time when I prayed the office, and even continued with the practice after the assignment was over.

The other influence came from reading Henri Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved* (Nouwen 2002) as part of the Renovaré Book Club. The idea that I was God's beloved child – a familiar theme from my earliest days as a Christian – struck home with new force, and I settled into a feeling of great peace. This idea resonated with a secondary theme from Coe's lectures: that even the trials and disappointments of life could be viewed as an invitation from the Holy Spirit to examine some unexplored corner of your psyche. The discontent itself becomes a kind of spiritual discipline that you can enter into in order to identify some hidden idolatry or lie embedded deep in yourself. My first practical experience of this occurred at a retreat in September 2017, when I became irritated with the poorly led worship. When became aware of my irritation, instead of feeling guilty for it (my usual practice in such a moments of clarity), I opened myself to it. I thanked the Holy Spirit for the awareness and asked Him what He wanted to reveal about my inmost being in that moment. As unpleasant as the process is, it is rich and life-giving, so even jarring circumstances can become grist for the spiritual mill.

So even if you lose, you win. The sense of invulnerability that comes from this conclusion is hard to overstate and explains the most extravagant promises of joy and protection from harm found in Scripture.

From this position of safety, I was able to start to step away from my careerism. As my story thus far has illustrated, I have felt called by God to a ministry of teaching. I believe this to be a genuine call, attested to by the fruit generated in the lives of my students and myself when I teach. However, I have been impatient in the working out of this call, longing for certain teaching positions. I would sometimes apply all my human effort to make it happen, in my way and in my time. This achievement of a good end through human fortitude echoes Abraham's attempt in Genesis 16 to realize God's promise of a descendant by having a child with Hagar. These Ishmaels rarely succeeded, and the few times they did the ministry ended in failure. But now that my value wasn't being dictated by how successful a teacher I was, I no longer hungered for the opportunities. Dallas Willard warned against maneuvering to gain access to a platform from which to speak (Willard 2003). Instead, he urged his listeners to work on having something to say and to leave it for God to provide a platform – or not! I surrendered my teaching gift back to God, giving Him permission to waste it if He so chose. I resolved to no longer actively seek out teaching opportunities, but instead to work on my own journey and learning and wait for invitations to teach. They were not long in coming, and I now have greater platforms from which to speak than I ever did before.

This journey into burnout and the emergence from it has been my mid-faith crisis. It's not over yet, and I often feel as though I am just beginning. But that is the nature of the mid-faith crisis: it is a start into a new way of being with God and in the world. Others have found it to be so as well. Moving on from my particular case, let us examine a general model of the phenomenon.

CHAPTER 3:
MODEL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Oh, night that guided me; Oh, night more lovely than the dawn;
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, lover transformed in the
Beloved!
— John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul”

In 1911, British author James Gilchrist Lawson published a unique survey of Church history. Rather than focusing on great thinkers and events, he told the stories of the *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians Gleaned From Their Biographies, Autobiographies and Writings* (Lawson 2012). Like all historians, he was writing from a particular position – namely seeking to find historical precedence for a second blessing experience in the Christian life. Nevertheless, he cast his net remarkably widely, drawing on the lives of Biblical characters from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as Christians from diverse parts of Christian history and all confessional backgrounds (although he did restrict himself to those he considered Protestant). He described how these prominent members of God’s people had some sort of experience during their lives that qualitatively changed how they experienced and followed God. In doing so, he catalogues a remarkable diversity in that phenomenon, including its timing, manifestations, outcomes and even the labels the person used to describe it. From Jacob at Peniel to Paul on the Damascus road; Savonarola’s vision of the heavens

opened to Madam Guyon's humbling through an attack of small pox; John Wesley's heart-warming experience at Aldersgate to George Whitefield's powerful ordination; from renowned historical figures such as John Bunyan and D.L. Moody to lesser-known diamonds in the rough like Christmas Evans and A.J. Gordon. Had he given himself freer reign, Lawson would have discovered similar experiences in the lives of Eastern Orthodox like Antony the Great, Evagrius Ponticus and Gregory Palamas, and Roman Catholics like Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Ávila. All of these people had their spiritual lives powerfully altered through experiences lasting a few moments to a few decades, and they were never the same again. It is no surprise, then, to learn that Dallas Willard described Lawson's work as "the one book other than the Bible that has most influenced me" (Willard 2016, 105).

Given how widespread was this phenomenon of a post-conversion qualitative change in one's life with God, several models arose throughout Christian history to describe it. The earliest was the classic three-stage model of spiritual growth developed by Pseudo-Dionysius: purgation, or a time of cleansing; illumination, a growing awareness of the light of God's truth; and union with God (Holt 2005, 73). The renowned 16th century Spanish mystic John of the Cross later expanded this model with particular focus on the phenomenon of a mid-faith transition from the purgative stage to the later illuminative and unitive stages, which he called the dark night of the soul (John of the Cross, 1990). The English Puritans also recognized a similar dynamic, labeling it "spiritual desertion" (Wang 2011, 27). Working from his own spiritual

experience, John Wesley developed the doctrine of Christian perfection (Maddox 1994, 179), which the later Holiness movement refined into the idea of entire sanctification, which then morphed into the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Lawson and his Pentecostal tradition cherished (Holt 2005, 140-1). While each of these models use different language, they are all seeking to describe a similar phenomenon: some sort of experience that occurs after conversion in which a Christian's entire paradigm changes and God is experienced in a whole new way. I call it the mid-faith crisis.

I adopted the term mid-faith crisis primarily for reasons of promotional clarity. When I would use the dark night of the soul as a label for this stage of faith, some people misunderstood it as referring to other unpleasant events in the Christian life. People would come to a seminar expecting it to address depression or grief and suffering, rather than the dark night proper. When I came across a podcast from England called "The Mid-Faith Crisis" (Davis and Page 2016), I immediately recognized this title as a superior description for what I was trying to teach about. The idea of a mid-life crisis was often already familiar to my audiences, and the concept of significant questions of meaning arising in middle adulthood was a much better fit for the phenomenon in view than the one I was using. It wasn't a perfect fit – the experience doesn't always arise in middle adulthood and it doesn't always manifest as a crisis. Nevertheless, it served as a better shorthand as evidenced by the expectations of my learners being more in line with what I was actually going to present once I adopted it.

When Does a Mid-Faith Crisis Occur?

When does the mid-faith crisis occur in a Christian's life? While everyone's spiritual journey is unique, it has long been held that there are enough common milestones that certain generalities can be perceived and usefully applied to assist people on their journey. As mentioned above, the threefold model of purgation, illumination and union has enjoyed popularity for much of church history (Holt 2005, 73). Even modern evangelical authors have used it as the basis for their models of developmental spirituality (Mulholland 1993, 81). However, the six-stage model developed experientially by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich is more granular and offers recommendations for spiritual formation at each stage, helpful in a modern Western context (Hagberg and Guelich, 2005). This model also has the advantage of corresponding well with the later stages of psychologist James Fowler's empirically based model of stages of faith (Fowler 1981).

In this model, the stages are cumulative and sequential, with the person having a "home stage" that currently characterizes their faith (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 9). Progress from stage to stage proceeds according to God's timing, so it can take much longer for some than others. This variability in the duration of a stage from one person to the next is also impacted by certain "caged behaviours" in that stage, which are ways in which people can become "bogged down in an unhealthy way" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 9). The first three stages follow a progression of discovery of who God is, learning to follow God, and serving others, while the second three stages recapitulate these three dynamics in

a much deeper way. Finally, this is not a celestial ladder, like the Dionysian model. The higher stages are not closer to God; God is equally accessible by people at every stage.

Stages 1-3: Seeker, Student, and Servant

The first stage consists of the recognition of God, where the Seeker accepts the reality of God in his or her life, prompted by a sense of awe or need. This can occur in an instant or over a period of years or even decades. The great need of spiritual formation at this stage is to find someone who will help the Seeker in his or her helplessness or show the Seeker who God is and how to approach the Holy Presence. The caged behaviour that traps people in this stage is a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy, the conviction that this God we've discovered surely wants nothing to do with us. Key to moving to the next stage is making the decision to follow this God we've discovered and joining a group where we can belong and where our questions can be answered.

Stage two is the life of the Student, characterized by learning about God and what it means to follow God and participating in the life of a faith community: participating in its activities and forming relationships with its members. This shares commonalities with both stages two and three in Fowler's schema. These characteristics include "lawfulness and reciprocity," anthropomorphic images of God, (Fowler 1981, 153), an external locus of authority (Fowler 1981, 154), tacit knowledge (Fowler 1981, 161) and symbols that "are not separable from what they symbolize" (Fowler 1981, 163). Spiritual

formation for Students is facilitated by providing the tools needed to live in accordance with the community's shared path. This includes modeling behaviour, teaching or discipling, and admonishing or correcting. There are two sorts of caged behaviours that Students may suffer from: reductionism and attachment problems. Reductionism traps the person in this stage by reducing following God in all its diversity and multifaceted aspects to an approach that is simpler to understand. For example, moralism reduces the Biblical concept of holiness – being God-oriented or living for an audience of One – to merely behaving morally. While holiness includes moral behaviour, that behaviour is meant to be an outcome of God-orientation not a primary manifestation of holiness. In some cases, moralism can be further reduced to legalism, where the broad aim of moral behaviour is narrowed to a short list of do's and don'ts – again, motivated by a desire for simplicity. There are two kinds of attachment problems: one of excess and one of deficiency. Excessive attachment to the community results in tribalism, or a strong us-against-them posture towards other communities, where we are always right and strong while they are always wrong and weak. A deficiency in attachment arises from an inability (or unwillingness) to commit to a single community, instead flitting from group to group to find the right one. The key to the next stage is coming to view oneself as a contributor to the life of the community rather than merely a consumer of its benefits. This usually calls for Students to recognize and accept their own gifts and passions and to be willing to take the risks inherent in assuming a new responsibility. Fowler found that most people in his study were in this stage (Fowler 1981, 164), and if most people in

congregations are Students (either as part of their healthy development or stuck in this stage) it would explain the phenomenon where much of the work in a congregation is done by a few.

Stage three is the productive life, full of meaningful and challenging work for God's kingdom. The Servant feels special as she makes her unique contributions to others, attracted to the challenges, the strengthening of faith and the positive recognition that all come with taking on responsibility. Fowler labels this stage Individuative-Reflective faith (Fowler 1981, 174), and finds that it is characterized by self-certainty and the conscious development of conceptual meanings for symbols. Formation at this stage is facilitated by helping Servants develop their gifts and empowering them to use them wisely. Leaders should model the use of their own gifts and resist the temptation to be threatened by the service of Servants they are coaching. Caged behaviours include an excess of zeal for the causes they are passionate about, and performance orientation that roots their identity in their service, leading to ambition, pride, wearing masks, and burn-out.

Stages 4-6: Sojourner

Every evangelical church I have been a part of has either had no model of stages of faith development post-conversion, or a model paralleling these initial three stages of faith. This impression is borne out by the popularity of such models as those put forth in Rick Warren's bestselling *Purpose Driven Church* (Warren 1995), Willow Creek's *Move* (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011) based on

the results of their REVEAL survey, and the Navigators' "Beginning with Christ / Growing in Christ / Going On with Christ" model (Navigators 2019). As a result, stage four looks more like losing one's faith, rather than the next step in the journey. The key to moving into it is some sort of faith crisis, with the accompanying loss of certainty and the feeling of being abandoned by God. The Sojourner must also be willing to let go of success and enter into the mess of the next season. This stage is characterized by uncertainty, questioning and a desire for greater authenticity in our relationship with God. In Fowler's system, this stage is the transition from Individuative-Reflective faith to Conjunctive faith (Fowler 1981, 184). This involves the integration of much of what was suppressed in the prior stage into the self and one's worldview through "the sacrament of defeat" (Fowler 1981, 198). This stage is the mid-faith crisis that I am investigating. While this is a deeply personal journey, the community can still uphold the spiritual formation of the Sojourner through the interventions described later in this chapter. Caged behaviours in this stage include becoming stuck in a never-ending cycle of questioning and self-examination, trying to retreat to an earlier stage, withdrawal from the community of faith, or even walking away from God completely. The key to moving to the next stage is surmounting the inner obstacle Hagberg and Guelich call "The Wall" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 114). The exact shape of the Wall varies from person to person, due to differing needs for inner healing (see the next section), but it involves breaking through the barriers we have built between ourselves and God.

If stage four echoes the dynamics of stage one – a re-discovery of God – then stage five is a new life of discipleship, in which we explore what it means to follow the One we now realize God to truly be. This is Fowler’s fully-fledged Conjunctive faith, which is characterized by a second naiveté – an openness to paradox and mystery rather than the firm and clear boundaries established during the Individuative-Reflective faith stage (Fowler 1981, 197-8). The great strength of this stage comes in “the rise of the ironic imagination – a capacity to see and be in one’s [own] or one’s group’s most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality” (Fowler 1981, 198). Leaders can encourage formation in this stage by allowing subgroups to be free to develop this stage within themselves, without requiring the entire congregation to go there. Due to the deep inner healing that occurred in stage four, people can no longer be truly caged in stage five and six – although their freedom born of a rich sense of God’s acceptance can lead to radical behaviours that others *perceive* as caged.

Stage six is a change in degree rather than kind, with the person now re-entering the life of service, only now that service springs from the fountains of abundant life within them overflowing into the lives of others. This service may appear neglectful of self and others may think we are wasting our lives, but it is the free expression of our deepest Kingdom desires. Fowler describes this as Universalizing faith (Fowler 1981, 199), which is heedless of self, scandalously extending love across boundaries to the marginalized and the enemy, and embodying “a kind of relevant irrelevance” (Fowler 1981, 203).

Limitations and Extensions to the Model

One weakness in Hagberg and Guelich's model is its linearity. While stage four's journey into darkness does seem a common phenomenon, what isn't clear is whether this stage and its successors are a one-time incident. John Coe suggests that after passing through an initial dark night, one 'graduates' to an ongoing series of dark nights, which he portrays as a continual cycle of consolation and desolation (Coe 2010). In this cycle, the Christ-follower is progressively purged deeper and deeper, with more and more hidden areas of life coming under the spotlight of divine love. While this may be what Hagberg and Guelich mean by stages five and six, their descriptions appear to be more uniformly positive, without any hint of darkness persisting past stage four.

Fowler's model suffers from its own shortcomings. It began with "hypothesized stages," which he asserts were then empirically refined through his research to the point of being "indisputably normative" (Fowler 1981, 199). This is a bold claim, and the model has generated a great deal of disputation from both theological (Botton 1990) and psychological (Coyle 2011) circles. Particularly problematic in this context, however, are his study of stages of faith as a general human phenomenon rather than Christian faith development specifically, the exclusive focus in the final stage on social justice and reform rather than other streams of spirituality, and the way his prior commitments to the works of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg narrowed his view to linear, cognitive

development rather than emotional growth and changes to the experience of prayer.

