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Grace Leads to Joy:

Spiritual Formation and the Examen

Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
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of Doctor of Ministry
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by

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Toronto, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this portfolio was to study how best to lead church congregants in Christian spiritual discernment toward spiritual formation. This portfolio begins with the author's spiritual autobiography and with that knowledge the model of spiritual formation was developed. The spiritual model can be pictured using an image of a wheel where Christ is placed at the hub (the center) of one's life and is connected to all the spokes (or parts) of one's life. The model works to encourage people to move Christ closer to the center of their lives, where they can live and have their being in their "true selves," as God's will intends.

Using this model of spiritual formation, a field research project was developed to help spiritually form the spiritual leaders of the Oakridge Presbyterian Church congregation towards a greater unity in Christ. Using the Examen as a spiritual practice helped guide participants to focus and be intentional about noticing God's presence in all things and therefore helping to keep Christ as the centre of their life. The field research component helped determine how the congregation's spiritual leaders had deepened their awareness of the presence of God in daily life.

DEDICATION

To my five children:

Luke

Elleana

Kiera

Jacob

Nico

May the joy of God's grace and God's presence
guide your hearts and minds every day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My commitment to the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program took me by surprise. I was not looking for more work but felt God's nudge to do so. This nudge came with a desire to learn more about spiritual formation. This journey has been energizing, challenging and transforming.

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In a practical way, my congregation has provided the context to engage the new insights I learned. I am thankful to the Session for allowing me the time for further study and encouraging me to proceed with the research project in the congregation. I am grateful to all those who took eight weeks out of their lives to be active participants in this research. My DMin program has energized my ministry and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to do this study in conjunction with my congregation and to share the excitement of what I learned with others.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSF	Christian Spiritual Formation
OPC	Oakridge Presbyterian Church
PCC	The Presbyterian Church in Canada

GLOSSARY

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

- Congregant:** Anyone who participates in the life and ministry of the congregation whether the individual is a member or not.
- Grace:** The gift of being loved unconditionally by God and consistently receiving from God what we did not earn or deserve.
- Joy:** The experience of receiving the blessing of God's grace and peace in Jesus Christ both in times of celebration and in times of suffering.
- Means of Grace:** The things in life through which God gives grace to God's people.
- Session:** The top authoritative decision-making body of the congregation. The session is comprised of elected teaching elders and elected ruling elders.
- Staff:** A person hired by the congregation to take responsibility in a specific area of congregational ministry.
- The Good Life:** The good life is the ultimate end to which one is oriented and directed by one's desires. The 'true good life' is life orientated toward the kingdom of God. The 'false good

life' is life oriented to the kingdom of personal success, superiority and entitlement.

Ruling Elder: A lay spiritual leader selected by the members of the congregation. These leaders have a seat on the session.

Teaching Elder: An elder who is ordained as clergy and functions on the session as the one who leads, teaches, and preaches.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2017, after serving as a pastor for 21 years, I began contemplating further theological study. I had accumulated five years of study leave and had a deep desire to use it in a meaningful way. During my work in Malawi, Africa, from 2008-2011, I had witnessed the joy of the gospel in the lives of the Malawians. In spite of the poverty and suffering in Malawi, there seemed to be a higher measure of joy compared to other more affluent societies. This joy was so much more evident than I had previously experienced in a group of believers, that I eventually came to the decision to study this theme of joy. I desired to examine joy in the framework of spiritual formation within a community – with the goal of learning and exploring how best to use this for the betterment of the congregation that I currently work for and serve. My central question was this: How can I help my congregation more readily experience the joy coming from the creator of love and unconditional grace?

My desire to enter the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program in spiritual formation at Tyndale University was also motivated in part by my own awareness of my weakness in the area of spiritual formation. As a pastor, I see spiritual formation among my congregants as vital to their relationship with the Lord and their desire to serve Christ in His Kingdom. It was important for me to also be forming myself and thus equipping myself with some tools for spiritual formation that I could pass on to those I lead.

The work in the church is exciting. I am meant to be a pastor. I love people and have a strong desire to help them on their spiritual journey. The society we live in does not make it easy for families to carve out specific time for their spiritual formation. All kinds of societal influences are forming individuals, whether they are aware of it or not. My understanding and hope are that, if I can help my congregants with their spiritual formation, I will in turn help them see the grace of God at work in their lives, allowing them to experience more joy. As the angels said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you *good news of great joy for all people*” (Luke 2:10, emphasis added). It was my highest aim to have my congregants experience the great joy of the good news and to harness that joy of the gospel in their everyday lives, despite the fear brought on by the difficulties and hardships that are part of our ordinary lives.

In writing the stories of my life, I became aware of my own spiritual formation and gained a greater understanding of how all of life contributes to one’s spiritual formation. As Atkinson says, “Telling our stories may be the most important way we have of giving our lives meaning, healing those parts of our lives that need it, making peace with ourselves, and gaining the power from stories that they have for us. Through telling our stories we can experience many forms of release, recovery, resolution or renewal” (Atkinson 1995, 16). Through the writing of my Spiritual Autobiography, I became more aware that a person is spiritually formed through hundreds of small experiences. One derives meaning from a situation as one reflects on and decides if the event was a positive forming experience or a negative one. Throughout the experience of writing down the

narratives of my own spiritual formation, I was pointed again and again to the undeserved grace of God which, when recognized, gave way to gratitude which led to me experiencing great joy in my life.

Reading other spiritual biographies inspired my preparation before I began writing. The biographies of widely known spiritual leaders motivated me to glean from my own life the ways in which my spirituality had been formed. For example, Corrie Ten Boom's *Tramp for the Lord* was an inspiring story of a confident faith in God's forgiving love and a determination to be a disciple of Christ, regardless of uncertainties (Ten Boom, 1974). The miracles she experienced and the joy she found in close relationship with God was evident in her writing. Saint Augustine of Hippo's determined quest to find truth, meaning and peace led him to hear the voice of God (Augustine, 1955). St. Teresa of Avila's determination in prayer brought her great joy and pleasure as she grew closer to God through the Holy Spirit (Avila, 1904). C.S. Lewis left his childhood faith and became a determined atheist. His intellectual questioning and reflecting on evil, pain and suffering led him back to faith in Christ - encapsulating God's grace and joy (Lewis, 1995). For Lewis, joy was intimately linked to receiving the blessing of God's grace and peace. These spiritual biographies showed the width and depth of God's diversity in working, moving, and forming spiritual entities. Every narrative was as unique and evolving as the person God formed, since each individual made different choices and experienced different upbringings, societies, traumas, gifts, relationships, and other diverse experiences or backgrounds. Each narrative told the story of experiencing God's grace in a

variety of ways, which ultimately led them to experience more joy. Despite their differences, each spiritual giant was formed and moved by the one common spiritual formation goal - being all God created them to be.

In the events and stories of my life, the theme that came up repeatedly was the grace of God in my relationships. I discovered that relationships are based on a love that points to the love of God found in Jesus and the people who are brought into our lives. These human relationships, though imperfect, are a strong vehicle for spiritual formation. It is these relationships that are the fibers of our narrative weaving with which we form the tapestries of our spiritual stories. This does not negate the responsibility of the church in spiritual formation, but it shows how the relationships in the body of Christ, the church, are an integral part of that formation. The church is made of individuals who are each called to be part of the body of Christ reaching out to the world (Ephesians 4:11,12). Through the body of Christ, individuals experience first-hand the grace of Christ and the joy of the good news.

This narrative is the story of spiritual formation in my life. I have become more cognizant of how all are formed in a spiritual sense whether it is by a Christian or non-Christian influence. Consumerism, as a modern-day example, could be viewed as a spiritual quest. James K. Smith refers to this quest as the practice of cultural liturgies through which one practices the things they love. “To be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be embarked on a kind of unconscious journey toward a destination of your dreams” (Smith, 2016, 10). ‘Cultural liturgies’ is the idea that what we do teaches us how to love. Cultural liturgies are

the repetitive practices, such as shopping or binge watching or decorating our Christmas trees, which point our hearts in a direction that defines who we are and where we belong. We are spiritually formed by what we do. One is exposed to and participates in formation spiritual or otherwise. Careful examination of how I was formed shows that I was predominately formed in a Christian spiritual direction. Yet at the same time, I was influenced by other formative forces away from Christian spiritual formation. These secular influences came partly from my family and were reinforced by values of western culture such as consumerism, prestige, pride, greed, pleasure, jealousy, and fear.

Though secular influences as listed above are to be resisted in the journey toward spiritual formation, there are influences from secular culture which are consistent with God's will for our lives. For example, the movement toward social justice and equality in our society. Though still present, racial and other forms of discrimination in Canada are not tolerated within our laws. Another example of positive influences in our culture would be the increased focus on sustainable environmental practices to care for the world and preserve the goodness of God's creation for the next generations. This is a direct movement toward putting oneself aside for the benefit of others. As followers of Christ, we are to name such influences and join in the effort to encourage these practices because justice and creation care align with God's love.

Christian spiritual formation is the process by which one is spiritually formed from the false self (when self is the center of one's life) towards the true self when one's life is in union with Christ. Being in union with Christ means

Christ is at the center of one's life. Mulholland explains the concept of the true and false self, arguing that there are two fundamental ways of being human in the world (Mulholland 2016, 22). One is to trust in our human resources and abilities and the other is to trust radically in God in all things. You cannot be sustained in the deeper life in God where one is like Jesus, until you are aware at the deep level of your being. He described these two ways of being in the world as the false self and the true self. "Unless you are aware of these two selves—these two ways of being in the world – you will have great difficulty allowing God to lead you into a deeper life of wholeness in Christ" (Mulholland 2016, 24).

My model for spiritual formation (discussed in Chapter 3) is based on the concept of the false self and the true self. These two ways of being in the world are illustrated in Figure 1. The figure illustrates what Mulholland is stating, but in my model for spiritual formation (chapter 3), the true self is being in union with Christ. The wheel labeled as the false self identifies an individual who is formed by secular influence shaping the individual into a way of being in the world. The outer ring is the combination of cultural practices and liturgies shaping the individual into the false self. The false-self orients one's life into alignment with the values of secular culture. The circle labelled as the true self identifies an individual who is formed by spiritual influences, shaping the individual into a way of being in the world. The outer ring is the spiritual practices and liturgies shaping the individual into the true self.

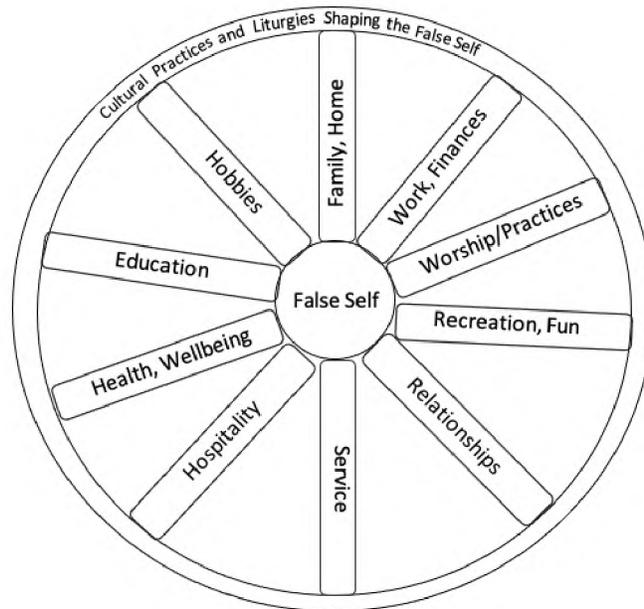


Figure 1: True Self versus False Self

Experiences of the true and false self are reflected in my own life story documented in my spiritual autobiography. Kotre and Hall explain how important it is to know our own story as a key to awareness of oneself in the world and the resulting joy. “Knowing our story well helps us to know ourselves, others, the mystery of life, and the universe around us better than we had before. It has been said that our ability to see our life as a comprehensive story is a key to our own happiness” (Kotre and Hall 1990, 16). A spiritual autobiography is a kind of debriefing of one’s life. In a spiritual autobiography, one critically examines one’s life and reflects on how one has progressed from the false self toward the true self in terms of spiritual formation.

In terms of one’s spiritual formation and the connection with the church, it is vital that one is formed spiritually in the context of the body of Christ. Jesus’ vision of loving one another is the vision of the church. Coming up with strategic plans and objectives for ministry are important, but not at the expense of building community and loving one another as God has loved us. Relationships of love and support for one another are first and foremost the vision of Christ – the vision we are to follow in terms of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is not done alone. The Christian life was never meant to be lived in isolation. It is meant to be lived in Christian community where people strengthen one another in the way of Jesus.

Writing my spiritual autobiography helped me seek the spiritual formation practices that may benefit the congregants that I am called to serve. The basic question I asked in terms of my spiritual autobiography was: How did God form me? How is God forming others and how do I participate more fully in that

process? In other words, what could the plan for spiritual formation be in my congregation? My model for spiritual formation in the congregation (discussed in chapter 3) is a plan to move forward on the spiritual journey from the false self to the true self. My model encourages the congregants to personally reflect on their daily life, building self-awareness in terms of the false and the true self. The true self focuses daily life on loving God and others. The task at hand was to provide a model of spiritual formation that would guide congregants in examining when they are living in the false self. With this increased awareness, the congregants will know to take steps toward opening the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to form them toward the true self in Christ.

The goal of practicing this model in the congregation is an increased awareness of God's loving presence guiding the congregants each day. The result of the awareness and of receiving the gift of God's love, joy and grace will translate into freedom which is rooted in an intimate relationship with God. Freedom in the Christian life is one's confidence of God's loving presence at all times and for eternity. The experience of God's presence provides liberation from fear and affords certain hope despite uncertainty. Grace is the gift of being loved unconditionally by God and consistently receiving from God what we did not earn or deserve. Joy is the experience of receiving the blessing of God's grace and peace in Jesus Christ both in times of celebration and in times of suffering. Though Mary's future was uncertain, the Christian faith begins with joy as Mary sang:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
(Luke 1:46-7). When her child was born in a stable in Bethlehem, angels

visit the poor and freezing shepherds in the field: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). According to the Eastern Church, this birth of the divine child happened not in a man-made stable but in a cave of the earth: he is also the savior of the earth! The birth is embraced by God’s joy and received by the joy of human beings and the earth. This is why today we still sing cheerful Christmas hymns and carols and give each other gifts as ways to express our joy. “Joy to world the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.” (Moltmann 2015, 6)

These gifts from God are ours because, in Christ, God delights in his people. In my life, I have a glimpse of the delight God has for us as I reflect on delighting in my children and grandchildren. My model is a plan of spiritual formation to encourage congregants to move Christ from the periphery of their daily life where Christ matters less, to the center of their lives where they have union with Christ in all things. When Christ becomes the central focus of your life your priority will be to follow in the will of Christ over and above everything else.

In terms of following a model for spiritual formation, habits play a key role. Habits are indicative of who we are. Habits form our desires:

Our desires are caught more than they are taught. All kinds of cultural rhythms and routines are, in fact, rituals that function as pedagogies of desire precisely because they tacitly and covertly train us to love a certain version of the kingdom, teach us to long for some rendition of the good life. These aren’t just things we do; they do something to us. (Smith 2016, 22).

With the numerous distractions in modern life, building an intentional awareness of God’s presence through the habit of regular formative spiritual practices is helpful in deepening that awareness. With this deepened awareness, the congregant is increasingly confident to name and resist detrimental influences from the surrounding culture. Spiritually formative practices teach a believer to be

aware of God's presence and with that knowledge and experience, also become aware of how one is living (or not living) within God's will for their lives.

Awareness of the habits and cultural liturgies in which one is engaged is an important step to moving forward towards desiring the true self in Christ.

Spiritual practices are a means to building habits for spiritual formation. In introducing spiritual practices to the congregation, I initiated a book study in which around 80 congregants participated in a six-week study on various spiritual practices based on Tony Jones' book, *The Sacred Way* (Jones 2005). This book study was an opportunity to make the congregation aware of the value of these spiritual practices for Christian spiritual formation both for personal formation and in the context of the congregation. It was met with some resistance, as several congregants were not familiar with many of the spiritual practices presented in the book and they were not sure that it would be beneficial to engage in the Bible study. However, this exposure to various spiritual practices opened the opportunity to become more readily engaged in new spiritual practices.

The exploration of different spiritual formation models in the book study was helpful to lay the foundation for introducing the spiritual practice of the Examen to the spiritual leaders in the congregation. I decided to offer this spiritual practice to the congregation's spiritual leaders because of the nature of their position in the congregation as leaders whose purpose is faith formation in the congregation. My research project invited the spiritual leaders of the congregation to engage in the practice of the Examen to determine if they would experience a higher awareness of God in their everyday lives, experience more of God's grace

at work, become more reflective and self-aware, and experience an increased joy from their deepened awareness of God's presence. "The Exercise is used to help people to review and explore their life, seeking to discern what God has been up to and how well they are able to cooperate with God" (Warner 2010, 29).

My research project involved the spiritual leaders in the congregation of Oakridge Presbyterian Church (OPC), London, Ontario, where I am the Lead Minister. These participants were congregationally elected elders, the ministry staff, and other identified spiritual leaders within the congregation. It was my hope that the leader's deepened sense of God's grace in their daily life would be evident and thus encourage those who are under their care in the congregation. Fifteen volunteered to participate in the eight-week Examen Spiritual Exercise.

The Examen provided an opportunity for participants to see God's presence more clearly in their daily lives. For example, on a basic level, the practice of taking time to intentionally examine and record one's day for 8 weeks, helped all the participants focus on God's presence in the minutia and the mundane of life. God's presence can instill mystery, wonder and a sense of abiding love and the realization that no one is alone. The habit of seeking God in all things gave the participants a sense that they are not alone in the world – instilling hope for the future and joy in the present.

Our God-with-us theology is centered on Christ's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit. We do not seek God first; God comes to us and finds us (Luke 15). The intent of the Examen was to help the participants become increasingly

aware of God's constant presence. The Examen also helped make the concept of common grace more visible by showing God's presence in all who are made in the image of God, even those who may not profess faith in Christ.

Experiencing the spiritual practice of the Examen helps one expand their faith from merely a cognitive level (the head) to a more trusting level – the heart or the core of their being. The Examen is also a helpful exercise in the congregation to encourage people to pray because they become more deeply aware of God's grace in their own lives. With the knowledge that God's presence is with you, you can speak with God and know that God will listen. In return, you can listen to God, and He will speak to you. God is a relational God.

The practice of the Examen also helped the participants reflect on their cultural liturgies – those daily habits/practices in which they are presently engaged. During that period of reflection, they become personally aware of desires which are promoting the false self, and those which are promoting the true self. I wish to emphasize that the goal is not to have spiritual leaders and Christians in general continually try harder and tire themselves out to have a deeper relationship with God. Rather, through building a habit of spiritual practice, the spiritual leaders will more naturally notice God's presence in everyday life and respond with surprise and joy. They are then able to respond with gratitude about this good news of great joy and share it with others.