Another point at which the Critical Journey model could be enhanced is at stages 5 and 6. These are the shortest chapters in the book, and this brevity may be attributed to the small population that dwells in these stages. Fowler similarly struggled to describe these higher stages and shifts noticeably from speaking empirically from subjects of his study to speaking anecdotally about famous religious figures of recent history. Working anecdotally as they did, Hagberg and Guelich presumably had an even smaller data set to work from, with a corresponding paucity of patterns of spiritual formation ministry to people at this point in their spiritual lives. To fill in some of the blanks for these later stages, one can turn to the resources of the contemplative tradition, as can be found in Coombs and Nemeck's *The Spiritual Journey* (Coombs and Nemeck 1987).

Table 1. A comparison of the various models of developmental spirituality

| My model | The Critical Journey (Hagberg and Guelich 2005) | Stages of Faith (Fowler 1981) | Thresholds of Adult Spiritual Genesis (Coombs and Nemeck 1987) |
|-----------|---|---|--|
| Seeker | Stage 1: The Recognition of God | Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith | Immersion in creation |
| Student | Stage 2: The Life of Discipleship | Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith and Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith | |
| Servant | Stage 3: The Productive Life | Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith | |
| Sojourner | Stage 4: The Journey Inward | Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith | Emergence through creation |
| | Stage 5: The Journey Outward | Stage 6: Universalizing Faith | Personal conversion |
| | Stage 6: The Life of Love | | Spiritual espousal and marriage |

Working within the Roman Catholic tradition, Coombs and Nemeck firmly locate their Thresholds of Adult Spiritual Genesis model within the Pseudo-Dionysian threefold framework of purgation – illumination – union, as enhanced by Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 14-15). Despite this bias, the model is useful for filling in the higher stages of the Critical Journey as it focuses almost entirely on stages four to six. Their first stage is the “immersion in creation,” which runs from birth to midlife (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 46). During this stage, one’s relationship with God becomes more intimate and prayer becomes more personal, conversational and effective. However, this upward trend caps in midlife and one enters the stage of “emergence through creation,” which is characterized by a growing detachment – “a need to die to self and to leave all self-interests behind” (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 47). This emergence may take years or even decades, and the three critical thresholds that follow are simply intensifications of this emergence. Personal conversion is a distinct moment of time, “a unique instant of breakthrough and definitive stabilization in the process of emergence” in which we realize for the rest of our lives “that we are possessed by Christ and that we wholeheartedly desire to surrender ourselves to him in love, hope and faith” (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 48). This is followed by spiritual espousal, which is an insatiable yearning for complete union with God, and then spiritual marriage, where “the soul experiences the most intimate communion with God

that is possible this side of the resurrection,” usually occurring shortly before death (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 48).

The Thresholds of Adult Spiritual Genesis model is also specifically interested in the evolution of prayer in the lives of Christians as they move through these stages (Coombs and Nemeck 1987, 49-50). In the stage of immersion, prayer begins as an obligation, a duty one should fulfill. This gives way to a growing pleasure and exuberance in prayer, a delight which draws the Christian back to prayer again and again. In the threshold of emergence, however, this gives way to aridity, where the harder we try the less we feel about God or anyone. This is the beginning of contemplative prayer; this is the mid-faith crisis. Many abandon prayer at this point, as it can persist for years or decades. Paradoxically, only then are they drawn back to prayer by a burning hunger for prayer and solitude (Jeremiah 20:9). The aridity did its work of burning the narcissism out of the Christian’s prayer life. They feel the same pressure to pray as they did at the start, only the external “should” is replaced with an internal “must.”

All three models – the Critical Journey, Stages of Faith and the Thresholds of Adult Spiritual Genesis – recognize the phenomenon of faith transition that occurs in midlife, an often unpleasant invitation away from the faith of one’s successful young adulthood into a richer experience of God and a greater identification with the world. But why are such stringent measures necessary? If God is a God of love and desires the best for us, what ailment afflicts us that calls for such strong medicine?

Why Is a Mid-Faith Crisis Needed?

The world is a frightening place for young children. Coe (Coe 2010, Lecture 4) notes that even for those growing up at a time of peace, in a home where all their needs are lovingly provided for, the world is large and loud and they are small and powerless. For those who grow up in chaos – whether due to war or abusive parents – this is even more true. Due to our innate sinful nature, the universal human response to this sense of vulnerability is fear, and this fear, in turn, creates a compulsion to hide. We unknowingly imitate the response of our first ancestor, who after eating the forbidden fruit realized he was naked (i.e., vulnerable) and so hid (Genesis 3:8-10). Most children don't hide literally but metaphorically, behind a painstakingly crafted and maintained persona that aims to shield them from the bumps and bruises of life. This persona grows alongside the child's core identity as they develop. As a defensive measure, it may serve a useful purpose, allowing the child to survive (literally or figuratively) to adulthood. Furthermore, not all hiding from hurt is part of the development of the false self. However, even where this constructed persona had pragmatic value in childhood, it generates significant problems later in life. Thomas Merton dubbed this persona the "false self" (Merton 1961, 23), and it has been popularized by such recent spiritual formation luminaries as Basil Pennington (2000), David Benner (2004), Richard Rohr (2013) and Robert Mulholland (2016).

The Nature of the False Self

The false self consists of two layers (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 1). The outer layer is the propaganda layer, turned outwards towards the world. It is the disguise we adopt because we are afraid, the mask we use to get what we want and to avoid what we don't want. Merton calls this the hollow man:

There is no substance under the things with which my false self is clothed. I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory, like bandages, in order to make myself perceptible to myself and the world, as if I only become visible when something visible covered my surface. I am hollow. And when my bandages are gone, there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness, emptiness, and hollowness to tell me that I am my own mistake. (Merton 1961, 36)

This outward-oriented layer deception is matched by an inward-oriented layer. These are deeply held beliefs about oneself that are not true, and they are the source of the fear that props up the outer layer. These lies are based on labels acquired in childhood, either taking on those labels or reacting strongly against them – but in both cases entangled in a death-grip with them. This forms the identity upon which one's worldview, beliefs and behaviours are based.

Acting, as it does, as the lens through which we look out upon the world, the false self is fiendishly difficult to perceive in ourselves (although often it is sadly easy for others to detect in us). Nevertheless, there are some clues by which we can detect the false self. First are those points in life where we are defensive and oversensitive, where we take offense easily (Benner 2004, 73-74). Taking ourselves too seriously is a sign of the false self. Those things that most bother us in others – our pet peeves – are also a manifestation of the false self. Another is

our compulsions – those things we feel we must do in order to be happy or safe. The false self also betrays itself in the tools we reach for to resolve the problems life throws our way. These can include anger, compliance, perfectionism, data gathering and analysis, self-soothing or conflict avoidance (Barton 2012, 50-51). Finally, the false self can prompt certain “image management” techniques (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 1), such as rehearsals (practicing our social interactions ahead of time) or taking inventory (checking the social temperature of the room so we can adjust our chameleon colours accordingly).

True interpersonal communication is significantly compromised by the false self. Imagine two persons wanting to communicate. The speaker is not speaking from her real self. Instead, all communication is passed through the filter of the false self, where it is massaged and customized in a way that is calculated to create the desired impact in the listener. Thus, she isn't actually saying what she means. Likewise, the listener is not listening from his real self. Instead, all communication is again passed through the false self's filter, where it is parsed and analyzed for threats and opportunities and normed by the false self's prevailing narratives. Or perhaps the listener isn't even listening at all and is simply using the interval to plan what he's going to say next. Thus, the listener isn't hearing what the speaker said; he is hearing what her false thinks he needs to hear, further modified to what his own false self thinks she said. With a society of a false selves constantly interacting in this way, it is remarkable that any communication happens at all.

The false self can reap pragmatic rewards – in fact, some people have developed a false self that interacts with the false selves of those around them in ways that generate a great deal of adulation, prestige and material possessions. Nevertheless, the false self always levees a cost greater than any benefit it can gain (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 3). First and foremost, it deadens spiritual life because God does not relate to the false self. Not that God refuses to. He simply can't because it is not real; the Great Person can only relate personally to another person, not a construct. Remember God's response to Adam's hiding: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). God knew where Adam was located; He was asking why Adam had withdrawn himself from their fellowship. Kirwan notes that, "It is the real self which Christ loves and accepts" (Kirwan 1984, 184). Furthermore, the false self requires an immense amount of energy, time and creativity to sustain the difference between who we really are and who we're portraying to the world (and even to ourselves). In addition, we created our false self to win love and approval, but the tragic irony is that we can't receive love because of it.

Anytime a person is praising us, thanking us, appreciating good things about us, we can't receive that love because we know it is ill-gotten gain. Suddenly, we get honest, "If they really knew who I am, they wouldn't be saying that." So we're cut off from the very thing we created the false self to secure. (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 3)

Finally, because the false self can't receive love, it spawns an unending, compulsive quest to numb the pain of the disconnect between who we are and who we are portraying – giving rise to all sorts of addictions (some of which are more socially acceptable than others).

Turning from the False Self to the True Self

But how can one set the false self aside? It does not automatically fall away when a person has a genuine experience of God and begins on the journey of faith. In fact, the false self tries to contain the experience (and its divine Author) and enlist the newfound religion as a new resource for its never-ending quest for protection and pleasure. Instead, it goes underground. Mulholland observes that:

Our religious false self may begin with a genuine experience with God. But then, like Peter on the mount of transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-4), we often seek to contain our experience within a box of our own making. We attempt to integrate our experience with God into the structures of our life in ways that are minimally disruptive to our status quo. The “God” within our box, however, becomes a construct, an idol, that enables us to maintain control of what we call “God” as well as continue to be in control of our existence. To put it succinctly, whenever we attempt to have God in our life on our terms, we are a religious false self. (Mulholland 2016, 49)

John of the Cross noticed this tendency in the 16th century when he described how each of the seven deadly sins adopt religious camouflage and smuggle themselves into the new believer’s spiritual life (John of the Cross 1990, 37-60). Mulholland asserts that this religious form of the false self bears all the hallmarks of the false self, only now in a religious guise. As the false self is based on fear, so is the religious false self. First, there is the fear that the real God will show up and destroy the box that we placed Him in, so the religious false self reinforces the box with creeds, doctrinal statements and liturgies (Mulholland 2016, 50). It also fears “that others might discover its religiosity is a façade,” so it works frenetically to stave off any possible accusation of hypocrisy (Mulholland 2016,

50). The religious false self also manifests itself as anger against any who might challenge our idol-box, as our identity is wrapped up in it (see Jonah 4:1-4 for an example) (Mulholland 2016, 51). Manipulation is another hallmark of the religious false self, as it is “always seeking to leverage our religious world and all those in it in ways most advantageous to its security, its prestige and, especially, our religious agenda” (Mulholland 2016, 54-55). There is a kind of spiritual indulgence, where the religious false self is always hungering for a greater high in worship and devotional activities (Mulholland 2016, 59). Finally, there is “distinction-making,” where the religious false self seeks to elevate itself by using denigrating labels (like “fundamentalist,” “charismatic,” and “liberal”) to push others down (Mulholland 2016, 60) and showy spiritual practices to win adulation (Mulholland 2016, 57). Echoing the almost-Christian sermons of the Puritans and early Evangelicals, Mulholland states, “Our religious false self may be rigorous in religiosity, devoted in discipleship and sacrificial in service – without being in loving union with God” (Mulholland 2016, 47). So just becoming a Christian does not dispel the false self, and in fact may actually exacerbate it as it discovers a whole new arena of life to exercise its old tricks.

How, then, is this obstacle to be cleared away? The natural reaction is to seek to identify the false self and destroy it. But this is an assertion of wilfulness (May 1982, 6) and simply results in the establishment of a more subtle false self. C.S. Lewis illustrates this dynamic in his Narnia novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Lewis 1952b), when a greedy boy named Eustace is turned into a dragon by a magical bracelet that he stole. Aslan the Lion (the Christ figure in Narnia)

brings him to a pool to be cured, but he must strip off his dragon-skin before he can enter the water. Like a snake, he sheds his skin, only to discover after each attempt that there is another dragon-skin beneath it.

“Then the lion said, ‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.”

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts, but it is such fun to see it coming away.”

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious.” (Lewis 1952b, 118)

The false self cannot be defeated by our own efforts. It is not only impossible, it is spiritually dangerous, as the effort will result in despair and depression when it fails or – if apparently successful – pride and self-satisfaction. The second outcome is by far the worst.

Instead, one must acknowledge the reality of who one is – the real self – and accept that this fallen, selfish, fearful person is nonetheless a beloved child of God (Nouwen 2002, 30). With that acceptance, one receives the gift of the true self from God, participating in the unfolding of this gift by learning to know Christ experientially:

The true self is who, in reality, you are and who you are becoming. It is not something you need to construct through a process of self-

improvement or deconstruct by means of psychological analysis... We do not find our true self by seeking it; rather we find it by seeking God. In finding God, we find our truest and deepest self. (Benner 2004, 92)

This acknowledgement and acceptance – this finding God – is not a human endeavour. We cannot choose to undertake it in our time and with our own effort. The false self is too ingrained within us for us to simply pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and set it aside. We cannot break out of it from the inside. Instead, we must be rescued by Someone outside ourselves. When the time is right, God must break in with an invitation to come to know Him and ourselves more deeply. This does not mean that we play no role in the process. After all, we must accept this invitation, surrender to this vision of ourselves and our Belovedness, and muster the courage to step out from behind the defensive mask we have constructed. But even these steps must be Spirit-empowered if they are not to become just another expression of the false self. This should come as no surprise to Christ followers, whose very spiritual lives started with a divine rescue. Furthermore, our spiritual lives can only continue with daily grace from God; it is an ongoing dance where God leads every step and we follow. The Apostle Paul warned against any temptation to believe otherwise when he admonished the Galatians with the rhetorical question, “After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2).

Returning to the previous discussion of developmental spirituality, the false self is Hagberg and Guelich’s Wall that must be surmounted in the stage four. But it is not we who surmount it, and the more we try using the toolbox we

have assembled to tackle problems in life, the higher the Wall gets. Instead, the Wall must be weakened and then broken from the other side. We participate in clearing away the bricks and debris, but we do not determine when and how it happens. So the mid-faith crisis is the Divinely initiated process by which God breaks the false self down, exposing the real self to God's loving gaze and nurturing the true self (Rohr 2011, 50). How, then, does this process arise and proceed?

What Does a Mid-Faith Crisis Look Like?