Before we explore the model and research project that came out of writing my spiritual autobiography, I will turn your attention to where it began.

CHAPTER 2:
MY STORY – A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was born on Sunday, August 13, 1961, and baptized the following Sunday in the Christian Reformed church in Belleville, Ontario. My grandfather, Reimer Bouma, insisted that the baptism take place right away. There was perhaps a vestige of superstition espousing the need for baptism to be done quickly, since until the second half of the last century, children often died in infancy. This same grandfather would have studied to become a pastor had it been financially feasible for his family. Instead, he became an elder and lay reader in the church.

I am proud to say that I am a second-generation Canadian – a child of Dutch immigrants. In August of 1952, my parents, with one child in tow and the second two months away from birth, arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax after a two-week ocean crossing. After disembarking from the *Waterman*, they took the train to connect with family in Trenton, Ontario. I was born eight years later in Belleville.

I have always been intrigued by my parents' move to Canada. My mother's parents and all her siblings and spouses immigrated to Canada in the early 1950s. However, my father's family stayed in the Netherlands. My father was more interested in immigration than my mother, even though my mom's family were already in Canada. My father, Wabe Hoekstra, had a sense of adventure. My father had a good job as an insurance salesman, so there was no

financial incentives or employment issues to precipitate a move to the new country. Although my mother loved her family (the Boumas), the cozy culture of the Netherlands was difficult for her to leave. My father, on the other hand, was more attached to his in-laws than to his own family. He loved his father-in-law, who was probably his most significant faith mentor. My father would speak about him in glowing terms – about his faith, about how he had worked in the underground during the war, and about how dedicated he was to the advancement of God’s kingdom. When I heard the stories about Pake Reimer (Grandfather Raymond), I wanted that type of faith; faith that impacted what you did with your life. These stories made me excited to be part of this lineage of faithful believers.

I grew up in a Christian home. Throughout my childhood, and into adulthood, we attended church twice each Sunday. I always enjoyed worship, although I did not attend closely to the sermons. Worship in the form of singing hymns and playing music was a positive and happy place for me. Throughout my lifetime, I never resented attending church and enjoyed worship more as I grew older. Although the social aspect of attending was significant, the primary reason I went to church was because of the friendships.

I feel that my birth placement affected how I gravitated to faith and religious beliefs. I was the fifth of six children born to Wabe and Marie Hoekstra. I loved my birth placement in the family, not having to endure the high expectations and stricter parenting practices that my older siblings complained about. Indeed, I always enjoyed my large family and my place as one of the youngest ones in it. My eldest brother and sister, Garry and Theresa, were very

attentive siblings. They loved to encourage and support me in my pursuits and life. Garry was particularly intentional about nurturing my love of music. The two of us travelled to Toronto one day when I was 10 years old to buy my first guitar. Lessons followed soon after that included a group guitar class where I learned the joy of creating and sharing music with others. I cannot underestimate the place music has held in my faith journey. Music made me aware from an early age that we have a God of beauty and creativity. Music made my spirit soar and my soul sing. Music transported me from this world into a world that is beyond the here and now. It reminded me that there was something more. Indeed, in music, I found a place of solace and joy, rivalled only by my youthful love of soccer.

My eldest sister Theresa was a naturally nurturing individual. Whenever I looked sad, she asked me what was wrong, regularly taking the time to really see me. The seeds of compassion and empathy were planted in my heart because of her. My second oldest sister, Rena, was less serious and more interested in “having fun.” I remember her ready laugh. Perhaps this began the theme of joy running through my life. The next sibling was my brother Ray, who was next to me in sibling order. He was a good brother who always let me tag along with him and his friends. I will always appreciate the fact that he allowed me to do so, and I look back with fond memories of being and feeling included. Bill, my youngest brother, completes the family circle. As I was six years older than my brother Bill, I finally had the opportunity to show the same kindness I had received from my older siblings. My older siblings and parents made our home a place of stability and warmth. I was content and safe with them.

I was also blessed to be born at a time of relative financial stability in my family. Though the early years were lean, when I was old enough to be cognizant of our financial situation, I never felt poor. I am thankful for that. In those early days, my father was one of those “work machines.” He would leave the house early in the morning and come home at dinner time. He would have dinner with the family, and then go to a choir rehearsal or a church meeting. He loved his church work, but as a result, my older siblings did not see or speak with him very much in their formative years. In this way, he was not unlike many of the breadwinners at the time who followed the prescribed role for men. The roles for mother and father were clearly defined, and for the most part not questioned.

My father was not one to delve into the emotions or personal experiences of his children. He followed the script of his father before him. However, he was a storyteller. My father would share stories about his day on the job as a house painter. I remember he would create a picture of the customer or the house he was working on and would usually find a humorous tidbit in his day to share with us. It seemed like the house painter was similar to a hairdresser; people would tell him everything, often resulting in hilarious second-hand accounts. This exposure to storytelling certainly helped me enjoy the everyday narratives of life. Even on seemingly mundane days, my father was usually jolly. He was a good example for me in cultivating this joy in my own life. Sharing faith stories came to my father easily. He enjoyed telling us these stories of faith, often with tears in his eyes.

My mother was the one who talked with us each day and gave us hugs. She came from a very close family that regularly showed their love through

physical affection. In my experience, my mother was also the disciplinarian in the family. I heard from my older siblings that my father had also disciplined them with corporal punishment when they were younger, but I did not experience this.

In our family, church attendance was not only encouraged, it was also mandated. Yet this directive was never delivered in legalistic terms, but rather in an authentic and liberating way through my father's own life. It was evident to me that my father had a relationship with Christ. Furthermore, it was visible to me that he practiced spiritual discipline through this faithful church attendance, daily personal devotions, shared stories of faith, and prayer. He also lived out his faith through his love for us. He loved my mother and his children and prayed for us daily. This living faith made my father my most influential faith mentor.

Importance of the Dutch Christian Reformed Community

While living in Belleville, my family was involved with our extended family and with the church. The church was primarily a faith community, but it was also a strong cultural center. The immigrants shared a common heritage and faith. They were in a strange land; the connection with those who spoke the same language and experienced the same culture was comforting. My parents certainly enjoyed the cultural aspects of belonging to the Christian Reformed church, and they appreciated the church's love for Jesus and his redeeming grace for humankind. Their genuine faith was evident to my observant young eyes.

My father and mother wanted their children to have Christian education. There was a Christian elementary school in Belleville at that time but not a high school. My oldest brother, Garry, would soon be old enough to attend high

school. My parents wanted to move to a place where Christian education was possible. My father saw an advertisement in a Dutch newspaper promoting Brampton as a frontier for business. He spoke with the Dutch Christian man who ran the advertisement. He bought a house in Brampton that same week, and within a couple of months we had moved. Providing a Christian education was so important to my parents that they chose to leave their family and community and move 2½ hours away. My parents showed an amazing commitment to passing the faith on to the next generation. This was not lost on me as a young boy.

The move to Brampton, however, upset my older siblings. They missed their school community and friends, making the transition a difficult one for them. Meanwhile, as a young child, I was quite content. My community was primarily my family. I went through elementary and high school in the private Christian school system where a strong faith foundation was laid for me. My Christian faith formation began in the home and was reinforced through the church and the Christian school. I was taught through word and deed that faith mattered. This teaching was planted in my heart and continued to form and grow into my adult life.

There was also a strong Dutch community in Brampton, which in time became home for the family. I lived in a wonderful area of town where, for eight years, I was a paperboy for the Toronto Star and the Brampton Daily Times. This was a good way for me to earn a little money and gain some people and business skills. I clearly recall a situation where I was owed about a month's worth of collection money. I rang the doorbell and finally caught the man at home. When

he answered the door, he asked what I wanted. I said in my ten-year-old squeaky voice, “You owe me four weeks of collection for the paper. That will be \$3.” He paused, then glowered at me and said, “Tough titty, kitty,” and shut the door in my face. Through these experiences, I learned some valuable life lessons about responsibility and the diversity of people in this world.

I always enjoyed church-related education but was not so fond of school. I had little aspiration to continue after high school. Post-secondary education was not encouraged in my family; on the contrary it was mildly discouraged. The work ethic was strong in my family. The entrepreneur was viewed in the best light and given the greatest respect. I remember my father once commenting that education could draw you further away from God by causing you to think that you know everything, making faith seem irrelevant.

In the summer of 1972, almost 11 years old and busy with multiple paper routes, I began to feel flu-like symptoms of fever and upset stomach. Despite rest, the symptoms persisted, and I began to feel very ill. My father brought me to the doctor who assured him it was just the flu. The “flu” persisted, and I became more ill, so my increasingly worried father brought me once again to the clinic where the doctor maintained that I merely had the flu. The next afternoon my father came home for lunch to check on me. He found me crying in my bedroom, carrying around chairs and not making sense at all. He rushed me to the emergency room and demanded that I see a “child specialist.” The hospital staff tried to calm him down, but he repeatedly demanded, “I am not leaving until a child specialist sees my son!” Soon after, a pediatrician diagnosed me with what

could have been fatal – spinal Meningitis. The first night I felt so ill that I vomited all over my bed and could not find a nurse to assist me. The lack of attentiveness by the nursing staff compared to the attentiveness of my father was noted in my memory. This was a defining moment in my understanding of a parent's unrelenting love for their child. The attentiveness of my father had given me a deeper understanding of the love of my heavenly father.

Sports – Music

As a child, I loved sports, particularly soccer, because I had a natural affinity for it. I was often one of the best players on the team, which led me to play in more competitive leagues and put on me the pressures of team captainhood. As I entered my early teens, I started to experience anxiety before matches and began to lose enjoyment of the game. At age 15, I decided that playing sports at a competitive level was no longer enjoyable for me. Later reflection on my soccer years has led me to realize that my responsibility for and organization of my teammates was my first foray into a leadership role, which I would continue for rest of my adult years. I felt confident in my role as team captain.

I come from a musical family, and over time I started to play more music. My father had learned to play the organ and direct choirs when he was a boy in the Netherlands, acting as a music director from the age of 16 through to his retirement. Three of my six siblings and I trained in music to a high level. Though my father was an inspiration to me in my musical pursuits, my mother was the encourager. She would sing along when I played hymns on the home organ, even singing through my myriad of mistakes until I caught back up.

Although I was still playing guitar by the age of 14, I became more interested in learning to play the organ. My father was an accomplished organist, but he was not one who loved to teach. He knew the organist from an Anglican Church in town who gave private lessons, so I took up organ lessons with him. After some time, my teacher made me one of his assistants at the church; I played Sunday evening services and was available to do weddings in the summer.

By the summer of 1976, at the age of 15, I was playing at weddings almost every Saturday and getting paid \$25 for each wedding. One Saturday, I played at three! I felt so confident; my paper routes were my ‘bread and butter’ income (I saved most of my money), but my organ playing brought a higher level of satisfaction thanks to all the hard work of practice. Sharing music with others had also become a joy in my life. This joy and confidence carried with me into my adult years. My exposure to a different denomination, different hymns and different ways of practicing one’s faith also contributed to a broader understanding of my faith horizons. To this day, the words found in the hymns I played and sang over the years still stay in my memory, strengthening me each time I hear them.

Early Lessons in Grace

At the end of grade eight when I was 13 years old, our class went on an end of year camping trip to Algonquin Park. The week was fabulous and ended with about half of the class equipped with the skills to paddle the canoes back to the outfitter’s store. Almost everyone wanted to paddle the canoes back, so a hat was passed around for everyone to pick out a piece of paper with either “Go” or

“Stay.” If you picked the paper with a “Go,” you were allowed to go in one of the canoes and paddle back to the store. If you picked the paper that said “Stay,” you had to drive back to the campsite. I received a “Go” (and did a little dance in my heart) and the boy beside me picked out a piece of paper with the dreaded word, “Stay.” He was very disappointed with the “Stay,” which was understandable. If I had picked the dreaded “Stay,” I too would have been disappointed. The difference was that this boy was suffering from bone cancer and it was uncertain how long he would be able to walk. I said to him that I really did not want to go, and he could have my “Go.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Yes, I am sure.” I lied; I really wanted to go. After he heard me say I was sure I did not want to go, he did not give me another thought. He partnered up with one of the other “Go” people and went in the canoe and down the river without even looking back. When I saw him later, he did not mention it again or thank me or acknowledge my sacrifice!

My compassion had motivated me to give up my place, but the way I presented it to him was false. The strange thing is that I have not forgotten it to this day. Certainly, I do not regret doing what I did, but it is interesting to me that I think this act of kindness affected me spiritually more than it did the boy struggling with cancer. What bothered me the most was that the boy did not linger in his thanksgiving. That was a big lesson for me – putting one’s self aside for the sake of others is what one does out of obedience to Christ, not for recognition. I have not forgotten how this “act of kindness” sharpened my understanding and pushed me ahead another step in my spiritual formation. I have told this story a

dozen times to my children and again recently in a sermon to my congregation. This story is a teachable lesson to share about the necessity of putting oneself aside for others.

At the age of 14, I spent some time with my cousin Danny and my aunt and uncle on their dairy farm near Belleville, Ontario. This visit was arranged by my mom and aunt as an opportunity for the cousins to bond. We were living in Brampton at the time – over a two-hour drive away. I had not been away from home for any length of time before, and the prospect of spending time with three relatives I barely knew was scary. When my parents dropped me off at the farm, I was informed that for the first week of my three-week visit, Danny would be on a week-long excursion with a number of local children. My parents thus left me with only my aunt and uncle in a huge farmhouse.

My Aunt Jansie was the angel you envision at the “pearly gates.” In stark contrast was my Uncle Cor, a rough, gruff, unshaven man who had dentures but never wore them and whose unkempt hair flew in all directions. He hardly said a word to me that first day, while my bubbly aunt explained that I could sleep in as long as I wanted the next day. With such kind intentions, I was almost discouraged from going to the barn the next morning. Up before the sun, I heard my uncle scurry around before leaving the house for the barn. I was wide-awake but waited an hour before I got up and followed. I felt a little awkward, but I was also curious about the dairy operation. When my uncle saw me, he just said “hello” and carried on with his work. After a few minutes, I gathered some courage and asked if I could help. His answer was, “If you want to.” He taught me

how to wash the cows' udders. I would do that before Uncle Cor would place the automatic milking machines on the cow. I was so happy to help because it took the edge off my fear of being with this scary man.

For the next few days Uncle Cor and I had a routine, even though we spoke very little. I knew what to do and was becoming quite good at cleaning the dried manure off the cows' udders. After the first day, I went into the barn just after Uncle Cor did. By my fourth day, I was feeling more confident and asked if I could also apply the milking machines on the cows. He said "Sure," and showed me how to do it. During the week of Danny's absence, I had learned the whole process of milking and loved it. I even got a few smiles and laughs out of my uncle.

Later that summer, Uncle Cor, Danny and I were talking on the farm driveway. My uncle asked me to bring the tractor over to the corncrib. I said, "No problem!" because I was still afraid of him and did not want to disappoint him. Though I did not know what I was doing, I jumped on the tractor and remembered how to start it and take my foot off the clutch. The tractor moved forward. I was quite pleased with myself. Then the anxiety started – I did not remember how to stop. I turned off the key – the tractor didn't stop and instead kept rolling towards the corncrib. I put my foot on the brake – the tractor slowed a small amount but continued to move forward. I had forgotten to put my foot on the clutch. The tractor hit the corncrib with a loud bang, damaging its 2x4 frame. The tractor stopped, but the damage was done. Corn was pouring out of the crib and onto the ground. I thought I was in huge trouble. My scary uncle would certainly be

furious. There was a brief moment of silence, but it felt much longer than that. It was then that I heard a huge belly laugh. Through his laughter, I heard him yell, “You will need to try to do that again tomorrow Eddie!” A huge feeling of relief came over me, and I felt undeserved love – I was experiencing grace through such an unlikely man. Instead of being reprimanded, made fun of, or simply chastised for being stupid, my uncle offered me grace. This made a big impression on me; a lesson in grace which I have never forgotten. I thank God for Uncle Cor.

Although he had his rough edges, he was one of the people in my life who helped form me spiritually. As I have learned through life, we are all a messy mixture of good and bad. Grace can come from unlikely sources at unlikely times.

Between the age of 10 and 16, I belonged to a boy’s club at my church called the ‘Calvinist Cadet Corps’ (Cadets for short). This was a program which focused on developing faith formation and discipleship, leadership, and nature and life skills. I excelled in the program. I began at age 10 and stayed in the program until I became a junior counsellor at age 15. When I started at age 10, the “Head Counsellor” seemed, to my young mind, to be the quintessential army sergeant one sees in movies. He was so strict that I dared not move or look in any direction except straight in front of me. Soon I came to enjoy the structure of the Cadet program. At age 14, I decided to work on a “public speaking badge.” The work required was not intense, but it was challenging enough that I had to compose a speech on a specific topic and follow the delivery guidelines to be successful. On one particular Friday, I gave the speech in front of the head

counsellor and earned my public speaking badge. It was a surprise to me how natural it felt to do the public speaking.

A month later, our Cadet chapter (Brampton One) travelled to Toronto for the “Cadet-o-rama.” This was the winter gathering where the various chapters in the Toronto district would compete in group and individual competitions. At the end of the day, the chapter with the most points won the event for that year. It was getting close to the end of the event and all the participants were gathered in the auditorium to watch the public speaking competition. Only two older boys from other chapters were signed up for the event. They came up one at a time and read their speeches to the gathering. When the second was almost complete, my head counsellor turned around and motioned for me to come and speak with him. He whispered to me that the speech I had done for my public speaking badge a month earlier was better than the ones we were listening to. He then encouraged me to do my speech after the second boy was done. I objected, saying I did not have my written speech with me. He told me to never mind, to speak it from memory.

After the second speech, my head counsellor went over to the judges table and said there was one more contestant. With his encouragement, I went on stage and delivered my speech on “What it meant to be a Cadet.” Although my speech was significantly shorter than the others, it was done from memory. The judges exchanged comments and announced that I was the winner, presenting me with a trophy. Although I had won numerous soccer trophies already, this one was, by far, the most significant for my life going forward. The significance came from the surprise of winning and a mentor’s ability to identify and encourage my gifts.

Since winning that competition some forty years ago, that trophy is the one memento I have kept. It holds a place of honour on a shelf in our home where our grandchildren delight in “awarding” it to one another. Upon reflection, this trophy holds a place of honour because it signifies for me God’s movement in my life towards a life of communicating the gospel.

Over the years, I have come back to the memory of that event with joy and a feeling of gratitude for the role it had in shaping who I am today. I also look back with thankfulness for the head counsellor who had the gift of encouragement and saw gifts in me that I did not see in myself. Noticing the gifts of children and youth and encouraging them helps them to grow their awareness of the strengths with which God has blessed them. I believe this incident did just that for me while also increasing my trust in true leadership and my awareness of the importance of these relationships in faith formation. This event also contributed to my trust in God who works through others to help us become aware of his plans and purposes for our lives. Indeed, it was in some way a catalyst for my later desire to pursue the call to the ministry.

Another aspect of my faith formation growing up in the church, from the ages of 14-18 was Wednesday evening catechism classes. Although it was sometimes inconvenient to attend, my siblings and I did so faithfully. Every week we went over the questions and answers to the Heidelberg Catechism. Question and answer one is the most notable in my memory: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Answer: “That I am not my own but belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ.” (The Christian

Reformed Church 2021) During these sessions, I remember one catechism teacher in particular who displayed faith in Christ and exemplified Christ's love for her students. Her vibrant faith was contagious and made a lasting impact on my faith journey. Her authenticity and abundant joy of the gospel as well as taking the time to get to know me and investing herself in this relationship has never left me.

As a youth, while I worked with my father in his painting business, I was reticent to accompany his choirs, because when it came to music, dad was a perfectionist. While I did not want the pressure of being an accompanist in my family's home church, I did follow in his footsteps in my early 30's and became a part-time music director of a Presbyterian Church in Mississauga, Ontario. My faith started to form more deeply when I became aware of my father's authentic faith, which was often most evident through his music and storytelling.

The Importance of Faith Stories

I cannot recount the impact my father had on my faith life without sharing a story I told at my father's funeral almost 23 years ago, a story he had often shared with us. My maternal grandfather, Reimer Bouma, was an elder in the church in Friesland, Holland, at a time when there was a shortage of pastors. On some Sundays he would lead the services and read prepared sermons that he had on file from preachers. By all accounts he was a true evangelist and desired more than anything else that people would accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour. He often shared this faith story with my father:

The husband of one of the faithful congregants of my grandfather's church was not a Christian man. In fact, when his wife would prepare for worship and get all the children ready for church, he would complain about church and how untrue it was, thus creating a negative atmosphere in the

household every Sunday morning. He was neither a happy man, nor was he a kind one. He did what he could to upset his wife and children. Indeed, he seemed to take satisfaction in the power he had to ruin the family's day before they went to church. His wife, on the other hand, was the picture of faith and commitment to God. She would not be moved by his efforts, yet his 'games' certainly had a negative impact on the family's joy.

My grandfather knew the man and had become acquainted with him over the years. When the man was diagnosed with terminal cancer, my grandfather visited him and encouraged him to put his trust in God and accept Jesus as his Saviour. The man said that he knew Reimer meant well, but he did not believe in any of that fairy tale stuff. My grandfather continued to visit. The man appreciated the visits, but nothing changed in his outlook on life and his rejection of faith as his health declined.

One morning my grandfather was listening to his radio and heard a story about a bird that was flying over a large body of water and was becoming very weary. Before the bird had started, he was not aware how big the expanse was, but he was beginning to understand that he did not have enough energy to turn back or make it to the other side. He then saw a boat below and thought to himself that if he went to the boat, they would probably kill him for food. On the other hand, if he kept flying, he would die from exhaustion and fall into the sea. He decided to take his chances and land on the boat. As soon as he landed, the people on the boat saw that the bird was near death from exhaustion. They took the bird, fed him and cared for him by keeping him warm and comfortable. My grandfather went over to the man's house that afternoon and told him the story and then said to the man, "You are like that bird. Get on the boat and God will take care of you and give you a new life. You have nothing to fear." The man responded and said, "Reimer, you are a good friend, and I know you care for me. It is a nice story, but I do not share your faith." My grandfather said goodbye and promised to see the man again soon. The next time my grandfather saw the man was a few days before he died. My grandfather came into the house, spoke with his wife briefly, and saw the man in the other room. He motioned for my grandfather to come close. The man then said, "Reimer, I am on the boat."

My father told that same faith story many times and could never finish it without his eyes welling up with tears as he proclaimed in his thick Dutch accent, "Ya dats really true. Dats what happened. He said, 'I'm on the boat Reimer.'" The telling and re-telling of this story of faith was one of the ways my father passed faith on to me.

While my father possessed the gift of storytelling, my mother possessed her own gift of storytelling through the spiritual gift of hospitality. Whenever there was a new person in the congregation, my mother would be one of the first to make contact and invite them over for lunch after worship. She reached out to those who were feeling vulnerable and needing companionship. My mother was an engaging conversationalist and drew out the faith stories of those she served. That environment of Christian hospitality made a definite imprint on my life.

Spiritual Crisis

During this period of my adolescence, there was a spiritual crisis in our family. My three eldest siblings became involved in a group linked to a cult. My oldest brother would come over and argue with my dad, both of them with Bibles drawn. Since my parents were not receptive to this “new teaching” my three involved siblings decided to shun my parents for over a year. There was much blame directed at my parents before the year-long period of silence. I remember standing firm with my parents at the time, trying to give them as much support as possible. I remember the pastor and other church members came over offering prayers and support. Finally, the situation resolved with pleas for forgiveness from two of the three siblings. Unfortunately, the other sibling did not ask to be forgiven. That prolonged the pain further. However, over time, my parents learned to accept it.

This family crisis became a teachable moment for my spiritual growth in conflict and resolution. I was young enough to be theologically unaware of what this “cult” had represented. My own reflections at the time were that my parents

were not to be treated this way. If someone loves you, you do not shun them and block them out of your lives. I comforted my parents and reassured them that I was there to support them, but I also felt a deep sadness at this loss of the siblings whom I loved. When they came home and the apology took place, I was so pleased and relieved that reconciliation happened.

Spiritually, I learned through this experience that not all brokenness can be fixed. This experience developed in me a greater awareness of the complexities of relationships and how important it is to continue to communicate with one another. It is very difficult to start talking when there has been silence for a long period; but it is not impossible. I also became aware of the significant support the church and Christian friends gave my parents through prayer and conversation during this difficult time of conflict. My family had a strong, supportive Christian community. That made a big difference for all of us. Spiritual formation develops through times of both light and darkness in one's life.

Trauma

During the summer when I was 15 years old, after my parents bought a new house in the country, I secured summer employment at a nearby dairy farm. I enjoyed getting up in the morning and doing the chores, the field work, the meals, and the social times associated with the farm community. My love for the land and animals became another way for me to connect with God.

The first summer at the farm went well, but the second summer was not as positive. One day rain started, so the work in the field was put on hold. I was told to work on the chores in the barn, while the farmer and the hired man mended old

fences. I completed most of my work quickly and found myself relaxing, with time to daydream. In this contemplative mood, as I was mixing food for the livestock, I became mesmerized by the waterfall of grain coming down the auger. I thought about how the grain would feel on the tips of my fingers. I put my hand close, and it happened. The middle finger on my left hand was caught and my whole arm was being pulled into the machine. The shut-off switch was about 4 inches out of reach. I yanked and I pulled until my hand jerked loose! As I looked at my hand, blood started pumping out of my ravaged middle finger. I jumped on my bicycle and met the farmer coming down the laneway. He asked where I was going. I showed him my hand and he almost fainted, quickly confessing that he became queasy at the sight of human blood. He took me in his truck to the farmhouse to get a rag to put over the wound. We then travelled to my home where my mother met us and took me to the hospital.

At the hospital, my mother pleaded with the doctor, “Could you take my finger off and transplant it on to Eddie’s finger? Eddie is a musician and needs his middle finger more than I do.” The doctor gruffly dismissed my mother’s request and walked the other way. Years later, it occurred to me the depth of my mother’s selfless offer. After the operation to remove the top two digits of my middle finger, my parents encouraged me to stay hopeful. My father reminded me that if I had to choose a finger to lose, it would be the middle one. While still in the cast, I started to practice on the home organ while my mother sang along from the kitchen. The shame associated with such a careless accident was minimized by

the grace of God clearly reflected in my parents' responses. I became more grateful and perseverant going forward.

How did overcoming a significant physical challenge form me spiritually? Too often Christians separate the physical from the spiritual. One can understand why this is done, while at the same time we know that our physical well-being is directly connected to how we are feeling spiritually. I know that through the encouragement I received from those whom I loved, I developed a great determination to not let my disability define me. The success I eventually achieved in music in spite of the accident was a blessing.

Coming of Age

About age 13, I began to take a greater interest in the opposite sex. Sexual education was not done in my home, and it was taught minimally in the Christian school I attended. What I learned came mostly from my peers. There was certainly a discomfort in sharing any knowledge in this area. I believe it was just something that had not been talked about over the generations and was not openly celebrated as a gift from God. The questions I had around sex were largely kept as an intriguing mystery in my household. What I learned as a youth through my church education was to "save myself" for marriage. I appreciated that emphasis, and I am thankful that my wife and I were able to follow this guidance, although we still enjoyed a good deal of physical expression of our love for one another. Another accepted church teaching of my upbringing was that homosexuality was a sin and a perversion abhorred by God. I just accepted this as fact, not knowing

that this teaching would eventually have many implications for my spiritual journey.

At the age of 15, I met Jackie, the woman who I was to marry. Jackie and her family had just moved to town, making her “the new girl.” I was very shy, and although she did not notice me, I noticed her. The first time I saw her I knew that she would be my wife; I felt that God had given me an epiphany. Three years later we began to date, and three years after that we were married. To this day, I know that she is a gift given to me by God. I believe we are equally yoked in our faith. We are definitely stronger together. Today we continue to spiritually form one another. We challenge one another theologically, reflect on how God works in our day-to-day living and continue to ask each other the hard questions of life.

Life changed dramatically at age 16. I started to drive; I quit my paper routes and farm work and started a part-time job working in a garage. I enjoyed the camaraderie of the garage staff and the customers as I pumped gas, changed the oil and made light repairs to the cars. I certainly enjoyed working with my hands and gaining practical skills that have been beneficial throughout my life. I soon decided that I wanted to become an auto mechanic.

Jackie and I attended youth conferences together through the Christian Reformed Church from the ages of 16-19. These gatherings became concrete building blocks for the formation of my faith, building upon the faith training I had received in my family, church, school, catechism, and youth group. Being together with other youth and speaking openly about faith was also encouraging. Hearing other youth speak about the Christian life as a “cool way to live” also

pushed my trust in God forward. The conferences showed personal examples of people whose lives reflected God's grace.

At this time, I also discovered a love of driving. I bought my own pick-up truck at age 17. Unfortunately, I exhibited that all too familiar invincible attitude of youth and drove far too fast. I received many speeding tickets. The worse blow to my ego was when I totaled my pickup truck by rolling it into the ditch and snapping a hydro pole. After the accident, I was so angry that my wonderful truck was lost. It did not occur to me that I could have died until mom mentioned it the next day. Her words constituted a "spiritual teachable" moment. I have shared this story often to youth and adults as I teach about the gift of life from our heavenly father. My mother's words made me stop to reflect and change my way of thinking.

When I finished high school, I was done with school and never planned to go back. I was a good saver and was able to gather enough down payment to buy my first house (with my brother) at age 18. Three years later, we bought a second house together. I was a self-starter and had a plan to start my own business and have my house paid off by the time I was 35. I was inspired by and learned this through my immigrant parents. One could say that the mission statement for the family was: "Fear God and work hard."

I always had a love for the Lord and wanted to follow him, but I was not ready to do profession of faith with my age cohorts in the confirmation class when I was 18 years old. I did not wish to do it merely because it was an expectation. Finally, around the age of 20, Jackie and I took the confirmation course. I

believed that we were equally yoked in our faith, and we both desired to profess our faith in Jesus at that time. This decision helped move Jesus more to the center of my life rather than on the periphery. This reflection helped me create a model of spiritual formation as a wheel with Christ at the center hub and other parts of one's life as spokes coming from that hub.

Jackie and I were engaged on Jackie's 21st birthday and married the following year on August 6, 1983. We were both 21 years old. During this time, I still had my license, but could not find affordable insurance. That was embarrassing, and the consequences of my reckless driving was felt. Reflecting on my formative years, it surprises me that in spite of the spiritually nurtured younger years and the grace I experienced, I still made so many mistakes going forward. The wonderful lessons I learned in a loving environment took more time to germinate than I may have hoped. I also know, however, that these mistakes have made me a more sensitive listener and caring pastor. The grace I experienced in my life was certainly cultivated and implanted in me to pass on to others.

At my grade 12 graduation in 1979, I had no desire or plan for continued education. However, three years after high school, I suddenly had a strong desire to go to college or university. I was surprised at my own desire for further education. I believe it was direction from God. For the first three years of our marriage, I was a full-time student. Jackie worked for the first two years. In the third year, I studied at Calvin College in Michigan to complete my degree in Economics and Sociology. My brother and I sold the houses we had purchased a few years earlier, and Jackie and I lived off the proceeds and paid for my tuition

fees. At the age of 23, Jackie and I were blessed with the birth of our first child, Luke. How would I pass my faith on to this little miracle?

In my church background, I was exposed to mission work on a regular basis. Our church supported missionaries who often gave presentations when they were on furlough. I was nurtured by my parents to give generously to the church and to missions (already as a paper boy in my teens, though the amount was small, I gave regularly out of my earnings to mission work). I was made aware through my home life, through the Christian school I attended, and in my congregation, that Mission work was vital to our faith. The studies at Calvin complimented the desire to become full time missionaries after we graduated. After graduation in the summer of 1986, our small family of three went to Mexico for three months of immersion training in that culture.

In Mexico, we took Spanish lessons, lived with the indigenous people and engaged in teaching at their summer Vacation Bible School. While living in a rural village, we contracted amoebic dysentery (Luke, then one year old, was spared). Thankfully, we were able to acquire medication and recovered. After a time of recovery, Jackie, pregnant with our second child, Elleana, was diagnosed with Placenta Previa and was advised to stay close to good medical care. As a result, we discerned it would be best for us to enter the mission field at a later date. This later date would be 22 years hence.

This sudden turn of events was disappointing and confusing. We had been focused on becoming missionaries. I asked God what was happening. What do I do now? Our plans had completely changed. I was finished school with a second

child on the way but had no job. My two older brothers encouraged us to move to the Ottawa area where they both lived. They mentioned that it was a good place to find a job and a wonderful place to live. We thus moved to the Ottawa region and I started a painting business. My faith continued to form as I volunteered at our new church as a worship piano accompanist and Sunday school teacher. Jackie worked in the home caring for our two young children, while I worked outside of it, trying to make ends meet. These were times of significant financial challenges. I did not think the painting business would be a life-long career, but I was intrigued by the challenge of starting something new. On Saturdays, Jackie would work at a nearby art centre while I looked after the children. In time, our painting business became well established. For the next four years, I was able to employ my brother and other young adults from the church. We knew that God had provided for us.

At that time, my brother Ray, who was a little older than I, confided to Jackie and I that he was gay. We loved our brother and were not surprised by his announcement. Ray had been teased and bullied all through his elementary and high school years. Our theological understanding of the subject was that it was wrong and against scripture; yet somehow, we knew God's grace was bigger than our understanding. We assured my brother that we were there to love him and support him. Ray was the second person in the previous four years who had confidentially revealed their sexual orientation to us. Earlier, a friend had come to us for help who had struggled terribly and experienced rejection and exclusion from society after coming out. This friend came to live with us for a few months,

and Jackie and I were able to assure him that we loved him. Ray would often help me when I needed an extra set of hands to finish a painting job, usually after his own day's work. By 1988, he left his high-tech job to join me full-time in the painting business. I had gained a good contract with an insurance company to do painting restoration, and my brother was ready for a career change. This was a positive experience for both Ray and I. Ray was given the freedom to leave his job for something to which he felt more called. I felt a sense of gratitude to God to be in a position to help my brother understand his vocational calling.

In 1989, Jackie experienced a period of inexplicable physical pain. She went repeatedly to the doctor, returning only with medication for bladder infections. We had no idea of the seriousness of her actual condition until she collapsed. She was rushed to the hospital where she was diagnosed with an ectopic pregnancy for which emergency surgery was needed. During the operation I was informed by a specialist that she did not know if Jackie was going to survive. Her fallopian tube had burst, and she had lost a lot of blood due to internal bleeding. I was ushered into the chapel to wait for the operation to be completed. Jackie informed me later that during the procedure, she had an "out of body" experience. She felt completely peaceful while watching "from above" as the medical team worked on her. Jackie survived the surgery. Over a 24-hour period, I experienced the extremes of worry, trust, thanksgiving and joy! Sadly, we lost the baby and part of Jackie's fallopian tube. The doctor informed us that as a result, we may not be able to produce any more children. Much to our delight, a year later, Jackie did give birth to our third child, Kiera. Thanks be to

God! Through this experience I learned to entrust my future into God's hands. I realized that I did not have control over my future and even the best plans may not be attained. I learned that when I kept Christ at the center of my life, God would work things out for good.

Soon after, my father informed us that he was retiring and wanted to know if Ray would like to take over his painting business in Brampton. Ray had worked for me for a year at that time and was enjoying the work. This offer from our father meant that Ray would be moving back to Brampton. He accepted the call and moved. This change had me discerning more closely about how I had put my call on hold. Was God using this change to get my attention to what He was now calling me to do? My desire was growing at this time to work with people in some kind of ministry. I answered an advertisement to apply for a Music Director/ Youth Ministry position in another province. Jackie and I were flown down and had the interview. The topic came up about my view on homosexuality. My answer was not satisfactory to them and resulted in a disagreement on how we are to minister to those with a same-sex orientation. The issue was not so much about affirming monogamous, committed, same sex relationships, but rather an emphasis on the sin of homosexuality and the need for them to repent. The discussion did not result in a job offer.

When Jackie and I returned to our motel room, the telephone rang. An individual from the church of the interviewing committee was on the phone. He expressed his disappointment with how the interview had gone and shared that he was struggling with his own homosexual orientation. He believed it was wrong

and decided to live a straight life. He was married and had a child. The next morning, he called me and said he could not sleep all night and regretted that he had disclosed his sexual orientation to me. He was worried that he would be discovered. I assured him that our conversation was strictly confidential. In this conversation, I was taking the role of the pastor in comforting him and extending grace to him. At that moment, I felt more strongly that God was calling me to a pastoral ministry, but I was still not sure about the form that would take. I was, however, beginning to realize that the “gay issue” in the church was coming up frequently in my life. Was God forming me to this special ministry of showing grace to those struggling with their sexual orientation?