While Scripture does not use the term mid-faith crisis or anything like it, some examples of this process can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. As mentioned before, Jacob's literal wrestling match with the Angel of the Lord at Peniel recounted in Genesis 32:22-32 left him a different person, as was symbolically indicated by his change in name from Jacob ("the deceiver") to Israel ("he struggles with God"). Job – already a righteous man at the start of the book that bears his name – likewise undergoes a personal transformation through a time of divinely-appointed darkness (see Job 19:8, 30:17 and 26) worsened by God's silence (Job 30:20). Walter Brueggemann assigns the Psalms to three seasons of life: psalms of confident orientation, jarring disorientation, and surprising reorientation (Brueggemann 2002, 12). Elijah's paradoxical depression after his great victory on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:1-9a) is familiar to pastors who are sliding into stage four even as the success of stage three is all around them. This depression and the divine rehabilitation that follows (1 Kings 19:9b-

18) are another manifestation of the mid-faith crisis. Simon Peter's betrayal of Jesus (John 18:15-18, 25-27) and subsequent reinstatement (John 21:1-22) resulted in a powerful change to his faith which, when completed by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), resulted in a ministry characterized by power (Acts 2:14-41, 3:1-10, 4:13), without the violence (John 18:10) and bombast (Matthew 26:33, 35) he was prone to before. Finally, Saul's entire religious paradigm was turned on its head through his own encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), which also precipitated a change in his name to Paul. While each of these experiences vary widely in their details, their unifying factor is a life-altering, qualitative change in faith from one form to another.

The Dark Night of the Senses

John Coe provides an excellent description of the symptomology of the mid-faith crisis, although he uses the vocabulary of John of the Cross's dark night of the soul. The first experience is the dark night of the senses, which unfolds as part of God's work to mature the Christian (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). At the start of the spiritual life, God wants to build into the Christian the habits that will build and maintain spiritual health throughout their lifetime. These habits constitute the classic spiritual disciplines, such as reading Scripture, prayer, fellowship, worship, and so forth. Because the new Christian doesn't yet have experience with the long-term benefits of these exercises, nor in most cases the self-discipline to practice them regularly, God provides an incentive: spiritual delights. Every

page of Scripture explodes with divine messages that seem directed to the new Christian personally, fellowship is sweet, worship is powerfully moving, and prayer not only yields powerful results but has the same effortless intimacy as a conversation with your best friend. What's more, vices, addictions and character flaws that once seemed intractable sometimes lose their power seemingly overnight. The new Christian's spiritual life seems to be all light and love and power and ease. Coe labels these incentives "the bottle" (Coe 2010, Lecture 3), in keeping with the Biblical metaphor for the nourishment that young Christians require (1 Corinthians 3:2 and Hebrews 5:12), as well as John of the Cross's own metaphor:

As soon as the soul is regenerated by its new warmth and fervor for the service of God... He makes it to find spiritual milk, sweet and delectable, in all the things of God, without any labour of its own, and also great pleasure in spiritual exercises, for here God is giving to it the breast of His tender love, even as to a tender child. (John of the Cross 1990, 38)

The bottle is exciting, energizing and heady – but temporary.

However necessary it may be for a young Christian, ultimately God does not want them on the bottle. The bottle cannot do the hard, transforming work of putting off the old person and taking on the new (Ephesians 4:22-24). As already noted above, the false self can be exacerbated by starting to follow Jesus, and the bottle is part of the reason why. The false self enjoys the delights of the bottle, and so it uses its tools and techniques to try to drink ever more deeply. John of the Cross notes a spiritual form of gluttony that can arise at this stage, where the beginner desires more and more spiritual "sweets" and is constantly hungering for

a bigger and bigger spiritual high (John of the Cross 1990, 54). This then leads to spiritual greed (John of the Cross 1990, 44-45), where the beginner goes from one form of a spiritual practice to another to seek that high – the next book, the better sermon, the more anointed worship leader, the bigger Spirit-filled conference. Another reason God doesn't want Christians on the bottle is to mature their love. God seeks a genuine relationship with us, based on our love for who He is rather than a desire for the benefits He supplies. Bernard of Clairvaux called this the transition from loving God for one's own sake to loving God for His own sake, from the love of a servant to the love of a child (Bernard of Clairvaux 2008, 61). It is the love of a weaned child with its mother (Psalm 131:2) – a child who climbs onto his mother's lap not for what he will receive but purely for the delight of her presence.

Therefore, at the point in a Christian's life when God deems it the right time, he starts to take the bottle away. This is dark night of the senses. John of the Cross uses the illustration of a mother weaning her child to explain this dark night:

But, as the child grows bigger, the mother gradually ceases caressing it, and, hiding her tender love, puts bitter aloes upon her sweet breast, sets down the child from her arms and makes it walk upon its feet, so that it may lose the habits of a child and betake itself to more important and substantial occupations. (John of the Cross 1990, 38)

Martin Laird describes this process using the image of a gardener who waters a young plant abundantly but then stops so that the plant can grow its roots deep to find water from a “more consistent if less abundant source,” thereby strengthening

the plant “against disease and drought” (Laird 2011, 97). As God withdraws the spiritual pleasures, the Christian experiences aridity in the spiritual activities that used to be exciting and rich. Coe describes three signs of this dynamic (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). First, your mind wanders during the activities and so they feel fruitless. Then, you start to shy away from the activities because you’re tired of feeling guilty for the poor outcomes. Finally, all this worries you, leading you to cry out to God, “I don’t know what’s gone wrong – my mind is all over the place and although I want to do these things, I find myself neglecting them. Help! I want You!” All three components are present in a true dark night of the senses. It is the third piece – the anxiety about the situation – that differentiates it from the mere backsliding that the dark night is so often confused with.

At the same time, avers Coe, the Holy Spirit brings the Christian’s attention to the hidden sin in the person’s life (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). Just as 90% of an iceberg is located below the water line, so we are blind to many of the things in our lives that bring spiritual (and occasionally physical) death to ourselves and those around us. For example, we are mostly unaware of the machinations and distorted narratives of the false self. However, during the dark night of the senses, the Holy Spirit starts to push up on the iceberg, bringing things that used to operate unseen in our lives into the light. This explains why one of the marks of spiritual maturity is, ironically, a growing sense of one’s own sinfulness (Porter, Sandage, Wand and Hill 2019, 15-16). It’s not that we are becoming more sinful over time, it’s that we are seeing more and more sin that we were blind to before.

So Paul was not adopting a false humility when he declared himself the worst of all sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Rather, he was demonstrating his spiritual maturity.

The dark night of the soul is therefore an experience of both aridity and conviction. It is no wonder that it is mistaken for a dead-end on the road of faith, rather than the way forward into a new kind of life in Christ. However, it is not called a dark night because it is unpleasant (although it almost always is). The “dark” in “dark night of the soul” refers not to the unpleasantness of the experience, but rather to how we are unable to see the work God is doing during this stage of faith. This is clearer in John of the Cross’s native Spanish, where the *oscura* in *la noche oscura del alma* has the primary sense of hidden – it is the same root as the English word obscure, meaning uncertain or concealed. The Holy Spirit is doing serious heart work during this time, and like a surgical patient, the Christian needs to be placed under anesthesia in order to prevent her from interfering with the process. The night is therefore dark, working beneath our level of awareness and beyond the reach of our control. Furthermore, the aridity and conviction are not only sadly necessary for the work itself, they are also a grace as they shield from our view the glory of the true self emerging within. It is a grace because our character is not yet able to bear the weight of this glory, for we would be tempted to take pride in the work and claim it as our own – thereby hardening the false self into an irremovable mask.

Coe identifies several temptations that accompany the dark night of the senses (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). First is causal thinking. When the bottle is taken away and the aridity and conviction settle in, a natural response is to assume that

the problem lies with us, so we try harder so we can get back to where things are working again. Sometimes that means doing what we've always done only with greater effort; sometimes it involves seeking out new ways to experience God. This is a manifestation of one of the caged behaviours in stage four: the (ultimately doomed) attempt to retreat to a prior stage. Causal thinking places all spiritual agency in our hands and ignores that God may be up to something different. Ironically, the base assumption is correct: we *are* to blame for the dark night, but the fault lies not with our technique or effort, but with our identity.

Another temptation of the dark night of the senses is what Kierkegaard calls becoming a “gentle Christian” (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). When the initial rush of our spiritual lives fades away as the bottle is removed, we can mistakenly assume that – as with so many of our other enthusiasms in life – the honeymoon period must be over and now “real” Christian life has settled in. We adjust our expectations to match our experience (so as to spare both God and us any embarrassment), and we settle into the long wait for the glorification that comes at the end of life. This calls for no small amount of circumspect hermeneutics, as the Bible’s extravagant claims for what Watchman Nee called “the normal Christian life” (Nee 1977, 1) can cause discomfort for the gentle Christian. However, the gentle Christian has many allies in the pews, and occasionally even in the pulpit, so it’s not so difficult a state to maintain as it may first appear. Nevertheless, the Hound of Heaven does not give up so easily, and the Spirit-prompted anxiety about our state and the hunger for something more keeps the question alive even when we would rather it died.

A further mistake to be made in the dark night of the senses is to assume that we are God-forsaken. We feel God has left us, and the palpable sense of His presence that we enjoyed for so long on the bottle has been lost. This mistake is understandable, as the very essence of the experience is that God withdraws the sense of His presence in our lives. The truth is that God has never been more active in our lives, but as mentioned before, the darkness of the dark night hides the Holy Spirit's work from our eyes. This can lead to fear of being ostracized by those in our community of faith. If they only knew the aridity and conviction we faced (we reason), they would surely put us out like any other hypocrite.

This fear, and the desire to claw our way back to stage three, can lead to a special temptation for leaders undergoing the dark night of the senses. As though trying to drown out the inner questions and turmoil, they can undertake what Coe calls "ministries of glory" (Coe 2010, Lecture 3). The term is taken from Luther's distinction of a spirituality of glory – a never-ending ascent into power, excitement and the bottle – versus a spirituality of the Cross – a descent into humility, brokenness and truth. Many leaders enter the dark night of the senses at the height of their careers (again, consider Elijah in 1 Kings 19). As the fruitful life of the Servant gives way to the rocky path of the Sojourner, they have more than just their spirituality at stake; their livelihoods are on the line, as well. So instead of embracing the uncertainty of the dark night of the soul, they instead go all in on the bottle in their work and ministry, hoping in vain to recapture a taste of it for themselves.

The dark night of the senses can manifest itself like other spiritual problems, so it is important to distinguish it from other ailments. As mentioned before, the dark night can look like backsliding. Both the Sojourner and the backslider experience distraction in their spiritual exercises, leading to a disinclination to undertake them. The key difference is that the person in a dark night is concerned by this. The backslider is not particularly bothered by the situation. To be sure, they would prefer that the bottle kept working, but when it stops, they simply turn to the next source of consolation. That's all religion was for them, and church was simply a religious service provider. But when the person in the dark night of the soul loses the bottle, their distressed response is the same as Peter's: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (John 6:68). So our worry that we might be losing our faith or that God might have turned His back on us is the very sign that neither is the case.

The aridity of the dark night of the soul resembles another affliction of the soul: depression. Depression's primary symptom is not feeling sad, but rather not feeling like doing anything at all. The aridity of the dark night does include a lack of motivation to undertake spiritual exercises, so it can be mistaken for depression. However, the two experiences are distinct, as spiritual maturity and mental health are independent of one another. The lack of motivation in depression is universal; it affects all areas of life, including our work, our hobbies, our family, and our spiritual exercises. The indisposition of the dark night of the soul is restricted to spiritual things; the rest of life usual proceeds unimpacted. Nevertheless, Coe proposes an important proviso: if you persist in resisting God's

work in the dark night, if you refuse to look at the material the Holy Spirit is bringing to light and get angered by the frustration of the experience, reactive depression can result (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). Therefore, the two conditions are separate, but they may occur simultaneously in some cases.

The Dark Night of the Spirit

As challenging as it might be, the dark night of the senses is only the first stage of the dark night of the soul. John of the Cross calls the second part the dark night of the spirit, as he divides the soul into an outer “sensory” shell and an inner “spiritual” core (May 2004, 52). The dark night of the senses shows us how our vices smuggled themselves into our Christian life, adopting a religious overcoat to disguise themselves. The purification of the dark night of the spirit goes even deeper. Instead of weaning us of our hidden vices, the Holy Spirit now weans us of our cherished virtues (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). Much of what we mistake for the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is merely the product of a good upbringing, favorable life circumstances, inborn temperament, or our own moral self-improvement. Therefore, God now invites us to no longer trust in our own goodness, but rather fully embrace the truth that apart from the Vine we can do nothing (John 15:4).

Coe notes that while the dark night of the senses is a single experience (however long in duration), the dark night of the spirit is a series of short nights (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). In this stage we move back and forth between times of great consolation, comfort and peace, and times of darkness, travail and struggle.

With each turn in the upward spiral, we are purged ever more deeply and illumined ever more brightly. However, John of the Cross insists that these cyclical experiences are merely the prelude to the dark night of the spirit proper:

The soul... is not led by His Majesty into this night of the spirit as soon as it goes forth from the aridities and trials of the ... night of the sense; rather it is wont to pass a long time, even years, after leaving the state of beginners, in exercising itself in that of proficients... It goes about the things of God with much greater freedom and satisfaction of the soul, and with more abundant and inward delight than it did at the beginning before it entered [the night of the sense]... although... it is never without certain occasional necessities, aridities, darknesses and perils which are sometimes much more intense than those of the past, for they are as tokens and heralds of the coming night of the spirit, and are not of as long duration as will be the night which is to come. For, having passed through a period, or periods, or days of this night and tempest, the soul returns to its wonted serenity. (John of the Cross 1990, 91-92)

The discrepancy between Coe and John of the Cross at this point can be explained by John's later observation that God only draws into the true dark night of the spirit those whom He intends to bring into divine union in this life (John of the Cross 1990, 92). This cycle of tempest and serenity is God's method for purifying the rest (John of the Cross 1990, 92). Since John of the Cross believed that very few Christians are destined to experience divine union on this side of heaven, Coe is right to speak to the majority case (however his imprecision of terminology may irritate the purist). Therefore, it is these pseudo dark nights of the spirit that will be described going forward.

The dark night of the spirit corresponds roughly with stage five. The correspondence is rough, however, as the phenomenon does not fit perfectly the picture that Hagberg and Guelich paint of stage five. They describe the stage,

overall, as a renewed Student phase, where in a recapitulation of stage two the Christian re-learns what it means to follow God in light of the revelations disclosed in stage four. Such a portrayal seems entirely compatible with the ongoing learning that occurs in the dark night of the spirit. However, Hagberg and Guelich insist that stage five is characterized by a “deep calm or stillness” once we emerge from the crucible of stage four (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 140). The apprenticeship described in the dark night of the spirit is of a more rigorous kind, as John of the Cross notes that the periods of darkness can be even worse than the dark night of the senses (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). Nevertheless, given the central idea of working out a new way to follow Jesus that both models share, they can be considered to address the same stage of faith.

Coe avers that the sign we are entering a dark night of the spirit is when the Holy Spirit brings up the question of whether something is missing from our spiritual lives (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). This can take several forms. We may become disillusioned with our own goodness or past accomplishments, no longer drawing energy and satisfaction from them. There can be a growing sense that this earthly life is an inadequate home for us and we start to long for something greater. Maintaining the façade of our goodness starts to become fatiguing, and we can feel lonely as this façade isolates our real selves from those around us. Our ministry might be successful and a blessing to others, but it no longer satisfies our own souls. There can be a growing recognition that our theological knowledge and wisdom are correct, but inadequate. Finally, we come to see that our wills are set more on ourselves than on God.