Considering Call to Ministry

While I was still sensing a call to the ministry of word and sacrament, I put it to the side. As I looked through my family history, there were no ministers. My grandfather was an elder in his church; my father and some uncles and aunts were music directors, but none were ministers. I asked myself why I felt I could break the mold. I was not convinced that I had the gifts for ministry. Besides, my experience with ministers from childhood through to early adult life was that they were constantly being scrutinized or criticized for something. It would not be an easy job. My thought was that one should not enter such a profession unless they were confident of God’s calling to this work. Having said that, I did feel confident that I was called away from the painting business and called to a profession where I would be working with people in some ministerial capacity.

I continued to seek ministry positions as I saw them advertised. I interviewed for a youth pastor position in a Christian Reformed Church (my denomination at the time), and the interview went really well. I felt confident as I left. As it turned out, I was not the chosen candidate. A few days later, I was contacted by the principal of the Christian high school I had attended. He mentioned that he had heard I had applied for a youth pastor position in a Christian Reformed Church and wondered if I would be interested in teaching music at the high school in Woodbridge Ontario. He explained that since this was a private school, I could be hired without a teaching certificate if I met certain qualifications. The idea was that I would work towards becoming certified as a teacher as I worked at the school. I felt this was not only a call from the principal, but also a call from God. I was interviewed and hired for the 1991/1992 school year. I had just turned 32 years-old and moved back to Brampton to begin teaching.

The experience I received managing and teaching a class was very relevant training for my later ministry work. The experience certainly helped me mature in understanding youth. I gained a higher level of compassion for youth who were struggling. I was able to practice my discernment skills as I was listening to rationale about why two youths were arguing or about why the homework was not completed. I was thrilled that I had the experience to learn about both the students and, in turn, about myself.

Looking back, I see many parallels between a classroom and a congregation – both are a group of unique people with various backgrounds and

perspectives who are all deeply loved children of God. The high school classroom was a place where these youth were formed spiritually. I left the high school a stronger person, but I also knew that teaching was not my long-term calling. The call to the ministry of word and sacrament kept coming back to me, and I could not ignore it.

Soon after I started my teaching position, Jackie started to homeschool our children; this was something she had always been interested in as an affordable way for us to offer Christian education to our children. Over the years, this became a huge blessing to us as a family, bringing us closer together and bringing to our children and to us a Christian perspective on life throughout all subjects.

In the fall of 1991, my father made me aware of a small Presbyterian Church looking for a part-time music director. I was not earning a large salary at the high school, so the small stipend from the church would nicely supplement the family income. My dad also commented in his Dutch accent that theologically the Christian Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church in Canada are... “purty vell de same ting.” After I accepted the job as music director, the lead minister also asked if I was available to lead a youth group in a Korean congregation in Mississauga (close to Brampton). These youth were mostly second generation from Korean immigrant families and were therefore fluent in English. I led the Friday night youth group and was asked to give a message every Sunday to the youth; this was a challenge, as I did not have any previous experience in preaching. I soon realized that my high school teaching experience greatly helped in my preparations. I was also learning about Korean culture as I visited many

different families of the youth for the Friday evening gatherings. This experience prepared me for my later cross-cultural experience in Malawi and in my current experience with the Korean-speaking members at OPC.

During this period and in this new position, I felt myself pushed beyond my comfort zone. I saw more clearly that going past my comfort zone was central to Christian discipleship. I learned that it was not only okay to be uncomfortable when we served others in the name of Christ, but that this discomfort and stretching was necessary for faith formation. This ministry experience acted as a catalyst, forming me spiritually as I depended closely on God through prayer to lead worship and deliver my messages. My feeling of blessing was compounded during this period as we welcomed our fourth child and second son, Jacob, in July of 1993. This was yet another blessing from God pointing me once again to the giver of all life.

In the fall of 1994, my father, who had been for all his life a picture of health, was experiencing pain which would not go away. He went to see the doctor and after repeated examinations was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The journey was difficult. He was 69 years old and had been a moderate smoker for most of his life. Nine short months after his diagnosis, my father passed away. The time he did have, he gave family and friends an opportunity to visit and say goodbye.

I was blessed to have had a good relationship with my father throughout my life, and so I was pained to watch as he struggled at the end. Perhaps dad had some unresolved issues and did not die peacefully. I have no doubt that he is with

his Lord, but in the transition, he wrestled with leaving this life and falling into the arms of Jesus. I had difficulty coping with the understanding that my wonderful mentor in faith did not leave this earth peacefully. One so often heard wonderful stories of people "slipping away peacefully" or dying in their sleep; peaceful deaths, which I have since witnessed in my role as a pastor, was not so for my father.

Henri Nouwen spoke of his mother's terrible struggle in her death in his book *In Memoriam*, and he concludes that the struggle was between his mother and God and that some unfinished business needed to be completed (Nouwen 2005). One does not know what it will be like when we see Jesus. Through discernment and speaking with others, I came to the realization that the struggle does not necessarily indicate a lack of faith and trust in the Lord. It is rather a function of life being complex and different for every person; God creates us with diversity. I believe that in death there will be final judgement but by our gracious God who loves us beyond our comprehension. We will not be condemned but shown more clearly the meaning of our lives and will more fully understand God's grace at work. The fact that my father was only 70 years old when he died, also contributed to the fact that he was not ready to say goodbye to the joy-filled life he knew on earth with his family.

About a month before my father died, I thought it was time to tell him that I was pursuing what I believed was God's call to the ministry of word and sacrament. My expectations were that he would be so overjoyed that the news would increase his health and wellbeing, even if it were for a short time. With dad

being such a pillar of faith in my life, I imagined he would feel a sense of healthy pride that he had contributed to his son's vocational desire to pastor a church. To my surprise, his reaction was quite sobering. After I shared the news with him, my father said, "That is okay, Ed, but do not neglect your family." That was it. There was no enthusiastic smile of satisfaction or questions about how it happened. He just responded with honest, practical advice. He gave me the best advice I could have received at that moment. If I became a successful minister (whatever that means) and spent less time with my wife and family, it would not amount to much. In other words, the most important thing for me to do was to love my wife and children. If being a pastor is what I wanted to do, that was okay, but not at the expense of being a loving father. When I reflect on my father's remarks, I realize with regret that I have not always followed his advice. Too often the work of the church seemed so important. Was the urgency to spend more time at the church more about my ego than it was about the Kingdom of God? My father's response was more about the Kingdom and less about my ego. I feel a sense of regret that my faith may have been seen by my children as more of a professional duty than as a personal relationship with Christ. I remember my father's genuine and heartfelt faith; perhaps I wondered if I lacked that personal joy of the Gospel which was so evident in him. I hope I am wrong about this.

While serving as music director, an elder approached me asking if I had ever thought of the ministry of word and sacrament. I said, "Yes, and in fact, I have been approached by others over the years whom I respect and trust, asking if

I had ever considered be an ordained minister.” The elder responded by saying, “Then you must take that message seriously and test that possibility.”

In 1994, I attended a special gathering at Knox College for those who were considering studying for the ministry of word and sacrament. This day was a very important event in my process of certification through the Presbytery and entrance into Knox College. I began full time study in the fall of 1995. My family offered some opposition to my decision to enter seminary. My brother Ray said I was crazy. He questioned: “What are you going to live on? Love?” He explained that as a father of four children, what I was doing was irresponsible. I explained to my brother that I felt a real call from God, and in order to be responsible, I needed to test it. If I started the program and found that it was not what I was meant to do, I would stop. He then said, “Would that not be embarrassing”? I said that it would be worth the embarrassment, because if I did not try, then I would not have tested my faith and I would never know if I was truly called or not. Overall, I experienced a positive response from both Jackie’s family and my own. In fact, Jackie’s brother, a self-professed atheist, encouraged me by saying I would be great at it. God speaks though people you sometimes least expect. Support from friends, family members, unknown financial donors, congregational members, and choir members all helped us see God’s grace through the entire process of becoming a minister.

Student Ministry in Coldwater

Just before my second year of study, my family and I moved to Coldwater, Ontario to become the student minister at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church. This

congregation was a congregation who could not afford a full-time pastor but could afford a student. I led worship and preached on the last Sunday of June, 1996, and had an interview with the search team later in the afternoon. The most challenging question went something like this: “You are not one of these types who calls God a “she,” are you?” I was about to answer, when one of the other elders did it for me: “God is beyond gender,” the elder stated. A few days later, the interim moderator contacted me to say that the church in Coldwater would like me to be their student minister while I studied at Knox College. We would live in the manse and receive a stipend. This was so exciting to all of us! This was a wonderful adventure. We had a youthful confidence that we were going to be just what this church needed to grow the congregation. That youthful enthusiasm is a precious thing in life. Looking back, I feel it was a little too much of me and not enough of the Holy Spirit in my thinking. Still, Coldwater was a good fit for Jackie and me. We were both more oriented towards small town, country life. We were excited about this opportunity.

One concern was dampening our enthusiasm. We felt a little apprehensive as we were expecting another child. Jackie had notified me that she thought she might be pregnant just before the interview in Coldwater. We already had four children, and although we thought that was enough, we had not taken any decisive action to prevent any more pregnancies. The pregnancy realization was a shock, especially to Jackie. We felt embarrassed and even irresponsible to have another child while I was in school full time and with very little income. Would the people of Coldwater think we were irresponsible? The day after the interview, it

was confirmed that we were expecting. We agreed with one another that if we had discovered that we were expecting another baby before the interview had taken place, there was a good chance that we would not have gone at all. Thanks be to God for the timing. Although we did not have any idea how the congregation would react, we felt that it was God's leading that allowed these events to unfold. In fact, we found that the congregation loved that Jackie was expecting. This made our arrival even more exciting for them. Our fifth child Nico was born in the manse in Coldwater in a midwife-assisted homebirth. Everyone was blessed through the event. We cannot imagine life without him. We were so thankful to the Lord that everything worked out so well. We believed that God had a plan. Though the plan had taken some twists and turns, we believed that we were in the right place at the right time.

The student years at the church were wonderful. The church family, as well as our own family, was growing. It was certainly a busy and challenging time, having to balancing family, school, and congregational responsibilities. Jackie supported this move into ministry. It is important to remember that she did not marry a minister. It seems to me that being a spouse of a minister is just as large of a calling. Jackie was deeply involved in the Sunday school, assuming the role of superintendent. She also initiated women's Bible studies and created a space for young families to gather and grow in their faith. Jackie is also very musical, and she used her love for music in nurturing the gift into each of our children.

Another wonderful gift to me at this time was my mentor Rev. Charles Carter. Charles was not my immediate predecessor in Coldwater, but he was the minister in residence before that. He served the three-point charge of Coldwater, Victoria Harbour, and Moonstone from 1951-1987. Charles met me soon after I started in Coldwater. He made it clear that he did not want to intrude on my ministry but wanted to support me in any way he could. When I was a student, Charles often assisted at communion. We would go together to home communions as well. On one occasion, I officiated at a wedding, and he came along and provided the official signature and his government number to make it legal. After that wedding, he made it clear to me and many others that he did not think he ever attended a more moving wedding. He was a man of great faith and hope. I treasured his abundant support. Charles also had a great sense of humour, which helped me not take myself too seriously. A year after I was ordained, I officiated at Charles' funeral. I was blessed to have had such a good friend and mentor in my ministry.

Soon after graduating from Knox College in 1999, I was called as the ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Coldwater. The congregation had grown large enough to call a full-time minister. Since the attendance at worship and Sunday school had grown substantially over the years, the congregation decided to put an addition on the church. This addition was exciting and played into my youthful enthusiasm and confidence to advance the Kingdom in Coldwater. My time as a student minister in Coldwater was an important piece of my spiritual formation. I learned about what was working and

what was not. I learned about conflict and that my gifts of listening and reconciliation were not always enough. I learned that I do have limitations, greater than I had realized. In a way, I felt freer in those days, and somewhat more trusting in myself. Today, I have a greater awareness of my personal limitations, and I more readily see the need to place more of my trust in God. Now that I am older and have matured both spiritually and with overall life experience, I can see the context more clearly and see where the true self and the false self were operating in me during these years.

During my ministry in Coldwater, I needed to respond to a couple of tragic occasions. On the morning of Easter Saturday one year, I was working in the basement of the church when the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and heard the heart-wrenching cry, “My daughter is dead!” Just the week before, this mother and her daughter were in church celebrating communion. I hung up the receiver and raced to the nearby village of Moonstone. We left in the mother’s van and travelled to Kingston where the accident had taken place. The investigation concluded that the driver had fallen asleep, crossed the center line and hit an oncoming car. Everyone in the car carrying my congregant’s daughter were killed – all of them teenagers. We went into the morgue to identify the daughter. I did some serious praying through the whole journey, but now we were at the climax – identifying the body. They rolled back the sheet, and it was her. The next day, we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Two days later was the funeral. The church was packed, with people spilling out of the church onto the streets. I gave the gospel message and trusted that God would speak to

the hearts of all the young people present. Despite this tragic event, God was there on this Holy Weekend. I was also glad to be there to be an instrument of our Lord.

Other tragic deaths in Coldwater which have been imprinted on my memory were the two funerals of local women who were in a boating accident and were flung overboard in frigid early spring waters. One woman was in her 20s, the other in her early 40s. It was so difficult for the families. They were not church-attending people, but the families asked me to officiate. I was blessed to have been able to do so. Every time I am with people at this low time in their lives, I know that the Lord is present to guide my words in bringing comfort to the mourning loved ones. These experiences have contributed in forming my faith to rely on God at these very difficult times of loss.

Fragile, Handle with Care

When I began as a student minister in 1995, there were about 30 people regularly in attendance on Sunday mornings. During our ministry, the average church attendance grew until, in early 2005, we had reached close to 120. We were starting to plan for a second worship service on Sunday mornings when difficulties arose. In 2004, I had received a telephone message from someone inquiring about our church, worship times, etc. I returned the call, and spoke with a gentleman who said he would, "See you on Sunday!" On Sunday, two men, two developmentally delayed adults and a young boy came to the service. People in the church, myself included, thought that they were part of a group home. I spoke with each of them after the service and they began to attend regularly. After a period of several weeks, I received a telephone call from one of the men. He

wanted to be honest with me and told me that he and his partner were a same-sex couple and wondered if it would be a problem if they continued to attend worship. I responded by saying that everyone was welcome. He mentioned that when he left the original message, he also left a message with all three of the churches in Coldwater (United, Anglican and Presbyterian), and I had been the only one who called him back. I have reflected about the fact that I was the one that called back while the other churches had not. Upon reflection I began to see how the spirit moves in surprising ways.

At the next session meeting, I mentioned to the elders that the family with the developmentally delayed adults was not a group home but a same-sex couple who had adopted the young boy and were caregivers for the adults. The reaction from the session was mixed. One member spoke up quickly and said that it was wonderful that we could welcome them. Another said, “Ok, but they better not ask for membership.” The first person who spoke asked, “Why not?” Everyone agreed that they were free to attend worship. After all, they were very faithful attenders and people had commented on how friendly and nurturing they were to the adults and young son in their care. Negative comments also came forward about their “hidden agenda.” Both of these men had solid church backgrounds; one was Brethren in Christ (BIC), and the other was Anglican. They were both active schoolteachers who soon adopted two more children, a sister and brother. Throughout this time, a conflict was slowly brewing in the church both under the surface and out in the open.

The family came to me with a request to baptize their newly adopted children. I brought this to the session and mentioned that at least one of the parents needed to be a member for the baptism to proceed. The session was divided. Two members resigned from their position of elder immediately. Despite the friction, the session sustained the request for the children of the same-sex couple to be baptized. Many of the congregants could not accept the session decision, however, and much discussion ensued.

To address the growing divide in the congregation, we invited a consultant from the national office of the Presbyterian Church to lead worship and a congregational discussion afterward. He clearly set the boundaries and rules of engagement for the meeting. He reminded the congregation to respect one another in the discussions, going so far as to distribute name tags that said, "Fragile - Handle with Care." The meeting started out well, with very clear guidelines defined, but the meeting deteriorated quickly. My children were in attendance and witnessed kind people speaking loudly and disrespectfully about the couple in question, as well as some of the leadership and members of the congregation. I believed this had a damaging impact on our children. They heard people who were so kind and loving act in an extremely unloving way. One of our daughters was especially taken aback by the experience. In a way, her trust was broken with these previously trusted individuals, and this happened in a church meeting of all places. This same daughter is currently not interested in being part of a church. She has voiced the hurt experienced in that meeting as a turning point for her.

While we did speak with our children about it, hoping to help them process it, the damage was done. Even so, we hope that healing will continue to occur.

After the divisive meeting, one of our elders travelled with me to the homes of congregants who were against accepting this same-sex couple into our membership. There was both scriptural concerns and a fear of culture setting the agenda in the church. We reviewed scripture and prayed with them. Despite these efforts, we lost 40% of our congregants. A second worship service was no longer necessary.

This was probably the most difficult part of my ministry. I spent many hours in prayer asking for discernment. These were not easy decisions to make. Certainly, everyone wanted to be faithful to Christ and the written word. We asked questions such as, “What is the Holy Spirit saying to us in this time and in our context.” The family in question was a real family attending our church. They were not a theoretical case study. They were building relationships in the congregation and displayed the fruit of the Spirit. I was so sad about those in the congregation who left, because I also loved them. They were my friends who were also strong believers in Christ. I missed them dearly. It was also sad for those who stayed because a division had occurred not only in their church, but also in their relationships. A blessing, which resulted, is that those who stayed continued to, and even increased, their support for the couple and their family going forward. This gave the family confidence that they were welcome as they continued to worship at St. Andrews.

This issue of inclusion and affirming those in committed same-sex relationship is a difficult one for many. This issue has followed me throughout my life and ministry. If this same-sex couple had not come to our church, I would not have made an issue of it. However, we were not merely talking about what we believed concerning Christ and the scriptures; we were confronted with real people, created by God, who were holy and dearly loved. These men had been raised in the church, believed scripture, had a relationship with Christ and wanted a place to come to worship with their family. I believe that it was part of God's plan. I question why the other congregations did not return the initial call from this family. For some reason I was called to do this work. We continued to minister in Coldwater for the next three years rebuilding the congregation.

Malawi and Returning to Canada

By 2007, we had been at the church in Coldwater for over a decade. Our ministry had its ups and downs, but we believed that we were able to work with the congregation in advancing God's kingdom in the Coldwater area and beyond. Once again, however, the mission field was calling us, and we both felt that this might be the time to revisit this option. We listened to the Spirit and made the next step by contacting the International Ministries' national office in Toronto to inquire about the current mission appointments. We were asked to come to the office so they could give us some information. They informed us of a position in Guatemala. After some consideration, we decided that while the Guatemala option was not suitable for children, another mission appointment which had come available in Malawi could be a good fit. We accepted a three-year term.