John of the Cross believed that the inner, spiritual part of the soul contains three faculties: intellect, memory (which he understood as not merely an archive of the past, but also an imagination shaped by this archive), and the will (May 2004, 54). Therefore, in the dark night of the spirit, God works in all three of these areas (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). Our theology has helped us to understand God and how to follow Him. In the dark night of the spirit, God brings a darkness to the intellect where He moves us from knowing about Him to knowing Him, personally and experientially. Similarly, our memory has served as a map to ourselves, others and the world around us that we use every day to navigate life more or less successfully. Now, God shows us the vanity of our memory so that we can be fully present to what is in front of us, rather than interacting with a projection of it thrown up before our eyes by our memory-trained imagination. Finally, there is a dryness in the will, where once again we experience aridity in the spiritual exercises that were so fruitful in the past.

The primary temptation in a dark night of the spirit is to fear – fear that if we give up our goodness, God and those around us aren't going to love us anymore (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). Giving up our goodness doesn't mean antinomianism; our good character honours God and is a blessing to ourselves and others, so we don't discard that. Instead, it means to lay aside our reliance on our goodness for our sense of well-being, as a source of our identity. When our sense of well-being rests on our goodness, we can fall to pieces when sin momentarily overcomes us. Then we berate ourselves for having failed – a poor counterfeit of contrition that has more to do with our wounded pride than true humility – with

the end result that our discouragement and remorse separate us farther from God than our sin would have done (Smith 1985, 137). But someone who has given up their goodness is like Brother Lawrence, who “acknowledged his sins and was not surprised by them” (Brother Lawrence 2015, Conversations 21):

When he failed he did nothing other than acknowledge his failure, telling God, “I will never do anything right if you leave me alone; it’s up to you to stop me from falling and correct what is wrong.” After that he no longer worried about his failure. (Brother Lawrence 2015, Conversations 16)

This is what God aims to bring out ever more fully through the dark nights of the spirit: a bones-deep conviction that apart from the Vine we can do nothing.

How Can One Participate in God’s Work in a Mid-Faith Crisis?

Divine initiative at every point of the mid-faith crisis cannot be emphasized enough. John of the Cross emphasizes the passive nature of the dark night of the soul:

In John’s vision, it is during the passive nights that God’s grace flows through the ruins of our failed attempts, softens our willfulness, and takes us where we could not go on our own. . . . And it is during the passive nights that the real liberation takes place. All the rest has, at best, been nothing but preparation. (May 2004, 86)

The temptation of causality, to grab at the wheel when God turns down what appears to be a dead-end on the journey, must be firmly resisted. However, this passivity does not mean inactivity – that would be to make the mistake opposite from activism: quietism. The surrender called for in the mid-faith crisis is an active thing, requiring all our strength at times. While we are called to lay down

the tools of self-improvement in the mid-faith crisis, there is a place for participation in God's work.

Get Real

The first step is to get real with God and ourselves. Only God can bring forth the true self in our lives, but we can acknowledge the real self underneath. Shattuck calls this “living in the real self,” which consists of accepting the reality of who we are right now – that we are “a mix of dignity and depravity” (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 3). The dignity includes all of God's glorious gifts to us, including our talents, passions and temperament, while the depravity includes all the vulnerabilities, wounds and vices that sent us scurrying for the cover of the false self in the first place. Shattuck is careful to note that living in the real self is neither denying the reality of sin nor dismissing it as OK, but rather it is a “hopeful brokenness” (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 3), like the conviction of Peter versus the despair of Judas. “It's messier than living in the false self,” notes Shattuck, “but at least it's honest” (Shattuck 2013, Lecture 3). Teresa of Avila calls this learning to sit among our weeds, allowing God to be our gardener (Coe 2010, Lecture 4). The temptation is to pull the weeds up, to be our own gardener, but it must be resisted, as the dark night of the spirit shows us that even our desire for transformation is self-centered. There is a place for the exercise of the will and self-discipline, but it is not here. Rather than working at ridding ourselves of our vices (at least the ones we find objectionable), we must instead work at staying

connected to the Vine (John 15:4) trusting God to bring forth fruit in the right time and the right way.

But what does living in the real self actually look like? It begins with what Antony de Mello calls awareness, or an ongoing posture of patient, non-judgemental observation:

Think of the sad history of your efforts at self-improvement, that either ended in disaster or succeeded only at the cost of struggle and pain. Now suppose you desisted from all effort to change yourself, and from all self-dissatisfaction, would you then be doomed to go to sleep having passively accepted everything in you and around you? There is another way besides laborious self-pushing on the one hand and stagnant acceptance on the other. ... What you attempt is not to change yourself but to observe yourself, to study every one of your reactions to people and things, without judgement or condemnation or desire to reform yourself. (De Mello 1991, 60-61)

Martin Laird sees this as what the ancients meant by the spiritual discipline of vigilance or watchfulness (Matthew 26:41, 1 Peter 5:8, Proverbs 4:23):

One type of watchfulness consists in closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation. This watchfulness is not our superego's monitor, ever ready to shame us into conformity to an internalized ideal of what holiness is supposed to look like. It is free of all ego strategies that hold onto what we like or push away what we don't like. It is a grounding, vigilant receptivity. This witness, that which is aware of the afflictive emotion, that which is aware of clinging to it or fleeing from it, is itself free of the affliction, free of the clinging, free of the fleeing. (Laird 2006, 100)

In short, this is an act of meta-cognition – thinking about our thinking. Become aware of our inner dynamics, our emotional programming that tells us what will make us happy, and our mental commentary on what is going on around us. Don't

judge these dynamics, condemn them or hate them. Just observe and seek to understand them, which starts to rob them of their power.

The other half of living in the real self is to embrace our belovedness. A growing self-awareness must be matched by a growing sense of God's great love for that self of whom we are becoming aware. John Calvin opened his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the assertion that the twin pillars of the Christian life are knowing God and knowing ourselves (Calvin 1960, 1.1.1). But both must proceed apace: trying to know God without knowing ourselves produces a mere head knowledge, while trying to know ourselves without knowing God leads to self-fixation. The best way to grow in both is to look at God looking at us, and the first and final lesson to learn in this growth is how deeply God loves us. All the things that we imagine disqualify us from that love are in fact no obstacle to it (Romans 5:6-10). Nothing we can do or fail to do and nothing that can be done to us can diminish or increase that love (Romans 8:31-39). We do not serve a swivel-chair God, who alternates between acceptance and disappointment depending on our performance (Smith 2009, 94). Only an abiding conviction that God loves us now – not our potential but our actuality – can give us the courage to step out from behind the false self. This is not the world's cheap imitation of self-acceptance – an acritical mutual positive regard that ignores our deep wounds and the sinful maladaptations we have adopted. This self-acceptance is based not in self-love, but in God's love of the self; it is an act of faith, trusting God's image of us over our self-image. Even when it feels like we are lying to

ourselves (and perhaps especially at those times), we must affirm that we are the Beloved of the Father, in whom Christ dwells and delights.

Linger with What Provokes You

In addition to living in the real self, we can also participate in God's work in the mid-faith crisis to dismantle the false self and bring forth the true self. As we practice awareness and the discipline of watchfulness, we will notice flashes of the false self as it is momentarily flushed out of hiding. We perceive those lenses through which we see the world. Remember that the false self betrays itself in moments of irritation or fear, or perhaps one of our cherished false narratives is brought to light. It might even be an experience of conviction, where the mirror is held up before our eyes and we are unable to look away. Whatever the case is, we are gifted with a revelation as the Holy Spirit pushes a bit of the iceberg above the waterline. Of course, this doesn't feel like a gift; it feels like embarrassment, shame and disappointment in ourselves. But there is another way of looking at it. Haase suggests viewing it as graced guilt: "instead of treating your sinfulness and its guilt as a dead-end street, approach them as teachers who are instructing you about yourself" (Haase 2008, 72). Brown calls this learning to "linger with what provokes you" (Brown 2013, 81). This is one way God uses all things for the good of his beloved children (Romans 8:28).

Coe offers a four-step process for responding to these gifts (Coe 2010, Lecture 5). As always, the initiative lies entirely with God: the Holy Spirit shows us something of the iceberg in our reaction to a situation, inviting us to set aside

some aspect of the false self and grow more fully into the true self. The first step of the human response to this invitation is to allow ourselves to be addressed (or even confronted) by it, to open up to it. Equally important is to resolve before God that any response will be an expression of willingness rather than willfulness: “God, whatever I’m going to do, I only want to do this in Your Spirit, not my way or by my own power.” It is vital that any obedience the invitation inspires must not arise from the false self, to be a “good little boy/girl” or “to get the monkey of guilt off my back” (Coe 2010, Lecture 5). After this presentation and resolution, the person asks God three questions. The first is, “To experience what You’re inviting me into, what kind of person do I need to become?” This acknowledges that lasting spiritual formation only comes through heart transformation. Striving to adopt new behaviours directly is a doomed endeavour. Furthermore, it is asking God for a vision of the true self we’re being invited to become. Such a vision is an essential part of transformation (Willard 2002, 83). The follow-up question is, “In light of the kind of person You are inviting me to become, what are You asking me to do today?” Is this invitation a backburner issue, something that God is putting on the table for our reflection, rumination and observation? Or is it a front-burner issue, where now is the time to formally take up a regimen, or an intensive period of training focused on this becoming? This discernment is necessary as we can receive multiple invitations to life and wholeness every week and trying to focus on all of them is too much. The key is to identify which invitation is to be acted upon today. If we are to proceed, the final question is, “What plan of training are You calling me to?” What activities of the mind,

affections, body and social context will open us up to God's transforming touch in this area of your life? What disciplines of abstinence (like fasting, solitude and silence) or engagement (like worship, Scriptural meditation, or adoration) will assist with this process (Willard 1988, 158)? How long should this intensive regimen be followed, and how will it end? It is vital that these questions be true acts of discernment, where the answers are worked out together with God. Otherwise, the divine invitation may degenerate into just another self-improvement project sponsored by the false self.

Huddle Up

While much of the soul work of the mid-faith crisis is internal and personal, this does not mean there is no place for the assistance of others. A trusted voice can speak necessary truth into our lives, becoming the occasion of the Holy Spirit pushing up the iceberg. An old autobiography of a saint passing through their own mid-faith crisis may give us categories for what we are experiencing. But most of all, other Christians can support and encourage us as we do the hard, inner work this season demands – just as “when Moses' arms grew tired, Aaron and Hur brought a stone for him to sit on, while they stood beside him and held up his arms, holding them steady until the sun went down” (Exodus 17:12).

Two kinds of helpers are especially important during the mid-faith crisis. The value they bring is largely due to the intentionality we bring to the relationship. God can open anyone's mouth to assist us in this time (Numbers

22:28), but the deliberate focus these relationships entail mean that they can be a consistent source of help. First there are spiritual friends, our peers or those slightly further ahead of us on the journey of faith. When passing through a dark night, it is important to weave a circle of friends around you to get together regularly to share the state of your souls. It is important that most or all of them have passed through (or are passing through) the mid-faith crisis themselves, or they are likely to misunderstand what's happening, which will significantly impede their helpfulness. In addition to this band of brothers (or sisters), the help of a spiritual director can be invaluable. Different than a pastoral counsellor or therapist, a spiritual director is gifted and trained in the ministry of helping another Christian hear God more clearly and respond to God more consistently. Unfortunately, the name is misleading. A spiritual director is not exclusively focused on the directee's religious life, for all of life is seen as the arena in which the Holy Spirit is active. Neither is a director highly directive, but rather helps the directee find the path God is laying out for him or her. As a result, directors often have significant understanding of and experience with mid-faith crises. Working with a spiritual director is always helpful but sometimes necessary, such as when passing through a mid-faith crisis.

Assisting Another in a Mid-Faith Crisis

What if we are one of those spiritual friends? How can we best encourage and support someone passing through a mid-faith crisis? The more important step is to de-stigmatize the experience. Passing through the crucible of a mid-faith

crisis is already a difficult experience, with the attending aridity, conviction and shifting understanding of who God is. It is made immeasurably worse when internal and even external voices are prosecuting a misdiagnosis of backsliding or even mental illness. Therefore, the greatest gift a friend can give is to resist becoming alarmed and instead calmly explain that mid-faith crises are part of the journey and that, as disorienting as it is, God is inviting them into something deeper and greater. This is also a gift an entire community of faith can give by normalizing the experience in the group's culture. Developmental spirituality can be taught, ministry offerings can target people at various stages of development, leaders can speak about and from their own mid-faith crises (and be selected from those who have passed through one), the category of "those in mid-faith crisis" could be added to collects, and songs of lament² can be included in worship services to give voice to those in a mid-faith crisis.

In addition to this primary way to help those in a mid-faith crisis, there are several other means to support them. The first is to close ranks about them. Even where a person recognizes a mid-faith crisis for what it is, there is a tendency to withdraw and hide from others. Like a wounded animal they step into the shadows, driven there by embarrassment or weariness. We hear Adam's echo in our friend's retreat: "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid" (Genesis 3:10). This tendency is exacerbated among those who don't know that a mid-faith crisis

² Examples of worship songs that give voice to lament include "It Is Well With My Soul," "Blessed Be Your Name," "How Long, O Lord?," "Abide With Me," and "Rivers of Babylon."

is part of the pilgrimage, or who know it but don't realize that their current indisposition is the hallmark of one. To combat this instinct, we must close the gap by moving closer to them. When we take pains to invite them out to gatherings of God's people, we give the implicit message that they are still worthy to participate. Even when they cannot face the crowds, we can spend time with them one-on-one. The important thing is just to keep up contact, to keep their connection with the community alive – even if it is just where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus (Matthew 18:20).

The primary activity during those times of connection is encouragement, to literally put courage into them (en-courage). The mid-faith crisis entails a great deal of inner work, and it is easy to shy away from the job. As is the case with putting off unpleasant but necessary dentistry, this only prolongs the discomfort without making the eventual procedure any easier. This tendency is understandable, however, so we must be sympathetic when they run out of willingness to keep up the fight. Acknowledging the reality of their suffering, we nevertheless cheer them on. Help them not to fall into despair, and dispel any idea that the suffering in the mid-faith crisis is vain. Gently leading them back to the harness, we don't allow them to give up on themselves.

Patience is key for this support network. A mid-faith crisis is the work of years, and while it is not all doom and gloom for that entire time (although in some cases it can be), a person must be allowed to move through it at their own pace. The word compassion comes from the Latin meaning to suffer with, for being in the presence of someone who is suffering causes a sympathetic resonance

between our hearts and we ourselves begin to suffer. To eliminate this discomfort within themselves, caregivers can be tempted to offer a quick fix for the problem or even grow impatient with the sufferer when the fix doesn't take. Instead, these companions must steel themselves for the discomfort of sitting among the ashes with their friend (Job 2:12-13).

Conclusion

Does everyone pass through a mid-faith crisis? Models are composites of a multitude of personal experiences, simplified representations of reality that are intended to provide a reliable map to the ground. However, to insist that a model could not be wrong is not only arrogant but also the doorway to oppression of those whose experience does not neatly fit the model. This model of spiritual formation is based on the observations of spiritual giants in the history of the church, reflecting on the experience of Christians from differing cultures and across the centuries. Classical writers like John of the Cross and modern authors such as Fowler and Hagberg and Guelich would say that all who do not become intractably mired in an earlier stage will sooner or later enter a mid-faith crisis. Nevertheless, an appropriate creaturely humility demands that we not dictate to God that the Holy Spirit must only work in certain ways. Even those who would affirm the necessity of a post-conversion paradigm shift in our experience of God don't agree on how it presents and proceeds. For instance, while John Wesley stoutly insisted on the goal of Christian perfection and acknowledged that people grow in times of suffering or when God withdraws the sense of His presence, he

objected to the idea that spiritual growth requires these interventions (Collins 2003, 1932). Happily, the model does not need to be without exception to be useful to spiritual formation practitioners. The mid-faith crisis has been found in diverse cultural, theological and historical contexts as a common, non-pathological development in the spiritual journey. So, while we must acknowledge that each Christian will be led into their true self in a divinely appointed manner and timetable, we can recognize that there are recurring patterns to how this faith transition unfolds and use this awareness to smooth the way for people.

Thus, the mid-faith crisis is a common phase in the Christian life. God invites us to move from the triumphalist and simple faith of our youth and young adulthood to a deeper and more authentic experience of the eternal, abundant life that Jesus lived and died to bring us. Ultimately, this invitation is to step out from behind our false self and live in the real self so that God can form our true self ever more fully. God does this by weaning us of the bottle of delight in spiritual activity and drawing us into the desert where the people of God have always been formed. The entire process from beginning to end is under God's exclusive control – after all, the need to control is one of the primary things to be purged from our hearts. Nevertheless, if we choose to lean into the work, participating with it rather than resisting it, it does proceed with greater facility. However, there is no speeding it up as it never fully ends in this life. Instead, after the primary mid-faith crisis, the rest of our lives are spent in a cycle of consolation and

desolation as we are drawn up a spiral into an ever-fuller participation in the divine nature (1 Peter 1:4).

CHAPTER 4:
ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord;
Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word.

Once His gifts I wanted, now the Giver own;
Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone.
— A.B. Simpson, “Himself”

For many years I have been teaching on the mid-faith crisis whenever I was invited to speak on spiritual formation. Given how uncomfortable this stage of faith is and how it is often misunderstood, raising awareness of it seemed a precious gift I could offer any congregation. This is why my model of the mid-faith crisis includes de-stigmatizing the phenomenon as the first thing a person can do to help another who is in it. Following my own advice, I set out to raise awareness of the mid-faith crisis among the circle of churches in my personal network. More than just my single sermon, I wanted to develop an entire small group teaching plan to dive deeply into the phenomenon to encourage those in it and to equip those who want to serve them.

Introduction

This section describes the nature of the problem I sought to address and how I proposed to do so. To ensure this was done safely, I address how I was

supervised, how I secured permission for the research from the church leadership and the participants themselves, and how the collected data was secured.

Problem

In my practice of spiritual formation ministry I have found developmental spirituality, or the recognition of different stages of spiritual growth, to be a valuable tool for the promotion of spiritual vitality. Understanding the contours of the spiritual landscape – and the distinct challenges and activities proper to each stage – can eliminate a great deal of uncertainty, misunderstanding, and misdiagnosis.

One phenomenon that especially requires explication is the mid-faith crisis. As elaborated in chapter three, the mid-faith crisis is a phenomenon in the life of faith when God withdraws a sense of His presence in order to purge believers of their false self and invite them into a deeper life of intimacy. This is an often unpleasant but common phase in the journey where God leads the soul out of the simple answers and models of the first stages of the Christian life into deeper waters of His mystery. It is an unsettling time that feels like a dead-end but is actually the royal road forward into a deeper kind of life. For this reason, the mid-faith crisis requires careful instruction, and yet it is largely unknown in conservative Evangelical circles.

Response

My project developed a curriculum for a small group experience that introduces experienced churchgoers to the mid-faith crisis. Over the course of the brief and intensive program, the group unpacked the mid-faith crisis, including how it presents, what God is doing in it, and what we can do if we or others are passing through it to work with God rather than resisting. This curriculum was presented in three conservative Evangelical congregations sequentially, to incrementally and iteratively improve it.

Supervision, Permission and Access

This project followed the research ethics best practices described in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics* (TCPS 2: CORE), as well as the specific guidelines of the Tyndale Research and Ethics Board (REB). Access to the congregations was granted by permission of the senior pastor, to whom I was accountable. All participants opted in to the sessions. Informed consent was secured at the start of each program from all participants, a means for reporting any ethical concerns about the project was described, and all findings will be made available to them (see Appendix A). All information gathered was entirely anonymous, collected in aggregate at the level of each congregation, with no personally identifiable information recorded.

Context

I have been engaged in spiritual formation ministry of one kind or another for almost 20 years, starting with teaching small groups and later being trained as a spiritual director. Over that time, I discovered how common the mid-faith crisis is in church circles – especially amongst those who have been attending church for a decade or more. Even worse is how these saints suffer in silence due to their misunderstanding of the stage they are in, causing them to misdiagnose their condition as backsliding, thereby adding a further burden of shame to their guilt. As a result, whenever I am invited to speak on the topic of spiritual formation, I always address stages of faith, with a special emphasis on the mid-faith crisis. If there is only one thing a Christian ever learns about spiritual formation, I believe this to be the single most important topic.

The mid-faith crisis has also connected with my personal and ministry contexts. I have been moving through a mid-faith crisis for many years myself, as described in chapter two. Furthermore, when I unexpectedly became the lead pastor of Tapestry in March of 2017, I discovered our community's distinctive is that we largely consist of people who have passed through a mid-faith crisis. Therefore, our mission is to reach out to those still on that phase of their journey or emerging from it.

As a result, I aim to raise awareness of the mid-faith crisis in faith communities outside of my own. I have contacts with the leadership of three other churches, and they opened their doors to my leading a small group on this topic. North Burlington Baptist Church is a sister congregation to Tapestry in the

CBOQ, and it serves in the same city. West Highland Baptist Church is a Fellowship Baptist congregation located in suburban Hamilton. Bethany Community Church is an Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada community located in St. Catharines. These congregations are larger than our own, but of a similar demographic make-up (i.e., largely white, upper-middle class, educated Canadians of northern European descent). One key difference, however, is that while all three churches have strong discipleship programs, the spiritual journey is largely understood as a simple linear progression from seeker to student to servant.

I had two sets of partners on my project team. The proposed curriculum was first reviewed by a gifted and experienced teacher of spiritual formation prior to its initial presentation. I then enlisting the aid of several journeyman spiritual formation practitioners I have been training over the past few years, to act as observers and insightful commentators in the debriefs we had after each iteration of the program.

Models and Other Resources

In 1159, John of Salisbury wrote “Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature” (MacGarry 1955, 167). This is the foundation of all scholarship, and so is the case in this project. The curriculum’s content was built on my model of spiritual

formation, which itself relies on resources in Scripture, church history, and modern scholarship. The approach of the research project itself came from the literature of continuous improvement, lean education, program evaluation and action research.

Background from Model of Spiritual Formation

My model of spiritual formation explored the nature of the mid-faith crisis. Its four sections became the themes for the four small group sessions: when the mid-faith crisis occurs in the life of faith, why it is needed, what it looks like, and how to participate in it. This model drew on several resources from the usual sources of theology: Scripture, the history of the church, and the works of modern writers.

Several Biblical passages informed my pursuit of this project. The prototypical narrative is that of Elijah's depression, silence, and experience of God that (ironically) followed his great victory against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19). As I learned more about the dynamics of the mid-faith crisis, I noticed other examples, including Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel (Genesis 32:22-31), Job's crisis of faith (Job 19:8, as well as 30:17, 20, and 26), Simon Peter's reinstatement (John 21:1-22), and Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19). Several Psalms also allude to such crucibles of faith from which the pray-er emerges transformed, such as Psalms 13, 77, 103, and 112. These passages mirror the experiences of many mature believers in the churches I have worked in – experiences that cry out for validation, encouragement and guidance.

Two authors from the history of Christianity are especially helpful to such an endeavour. First is the 16th century theological poet from Spain who coined the phrase dark night of the soul: John of the Cross. His description of the experience is primarily found in the 8-stanza poem *Dark Night* in the late 1570s, and the partial commentary he wrote several years later (covering only the first two stanzas and the first line of the third). The second source comes from almost a century later from the pen of Puritan pastor Thomas Goodwin. *The Child of Light Walking in Darkness* (Goodwin 1861) is a published sermon on Isaiah 50:10, which explores the condition of God's children who pass through a season seemingly bereft of comfort and illumination. These two resources form the historical keel that allow those passing through a mid-faith crisis to sail across or even against the winds they face.

I also made use of several contemporary resources to understand and explicate the mid-faith crisis. John Coe's (Coe 2010) *Introduction to Spiritual Formation* lecture series is a very helpful and practical guide to the mid-faith crisis, delivered from the perspective of an evangelical theologian and clinical psychologist. Gerald May (May 2004), another psychologist, delivers a similarly useful treatise in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, with an even stronger emphasis on the John of the Cross (John of the Cross 1990) source material. James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (Fowler 1981) and Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey* (Hagberg and Guelich 2005) explore the mid-faith crisis within the broader context of faith development, while Mulholland's *The Deeper Journey* (Mulholland 2016), Benner's *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Benner 2004) and

Rohr's *Falling Upward* (Rohr 2011) connect the divine work of the mid-faith crisis with the emergence of the true self from the false self. While there are many more resources that describe the mid-faith crisis, these are the ones I found to be of greatest utility when explicating the nature of the mid-faith crisis and how to participate in its work.

Other Resources

Moving from the content of the curriculum to how it will be developed during the project itself, I relied on four key resources. First is Emiliani's (2015) guide to iterative and incremental improvement in the educational context, *Lean Teaching*. Another helpful resource in this vein was Fitzpatrick, Sanders and Worthen's (2017) work on program evaluation. For the approach to the action research project itself, especially the data collection and analysis techniques, I was guided by Sensing (2011) and Stringer (2014).

Project, Methodology, and Methods

This section describes the approach that was adopted for the project, including what was done (and why), where and when it was done, and how the participants were safeguarded.

Field

The project consisted of the presentation of a series of four 75-minute learning experiences centred on the topic of the mid-faith crisis. The series was presented three times in different contexts with time in between each presentation

for reflection and alteration of the content. The first was a four-week series in the Training & Equipping Christ-Followers (TREC) adult education program at West Highland Baptist Church in Hamilton. The second was an all-day Saturday event – an intentionally different format – at Bethany Community Church in St. Catharines. The third context was a four-week series in the Deeper adult education program at North Burlington Baptist Church. The primary participants were the congregants who opted to attend the series. These formats were chosen to fit into the life of each congregation as unobtrusively as possible by being presented as just another elective in their existing Christian education ministry. Furthermore, a four-week series format and a one-day intensive format are both commonly used in other congregational and retreat venues, so the resulting curriculum (see Appendix E) could be easily implemented in the future.

There were two kinds of secondary participants. First, a panel of experts who reviewed the base version of the course content to assess whether it is suitable to achieve its learning objectives and to provide recommendations for improvement. This panel consisted of expert scholars and instructors of spiritual formation, all of whom I have studied under personally. The panel included Dr. Evan Howard, Jillian Weber, and a third member, who unfortunately was unable to complete his review in time for inclusion in the study. The other group of secondary participants was the observers who took notes on the reactions of the students to the learning experiences, conducted a brief weighted feedback session at the end of each series, and participated with me in a debrief after each series to identify improvements to be made to the learning experiences. Most of the

observers – Karen Fletcher, Janetta Howson, Marilyn Ward, and Jordan Bookma – have been trained by myself and others in the practice of spiritual formation, while Louise Loten was also included as a discipleship expert and professional educator. The observers all signed a non-disclosure agreement to preserve confidentiality (see Appendix A).

Scope

The project operated within certain boundaries to be attainable with the resources and time available. I presented the seminars in three congregations, all from a single theological tradition (broadly speaking) and in a constrained geographical area. This kept the implementation manageable and the results targeted for future use in the many other churches sharing those characteristics.

The panel was restricted to scholars whose instruction I have personally witnessed. There are many others who might no doubt have offered excellent suggestions for the learning experiences, but I needed to keep the feedback to a volume that could be implemented before the first sessions began.

Finally, the project explored the best way to disseminate an awareness of the dynamics of the mid-faith crisis and how to participate with God's work in such times. As a dissemination project, it did not focus on expanding the body of knowledge about the mid-faith crisis. Rather, it sought to discover the most effective way to raise practical awareness of the experience among a population that is typically ignorant of it – namely, southern Ontarians in the conservative Evangelical tradition.

Methodology

I used the Curriculum Development methodology, whereby a curriculum is created, tested and refined over several iterations (Stringer 2014, 67; Riding, Fowell and Levy 1995). My primary guide for this iterative and incremental approach was Emiliani's *Lean Teaching* (Emiliani 2015), itself based on Masaaki Imai's *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* (Imai 1986). This methodology advocates a process of continuous improvement in teaching, following the PDCA cycle of Plan-Do-Check-Act (Emiliani 2015, 33). First, the instructor plans the learning activities that will achieve the desired learning outcomes. Then those activities are implemented with a group of learners. Next, the efficacy of the learning activities is measured. Finally, the instructor acts on the collected feedback, revising deficient learning activities, or replacing them altogether.

Methods

Prior to implementing the curriculum with a group of participants, a panel of experts reviewed the initial draft of the curriculum – that is, the proposed learning activities and their intended learning outcomes. Each member of the panel was emailed the lesson plans and handouts, and while any feedback was encouraged, I also sent along a list of questions to guide their evaluation (see Appendix F). I then analyzed the feedback from the members of this panel by identifying the aspect of the curriculum to which it related (see codes in Appendix

D) and then making revisions to the activities and their outcomes to mitigate the risks identified. This was the project's first Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle.

During the implementation phase, data was collected in two ways. First, there were observations of the participants' engagement with the various learning activities, made by both myself, as the instructor/facilitator, and the team of observers. The suggestions made by Sensing (2011, 180-190) and Stringer (2014, 113-115) regarding field notes identified the elements to be observed. The observers kept notes on each learning activity, observing non-verbal cues and engagement by the participants. They also recorded any ideas they might have for improving the learning activities, but recorded them separately from the raw observations. Due to the small number of participants in each session, the observers watched the entire group. My field notes also included my own inner responses to the teaching encounter.