This was not a decision we made lightly. Going to Malawi meant leaving our three oldest children in Canada and taking our two younger sons with us halfway across the world. This may have been the most difficult decision of my faith journey. Yet even in this life-changing choice, I felt God's steadfast guidance.

When I met my wife Jackie at the youth group at church, she had a vibrant Christian faith, already in her teens. When we were engaged, we believed we had a vision from God that one day we would serve on the Mission field. We encouraged one another in our own sense of missional living. When we did serve with the Presbyterian Church in Malawi from 2008-2011, it was a fulfillment of our mutual dream and our sense of calling. My position was to represent the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) to our partner church in Malawi. The PCC had been sending funds over to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in Malawi for many years, and my role, along with my family, was to be the "face of the aid." We began to understand and continued to learn what appropriate aid looked like as we served alongside colleagues and congregants in Malawi. We learned much about their culture, suspending judgement as we listened and learned. We connected well with the people, and we thank the Lord that we had this opportunity to serve in His Kingdom. The relationships we built with the local people strengthened us in understanding how to connect with our brothers and sisters from cultures different from our own. With more families attending our church from various African backgrounds, I felt more equipped through my mission exposure to welcome them and nurture them appropriately.

During our time in Malawi, I was engaged every Tuesday morning with the prison chaplain at Chichiri Prison in the city of Blantyre. In this role, I led a Bible study to over 100 male inmates. I shared with them both my music and my love of Jesus. While I was there, I brought donated guitars into the prison, which the men played with joy. The men sang together as a choir with beautiful harmony praising God. These men were in a prison built to accommodate 800; there were usually 2000 living there. The shortage of room was so severe that the inmates needed to sleep sitting up against one another. Despite this, the inmates were so appreciative of my presence. I came to the prison rested and showered in such contrast to the inmates and they still greeted me at the gate telling me how amazing I was for being with them that morning. I learned more about gratitude.

HIV is prevalent in Africa; Malawi is no exception. There was still a great stigma among families if one of their own was inflicted with the disease. Due to the embarrassment and stigma involved in testing positive with HIV and being detected, those infected individuals would delay in seeing a doctor and receiving treatment. There was anti-viral medication available in the cities, but many did without until it was too late. The medication was also often too difficult to obtain. As a result, about once a week, I was involved in a funeral of an individual who was often younger than I. I would often see the young mother or father with small children weeping at the graveside.

When someone dies in Malawi, other family, friends, congregants, and community members immediately visit the family. As a pastor, I would arrive with the elders, and we would sit with the family, pray, and read scripture with

them. The singing would have started long before we arrived and would not cease even after we had left. The people gathered around and made it a supportive community event. The funeral service would sometimes be in the church, but more often would take place close to the home of the deceased. I would often lead the service in the street, with a few chairs and most people sitting on blankets on the ground around the houses. Sometimes it would be oppressively hot, so a local person would position himself with an umbrella over my head. After the service, everyone went to the full burial. The grave was usually hand-dug by a number of men. The body would first be lowered, and then a team of men and boys would start filling in the soil. After about five minutes, the clerk of session would announce that we needed fresh men to continue the digging. The clerk would make the shift changes until the burial was complete. Several wreaths were placed on the mount with an announcement about the dedication for each one. I would be reading the liturgy as the events unfolded around the ceremony. The last thing would be a song and benediction. The ceremony was a totally nurturing and supportive event.

I have mentioned to Jackie that Malawi does funerals and interments well. I would like my own funeral to reflect the hope and joy that I found in Malawian funerals. Even though there are so many problems in Malawi – poverty, HIV, and corruption – the people have so much joy. Their joy comes from their faith and hope in Christ. They are not dependent on their own resources to have a full life; they need one another to survive. The people are very thankful when they can feed their family for another week. Overall, I believe they have more joy than the

average person in the west. There is a reason Malawi is called, “The warm heart of Africa.” My brothers and sisters in Malawi formed me spiritually in significant ways. This joy at the center of their life helped influence my spiritual model that sees Christ at the center of the hub. My Malawian brothers and sisters saw the grace of God in all aspects of their life and continued to be joyful in both life and in death.

At the end of our first year in Malawi, our first grandchild was born. We came back to Canada for the baptism and for a rest. I was so blessed to baptize my own grandchild, Judah. Baptism is one of my favourite parts of the ministry. The evidence of God’s grace is so apparent in both infant and believer’s baptism. While in Malawi, I was blessed to have sometimes baptized up to twenty or more children in one service. With the birth of my first grandchild, I allowed myself time to reflect on his spiritual formation. Would the spiritual formation of the next generation look differently than mine?

I am very thankful that my family and I had the opportunity to serve in Malawi. I sometimes “pinch myself,” as it were, that God called us and blessed us there. I often think back and remember both the hardships, and even more so the joy and hope, which the people experienced there. The joy was so evident in their smiles. It is this image of laughing and joyful people that has been the impetus of this study into how people are formed and how they experience this joy. While still in Africa, I was led to study in the Reformed University of Stellenbosch in South Africa on my study leave. I did an independent study exploring how one could minister to a white middle class congregation coming from a context of

deep poverty and vulnerability and be relevant. This study helped me prepare for my transition from a society of want to a society of plenty.

With the plan of returning to Canada in June of 2011, I contacted Oakridge Presbyterian Church in London Ontario, which was seeking a new lead minister. A retired Presbyterian minister whom I knew well encouraged me to apply for the position. He felt that I would do well there. I believe God speaks through others as well to direct us into ministry. I took that remark seriously and contacted the interim moderator receiving inquiries. I applied and became the lead minister starting in November of 2011. I felt God's guidance through this. Oakridge was a large congregation – quite different from what I was accustomed to in Coldwater – but I felt that this was where God was calling me to serve.

After the honeymoon period, one of my staff members disagreed with where the direction of the church was going; the person was asked to leave. Subsequently, one of my congregants filed a complaint against me. This complaint was forwarded to Presbytery. A Presbytery team conducted an investigation, and after a couple of months, I was exonerated. This all happened within the first year and a half of my ministry. This was rough, and it made me rely on my Lord and others more for support.

I am not a conflict-oriented individual; bridge-building is one of my gifts. In times of conflict, I feel God has equipped me with the gift of bringing people together and creating unity. Through this conflict, I believe God spiritually strengthened me through the community of faith and the wider community of the Presbytery. The strength, prayers and support from God and others gave me a

stronger awareness going forward that I was not alone. The ego is something that we all need to deal with in our lives to various degrees. I believe my ego was hurt in this process. However, in a positive sense, I moved a step forward in awareness of my false self and my true self. Through self-examination I was again reminded that my sense of self is not rooted in what others thought of me, but my sense of self is rooted in Christ. The fear and worry found in my false self, diminishes the authentic joy offered by God in my true self. In moving toward the true self where Christ becomes increasingly the center of one's life (and not merely on the periphery), I remember the words of St. Augustine, "You have made me for yourself, and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you." (Augustine 2007, 3).

When I started in the ministry, I mentioned to myself and others that "I just wanted to be myself." I did not want to be something I was not. I was told by my mentors that my best asset for ministry was who I was, so I should not try to be a something I was not just to please people. I have experienced that when I rest in God and his love, the best of me will be expressed because it comes from the freedom of being loved rather than the fear of not being enough. This experience with conflict spiritually formed me closer to Christ to rely on him and others more readily. It also taught me to be less angry and more forgiving with my opponents. One of my most severe critics from the congregation became seriously ill shortly after this event. He was able to resolve his differences with me, and I was able to provide pastoral care to him and his family through his illness and death. Thanks be to God.

I have also become more cognizant of the presence of Jesus in others. One experience in particular illustrated God's presence in the work of our congregation. Our congregation leads a monthly worship service and meal to the men who come to the local Men's Mission and shelter. Over a year ago, one of the men (I will call him Tom) asked where our church was located. We mentioned that it was on the other end of the city. I mentioned that if he would like to come, he would be most welcome. With no expectations, I gave him my card. Tom came to worship the following week. He attended worship several times and took friends from the mission along with him from time to time. We did not see Tom for about a month, and we eventually received word that he had been rushed to the hospital where he died from an aneurysm. His wife, who lived out of town, called me, and asked if I could officiate at the funeral. I agreed, and one of our elders who attended the Men's Mission services accompanied me to the service.

Tom's wife shared that, through contact with the people of OPC, her husband had found God again. His wife said that he had strayed away from his faith but had never lost it. I shared this great news with the congregation and said, "God was present among us and all of you who were part of helping Tom experience God's presence again in his life. I saw Jesus in Tom, just as Tom saw Jesus in us." This kind of experience helps to form our faith, giving us the knowledge that God has used the church to be a means of grace. The acknowledgement of the presence of God helped to form confident faith in the congregation, especially with those who had been directly involved in the Men's Mission.

Conclusion

Relationships were foundational and spiritually forming in my life. I was a recipient of God's grace in my life from committed mentors who displayed and dispensed grace and also mentored a trusting faith in God. I was raised in a family and in a congregational environment in which my faith in Christ was nurtured. I have been blessed. Though equipped with a solid foundation toward faith formation, so much of the time I was living in the false self where my ego was the center of my movements in all the various dimensions of my life. I see more clearly now that though I was a follower of Christ and called by God to the ministry, I was motivated to prove my worth as a Christian leader through performing well and hoping others will see and affirm me. In reflection on my life, I came to realize more fully that I experienced the nudging from God on several occasions sometimes resulting in change and new direction for my wife Jackie and me, and for our children. Throughout my life, I was aware that God has been active in my life. However, because I was motivated by performance, I was not fully aware of God's presence and action in my life. With that lack of awareness, I was diminishing the joy of God's grace in my life and of dispensing that grace to others. The goal for spiritual formation is to be open to the Holy Spirit to transform one's life from the false self where self/ego is the center of one's orientation toward life, toward the true self where God is the center/heart influencing all the parts/dimensions of one's life. In the true self one acknowledges that they do not belong to themselves; they belong to God. Nouwen reflects on this orientation toward life:

You are not what you do, although you do a lot. You are not what you have collected in terms of friendships and connections, although you might have many. You are not the popularity that you have received. You are not the success of your work. You are not what people say about you, whether they speak well or whether they speak poorly about you. All these things that keep you quite busy, quite occupied, and often quite preoccupied are not telling the truth about who you are. I am here to remind you in the name of God that you are the Beloved Daughters and Sons of God, and that God says to you, “I have called you from all eternity and you are engraved from all eternity in the palms of my hands. You are mine. You belong to me, and I love you with an everlasting love.” (Nouwen, 2021)

I am aware my own need for spiritual formation and how this will bring increased joy to my own life, my family, my congregation, the community and to all the various dimensions of my life. This awareness has planted in me a greater desire to help encourage others toward spiritual formation. As a pastor, I developed a model for spiritual formation (Chapter 3) to use as a plan for spiritual formation in the context of my congregation. My quest was to find a plan or method of delivery, which I could use in my present ministry context to shed some light on the necessity of spiritual formation and lead others on this path. In the next chapter, I explain in detail a model of delivery for spiritual formation.

CHAPTER 3:
DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The goal for my model for spiritual formation in the congregation is to create opportunities for the congregants of Oakridge Presbyterian Church to move from living in the false self toward living (in all areas of their lives) in the true self as God wills for their lives. The model is designed as a basis to enable the congregants' spiritual formation toward their true self. I considered three basic questions in developing the model: How are we formed? How are other people formed? What are the spiritual practices one can utilize in forming individuals into the body of Christ and the community? Together with these questions and my calling as pastor to equip and form others, the plan for spiritual formation was implemented.

In this chapter, I will explain formation and its connection with the movement of our spiritual formation from the false to the true self. I emphasize how receiving the grace of God in our lives frees us from the need to try harder to be better, or be acceptable to God. We are already considered worthy by God. Spiritual formation moves an individual toward accepting this reality and adopting daily practices which form habits that point them consistently to God's Kingdom. In the formation process, the Holy Spirit does the work, and the body of Christ provides fertile ground for the seeds of God's love to grow. Spiritual formation toward the true self in union with Christ is about relationship with God and others. It is a relationship in which one knows they belong to God, that God

loves them, and that nothing can separate them from this love (Romans 8). The spiritual practices of Holy Communion and Baptism reenact this undeserved love (grace) which is ours to receive. Spiritual practices point us to the Kingdom of God; the joy of the good life and abundant life (John 10:10b) in which we can truly belong to Christ and are free to be who God created us to be.

After reviewing my own spiritual autobiography, I realized that my spiritual journey had been developed by relationships that had shown me and pointed me towards the grace of God in my life. This, in turn, had given me a greater joy in that awareness. I realized that my own relationship with Christ was nurtured by my relationship with others. God was in the center of all my relationships which gave me the greatest awareness of God as the center of who I was and professed to be. In that centeredness, I could live out my true self. I needed a spiritual formation model – a plan for spiritual formation – that would help my own congregants form spiritually and live more centrally from their true self rather than their false self. My model evolved out of the true/false self as depicted in the Figure 1 in the introductory chapter.

I arrived at the following thesis for my model of spiritual formation: “With many distractions pulling us away from God and his kingdom, many believers have Jesus and faith as just one spoke on the wheel of life instead of the center. As a result, spiritual formation is neglected. However, in a congregational setting, where believers can be mentored in the way of Jesus, the way of freedom in Christ can be worked out in tandem with a richer awareness of the true self. This results in a grace-filled life lived for Jesus and others through the Holy Spirit.”

My research, discussed in Chapter 4, shows how spiritual formation is enabled and negative influences resisted in a congregational setting by increasing the awareness of God's presence in individual lives. Such increased awareness places Christ at the center, as my model suggests.

I developed this model for spiritual formation within the Presbyterian/Reformed traditions, specifically at OPC where I have served as lead minister for the past seven years. This was a predominantly white, middle class congregation which has become more ethnically diverse over the last several years, including members from Korea and various African countries. This congregation is the largest Presbyterian Church in the London district and one of the largest in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. This is a congregation with several staff members both full time and part time. The church is located in the suburbs on the west side of London, Ontario, Canada.

As I was developing my model of spiritual formation for the congregation of OPC, I began with my calling as a pastor. My calling as a pastor is not to perform all the necessary ministry functions of a healthy congregation. Rather, my calling is to provide a means to enable the congregants to grow spiritually. In other words, helping congregants grow in God's grace and grow in the awareness of God's grace will in turn help them develop their gifts for ministry and thereby equip themselves for ministry in the congregation and in the world. Ephesians 4:11-2 states, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." If there was an awareness

of God's grace working in all parts of their lives, these gifts and the fruit of the Spirit would be evident to the congregation and they would see the potential to experience the joy of the gospel in all circumstances. This joy would be turned to grace as it is shared with others both inside and outside of the congregation.

A "one size fits all" model for spiritual formation does not exist. This is because we are all unique and motivated differently. However, there are some commonalities. A foundational skill for every Christian is to cultivate a friendly and welcoming spirit to everyone they encounter. Each congregant has the ability to develop this gift to varying degrees through encouragement, presence, love, and example. One could argue that this is similar to raising children and teaching them to respond to adults who are speaking to them. Many parents will teach and mentor their children to look adults in the face and speak directly to them when they are spoken to. This direct acknowledgment of the other is an important practice for building relationships and for spreading the good news of Christ. This practice can cultivate a friendly and welcoming spirit of hospitality making the world a kinder and more joyful place.

The Telos (goal) of Spiritual Formation is to have union with Christ at the hub (center, heart) of one's life. The awareness for an individual to be the image of God will have positive influence on the many dimensions of one's life. Diane Chandler (2014) employs the Imago Dei in her model of Christian spiritual formation (CSF) and that is helpful in understanding formation toward the true self. However, Chandler's model is not fully sufficient in bringing forth aspects of the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) such as love and joy which emerge when

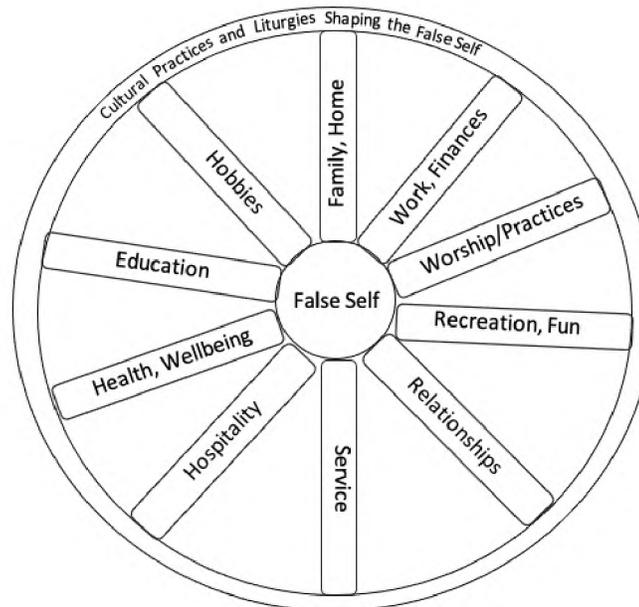
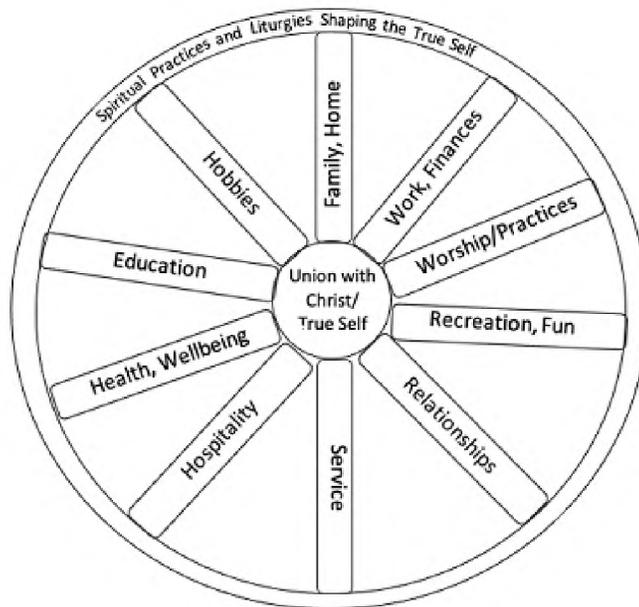


Figure 2: Model for Spiritual Formation – Christ at the Centre or the Hub of One’s Life

one is in union with Christ in the true self. So, I have placed “union with Christ” as the center or the heart of the telos toward spiritual formation into the true self.

In the first wheel of my model for spiritual formation, shown in Figure 2, the desires of Christ would then influence all the other dimensions (or spokes) of one's life. One could say that the spokes are directly connected to the hub and are going out from Christ, through us and into the world. Similar to a wheel each spoke which connects to the rim is situated in a shared context. The outer rim in the model functions as the shared context where union with Christ influences/ shapes the dimensions of one's life. This shared context also works to resist formation (of the self) by detrimental cultural influences. This shared context of the rim shapes, orients and directs the self toward the Kingdom of God with ethical living based in God's grace. The second wheel illustrates the person living in the false self. In the false self, the context of the shared cultural influences (the outer rim) further shape and reinforce the nature of the false self.