Second was the participants' weighted feedback on which aspects of the learning experience were helpful and which needed improvement. This data gathering technique followed Stringer's guidelines for focus groups (Stringer 2014, 111-2). After I left the room (so the participants could speak more freely), a facilitator (i.e., one of the observers) reminded the group of the learning objectives, and then asked the participants to identify the aspects of the experience that worked well and therefore should be preserved. The facilitator wrote these items on a whiteboard. When the suggestions stopped coming, the facilitator then asked the group to indicate which aspects they found the most helpful by coming to the front and drawing one or more stars next to their

favourites. Each participant received $n-2$ stars, where n was the number of items on the list. This resulted in a weighted list of those parts of the sessions that were most impactful. The process was then repeated for the aspects of the experience that were the least impactful, or most in need of improvement (see Appendix C for this feedback). The participants didn't need to come up with suggestions for *how* to improve those aspects (although such suggestions were welcome) – they just needed to identify the areas in need of attention. This data collection method had a formational secondary benefit: by reflecting on the experience in order to provide the feedback, the learning was further cemented in the minds of the participants.

The collected data was then analyzed by myself and the observers together in a debriefing and brainstorming session that was held after each series of presentations was complete, which at times included the development of new or revised learning activities where the group felt such changes were warranted. This data analysis followed a three-step process as the observers and I worked through the four sessions, activity by activity. First, each team member shared their observations about the learners' engagement with the learning activity. Second, each team member noted their interpretation of the effectiveness of the activity and its basis on the observed behaviours. Finally, the group brainstormed ways in which the activity could be improved, or what more effective activity should replace it. Later, I assigned codes to the various observations (again, see Appendix D). These walkthroughs represented a complete PDCA cycle, which

was repeated three times after the content was presented in the three congregational venues sequentially.

Table 2. Phases and timetable for action research

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| June | Finalized arrangements with three congregations, Expert Panel and observers (all were already contacted in April) |
| July-August | Developed initial draft of the curriculum |
| September 21 | Project approved by REB and Supervisor |
| September 21 | Sent curriculum to Expert Panel for feedback |
| September 22 | Trained observers |
| September 23, 30; October 14, 21 | Presented curriculum at West Highland Baptist Church (4 weekly sessions) |
| September 25 and October 1 | Curriculum feedback received from the Expert Panel |
| October 21 | Debriefed and revised curriculum |
| October 27 | Presented curriculum at Bethany Community Church (1 Saturday workshop) |
| October 27 | Debriefed and revised curriculum |
| November 4, 11, 18, 25 | Presented curriculum at North Burlington Baptist Church (4 weekly sessions) |
| November 25 | Debriefed and revised curriculum |
| January | Finalized project report |

Ethics in Ministry-Based Research

At the outset of the project, I identified several possible benefits that the primary participants in the project may enjoy. First and foremost was a greater understanding of and appreciation for the mid-faith crisis in the life of faith. Furthermore, they could gain some practical insight into how to cooperate with this work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, and how to support others as they pass through such seasons. As with any communal faith activity, they could experience the creation or deepening of connections with other believers through mutual self-revelation. Note, however, that these benefits are all potential benefits, as much of the impact of a small group experience depends on two

factors outside of the facilitator's control: the action of the Holy Spirit and the inner disposition and attitude of the participant. Nevertheless, insofar as it is up to me, I endeavoured to craft and facilitate an experience where such benefits were within easy reach of the participant, and I lifted up the sessions in prayer to invite the Holy Spirit to work in power and to circumvent any obstacles present in the lives of the participants.

Two future benefits were also anticipated. The first was the creation of a tested curriculum that could be used to introduce other groups to the mid-faith crisis. The second was the training of the observers for their own ministry as spiritual formation practitioners. By seeing behind the scenes, they could learn one way to approach the development and delivery of a small group experience.

My project also ran certain risks. Personal information that a participant disclosed during discussion exercises may be spread more broadly by other participants, either inadvertently or maliciously. To mitigate this risk, the first session began with the establishment of group norms, including those of confidentiality. Another risk emerged from the nature of the material itself. The mid-faith crisis can be a painful and perplexing experience, especially for those who do not understand its role in the journey of faith. As mentioned above, this is one of the reasons for the curriculum. However, presenting, discussing and encouraging reflection upon the mid-faith crisis may be a disturbing experience in the short term as inner doors long closed are opened. This risk was mitigated in several ways. First, the material was presented with sensitivity and discretion. Next, I lingered after each session to allow those with private questions to

approach me. As a spiritual director with both formal training (through Tyndale Seminary's academic course and ten-month direction practicum) and experience, I was able to diffuse several concerns and distressing misapprehensions. Finally, I alerted the pastoral leadership of the congregations that a closer-than-usual pastoral presence may be required for the participants during and after the sessions.

As a visiting teacher in each of these contexts, I secured permission to teach the material from the lead pastor of each community. Since there was no existing relationship with the participants, the only dual-role ethical consideration is that of teacher/facilitator and researcher. Regardless of instructional approach, any teacher unavoidably wields a certain authority. However, as there was no prior authority over the students, there was little pressure to participate. Furthermore, the participants needed to opt in to each of the sessions, as they were all offered as part of Christian education programs where attendance was optional. A brief description of the session contents was promoted to the congregations in the usual way that such electives are announced (see Appendix B).

The participants' expectations of the experience were identified and managed through one of the first learning activities, which entailed making explicit and discussing these very expectations. Participants were asked to sign a consent form that described the goal and methods of the research project and how all data would be collected anonymously and in aggregate, and no personally identifiable information would be collected at any point (see Appendix A).

The research proposal was reviewed by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board and approved on September 21, 2018.

Findings, Interpretation and Outcomes

As I hoped and expected, I learned a great deal over the course of the research project, both during the sessions and in reflection afterwards. This section describes the data that I collected, what I learned from that data (and the changes I made to the curriculum as a result), and the outcomes from what was learned.

Findings

Four passes of data were collected over the course of the project. First, the Expert Panel emailed me their feedback on the lesson plans and handouts. Dr. Howard appreciated how well the content fit the learning objectives, and how each session built well upon the session before to present a full picture of the mid-faith crisis experience (Howard, September 25, 2018, e-mail message to author). He also had some suggestions for improvement. First, he expressed concern that there might be too much material in sessions 2 and 3 to cover in 75 minutes (for the actual content of the sessions, see Appendix E). He also observed an over-reliance on the learning activities of lecture and discussion. He recommended seasoning this mix with some practical experiences (such as the index card exercises in session 3). In the same vein, Ms. Weber encouraged greater use of drawing pictures as a learning activity (Weber, October 1, 2018, e-mail message

to author). For instance, in session 1 she suggested that the participants could draw a map of their own journey and where they are in it, while in session 2 she suggested doing a collage of magazine cutout pictures to build their false self. She also identified the risk (already identified) that the participants entering these deep waters might be opened up, and therefore might require longer term accompaniment with a spiritual director.

The second pass of data collection was from the sessions at West Highland Baptist Church in Hamilton, Ontario, including my own notes, the observers' notes, and the feedback from the participants' feedback exercise at the end. The average attendance was 18 people for the four classes on September 23 and 30 and October 14 and 21. The participants appeared to be above 40 years old and six were men while the other twelve were women. As the Expert Panel noted, it was observed that there was a great deal of content to be covered in four 75-minute sessions, and it might be better suited to longer or additional sessions to allow more time to work with the content. The handouts were also found to be quite crowded, without room for participants' notes. In the process of explaining the content or answering a question, I spontaneously used an illustration or drew a diagram that was not part of the handout. Since they were often helpful, I was encouraged to include them in future versions (see the participant feedback in Appendix C). All three groups of participants commented that my knowledge of the field was both broad and deep, and I was able to marshal that knowledge in way that was helpful to the audience. No matter how far afield the questions went, it was observed that I had content at my fingertips that was informative and

helpful. They also found that I was adept at sharing personal stories – enough vulnerability to be authentic but without over-sharing. Some criticisms were also made of my speaking style, such as my use of technical vocabulary that occasionally left the audience scrambling to understand and my tendency to fade away at the end of a sentence.

As related to specific content, the team made several observations. In session 1 they noted that the positive spin I put on stage 4 of the journey of faith (i.e., the mid-faith crisis) was unexpected, passionate and impactful (again, see Appendix E for the details of the curriculum). In session 2, the reflection questions that were meant to be private introspection turned into table discussion. The story I used to illustrate the formation of the false self in childhood was also found to be dated and a bit impersonal and artificial. On the other hand, the Eustace story in session 3 was very well received. Finally, in session 4, the Get Real section was a bit awkward, leading me to simply read the content without much embellishment or ornamentation. Furthermore, it was not always clear that the process of preparing a regimen was to be a God-led process and not just a self-improvement project – an important point after emphasizing how the mid-faith crisis weans us of our over-estimation of our personal agency.

I noticed in the first debriefing session that the different observers brought very different kinds of observations. This appeared to be the result of the diversity in their backgrounds, especially theological tradition, career, and prior ministry experience. Where these three were similar, the observations were similar; where they diverged, the observations varied. It wasn't a matter of conflicting

observations being made, but rather different aspects of the experience were observed.

The next data collected was at the one-day seminar at Bethany Community Church in St. Catharines, Ontario on October 27. Only two observers were able to attend, and most of their observations were the changes that were implemented from the first presentation of the material. However, a few items of significance were noted. First, we were surprised at how quickly the group of 16 gelled, especially considering they were drawn from such a large congregation (Bethany is approximately twice the size of West Highland) and therefore most had not known each other prior to the session. Nevertheless, they shared quite vulnerably almost from the start. Interestingly, this same dynamic was perceived at West Highland and would appear again at North Burlington Baptist. Another observation was that I moved quite quickly through the fourth session at the end of the day, completing it in 45 minutes rather than the planned 75. I was quite tired by that point in the day and eager to be finished. Finally, we observed that, unlike the other two groups, there were 4 people who were younger than 40. This group was also more weighted to female participants, with only 4 of the 16 participants being men.

The final pass of data collection was from North Burlington Baptist Church in Burlington, Ontario. There, six participants (all females over 40) met on November 4, 11, 18 and 25. Two observations came to the fore with this group that were also echoed in the earlier groups. First, the free-form discussion in session 2 in all three cases led to conversation about personality. That is, in

discussing the false self, there was much speculation on how the false self differs based on personality, and how some dynamics might be an expression of false self in one person and merely the expression of personality in another. The other common observation was that all three groups suggested some kind of follow-up in their feedback, whether an ongoing group meeting monthly or a seminar 6 or 12 months later. In all cases there was a recognition that these four sessions merely started a conversation that many of the participants wanted to keep going.

Interpretations

The observations from the Expert Panel and the first sessions at West Highland were combined to generate a set of alterations to the lesson plans. This is because the Expert Panel feedback was postponed due to an unexpected delay in project approval (which came on September 21) while at the same time the sessions at West Highland had a hard start date on September 23 (instead of October) due to the broader needs of their TREC program. This meant that there was insufficient time to send the curriculum to the Expert Panel, get their feedback, and effect changes to the curriculum based on that feedback before the first session began – as was the original plan.

The interpretations were mostly worked out in the team debrief that occurred after the last session at West Highland. One that was implemented immediately, however, was a shift in the classroom after session 1. The initial classroom was found to be too small for our numbers (which were larger than expected), so we changed to a much larger room for the remaining sessions. The

new room also had the benefits of having a clock I could see (which helped me adjust my pace) and a microphone (which helped with my occasional muttering). After the sessions, several improvements were developed by the team. I added a few of the most helpful illustrations and diagrams to my lecture notes to ensure they would be included in future presentations. This also helped break up the lecture with some content that, while still unidirectional, was a shift in learning style. I also added more white space to the handouts, to create space for the participants to write their own notes. Another way developed to break up the lectures was to reduce the amount of material delivered in that mode, but to expand the Q & A time. It was noted that I am a competent lecturer, but I really shine when answering questions. They found that I spoke with more energy, I am skilled at making off-topic questioners feel understood but redirected the inquiry into an area more relevant to the topic at hand, and I personally felt that the times when the Holy Spirit spoke through me during the sessions was while I was giving these answers. Therefore, we concluded that more time should be given over to open question periods. We debated the value of creating a supportive PowerPoint presentation for the content, but ultimately decided against it as the small group sizes would be depersonalized somewhat by the introduction of a screen to be gathered around. Other ways to get me out from behind the podium were suggested, however. One final move away from lecture was the inclusion of two music videos in sessions 3 and 4.

I also made specific changes to the content for each session (again, see Appendix E for the lesson plans). In session 1, I changed the labels for each

session from abstract descriptions to the clearer seeker, student, servant, and sojourner titles. I personalized the language, replacing the first-person plural we with the second-person singular you. I also added further reading suggestions to all the sessions, based on the content in that session, instead of a single list at the end of the last session. Finally, I included an outline of the rest of the sessions at the end of the first session to inform the participants about the overall learning plan. In session 2, I removed some lengthy quotes from the handout (although I did still read them out), as well as other extraneous details across the entire session to tighten it up. I then added more detailed instructions for the reflection exercises. I also added further Biblical examples to illustrate the principles – an important nuance for more conservative Evangelicals to get on board. This was especially the case at the start of the session 3 handout, where I added five examples of the mid-faith crisis from Scripture. Like for the previous session, I did a great deal of tightening up of the content and included the reflection exercise instructions in the handout itself. The final session remained largely the same, but I did re-write some of the Get Real section to improve the flow, and I removed some unnecessary detail from the Assisting Another section.

After the Bethany presentation, the team developed three primary interpretations from the data. The first was that the material was so intense – for the instructor and the participants – that it did not lend itself well to a one-day seminar. Alternatives for a more sustainable intensive presentation might include splitting it over two Saturdays or offering it in a weekend retreat format to allow for time of silent reflection and rest between the sessions. The second

interpretation related to the quick gelling of all three groups of participants. Since attendance of the sessions was optional, and the session content promoted to the entire congregation ahead of time, these groups were largely self-selecting. The content is certainly not of interest to everyone; many in the congregation were either not at this stage in their journey or were but already had some level of understanding of it and how to proceed through it. However, those who attended the sessions came eager to learn and make sense of this confusing phenomenon. This pre-qualification resulted in groups that were small in proportion to the congregation's size, but very intentional as evidenced by their boldness to share private and often painful stories with others who were as intentional as they. Finally, the presence of some younger participants was possibly due to the fact that, while the mid-faith crisis largely occurs in mid-life, Heuertz notes that people are experiencing their “‘middle passage’... earlier and more frequently than in past generations” (Heuertz 2017, 63). Therefore, while this curriculum primarily appealed to those in their 40s and later, it was still appealing enough to younger adults for them to attend.

In light of the data collected during the second iteration, very few changes were made to the curriculum. Sessions 1 and 4 remained the same, and sessions 2 and 3 only had minor wording changes to make the phrasing less awkward. In short, the second iteration confirmed that the changes made after the first iteration were sound.

The iteration at North Burlington Baptist brought up several suggestions for the final version of the curriculum. First, since questions about personality

arose each time the false self was addressed, it might be useful to include some teaching on the Enneagram, either in session 2 or in an additional session (perhaps between sessions 3 and 4). Since the Enneagram is more focused on mid-life issues and movement towards the true self (Heuertz 2017, 16), it seems the most suitable personality instrument for this purpose. Some time could be made in session 2 for this new material, as some redundancy was identified in the description of the false self, and the second reflection exercise was skipped with this group and they did not seem to have suffered for it. Since that exercise asks the participant to reflect on the impact their false self has had on them, it presumes a self-awareness that might not yet exist as the person may have only become aware of their false self in that session. Second, since there was a common desire for follow-up, it would be helpful to plan this into the curriculum from the start by arranging some form of suitable accompaniment with the congregation's leadership ahead of time, then having the person who coordinated that announce it at the end of the final session. Finally, the language of "dark night of the soul" should be replaced with the more generic "mid-faith crisis." The term led some people to expect a talk on depression or instruction on how to handle suffering or grief. While no one reported this, I also wondered if the Roman Catholic origins of the label might not create needless concern in future participants. Therefore, I updated the curriculum to use "the mid-faith crisis" everywhere except in session 3, where the differentiation between the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit is a helpful distinction.

Outcomes

The primary outcome of my project was a proven curriculum for the mid-faith crisis to a particular demographic – in this case, white, middle to upper-middle class, southern Ontarian Evangelicals (see Appendix E). Refined by the feedback provided by myself, the Expert Panel, the observers and three sets of primary participants, a set of lessons plans that are suitable to this target audience has been developed. While further refinements are possible and no doubt necessary the further the audience differs demographically from the tested congregations, I would not hesitate to offer this curriculum in other Evangelical contexts in the future.

While the feedback demonstrates that learning objectives were achieved, without the administration of a post-test, primary data does not exist to support this claim. I considered including such an evaluation, but I decided against it as such instruments are unheard of in congregational Christian education circles. I wanted the experience to feel like any other learning experience in the participants' context, so I sacrificed some data collection for the sake of the ministry atmosphere. The goal was that the students understand the mid-faith crisis and its role in the spiritual life, appreciate that role and develop hope for themselves and others undergoing the experience, and know how to co-operate with the movement of the Holy Spirit in the mid-faith crisis in their own lives and the lives of others. The overwhelmingly positive feedback in the post-course feedback session, as well as anecdotal comments made to me and the observers,

indicates this but does not prove it. The students frequently remarked on how helpful they found the material and how surprised they were that they'd never heard the topic taught before, despite decades of faithful church participation. In all cases there remains a great deal more to learn, but the topic has been introduced and many of them have the resources to continue their exploration with the help of their community of faith. Therefore, in the future I would validate these outcomes by administering a simple questionnaire three months after the last session with Likert scale questions, asking the participants to evaluate to what degree (if at all) they found the planned outcomes manifested in their lives.

Conducting the teaching under the auspices of an action research project did not appear to have much impact on the participants as learners. I attempted to make the data collection as unobtrusive as possible. I conducted the teaching within the framework of an existing Christian education ministry. The observers were seated to the sides or even behind the participants so as not to be in their line of sight. In fact, apart from the consent form orientation at the start and the feedback focus group at the end, it was conducted like any other seminar or Sunday school class. And the participants appeared to respond in the ways that I find learners typically do in these situations. They were not especially reserved, nor did they attempt to make it easy for me by refraining from asking difficult questions. They appeared to have been caught up in the experience and many shared tearfully about their own mid-faith crises, despite being in a group with people from their congregation that they didn't know especially well.

I was also hoping that the observers would grow in their own ministry of spiritual formation, having witnessed how a spiritual formation seminar was put together, delivered, and iteratively refined. All the observers said they benefited from the experience – two remarking that they were still learning things about the mid-faith crisis even after hearing it for the third time! However, only two of the observers feel called and gifted for a ministry of teaching and equipping. The others were thankful for the experience but have no desire to lead their own spiritual formation group in the future. Nevertheless, there are many forms of spiritual formation ministry, many of which do not involve getting in front of a group of people to teach. So I still hope.

Finally, I learned a few things about myself, my gifts and my ministry approach. This was not an explicit goal at the outset of the project (see the identified benefits in the Ethics section above); it was one that emerged naturally as I recorded my inner experiences as part of the data collection. First, I had a bit of an existential crisis as I was teaching the first sessions at West Highland. I wondered if you can even teach on the mid-faith crisis, or if it can only be experienced. Would teaching on it only making things worse by giving the illusion of control through understanding? As Anthony de Mello warns, was I just giving formulas?

In the things that really matter, life, love, reality, God, no one can teach you a thing. All they can do is give you formulas. And as soon as you have a formula, you have reality filtered through the mind of someone else. If you take those formulas you will be imprisoned. You will wither and when you come to die you will not have known what it means to see for yourself. (De Mello 1991, 68)

Fortunately, further reading – this time from Scott Peck – came to my rescue. Peck agrees that life contains much ineffable mystery but insists that teaching such as that found in the curriculum “will facilitate their journey in three ways: it will help them to take advantage of grace along the way; it will give them a surer sense of direction; and it will provide encouragement” (Peck 1978, 296). Second, my rabbinic style of spiritual direction came to the fore while I was teaching. During my training as a spiritual director, my personal style of direction was described as rabbinic – that is, doing instruction through asking open-ended questions. As mentioned above, I learned that I should give as much time over to questions and answers, as I not only was at my best as a teacher but I often found the Holy Spirit would spontaneously give me a word or illustration to communicate a point. These incidents left a powerful impression on both myself and the learners. These words of knowledge became quite routine and I will therefore continue to build lots of Q&A time into future lesson plans to create space for such expressions of grace to occur.

Conclusions and Implications

This project developed the curriculum for a small group experience that introduces conservative Evangelical churchgoers to the spiritual phenomenon of the mid-faith crisis. This endeavour emerged from my own spiritual journey, needs that frequently arise in my ministry of spiritual direction, and the charism of my faith community. It addressed a shortcoming in the spiritual theology – or what the Puritans called practical divinity – in modern Evangelical circles:

developmental spirituality. Following Emilinai's PDCA cycle, the four 75-minute sessions were vetted by a panel of experts and then presented in three different Evangelical church contexts, with refinement between each presentation, with the help of a team of observers.

The outcome of the project is a proven presentation of the mid-faith crisis, suitable to Evangelical audiences in suburban southern Ontario. This is a ministry resource that myself or other spiritual direction practitioners could use as a starting point for other contexts – the seed for further continuous improvement cycles. Some interesting further modifications could be made to increase the effectiveness of the material. For instance, material could be added on how the false self intersects with personality – namely through teaching the Enneagram. The format of the content delivery might be made both more and less intense by offering it in a retreat format, with spiritual exercises and times of rest between the sessions. Planned pastoral follow-up might also be scheduled after the sessions are complete, either individually with a spiritual director or as a group in one or more anniversary sessions to review the material and answer questions arising from when the content had a chance to steep in real life.

The implementation of an iterative and incremental methodology itself bore fruit as well. I learned that it was a powerful ministry improvement technique, yielding many insightful and implementable suggestions in only a single iteration. While multiple iterations are helpful, this project shows that many iterations are not necessarily required for significant improvement. I would also heartily recommend the inclusion of the Expert Panel at the start of the process, as

their perspective was very different from the observers on the scene. A debrief after each session, rather than one at the end of the set of four sessions, would also keep the recollections and insights fresher. Finally, a plurality of observers with different backgrounds and lenses is very valuable and should be carefully considered when recruiting such helpers.

Overall, all the stakeholders were pleased with how the project went. I look forward to adopting this approach in further small-group spiritual formation experiences. Since this is the direction my ministry is taking – moving out of congregational ministry to retreats and guest teaching – I anticipate deriving much benefit from what I've learned here.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

In the Holiness classic *Hinds Feet on High Places* (Hurnard 2010), the Great Shepherd invites the protagonist Much-Afraid to journey with him to the High Places. When that pilgrimage takes an unexpected turn and leads her downwards – and into the desert no less – she understandably balks at this “apparent contradiction to the promise” (Hurnard 2010, Location 906). The Shepherd patiently explains that

an endless succession of my people have come this way. They came to learn the secret of royalty, and now you are here, Much-Afraid. You, too, are in the line of succession. It is a great privilege, and if you will, you also may learn the lesson of the furnace and of the great darkness just as surely as did those before you. Those who come down to the furnace go on their way afterwards as royal men and women, princes and princesses of the Royal Line. (Hurnard 2010, Location 944)

This project explored that royal road that Much-Afraid and countless others have walked. In chapter 2 I told the story of my own journey on the royal road, and the “lessons of the furnace and of the great darkness” that I learned. In chapter three, I developed a model of the royal road experience with the assistance of Scripture, Christian history and modern psychological research. Finally, chapter 4 recounted

my attempt to disseminate awareness of the royal road through a small-group experience developed for my own tradition, conservative Evangelicals.

Outcomes

These three chapters echo the threefold structure of the Doctor of Ministry program in Spiritual Formation at Tyndale Seminary (Tyndale 2015, 25). It begins in the first year with the first-person perspective of spiritual formation: “God and me” (Tyndale 2015, 25). This aspect focuses on the student’s own spiritual growth, where he or she is the subject being studied. In my case, there were three primary outcomes in the year. As I worked with a spiritual director, my long-standing acedia and prayerlessness were scrutinized with love and spiritual muscles that had long been seized up began to loosen and begin to slowly move once more. This forward motion began to accelerate under the regular application over an extended period of the practices of fixed hour prayer and fasting. Finally, it all came together in the composition of my spiritual autobiography. While I was initially somewhat skeptical of the value of the exercise, the perspective I gained by reflecting on my spiritual journey revealed some dynamics I had been blind to. Chief among these were chronic habits of sin, such as making Ishmaels with my own resources when I became impatient with God opening doors to fulfill what I believed was my calling. But I also became aware of the awakening that was occurring in my life during that first year in the program, and how it was an unveiling of the fruit of divine work that had been going on in secret for years.

In the second year of the program, the perspective shifts to the third person: “God and humans” (Tyndale 2015, 25) in general. This aspect focuses on the academic discipline of Christian spirituality, where the student becomes a researcher and theorist. I took this opportunity to systematically explore some of the ideas about spiritual formation that I had long wanted to work through, and then synthesize them into an integrated model. In particular, I wanted to develop an understanding of the faith paradigm shift, which so often happens in mid-life, that leads to a qualitatively different kind of spiritual life. The various labels of illumination, dark night of the soul, Christian perfection, entire sanctification, higher/deeper life, and baptism of the Holy Spirit or second blessing all seemed to describe this experience from different theological and historical vantage points. I identified when this experience seems to happen (using the categories of developmental spirituality), why such strong medicine is necessary (relying on the concepts of the false and true self), how the experience presents and proceeds (guided by John Coe’s understanding of the dark night of the soul) and the ways in which people can cooperate with this divine work, whether in their own lives or others’. Through the development of this model, I built a solid foundation from which to understand my own experiences and more deeply participate with the Holy Spirit’s activity in my life, as well as a full toolbox for my ministry to encourage and equip other believers also passing through a mid-faith crisis.

The program concludes in its third year with a second-person perspective: “God and you” (Tyndale 2015, 25). This aspect focuses on the ministry of spiritual formation, where the student becomes a reflective practitioner. I took my

model of spiritual formation on the road, developing a small group experience introducing the participants to the concept of the mid-faith crisis. After vetting the curriculum with a panel of experts, I then presented it to three different white middle-class congregations. With the help of trained observers and debriefing exercises with each group, I improved the curriculum and learned more about myself as a spiritual formation practitioner and how the Holy Spirit has gifted me to build up His church. In particular, I confirmed my rabbinic style of spiritual direction, and trained my nascent spiritual gift of knowledge.

Future Implications

A great deal of work remains to be done in raising awareness of the mid-faith crisis in conservative Evangelical circles. As mentioned above, the curriculum I created here could be further improved and even expanded. Further research on the phenomenology of the experience is also warranted. How widespread is the experience in conservative Evangelical congregations? What is its demographic distribution by age, gender, and socioeconomic level? Do those passing through it remain in those faith communities, or do they leave – and do those who leave eventually return? Are there certain elements of the mid-faith crisis experience that are accentuated or diminished in this tradition? Are certain interventions more helpful than others? These discoveries would assist with the task of disseminating life-giving instruction on this critical stage of faith.

In addition to these research implications, personal implications arise from this portfolio. I started the Doctor of Ministry with a plan to earn a professional

credential that would buy me credibility when applying for the sort of jobs I felt were the next step in my calling to teach on spiritual formation, such as a pastor of spiritual formation in a congregation or professor of spiritual formation at a Bible college or seminary. However, things have changed. I have repented of making any more Ishmaels, of realizing God's calling by forcing a door open in my time and my way. Instead, I'll take my approach from Dallas Willard's career advice to his fellow faculty:

I decided I would do nothing trying to secure myself or gain advancement. I am very much a literalist in terms of the Bible. The Bible says promotion does not come from the East or the West, it comes from the Lord. So OK, I don't have to do anything about promotion... I'll tell you why I have approached things in this way. When I was at Baylor University as a young man, as a very green young man, I was watching other green young men trying to find a place to preach. And the Lord said something very simple to me: "Never try to find a place to speak, try to have something to say." (Willard 2003)

Willard was not advocating a passive approach to career. Here and elsewhere he urged Christian scholars to write and teach carefully, rigorously and prayerfully. But it was in this arena – in the scholarly work – that Willard encouraged striving, not in self-promotion or fishing for professional opportunities.

So my new rules of engagement are as follows: I cease from all striving to "find a place to speak," instead accepting only unsolicited invitations to practice my teaching gift. These invitations may vary in scale from a brief question during coffee time after Sunday service to a full-blown job offer. But the key is that I am no longer working to generate opportunities to teach. Between invitations, my effort is now focused on trying to "have something to say." This preparation

consists of three related activities. First and foremost, I seek to maintain my own spiritual vitality. Without this, it would be dangerous for myself and others to undertake any teaching ministry. Second, on the professional development side, I keep abreast of what others are doing in spiritual formation by reading widely in the field (guided by friends' suggestions and the book reviews section of *The Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*). Finally, I post to my blog twice a month as a way to work out my thinking between formal teaching engagements. While it is publicly accessible, I take no note of the visitor count and I turned off all reporting – it merely serves an outlet to force me to structure my ideas for presentation to others. These three practices are rewarding in and of themselves, and they help me to have something to say when an opportunity to teach does arise. In the words of one of my old seminary professors, they help me wait on the Lord without waiting around.