In Table 1, I describe how the same dimensions (spokes) in the wheel are impacted differently when living in the true or false self, and how that impacts one's relationships.

How are we formed?

I was formed through relationships built throughout my lifetime with my family as well as through my church, work, music, and sports. I experienced much grace in my life, especially through my parents and family. The experience of God's grace embodied in others is helpful for authentic Christian spiritual formation to happen. Spiritual formation is a journey in which we will never fully

Table 1: Spokes on the Wheel – True and False Self

Dimension (Spoke)	True Self	False Self
Relationships	Oriented to approach <i>relationships</i> with unconditional love (God’s grace) for the other. This approach would discourage fear of not measuring up or being smart enough or good enough to be a friend.	Oriented to approach <i>relationships</i> with conditional love for the other. In the false self, if the relationship with the other does not benefit them in any way, it would likely be terminated.
Recreation and Fun	Oriented to approach <i>recreation and fun</i> as a gift from God. Jesus promoted rest among his disciples and talked about the importance of the sabbath. The true self would see recreation and fun as part of a healthy, balanced life as God would intend for his people.	Oriented to approach <i>recreation and fun</i> as something they deserve. The False Self would tend to be oriented to seeing rest and relaxation as a luxury and not necessarily vital to life.
Worship	Oriented to approach <i>worship</i> with joy and anticipation of how God will speak to them and the joy of meeting with the body of Christ and the family of God to encourage one another with love. Frequent spiritual practices to be reminded of the presence of God and to build the habit of being aware of what God is doing in their life and in the world.	Oriented to approach <i>worship</i> without being conscious of what it is. The false self’s patterns of behaviour, habits/practices may reinforce a love or desire for a person or for a thing without them knowing.
Work	Oriented to approach <i>work</i> as a calling or a vocation to engage in with passion and joy for God’s Kingdom. In the true self, <i>finances</i> are seen as a means to gather provisions for a healthy life, and share the abundance given to them by God. Money or finances are viewed by the true self as a means and not an end in itself.	Oriented to approach <i>work</i> as valuable for a person to have a purpose in life, and for the purpose to acquire finances for the things they need and want to do. The false self is oriented to a mentality of scarcity and the fear of not having enough.

Dimension (Spoke)	True Self	False Self
Family	Oriented to seeing family as highly valued. Family is the priority, but not at the expense of helping strangers who are in need (Matthew 10).	Oriented to seeing family as highly valued. Family is the priority, and often at the expense of helping strangers who are in need.
Hobbies	Oriented to seeing hobbies as an interest God has given them to enjoy. The true self will see hobbies as a gift to be thankful for. The true self looks for ways to share this hobby to spread the joy of God's Kingdom with others.	Oriented to seeing hobbies as a way to help enjoy life. They would not see hobbies so much as a gift, but more something which gives them meaning and to pass the time.
Education	Oriented to seeing education as a gift to learn more about God's creation and prepare for the vocation to which they are called. The true self also sees education as a means of grace to help others in need for the advancement of God's Kingdom.	Oriented to seeing education as a place to learn more about what one is interested in; and as a necessary step in acquiring a good job to earn enough money to acquire all the many needs and wants in life.
Health	Oriented to seeing health (one's physical and psychological well-being) as being a gift from God. Our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit to be cared for and loved (I Corinthians 6: 19).	Oriented to seeing health (our physical and psychological well-being) as something one deserves. In the absence of health, the false self is more oriented to be upset that they have lost opportunities and experiences.
Service	Oriented to seeing service as putting yourself aside for others as Christ has done for us. In serving, one does tasks for others to lighten their load and contribute to making them stronger, knowing they are not alone and they are valued and loved.	Oriented to seeing service as a community ethic that needs to be done from time to time when called upon. The false self realizes that life is uncertain and they could also fall victim to unfortunate circumstances and need the assistance of others.

Dimension (Spoke)	True Self	False Self
Hospitality	Oriented to seeing <i>hospitality</i> as an opportunity to have an interaction with another and share the good news of Christ’s unconditional love (grace). Through offering food, drink, visiting the sick, visiting someone in prison, inviting a stranger in, clothing those in need, the face of Christ becomes evident in the true self.	Oriented to seeing <i>hospitality</i> as an opportunity to have an interaction with people they know and whose company they enjoy. The focus is more on the friendship and the good experience and feelings when meeting with them. They are also oriented to helping others in need because it gives them the pleasure of doing good and it makes them look good.

arrive. The following paragraphs will help you question how far you are along the journey of moving from the false self toward the true self which is found in God.

The True and the False Self

The false self is living in a way where the center or the point of reference by which we make decisions is the self. In other words, what is best for the self is what guides decisions. The true self is living in a way such that the central perspective of how one views life and makes decisions is based on the grace of Christ. Often, we are not consciously aware of the false self. When one is conscious of the prevalence of the false self in their lives, they can be spiritually formed toward the true self. “Unless you are aware of these two selves—these two ways of being in the world – you will have great difficulty allowing God to lead you into a deeper life of wholeness in Christ” (Mulholland 2016, 24). We find our true selves (as opposed to our false selves) when we understand and experience what it means to have Christ living in us at the center of our lives.

Building awareness of his or her false self and true self must be a daily task of anyone on the journey of spiritual formation.

Mulholland (2016) claims that one's false self is a fearful self. He explains:

In the depths of our being, at a deep ontological level, our false self knows [that] the roots of its identity are firmly planted in mid-air. There is no anchor for its being that is ultimately real. This loss of ultimate reality is sharply manifest in our post-modern culture, where the only ultimate reality is that there is no ultimate reality. (Mulholland 2016, 30-1)

This false self is not grounded in love but rather in fear. Being grounded in fear puts one in the self-preservation mode to protect the self from being hurt by outside forces. When one is grounded in the love of God (living in the true self), there is freedom from having to protect this vulnerable sense of self. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1 John 4:18). God's grace, since we are made in God's image, is steadfast and will not change despite our inability to earn or deserve the love of God. That certain knowledge of grace in each person helps us reach out to each other as interconnected creatures of a loving and graceful God.

Mulholland continues: "One of the ways our false self tries to compensate is to find our identity in performance. 'I am what I do' is one of the most primal perspectives of the false self" (Mulholland 2016, 31). We try to validate our existence by what we do. This is exhausting, because it will never be enough because of fear that one will lose their ability to perform. On the contrary, when one moves toward the true self where they are rooted in the love of God, fear is diminished, and one is then free to be and do what God has called them to without

fear of failure. Fear constricts (limits) one's potential whereas steadfast love frees one to be and do without fear of failure.

There is true freedom in knowing that one does not belong to oneself. Rather, as I mentioned previously, we belong to God. Along the same lines, Galatians 2:20 says, "And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." In the true self one dies to the false self and one is transformed into union with Christ. One does not belong to the self but belongs to Christ.

The book of Galatians is a good example of spiritual formation in the New Testament. I led my congregation through a Bible study/sermon series on the book of Galatians in January and February of 2019 as the base for my model of spiritual formation. In Galatians 5, Paul emphasizes the freedom one has in Christ. The teaching we glean from Paul is that living for oneself is living in bondage. Paul teaches that the desires of the flesh are often out of line with the will of God. Living in alignment with the Spirit translates into a life of freedom grounded in the steadfast love (grace) of God. The flesh can be interpreted as the false self and being filled with the Spirit as the true self in Christ. Paul writes: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the

kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21). The false self is attracted to and can easily identify with the needs and desires of the flesh.

What is the flesh? It was discussed in our Bible study group that the “flesh” is the part of a person that focuses more on doing what they desire with a diminished regard for how their actions might impact others. However, the flesh is not all negative. For example, our physical side has needs which can be met in a positive and life-giving way when done in the spirit of God’s love. Self-awareness of one’s focus on the flesh is necessary for one to desire change towards the true self where the unconditional love of Christ takes over one’s heart, replacing the heart of self-gratification. The spiritually forming Christian strives to be led by Holy Spirit and not by the flesh.

Living one’s life in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit is the desire for those seeking spiritual formation in their daily life. The Holy Spirit is God’s spirit of love offered to all. Living one’s life by the Holy Spirit leads to gratitude, joy, and healing in the person and in those they meet. Living by the Spirit means not limiting oneself to one’s personal limited resources. In contrast to living by the flesh, living by the Spirit reminds us of God’s presence empowering each one to bear the fruit of the Spirit as explained in the scriptures (Galatians 5:22). Living by the Spirit empowers one’s life because it sharpens one’s perspective on life as a free gift of grace rather than living out of the flesh (the false self). Living from the false self, one lives life as a place of scarce resources, in which one must compete against others to achieve ‘the good life’. For the false self, the good life is life oriented to the kingdom of personal success, superiority, and entitlement.

This kingdom of the false self is continuously promoted as ‘the good life’. For the Christian, the good life is life orientated toward the kingdom of God where there is abundance (John 10:10). It is a place where no person is valued more than another. It is a gift which God wants all to receive – a place where grace has the final word. Smith (2016) notes: “The longings and desires that orient us toward some version of the good life ... [are] shaped and configured by imitation and practice. This has important implications for how we approach Christian formation and discipleship” (Smith 2016, 19).

Forming into Union with Christ

Although Chandler states, “to become more like Jesus spiritually over time, is humankind’s goal and destiny” (2014, 37), she moves further by stating that a balanced approach to Christian spiritual formation (CSF) is the goal. She explains that too many spiritual formation approaches lean too heavily on personal formation. Too much concentration on oneself would diminish outreach with the love and grace of God to others and to the world. It is vital that Christian spiritual formation is not only focused inward on the love of God through Jesus Christ but also oriented outward to share the grace with others and the world. The task of spiritual formation is to move closer to the place in which serving Christ while serving others becomes a natural practice of life. This would be considered “the good life.” Every person wishes to experience the good life. Smith explains: “It is our desires that orient and direct us to some kind of *telos* we take to be the good life, the version of the kingdom we live toward. To be human is to be a lover and to love something ultimate” (Smith 2016, 14-5). The good life for a Christian

is to live in union with Christ, where Christ or God's grace is the central hub (the heart) of who we are. This is where our desires are focused on God's Kingdom. Fear is diminished there, and we can just be our true selves as we love God and reach out to others.

In the journey of spiritual formation, one may put in more inward and outward self-effort and rely little on the Holy Spirit. In this scenario, the false self is more dominant in the person and the joy of God's grace is diminished. "The CSF model simply illustrates a dynamic process of being conformed into the image of Jesus for ultimate Kingdom impact" (Chandler 2014, 276). For the Kingdom of God to have a significant impact in an individual's life, the presence of God through the Holy Spirit is a dynamic power of grace and joy, motivating the person towards a healthy balance of inward and outward spirituality.

God's grace is offered to one as a gift, but if it is not received by an individual, it is not theirs. Accepting or receiving God's grace is so important in moving closer to our true self in Christ. Peterson writes about the difference between receiving and taking:

Receiving is a freedom word, take is not. To receive is to accept what the divine largess provides for us. To take is to plunder whatever is not nailed down. To receive is to do what children do in the family. To take is what pirates do on the high seas. All studies of the loss of freedom are stories of taking.

All the stories of access to freedom are stories of receiving. The most powerful of these stories is that of the Christian Eucharist in which Christ's disciples receive the sacramental bread and wine. The story continues to be told, re-enacted by persons who are set free, live freely. The difference between receiving and taking is deeply interior. It has to do with the disposition of Spirit, an act of faith, an openness to God. (Peterson 1988, 109-10)

When one is able to receive, they are accepting that they are created in the image and likeness of God. To give thanks is often the response when receiving the gift of God's grace. To be aware of this grace and to notice this gift of grace within the rhythms of everyday life is the beginning of gratitude and joy being awakened in the receiver of this gift of grace.

When one lets their guard down and surrenders to the Holy Spirit, and with the encouragement and prayers of others helping the person diminish their false self, the gift of God's grace becomes available, and the person can move toward having their true self at the center of who they are in union with Christ. This receiving is illustrated publicly in the congregation through baptism. Galatians 3:27-9 states: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you were one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." When one receives the grace of God, then the gift is theirs and they belong to God.

In spiritual formation, one surrenders part of themselves to receive God's grace, but continual surrendering is needed throughout one's life to see the change in formation. We give to God all that we know about ourselves. As we get to know ourselves better, we often discover there is more that needs to be transformed. The change can happen slowly; one day the individual may suddenly realize that they are different (as one of my congregants recently shared). A missing link appears – there is an epiphany and the person's spiritual formation

advances a step forward. Awareness of one's current "place" with Christ helps one to discern if there has been a formation or a change in their life. In my congregation, I am starting the practice of raising questions during worship and in Bible studies to remind congregants to reflect on where they stand in relationship with Christ. For example, I asked this question recently: "Is Jesus Christ the center of your wheel of life, or is Christ merely one of the spokes?" Although this is an important question, it can be heard differently depending on our experience with Christ. Some hear this as a stressful call to "try harder," while others understand it as an invitation to dwell more deeply on God's grace in Christ. This varied reaction depends on how the person has already noticed God's grace in their life. It is helpful for people to understand that they live in union with Christ and not merely with Christ.

God's grace through Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit will transform both the mind and the will. St. Augustine, for example, was intellectual and brilliant. However, he could not find satisfaction or peace with fame, fortune, or pleasure. He was restless while he sought to pursue meaning in his life. He searched until he heard the voice which prompted him to read.

I sent up these sorrowful cries: "How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?" I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl know not which-coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, "Pick up read; pick up read". (Augustine 2007, 125-6)

His intellect was a catalyst – a means of grace which brought him closer to God. He believed he (and humankind) was created in the image of God because of humanity's ability to think and reflect. In addition to humanity's ability to think

and reason, I have come to understand that one is created in the image of God because of their unique ability to engage in a loving, personal relationship with God and with others (John 13:34-5). This personal relationship with God extends to a relationship of care and stewardship for what God loves, namely all that God has created (Psalm 8). Each person's goal is to increasingly be formed into the likeness of Jesus as they mature into the image of God through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Our will to accept God's grace is motivated by God's grace as seen through those who love us and encourage us to believe, and by the power of God through the Holy Spirit who mediates God's love into our hearts. Once we accept the grace of God, we will be aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit around and within us to transform us. Chandler argues, "grace enlightens the intellect to discover God's truth, strengthens the will to follow the truth, and guides the emotions, the appetites and passions towards greater responsiveness to God's goodness and love" (Chandler 2014, 74). Regular self-examination is necessary to gauge how one's journey of spiritual formation is moving toward being more central to their daily life, although we are also able to deceive ourselves and others.

The will can also be persuaded by human pride, the desire for self-sufficiency and perfection. Our will to settle for what is easy and promotes the false self and cheap grace contrasts to the costly grace and the emergence, through God's work, of the true self.

Cheap grace results when mediocre faith fails to embrace discipleship, the cross or Jesus Christ, and is the foil of costly grace, the sobering price of

following Christ. For [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer, “It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.” (Chandler 2014, 74)

In my congregation, I see congregants led by the Spirit where costly discipleship is happening in quiet personal relationships. Encouraging these one-on-one relationships is foundational to actualizing spiritual formation in the congregation.

How are Other People Spiritually Formed?

When we speak about a model of spiritual formation to help form others spiritually, the process can appear like a recipe where one follows a set of directions and achieves the desired result by just following the instructions. This perspective is a concern, because we are not all formed in the same way; life is not always predictable, and circumstances can significantly change one’s course of life. Furthermore, one can see “ups” and “downs” in terms of progress towards spiritual formation. Certainly, one would argue that one needs a plan from which to be flexible. In other words, without a model for spiritual formation, one does not have a point of reference to refer to when adjustments need to be made.

A “one size fits all” approach to Christian spiritual formation does not work for all because of the diversity of God’s people. Different people have different approaches to spiritual formation and so we need to be sensitive to individualize practices. Though each person responds differently to models of spiritual formation, everyone shares the need for the desire and motivation to want to begin on the road to spiritual formation. All have the same goal of being conformed to Christ. In my experience in ministry, I have noticed that when individuals engage in spiritual formation practices and start experiencing a change

in their awareness of God's presence and God's grace, they are increasingly motivated to continue the practice. The spiritual practices help an individual to experience in their heart what they already know in their head about God.

The Power of Habit

Smith (2016) writes about liturgy and the power of habit. The spiritual power of habit helps one's head knowledge translate into one's actions. Smith includes a definition of liturgy: "Liturgy ... is a shorthand term for those rituals that are loaded with an ultimate story about who we are and what we are for. They carry with them a kind of ultimate orientation" (Smith 2016, 46-7). The liturgies of life in which we learn to love are not taught but more "caught." The Christian liturgies, for example, are a means by which we learn to love God and act according to God's Kingdom purposes.

Smith points out that a person does not yield to temptation and does not adopt a particular way of being in the world through the intellect. As humans, we do not tend to rationally make a choice based on the information available or experience at hand. We tend to act out of the habits we know and love. In other words, our sins are not merely results of bad choices; rather, sin rises out of disordered habits. Smith states: "overcoming [sin] requires more than just knowledge, it requires re-habitation, a re-formation of our loves" (Smith 2016, 54). The repetition of actions (spiritual practices) changes the heart in line with the practices. For example, in the absence of intentional Christian spiritual practices, the liturgies (the practices or rituals) of consumer society will mold the heart in line with the false self.

Relationship between God, Self and Others

A helpful reference point for individuals seeking spiritual formation is the summary of the law given by Jesus. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-1).

God relates to each one of us because all are created in the image of God. God also relates to others who are equal to us in God’s view because all people are created in the image of God. These three elements (God, self, others) work together in the individual in spiritually forming the person in God’s grace. God loves his people and sees all of creation as good, because all people are made in God’s image (Psalm 8). A personal spirituality with God and not with others is incomplete.

Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore, there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness. No one can be made whole except by being restored to the wholeness of that being-in-relatedness for which God made us and the world and which is the image of that being-in-relatedness which is the being of God himself. A glimpse of this is given to us in the consecration prayer (John 17) where Jesus prays that those who believe may be made part of the very unity of the divine being, united by that which binds the Father and the Son, which is nothing other than the glory of God. (Newbigin 1975, 70)

Others

Christians are encouraged to share with others the awareness of God’s imprint (Imago Dei) on all people. This awareness that others are made in the image of God needs to be mentored, instructed, and practiced. Once spiritual formation has gained traction in Christians’ lives this momentum will build within the congregation the courage to reach out to the outside community. If the church

does not reach out, how will the community know that the congregation cares? The church needs to be present in the community in a living way. God's Spirit is already at work in the community and in this way the congregation can join in what God is already doing. In line with this, one could ask the question, "Would anyone care if the congregation moved and the church disappeared from the community?" A goal with my model of spiritual formation is that congregants will reach out beyond the congregation and into the community with God's grace. God's grace will already be evident in the community but with practice the congregation may be able to learn to recognize and participate in God's work. Sociologist Robert Bellah reflects on how individuals and institutions find their true self:

We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions, but through them. We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning. (Bellah et al, 2007, 31)

When a congregation seeks to be accessible to the community, it must engage with the community. In this engagement, the community educates the church on the needs of the community, and the church enlightens with humility, the community about the grace found in Jesus Christ. The congregation has a mandate to initiate a connection with the community.

The Significance of Home

As part of my model for spiritual formation in the congregation, the congregants are encouraged and mentored to look at their church congregation/ community as a gift from God's grace and therefore something to be shared with

others in the broader community. I have encouraged groups who use our church building to consider the building and the congregation to be their second home. As part of the journey towards spiritual formation a Christian is to learn to share their church home with others who may be complete strangers to the church. As mature followers of Christ, our goal is to open the doors and invite everyone in. People in our society need a place that is safe and where they feel wholeheartedly welcome. A safe place includes acceptance, welcoming, encouragement and grace.

A banner was displayed on the outside of our church building for the neighbourhood to see. It read: “Your neighbourhood church where faith comes alive.” In other words, the congregation was saying to the community that the church was not a social club focused around a building. Instead, it was a community of people who encouraged an active faith in God – a commitment taken seriously and central to the congregation’s identity. The banner was also a meaningful reminder to the congregation that God is calling them out into the community before calling people from the community into the church.

The local church in a specific neighbourhood is to function as a home for people where they can feel safe and be part of the family where they belong and are loved by the people of God. In my model of Spiritual formation, congregants are to be spiritually formed from a ‘false self’ orientation in which they act more as tourists and less as pilgrims. Len Hjalmarson writes about the contrast between a tourist and a pilgrim:

There is a certain approach to life, a certain posture that dominates in our culture: It’s the posture of the tourist. The challenge we face as

followers of the Incarnate One is to move from the posture of the tourist, to the posture of the pilgrims.

Tourists are escaping life; pilgrims are embracing it. Tourists are trying to forget; pilgrims are trying to remember. (Hjalmarson 2014, 45)

When congregants act as tourists they are not serving in the life and body of the congregation making it difficult for them to practice spiritual formation toward the true self in Christ, and less likely to build up the church as a place of refuge and solace for themselves and for others.

When my family and I accepted the call to mission work in Malawi in 2008, we desired and oriented ourselves to be pilgrims among our brothers and sisters in Malawi. We spent three years there and lived among the people in Blantyre, Malawi. This was a life changing experience for all of us to varying degrees. We felt appreciated by our Malawian brothers and sisters. When we were in Malawi, we often heard, “Abusa [pastor] and Mayiabusa [Pastor’s wife] you have left your home and family to be with us here in Malawi and so far from home!” It meant a lot to the Malawian people that we would leave the comfort of our own homes, families and familiar culture to be among them and to minister to them. Remembering our brothers and sisters in Malawi and the hardships they face and being willing to come alongside them helped us keep Christ at the center and focus of our lives and allowed us to minister to the Malawian people in a meaningful way.

Resisting the Formation by Cultural Influences

In the church’s encouragement of spiritual formation, negative cultural influences are resisted through focusing on the development of a heart for God through communal practices. The formation of individuals by the negative

influences from culture is too often manifested within the church. Consumer culture gives the message of the “good life.” The repetitive actions of one’s cultural liturgies (rituals) create habits which mold one’s heart. For example, we buy what we do not need. Advertising will create needs in our minds, so we get in the habit of buying what we do not need without questioning the message. In terms of resisting the formation of the consumer culture, Smith (2016) speaks about head knowledge and the heart. Smith claims that it is not that we are to diminish “head knowledge” and work more on the heart, but we must keep in mind that the forming or transforming of our heart is what motivates our actions. Our actions are less in line with what we think about it, but more focused on what is important to us – that is, what we love. In other words, we do not act according to what we think, but according to what we desire or love. In our society, just like at the shopping mall, we practice a liturgy of consumption.

By our immersion in this liturgy of consumption, we are being trained to both overvalue and undervalue things: we’re being trained to invest them with a meaning and significance as objects of love and desire in which we place disproportionate hopes (Augustine would say we are hoping to enjoy them when we should only be using them) while at the same time treating them (as well as the labour and raw materials that go into them) as easily discarded. (Smith 2016, 52)

These items give a thrill for a time, but soon the shine loses its glow, and we are looking with longing eyes for the next thing to enjoy. We know with our minds that new consumer items are not sustainable in providing lasting joy. Yet our hearts will want to have that experience of romance with the new item repetitively. Life in between the shopping trips becomes mundane and ordinary. People “get through” the mundane of daily life by looking forward to the next shopping thrill. Smith is using consumerism as an example. His central focus is

on the development of appropriate liturgies to redirect our loves to the kingdom of God.

Distractions from consumer culture bombard most people without them realizing that they are being formed by the cultural liturgies in which they participate. In reflection on my role in the practice of helping to spiritually form others, I understand that this takes time and intention. In my role as lead minister, time does not always allow for much “one-on-one” focus. However, I can empower leaders in the various ministries of the church to mentor those under their care toward spiritual formation. For example, small groups help to nurture community and formation among congregants. When congregants meet with one another and develop trusting friendships with one another, they are practicing Jesus’ new commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Loving one another is a means of grace and therefore a means of formation and transformation.

Spiritual Practices that can be Utilized in Forming the Individuals, the Body of Christ, and the Community

Within congregational worship the regular practice of Holy Communion is a spiritual practice in forming congregants into the body of Christ. All of us are invited to share a meal with the creator of the universe and share the table with the King. When we are all invited to share the feast, it means that any conflict or feeling of unequal status needs to be reconciled as well. The Lord’s Supper is a leveling of all the differences which exist in society and the world. The words of Isaiah 25:6 speak to this: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all

peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” Smith puts these thoughts together: “The Lord’s Supper isn’t just a way to remember something that was accomplished in the past; it is a feast that nourishes our hearts. Here is the existential meal that restrains our deepest most human hungers” (Smith 2016, 98). This nourishment through the Lord’s supper is for personal hearts, as well as strengthening the collective heart of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is nourished and then reaches out with God’s grace to strengthen the community. In the act of communion, the congregation re-enacts the sacrificial offering of Christ on behalf of those He loves. This contributes a visual and experiential reminder of the depth of love Christ has for all. The practice of communion is a spiritual practice which reminds us of the grace of God.

At OPC, we celebrate communion once a month. Recently, for me, communion has become even more of a means of grace and formation which I love to share with the people. As I have become increasingly spiritually formed by the width and depth of Christ’s sacrifice, my need for this sacrifice is more apparent. As I gain more experience in ministry and spiritual formation as the congregation’s pastor, the joy associated with leading the Lord’s Supper has become clearer. This joy comes out of gratitude for God’s grace. The depth of God’s grace in Jesus Christ is continually a growing edge in the congregation’s and in my faith. As the congregation’s leader and mentor, in conjunction with the liturgy, I have the desire to be more creative in explaining the depth of God’s

grace in communion in order that congregants see the celebration as increasingly relevant to their lives.

Baptism is the other sacrament Christ commanded us to celebrate. Baptism is more than a celebration for us to show our love and devotion to God. Baptism is a means of God's grace, which comes to us from above. Smith puts it this way, "As a sacrament, baptism is not a bottom-up expression of our faith but a top-down symbol of God's gracious promises. He chose us before we could believe; he loves us before we even knew how" (Smith 2016, 115). As with communion, when I officiate at a baptism, I use it as a teachable moment to explain to those in attendance that God's invisible grace becomes visible through the symbol of the water and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The message of God's grace cannot be overemphasized as I mentor others in spiritual formation with the sacraments of Communion and Baptism. The formation from the false self of the flesh to the true self in Christ (Galatians 5:16-26) requires dependence on the Spirit working through spiritual practices which encourage humility and dependence on God's grace. Surrendering our false selves in favour of God's grace in Jesus Christ is the goal.

The Application of My Model to My Ministry

As mentioned, my call to ministry is taken from Ephesians 4:11-3. In my ordination vows, I took on the responsibility as a pastor to equip the saints for the work of ministry and to lead them in building up the body of Christ. In my model, I desire to articulate my calling with gratitude and joy, encouraging and

empowering others toward spiritual formation and to be active in ministry with the gifts God has given them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of the helpful images arising from discussion in our Bible study on Galatians was that Christ is “the Bridge” of grace which gives freedom and joy, and that the Law is “the wall” which holds us in fear of punishment and bondage which comes with that Law. As Christians, we are given freedom in God’s grace to build a connection with Christ and with others. In living more with the assurance that we are created in the image of Christ and that Christ lives in us and we are united with Christ, our spiritual giftedness will have the freedom to emerge because fear is diminished.

From writing my spiritual autobiography, I realized how I was formed and how I also needed to continue to grow in spiritual formation. This awareness influenced my model. One who believes that they have ‘arrived’ and are already spiritually formed displays a certain level of arrogance and have missed the point. Humility is one ingredient in the recipe of spiritual formation. Humility is in line with Christ in whom we find our true selves. Arrogance and ego are objects which obstruct the Holy Spirit’s formation in an individual. Having an arrogant attitude and an inflated ego is most often an emotion based in fear. In fear, the false self wants to guard the ego and not get too close to others while still desiring intimacy. Nouwen (1986) has wrestled with this:

If fear is the great enemy of intimacy, love is its true friend. Yet the words love and intimacy are used so casually in our heavily psychologized milieu that it requires special care to reclaim their spiritual meaning. We might be tempted to place intimate love on the same level as fear and suggest that it occupies the middle ground between “too distant” and “too suffocating closeness” and offer a happy medium.

Many contemporary reflections on interpersonal relationships betray this way of thinking. They seem to say: “We need each other, but we should not lose our independence; we have a need for closeness, but we should not give up individuality; we have need for mutual support, but we also need enough space for ourselves.” Although this is true, the suggestion is that good interpersonal relationships are the result of negotiation between partners, in which they define each other’s rights as well as needs. Thus the place of intimate love is constantly threatened by fear, whether it comes from the right side or the left. But, intimacy is not found on the level where fear resides. Intimacy is not a happy medium. It is a way of being in which the tension between distance and closeness is dissolved and a new horizon appears. Intimacy is beyond fear. (Nouwen 1986, 23-4)

For the congregants’ spiritual formation, it is important that they make room in their lives for spiritual intimacy with God. I cannot tell them what to do, but it is important that I suggest and provide the tools (practices) for them to follow. To further provide awareness of spiritual practices for OPC congregants, (as mentioned earlier) I introduced a book study in 2018 from a book I studied in the first year of my Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale University called *The Sacred Way* (Jones 2005). My Reformed Presbyterian congregation was not familiar with and often skeptical of these “Roman Catholic” type of practices. The book was considered controversial by some, but it opened the door for the congregation to become more familiar with spiritual practices that they could incorporate into their lives. This book study laid the foundation for the spiritual leaders to become more aware of the benefits of spiritual practices for spiritual formation. This in turn could highlight the importance of the spokes on the wheel of the model emphasizing spiritual practices as a way of moving toward the true self. From this awareness, there was the possibility of more acceptance of and commitment to participation in the field research project. Several participants

reported to me that the book was helpful, and that they are trying some of the practices.

Jones (2015) used the metaphor of a baseball shortstop who watched several videos and heard lectures about how to be a good shortstop. However, what will make him a good shortstop is not merely gaining information but getting out on the field and practicing. Head knowledge is not enough, even though so much of modern theology has emphasized that the more you know the better you will perform as a Christian.

Getting a ‘feel for the game’ in following Jesus is much the same. You can listen to innumerable sermons and read countless books, but the true transformation happens only when you practice the disciplines that lie at the heart of faith. As the disciplines are practiced, your life becomes more attuned to God’s life, and you become more ‘at one’ with the rhythms of creation. Like a finely trained athlete, you can anticipate the movement on the field; like a world-class pianist, you can actually inhabit the music as you take notes on the page and give them life; like an expert carpenter, you can run your hands over the grain of wood and see what this rough cut can become. (Jones 2005, 31)

I came to realize that I cannot mentor every congregant in spiritual formation, but I can mentor the other church leaders with a spiritual practice. With specific focus on my spiritual leaders, I introduced a “*Lectio Divina*” inductive Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Galatian church. Bible study is a regular and vital way of spiritually forming individuals. I chose the *Lectio Divina*/Inductive Bible study because it lends itself to individual as well as a community approach to the scriptures. Individuals listen to how God is speaking directly to them, and then share the word or teaching that God has laid upon their heart with the rest of the participants in the Bible study. This can lead to a greater understanding of scripture and to spiritual formation when different viewpoints are emphasized and

shared. The *Lectio Divina* Bible study can also be done on an individualized basis keeping in mind that spiritual formation happens differently for the diversity of God's people. Through this *Lectio Divina* Bible study, these spiritual leaders became open to a greater understanding of how the scriptures offer a means of God's grace to their daily lives. Wilhoit and Howard (2012) stated that Benedict "understood the power of prayerful reading and meditating on Scripture to shape our life direction" (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 140). In *Lectio Divina* Bible study, those involved are to listen to God's voice through scripture. *Lectio Divina* (or divine reading) is an ancient spiritual practice of praying the scriptures, a reflective reading of scripture that calls us to listen to God's Word with our heart. Instead of reading scriptures to only extract information *Lectio Divina* approaches scripture by listening to God with one's heart.

I introduced different initiatives to help congregants place Christ at the center of their activities (spokes). This initiative gave congregants the opportunity to engage in spiritual practices associated with the spokes of hospitality, mission and service, but these practices could also be associated with finance, recreation, family, hobbies and friends. These activities provided opportunities for congregants to be in direct contact with other congregants while practicing the spiritual disciplines for their own spiritual formation toward the true self in union with Christ.

In terms of the practice of hospitality, another spoke in my model of spiritual formation, I initiated a community dinner on a weekly basis to encourage congregants to reach out to others beyond their comfort zone. Individuals in my congregation who have the gift of hospitality prepared a simple dinner on a

monthly basis. After the dinner, we offered a 20-minute praise/prayer worship service. The goal was to provide a climate for interaction and friendship. Wilhoit (2008) speaks directly about the role of spiritual leaders to encourage this climate of relationships:

Part of the task of leaders in spiritual formation is to encourage the formation of spiritually challenging and supportive relationships in the Christian community. This is not a call for some grand social engineering scheme of trying to match people up, but providing a climate where relationships that are spiritually nurturing can flourish and are valued. (Wilhoit 2008,187)

In connection with the practice (spoke) of building relationships within the model of spiritual formation, I also initiated a “The Five-Minute Rule” in my congregation. Every couple of months during worship I would briefly explain the rule: “When you arrive at church, take 5 minutes to greet those you know. Then your task is to find people you do not know very well or not at all and engage in a conversation with them.” Too often as congregants, we act according to the false self, seeking out those we know and ignoring the rest. We are to build community and be intentional about it. This exercise is more difficult for some than others, but everyone is able to do it. Relying on God’s guidance in stretching situations is part of spiritual formation.

These initiatives in the congregation are connected to spiritual formation because mission and hospitality toward others is what followers of Christ do. In union with Christ, we are called to practice those things which Christ commands and calls us to do. In the practice of these acts of love, our desires become oriented and formed towards the true self in Christ. Matthew 25:38-9 states, “And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave

you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the King will answer them, Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Spiritual formation in Christ will deepen until these acts become automatic habits and part of the fibre of our being. When it is so much a part of our desires and habits, the fruit of the Spirit emerges and we do not realize we are doing it! 1 Peter 4:9-10 states, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” The more congregants practice mission and hospitality (through these spokes in the spiritual formation model) the more they will move toward forming habits in line with desiring the Kingdom of God, and become closer to their true self in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

My end goal is to move spiritual formation forward in the congregation where they, as individuals and as a community of faith, gain more confidence and joy in the love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that they may develop a greater awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. When Jesus Christ is located close to the heart – the hub of their life – the confidence and awareness of Christ’s presence and God’s grace makes it easier to hear and respond to the Spirit’s prompting to advance the Kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:16 commands, “Live by the spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The apostle Paul is urging the church in Galatia to live according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:21b states this: “I am warning you as I have warned you before: those who do such things will not

inherit the Kingdom of God.” Paul teaches that the gift of the gospel will not be theirs if they do not receive the gift of God’s grace through the Holy Spirit. It is not so much a judgement, but more of an urging to receive the gift and to follow the ways of the Spirit that bear fruit. The fruit of the Spirit, which is noticeable in a person who has Christ at their center, is mentioned in Galatians. “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians 5:22-3). The fruit gives freedom to us and to those with whom we minister. The fruit will appear without thinking about it. When one is living closer to the true self in union with Christ, the fruit will more naturally emerge. In staying close to vine by imitating Christ and engaging in spiritual practices, through the power of the Holy Spirit, one will develop the habit of desiring to reach out and serve in the name of Christ. The Holy Spirit counsels and forms us toward this goal of the Kingdom of God. This habit becomes part of our being and we naturally display the fruit of who we are in Christ. Love, the first fruit mentioned, is love from God dispensed through the believer. The next fruit mentioned is joy. Joy is displayed by the believer when receiving the blessing of God’s grace and peace.

The Three Classical Disciplines of Prayer, Spiritual Reading, and Liturgy

Mulholland and Barton (2016) write to help us understand how these three – prayer, spiritual reading, and liturgy – are guideposts pointing us to Christ on our journey. The spiritual life has two journeys – inward with God and outward towards the world. The inward journey is directly connected to the outward

journey. In a balanced spiritual formation, the two journeys go together. In terms of the inward journey, one's growth in awareness of God's grace, as found through prayer, spiritual reading, and liturgy, will lead to the outward journey of sharing God's grace in the practice of hospitality. Spiritual practices take discipline. Discipline, however, can have a negative connotation in our culture for some people. To propose spiritual discipline in a comfort-seeking culture that seeks instant gratification may seem to many as a downer (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 120). The common attitude in our culture is that there is no time for spiritual discipline when the results are not immediate and take time to nurture. Immersed in these cultural influences, OPC congregants would need to resist those pressures with the promise and the assurance of a better life in union with Christ. Daily spiritual discipline is necessary to resist negative cultural influences. But, when does it become too rigid and a burden? Spiritual discipline is more balanced and less rigid when practiced each day while living and engaging with the world. When practiced daily, habit is formed, and it has the potential to become second nature. "In a sense then to become virtuous is to internalize the law (and the good to which the law points) so that you follow it more or less automatically. As Aristotle put it, when you've required a moral habit, it becomes second nature" (Smith, 2016, 17). Spiritual discipline in the form of spiritual practices based in prayer balances the inward and outward daily journey needed for a clearer vision of God's presence in a secular society.