I have already seen this approach effortlessly generate opportunities as unexpected as they are fruitful, and I look forward to a richer ministry (and life) in the decades to come. In short, the Doctor of Ministry ruined my career plans – in the very best way possible.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS

Expert Panel Member Consent Form

Name: _____

- I understand that I will be participating in an action research project titled The Mid-Faith Crisis Project as a content matter and instructional expert. In this role, I will review the proposed lesson plans and give suggestions for how it might better achieve the stated learning objectives.
- I understand that I will not receive any remuneration for this feedback.
- I give permission for my name to be included in the project in the list of expert panel members.
- I give permission for my feedback to be presented in the project report, in summary form and without specific attribution to myself (i.e., anonymously).
- I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary, that I am not waiving any legal rights, and that I may withdraw consent at any time without penalty.
- I am aware that I may direct any future questions to the Principal Investigator Tom Sweeney, either via cell phone (905-630-3390), email (pastor@tapestrychurch.ca) or simply in person. I am also aware that I am welcome to contact Tom's research supervisor, Dr. Mark Chapman, Associate Professor of Research Methods, Tyndale Seminary, via email (mchapman@tyndale.ca) or office phone (416-226-6620, Ext. 2208).
- I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary and that I may direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of that Board at reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this project:
YES ___ NO ___

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Observer Consent Form

Name: _____

- I understand that I will be participating in an action research project titled The Mid-Faith Crisis Project as an observer. In this role, I will observe up to twelve 75-minute teaching sessions and participate in debriefing sessions to improve the quality of the curriculum.
- I understand that I will not receive any remuneration for this work.

- I give permission for my name to be included in the project in the list of observers.
- I give permission for my observations and suggestions to be presented in the project report, in summary form and without specific attribution to myself (i.e., anonymously).
- I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary, that I am not waiving any legal rights, and that I may withdraw consent at any time without penalty.
- I am aware that I may direct any future questions to the Principal Investigator Tom Sweeney, either via cell phone (905-630-3390), email (pastor@tapestrychurch.ca) or simply in person. I am also aware that I am welcome to contact Tom's research supervisor, Dr. Mark Chapman, Associate Professor of Research Methods, Tyndale Seminary, via email (mchapman@tyndale.ca) or office phone (416-226-6620, Ext. 2208).
- I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary and that I may direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of that Board at reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this project:
 YES ___ NO ___

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Observer Non-Disclosure Agreement

I understand that during the course of my role as an observer I may learn private information about the research participants. I will keep this information in the strictest confidence and not disclose it to anyone, and to return all observation notes to the Researcher at the end of each session. However, I have no obligation to treat as confidential any personal notes I recorded on the content being presented.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Learner Information Cover Letter

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

Welcome to the Group for the Perplexed! This is a four-part class about a common (and commonly misunderstood) period in the life of mature believers where God grows us deeply that one theologian called the Dark Night of the Soul. Before we dive in, however, it is important that you understand that the presentation of this material is also part of my action research project for the Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation program at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. This means that I and my team of observers will be making notes about how well each of the learning activities went, as well as asking for your feedback at the end of the last session. This information will be used to improve the course. No individual information about anyone will be recorded, and you are free to opt out of the data collection for the research project while remaining a full participant in the class.

Turn over this sheet to review the consent form so you understand the project in greater detail and the (minimal) affect it has on you as a learner. If you have any questions, either now or in the future, do not hesitate to ask me in person, by phone or email. Thanks for your attention, and I look forward to embarking on this journey with you!

Regards,

Tom Sweeney

Learner Consent Form

Name: _____

- I understand that I will be participating in an action research project titled The Mid-Faith Crisis Project as a learner. In this role, I will attend four 75-minute teaching sessions.
- I understand that observers will be present in the sessions and that they will take notes about the participants' engagement with the material. I understand that these observations will be noted in general, without any notes made about specific individuals or any participants' names recorded.
- I understand that the proposed study will generate the following benefits:
 - A greater understanding of and appreciation for the dark night of the soul in the life of faith
 - Practical insight into how to cooperate with this work of the Holy Spirit in my own life, and how to support others as they pass through such seasons.
 - A tested curriculum about the dark night that can be used in the future.
 - The observers will learn how a small group experience is developed and implemented.
- I understand that the proposed study bears the following risks:
 - Other participants may not respect the rules of confidentiality regarding personal information I disclose in discussions.
 - I may be upset by details brought up from my own life during the reflection exercises.
- The final session will conclude with an optional feedback exercise. I give permission for any feedback I offer to be presented in the project report, combined with that of other learners present and without specific attribution to myself (i.e., anonymously).
- I understand that the project report will be available to me through my pastor.
- I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary, that I am not waiving any legal rights, and that I may withdraw consent at any time without penalty.
- I am aware that I may direct any future questions to the Principal Investigator Tom Sweeney, either via cell phone (905-630-3390), email (pastor@tapestrychurch.ca) or simply in person. I am also aware that I am welcome to contact Tom's research supervisor, Dr. Mark Chapman, Associate Professor of Research Methods, Tyndale Seminary, via email (mchapman@tyndale.ca) or office phone (416-226-6620, Ext. 2208).
- I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary and that I may direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of that Board at reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this project:

YES ___ NO ___

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: PROMOTIONAL COPY

The following text was used to promote the small group series in each of the congregations where it was presented:

A Group for the Perplexed

Do you ever find yourself thinking:

- Is this all there is to the Christian life? It's OK, but I thought there would be more.
- Why doesn't God seem as real to me as He used to? I wish I could go back to how things were.
- After all that's happened, I'm beginning to wonder if I even know who God really is anymore.
- I have so many doubts that it feels like I'm losing my faith. The strain of maintaining the façade that all is well is starting to get to me. I don't want to let anyone down, but I don't know how much longer I can keep it up.

If you've had some (or all!) of these thoughts, then you're not alone.

Throughout the history of the Christianity, pastors, mystics, theologians and laypeople alike have undergone this experience as well. Given the name "the dark night of the soul" in the 16th century, this is not a regrettable detour in the life of faith, but the royal road to maturity that God takes His people on.

In this small group, you will learn:

- What the dark night of the soul is, when it happens and how to identify it

- To understand and appreciate why God uses the dark night to mature His people
- How to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in your own dark night
- How to appropriately support those around you passing through a dark night

Tom Sweeney is the pastor of Tapestry Church in Burlington, and a student in the Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation program at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. The development and delivery of this small group is part of his final research project.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

After the fourth session, a weighted list of feedback was elicited from each group on what they liked and what could be improved. Here are the results:

West Highland Baptist Church, October 21, 2018

| Liked | Improvement |
|---|---|
| Transparency – honesty and balance (3) | Clear definition of the dark night (5) |
| Personal examples (2) | Use our questions to build content (2) |
| Responsive to questions and comments (2) | Hard to hear questions (1) |
| Notes were linear and followed (1) | Room temperature (1) |
| Relaxed style (1) | Know you audience – spiritual journey (1) |
| Topic – we need this (1) | Terminology / vocab (1) |
| Eye contact (1) | Personality types (1) |
| Diagrams – visual and got me thinking (1) | Poll the audience (1) |
| Answers – knowledgeable (1) | |
| Only 4 weeks rather than 8 (1) | |

Bethany Community Church, October 27, 2018

| Liked | Improvement |
|--|---|
| Examples helpful (8) | More space in handouts for notes (4) |
| Music videos helpful (8) | Last section confusing / rushed (3) |
| Emotional / spiritual growth diagram helpful (7) | Allow participants to introduce themselves to one another (3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note: Some disagreed with this |
| Time went fast (6) | Allow more sharing time (2) |
| 1 day preferred over multiple (6) | |
| Helpful to normalize the stages (5) | |
| Teacher personable (5) | |
| Teacher clear/concise (5) | |
| The 4 sections worked (5) | |
| Teacher non-judgemental (4) | |
| Good flow (3) | |
| Good terminology – understandable (3) | |
| Helped with clarity/awareness discerning in others (3) | |
| Interest maintained in next section (2) | |
| Teacher repeated questions (2) | |
| This size group or smaller (2) | |

**North Burlington Baptist Church, November 25,
2018**

| Liked | Improvement |
|--|---|
| Personal examples (4) | Confused about meaning/purpose of lesson 2 (4) |
| Visual graphics (4) | Would like a follow-up (2) |
| Experience (4) | 8 weeks to give time to sink in (2) |
| Good listener (4) | Go slower, give more time to understand and flesh out content (2) |
| Dark night was demystified (3) | Lesson 2 – how could a coping mechanism be sinful (1) |
| After church service, instead of at night (2) | |
| Enthusiasm (1) | |
| Concise handouts (1) | |
| Difference between depression and dark night (1) | |

APPENDIX D: CODES

All data was tagged with the following codes as part of the interpretation process:

- Iteration – The cycle in which the data was collected. This indicates when and where the data was collected, as well as the version of the curriculum that was being commented upon.
 - I0 = Expert Panel feedback
 - I1 = West Highland Baptist Church
 - I2 = Bethany Community Church
 - I3 = North Burlington Baptist Church
- Processing – Whether the data is a raw observation (merely a record of what occurred) or an interpretation (often with some suggestion for changes for the future).
 - OBS = Observation
 - INT = Interpretation
- Domain – The area the data relates to:
 - CONT = The content that was taught
 - ACT = The learning activity
 - PRES = The presentation of the content, including the teacher's speaking ability
 - ENV = The physical learning environment
 - FORM = The format (i.e., time of day and week or the session duration)
 - INT = The teacher's internal experience of the preparation or delivery

APPENDIX E: THE CURRICULUM AFTER THE FINAL ITERATION

Learning Objectives

The learning outcomes intended for these series of lessons include:

- Cognitive: To understand what the dark night of the soul is, when it happens and how to identify it
- Affective: To appreciate why God uses the dark night to mature His people
- Behavioural: Practical insight into how to cooperate with this work of the Holy Spirit in one's own life, and how to support others as they pass through such seasons

Lesson Plans

Session I: When the Mid-Faith Comes

Activity 1: Welcome, Orientation and Consent Forms (15 min)

- Welcome the students, explain how the sessions are part of a research project and what that means, then walk them through the consent forms

Activity 2: Sharing of personal history and expectations (15 min)

- Ask each student what drew them to the class description and what they hope to learn in the class. Students can pass if they would like.
- If there are more than 8 students, divide into groups of 4-5 and then have each group summarize the common themes to the others

Activity 3: Stage I (10 min)

- Illustration: stages 1-3, "Up and to the right"
- Lecture introducing the first stage of the spiritual life (see handout) – 5 min
- Discussion of stage 1 (5 min) – comments, personal experience and questions

Activity 4: Stage II (10 min)

- Lecture introducing the second stage of the spiritual life (see handout) – 5 min
- Discussion of stage 2 (5 min) – comments, personal experience and questions

Activity 5: Stage III (10 min)

- Lecture introducing the third stage of the spiritual life (see handout) – 5 min
- Discussion of stage 3 (5 min) – comments, personal experience and questions

Activity 6: Stage IV (10 min)

- Expand illustration: stage 4 is "down and to the right"

- Lecture introducing the fourth stage of the spiritual life (see handout) – 5 min
- Lead-in to the next session: The fourth stage happens because of the false self – 5 min

Session II: Why the Mid-Faith Crisis Comes

Activity 1: Lecture introducing the false self (20 min)

- Origin (see handout)
 - Illustration: Little Timmy
 - Timmy’s team lost on the playground yesterday, and he overhears the jocks blaming him and arguing with one another so he doesn’t end up on their team today (so their false self can remain intact)
 - He doesn’t have the ego-strength and sense of self to explore what he’s feeling with God, so he seeks a way to hide; alienation is a nightmare, especially for young children and teens
 - When recess comes, Timmy is feeling sick to his stomach out of fear. He offers to clean the blackboard over recess. The teacher response, “What a nice thing to do!” But it’s not nice; it’s a fearful, neurotic, sinful thing for Timmy to do.
 - Soon he figures out that staying away from sports, staying under the radar, distracting others from his insecurities and weaknesses by excelling in school (and later at work), by being funny – all of that really works.
 - And so he unintentionally starts to build a false self, a persona that everyone, even he, thinks is him.
 - Genesis 3:8-10: Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”
- Definition (see handout)
 - Illustration: The real self circle within an outer circle (false self), and the true self as a separate circle
- Clues (see handout)

Activity 2: Reflection and Discussion (15 min)

- On the index card provided, reflect on where you recognize the false self in your own attitudes and behaviour. Resist the temptation to identify the false self in others; this deflection is a self-defense mechanism your false self commonly deploys.

- These will remain private, but if you would like to share, or ask a question, please go ahead.

Activity 3: Lecture on the impact of the false self (15 min)

- See handout
- Illustration: 2 false selves interacting, massaging what they say and filtering what they hear

Activity 4: Lecture on the religious false self (20 min)

- See handout

Session III: What the Mid-Faith Crisis Looks Like

Activity 1: Discussion (15 min)

- Where have you noticed the false self in your life this week?
- Are there any questions arising from last week?

Activity 2: Eustice's Story (10 min)

- Do not to respond to the false self by trying to identify and kill it; that will just unveil a subtler false self behind it. Instead, you need the help of Another.
- Read the story of how Eustice becomes a boy again from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

Activity 3: Lecture on the Dark Night of the Senses (15 min)

- See handout
- Illustrations
 - The charts of emotional intensity (consolation) and spiritual maturity over time; the effort to try to get back to the peak
 - The iceberg of sin getting pushed up
- Music Video: *The Rain Keeps Falling* by Andrew Peterson

Activity 4: Reflection and Discussion (10 min)

- On the index card provided, describe the dynamics of the dark night of the senses you have experienced
- You can share from your reflection or raise a question

Activity 5: Lecture on the Dark Night(s) of the Spirit (15 min)

- See handout
- Illustration: the cycles, (which is actually a spiral, although it doesn't always feel that way)

Activity 6: Discussion (10 min)

- On the index card provided, describe the dynamics of the dark night of the spirit you have experienced
- You can share from your reflection or raise a question

Session IV: How to Cooperate with the Mid-Faith Crisis

Activity 1: Get Real (10 min)

- See handout – 5 min
- Music Video: *Be Kind to Yourself* by Andrew Peterson

- Discussion, sharing and questions – 5 min

Activity 2: Linger with what Provokes You (20 min)

- See handout – 10 min
- My example of a regimen (fatherhood) – 5 min
- Discussion, sharing and questions – 5 min

Activity 3: Huddle Up (10 min)

- See handout – 5 min
- Discussion, sharing and questions – 5 min

Activity 4: Assisting Another and Exploring Further (20 min)

- See handout – 5 min
- Discussion (esp. brainstorming how we can assist others), sharing and questions – 10 min
- To Explore More (handout) – 5 min

Activity 5: Debrief (15 min)

Group feedback on what was good in the sessions and what could be improved

APPENDIX F: QUESTIONS FOR THE EXPERT PANEL

The following questions were asked of each member of the panel, derived from Emiliani's course evaluation questions (Emiliani 2015, 111):

- What waste, unevenness, or unreasonableness could be eliminated from the learning activities or their constituent parts?
 - Waste: Activities that do not directly contribute to the learning objectives (21)
 - Unevenness: Activities where the demands placed on the learners fluctuate significantly (23)
 - Unreasonableness: Activities that overburden the learners (23)
- How could the flow within and between the learning activities be improved?
- How could the learning activities better engage different learning styles?
- What risks are the learning activities incurring, and how could they be avoided or mitigated?
How else could the learning activities be improved to better achieve the intended learning outcomes?

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