Mulholland and Barton (2016) say this concerning how consumer culture views the spiritual practice of prayer: "We tend to think of prayer as something

we do in order to produce the results we think are needed or, rather, to get God to produce the results” (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 122). They continue that prayer is more relational and not functional. He quotes Nouwen who articulates the essence of prayer clearly:

In a situation in which the world is threatened by annihilation, prayer does not mean much when we undertake it only as an attempt to influence God, or as a search for a spiritual fallout shelter, or as an offering of comfort in stress-filled times ... Prayer is the act in which we divest ourselves of all false belongings and become free to belong to God and to God alone. (Nouwen cited in Mulholland and Barton 2016, 123)

In terms of the false self and the true self, prayer is a spiritual discipline through which one learns to let go of the false self and move closer to the true self where Christ is situated. That is the center of one’s life. Mulholland and Barton quote Nouwen as he expands on how prayer is a dying of oneself.

We want to move closer to God, the source and goal of our existence, but at the same time we realize that the closer we come to God, the stronger will be his demand to let go of the many ‘safe’ structures we have built around ourselves. Prayer is such a radical act because it requires us to criticize our whole way of being in the world, to lay down our old selves, and accept our new self, which is Christ... Prayer therefore is the act of dying to all we consider to be our own and of being born to a new existence which is not of this world. (Nouwen cited in Mulholland and Barton 2016, 123)

The practice of prayer can benefit from corporate support. Jesus was aware of this as he taught the Lord’s Prayer:

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

Mulholland and Barton describe the importance of corporate prayer in this way:

“Corporate prayer lifts us out of our narrow, limited perspective of our individual

needs and desires and provides us with the broader, deeper vision of vital relationship with and sacrificial response to God in the midst of our life and world” (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 125). Through worship and Bible studies, it is necessary to educate congregants about how prayer is not only a personal act but also a corporate act.

In terms of scriptural reading, Mulholland (2001) speaks about how we have been trained to read text and biblical text for information more than for spiritual formation. He speaks to the point that scripture is meant to form or shape us into the image of Christ where Christ is at the heart of our being, not merely to be used as a resource to fulfill a task. The text is meant to open us up to God’s control (not our control) and God’s will for our lives. This is radically different from approaching scripture for information.

We carry the habits of our information culture into how we read the Bible. In our culture, we use information to help us impose our purposes on the activities we want to accomplish. The “Word of God” is a means of grace. The Holy Spirit is promised to guide our reading of the Word. When we come with humility listening to the Spirit as we read, we allow God’s control and God’s will to be imposed on us. Even though we may have had an understanding of particular scripture readings from the past, in allowing the scripture to shape us, we are to remain open to how the Spirit may be changing the way we are looking at it today.

Mulholland and Barton (2016) also comment on liturgy. Liturgy is defined in various ways. One could say very plainly that liturgy is the habits we engage in

for spiritual purposes or non-spiritual purposes. We have personal and corporate liturgies which help us with our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Mulholland and Barton put it this way: “If prayer and spiritual reading are the means by which we are awakened to the deeper realities of life in Christ and called into the discipleship of a new order of being in Christ, then liturgy is the diverse structure of behaviours that serve to nurture us in that new order of being” (Mulholland and Barton 2016, 133). Liturgy is helpful in practicing what we know to be true. Smith (2016) explores how the gospel not only happens in our intellect but in all the movements of the human body by which we are spiritually formed. We gain experience through liturgy which helps to change our hearts and transform our actions. Liturgy is a subversive act – helpful in countering the formation from one’s culture. Some examples of liturgies include worship, daily office (scripture and prayer), study, fasting, etc. In terms of “study” as a liturgy, OPC has several Bible studies running simultaneously in the congregation. The leaders of these Bible studies are encouraged to ask their participants to invite others to join. Sometimes these groups become so comfortable with one another that they do not invite others to join. Resisting negative influences from the culture means putting comfort aside for the sake of the Kingdom. This message of inclusion comes from the study of Galatians and through the repeated narrative about God’s grace from the pulpit.

In my model for spiritual formation, it is important that the congregants are reminded that they are to move closer to the mind of Christ as the hub for all they do in ministry. In this model, the congregants are reminded that they are the

church. The church building and the programs are wonderful, but they only support the work happening through the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ. Further, it is important that congregants are encouraged to examine themselves in terms of where they are in their relationship with God and others. It is necessary for congregants to examine and raise awareness of how they are shaped by their desires, often unconsciously. If the focus is merely between them and God with minimal regard for others, the false self can gain influence and the congregation may be formed by the daily influences around them. Consumer culture can teach that fame, monetary wealth, and achievement are the good life. However, there are people outside the church who are committed to justice and equality. They may be unaware that the Holy Spirit is working in them, orienting and directing them to the things of God. The unexamined false self can be the cause of keeping Christ at the periphery rather than the center of one's being. This unexamined false self is more easily shaped by cultural or secular influences. Spiritual formation, on the other hand, counters the secular understanding of the good life with a formation based on divine love, love for one another, and the humility that Christ displayed on the cross (Philippians 2:1-10). If spirituality is only about one's experience with the divine, with little regard for others' needs, the Kingdom that God calls us to seek (Matthew 6:33) is left out of the equation. In union with Christ, spirituality is defined as not only connecting with God in love, but also with God's love to others. Christ at the hub of one's life creates the desire to advance God's Kingdom with and to others through all the various spokes attached to the hub.

The Kingdom of God

In my model of spiritual formation, the Kingdom of God, which is also referred to as “The Kingdom of Heaven” (in the gospel of Matthew), is the spiritual realm where God reigns as King. One could say that it is the fulfillment of God’s will on earth. The phrase “Kingdom of God” was used primarily by Jesus and is found in the Gospels. The Kingdom of God is where grace has the final word. It is a place where no person is valued more than another. The Kingdom of God is a gift which God wants all to receive and to desire for all.

In Luke 17:20-1, we read this account of Jesus: “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” In the context of this passage, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God was coming. Jesus answered these teachers of the Law that the Kingdom of God was not coming in the way they expected. The coming of the Kingdom would not be spectacular with a strong leader staking out his claim and chasing out the Roman occupiers. In Matthew 13:33, Jesus taught that the Kingdom will come silently and unseen like yeast in a batch of dough. Actually, the Kingdom of God had already started, right under the Pharisees’ noses. It was among them already in Jesus and in the hearts of his followers. The Kingdom of God is among you when the fruit of the Spirit is evident in you and in others. The kingdom of God is advanced when those created in God’s image desire the kingdom of God above everything else. In the process of spiritual formation, when one moves away from the false self and closer to the true self that is united

with Christ then all the spokes of one's life will be oriented towards advancing the Kingdom of God on earth. The change of the heart towards the will of God is where the Kingdom of God is found and where it expands as yeast in dough. The Kingdom of God is directly connected to Christ's mission to the world. The missional church takes Christ's words seriously in equipping congregants by cultivating spiritual formation in them to serve the world with passion in Christ's name. Christ's mission for his original disciples and for us today is summed up in his new commandment: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-5).

What is our desire for God's Kingdom? It rests in the fact that we belong to God, and Christ is at the center of our lives. In belonging to God, we are assured that we are known and dearly loved by God. Remember Paul's command: "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). This command is necessary for one to follow, because it is not based on a competitive fear of not having enough, but it is rooted in the abundance of God's love leading to gratitude and the joy of the freedom to experience the good life that God intends. The Spirit creates unity, not coercion. The Spirit forms us and shapes us to desire God's Kingdom. The church is to be open to the Spirit in mentoring others and encouraging spiritual practices, orienting and directing them to be aware of the presence of God and the gift of God's grace in their daily lives. When the Holy Spirit forms and shapes us, we are attentive to the true self.

The Field Research Project: The Examen

In reviewing various spiritual practices, I made a plan to mentor the leaders of my congregation by helping them engage in the spiritual practice of the Examen. The Examen is an opportunity for daily reflection and prayer. This practice invites those who participate to find the movement of God in all the people and events of their day. The Examen is practiced by the participants answering four introspective questions to reflect on where they are pointed to God's presence. The Examen is a practice which adults can readily engage in with other adults and even with their children. Warner (2010) explains the importance of the Examen:

The Examen was the central element of Ignatian Spirituality. Ignatius would give permission to his followers to refrain from various types of prayer for a season, but not from the prayer of examen. This prayer is steeped in biblical tradition (Psalm 139). The essence of the examen is not external change, but internal transformation. It is not another avenue of self-scrutiny but rather an opening to divine awareness. The goal of the examen is to gradually develop an internalized openness and sensitivity to the promptings and invitations of God throughout the course of your day. It is an aid to finding God in all things and becoming aware of the disordered attachments within you that hinder your freedom to say yes to God. (Warner 2010, 29)

The Examen spiritual exercise is used to help people review and explore their daily life, seeking to discern that God has been present and active in their lives and how well they are able to work with God in seeking God's will in their life. Generally speaking, the Examen invites one to discern the movement of God in all the people and events of their day. The Examen is a set of introspective questions for one to follow. They may be adapted to their own character and circumstances. The version of the Examen used in this project was a spiritual practice in which the OPC participants engaged by answering the same set of

introspective questions once per day for a period of eight weeks. The participants were asked to put time aside each day and reflect and pray about their day (previous 24 hours). The rationale for why the following questions were chosen will be given in the next chapter:

- 1 *Where were you surprised today?*
- 2 *Where/How did you experience joy today?*
- 3 *What pointed you towards God today?*
- 4 *What pointed you away from God today?*

The Examen helps one prepare for prayer by reflecting during the day and noticing the presence of God. After one has completed the four daily questions for the Examen, time is spent in prayer reflecting, speaking with, and listening to God. This prayer could include reflections of the day and other things which may have come upon the participant's heart. Many people do the Examen at the end of the day, but it can be done at any time of day as one reflects on the past 24 hours. Some groups practice the Examen more than once a day in order to help them focus on God at work and at other times during the day. The Examen helps to build the habit of integrating faith into daily life.

Summary

In reflecting on my spiritual autobiography, I became more aware that my Reformed Calvinist background was more about academic teaching and less about heart transformation. The teaching I received in my early formative years was dominated by theological knowledge and logic. I experienced that theology to be one in which there was a line drawn between the sacred and the profane. On Sunday mornings, for example, the congregants would concentrate on the sovereignty of God and God's grace, but when Monday came, the focus was more

on business matters and the drive to succeed. Though the Calvinist work ethic emerged from an understanding that we belong completely to God and our work is done for the Lord with diligence and excellence, the temptation was to justify all hard work and over working as holy. Without reflection of the intention of the work ethic, one can miss the integration of faith into daily life. This work ethic was relevant to my immigrant parents who were forging out a life for themselves and their families in a new country.

I have come to understand that I was not consciously aware of the false self that was prevalent in my spiritually formative years and how it shaped me. With that knowledge, using my model for spiritual formation in the congregation, I engaged congregants to reflect on awareness of the two ways of being in the world – the false self and the true self. Participating with God’s Spirit through one’s union with Christ brings freedom from bondage to the false self.

To varying degrees, each person wrestles with seeing God present and at work in their daily life. The person in the congregation being formed into the true self where they have union with God, engages in various spiritual practices orienting and directing their practices toward the good life of naturally desiring and living for the Kingdom of God. I expected that the spiritual practice of the Examen would create an opportunity for my congregational leaders to deepen their awareness of God each day and in all things, and to become free to receive God’s gift of grace with joy.

**CHAPTER 4:
DEEPENING THE AWARENESS OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE
DAILY LIVES OF THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS OF THE
CONGREGATION**

My goal for my model of spiritual formation is to help move Christians from seeing Christ as merely one of the spokes in the hub to experiencing Christ at the center where all the other spokes are connected and find their origin. Psalm 8:1-9 articulates that the sovereignty of God is over all things and speaks to God's presence in all God created. The miracle of life and the “good news” is that God is mindful of the humans he created. God gave humans the greatest honour by ordaining them to be responsible for all of God's creation. God's name is written on all humans and all that God created (verse 9). Christians believe that God is sovereign over all things and that God can be found in all of creation. The Examen reminds those who practice it that God is everywhere in all of creation. The daily practice of the Examen can help participants examine the day and remember that they are part of God's creation.

The origin of the Examen comes from the Psalms, particularly Psalm 139:23-4, where David asked, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead in the way everlasting." The words “search” and “examine” speak to the intent of the Examen as a spiritual discipline of awareness.

In the letter of Paul to the Galatian church, Paul states, "And it is no longer I that live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). We are all created in the image of God, and we have the Spirit of God living in us. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we belong to God (I Corinthians 6:19). However, we can be distracted by the flesh and be less aware of Christ living in us. With the practice of the Examen, through which one becomes increasingly aware of the presence of God in creation, the Holy Spirit helps to create the habit of noticing God's presence in the everyday mundane activities of life.

In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, Paul writes in Philippians 4:4-8 praising and acknowledging God's blessing and nearness in all things. Worry of the unknown can easily cripple any sense of the comfort that God is near. Prayer opens the connection with God and replaces the worry with God's loving presence. In prayer, the Holy Spirit counsels the heart and creates peace through Christ Jesus. Paul writes that it is important not to be distracted with the problems of this world but to concentrate on the opportunities of the existing things which are honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and worthy of praise. He encourages believers to think about these things that are present in daily life. The Examen helps us notice these things. When practiced, the Examen helps cultivate the habit of asking questions about God's presence and reflecting on the answers, to recognize God in the everyday.

Doctrines Providing a Critical Framework for this Project

The doctrines of the Sovereignty of God, the Trinity, and Salvation, provide a critical framework for my research project.

The Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is the Christian teaching that God is the supreme authority of the universe and all things are under His control. God is omnipotent, meaning that he is all powerful. God is omniscient, meaning that he is the ultimate standard and authority for truth and falsity. God is also omnipresent, meaning that since God's power and knowledge extends to all of creation, he is present everywhere. The practice of the Examen is helpful in having people stop to take notice and reflect on God's presence before they continue with their daily responsibilities. The knowledge that the all-powerful and all-knowing God is present everywhere in daily life provides assurance that one is never alone.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the trinity is the Christian belief that there is one God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are distinct yet equal. God is present in all parts simultaneously. Jesus Christ is both the Son of God and the human Messiah who through sacrificial love drew near to us. As God's beloved children, we are to put aside our false selves and draw near to our true selves found in Jesus Christ. In the Examen, we practice being aware of the nearness of God in all things of life and Christ within us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Doctrine of Salvation

Paul states the basis for salvation in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Those created in God's image are saved by God's grace. God's grace is a free gift for all to receive. When

believers are aware of God's grace and receive grace as a gift, the Holy Spirit comes to enact and regenerate their lives towards the will of God. As believers practice the Examen each day, they potentially become increasingly aware of God's presence in all things as a gift of grace. Through the Holy Spirit, the awareness of the grace of God motivates gratitude and joy in believers to follow in God's will.

Research Opportunity

Practising the Examen was aimed at giving the spiritual leaders of Oakridge Presbyterian Church (OPC) an opportunity to enhance their spiritual maturity. The spiritual leaders who participated in the study included the session, the church staff, and other identified spiritual leaders of the congregation. The congregation's ruling elders have been ordained and therefore have agreed in their vows to provide spiritual leadership and oversight to the congregation. As the Lead Minister and teaching elder, I have been commissioned to equip the leaders with the necessary skills to do ministry and to prepare the congregants for ministry.

Intentional mentoring of the spiritual leaders in my congregation is necessary for the work of the lead pastor. Several of the session ruling elders were hesitant to engage with congregants about spiritual matters. I am not sure where this attitude came from. Session meetings would often have a business-like atmosphere. Meetings were dominated with more negative criticism of what was going wrong than gratitude of what was going well. This session meeting attitude was a concern to me and some of the session elders. The hope was that by

practicing the Examen, the spiritual leaders would become more aware of God's presence within even the mundane business. This increased awareness of God's presence among the spiritual leaders would help to move them toward a perspective of gratefulness and joy that God is with them in spite of any difficult issues they are called upon to solve. The idea was that the spiritual leaders would see Christ in all things and therefore the conversations about spiritual matters would become more natural.

The research could determine if the Examen helped the congregation's spiritual leaders be more aware of God's presence in their daily lives and in the world. The participants were to answer four Examen questions at a certain time during each day. Some of the participants had already developed a daily sense of the presence of God through other practices, such as a regular time of solitude, reflection, and prayer. This continued practice would hopefully increase this growth.

One danger that was present in this research project was that personal biases could skew the results. In the consultation group meetings, for example, I made a point to act more as a facilitator encouraging feedback and discussion and less as a leader with an agenda. As a pastor who is called by God to equip the congregants for ministry, there is a bias towards wanting the participants to grow deeper in their faith by practicing the Examen. My wife Jackie and I had been practicing the Examen together on a daily basis for the two years before starting the project. Through that experience, I had gained a bias towards the benefits of the Examen and a bias to doing it daily with a partner. I shared with the

participants that I was familiar with the practice and that I was practicing the Examen daily with my wife. This improved my awareness of bias when analysing the data. Being mindful of my own biases kept me aware of my personal filters and helped prevent misinterpretations of the data.

My research project was intended to help my congregation form spiritually, to be more aware of God's grace, and to seek that grace working in and through them. The experience of the grace of God would lead to "Good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10) as announced by the angel Gabriel to the shepherds in the field tending their sheep. If I could help the spiritual leaders in the congregation become increasingly aware of the presence of grace in their lives, it would in turn spread to the rest of the congregation.

The Examen functions as a spiritual practice to develop the habit of being aware of God in the daily, ordinary, and mundane of life. My model of spiritual formation is intended to help the leaders see that positioning Christ at the center of life, rather than the periphery of life, increases the awareness of grace in each moment. The congregants would then be moving from a life oriented toward the false self to an orientation toward the true self in union with Christ. While the level of spiritual formation of each spiritual leader cannot be completely known, the practice of the Examen can only help, and not hinder, the centrality of Christ in their lives. Nouwen states that being more aware of the presence of God helps to move one's life forward.

If you were to ask me point-blank: 'What does it mean to you to live spiritually?' I would have to reply: 'Living with Jesus at the center.' . . . When I look back over the last thirty years of my life, I can say that, for me, the person of Jesus has come to be more and more important. Specifically,

this means that what matters increasingly is getting to know Jesus and living in solidarity with him. (Nouwen 2019)

Research Context

The leadership at OPC is in transition from leaders who are now quite elderly or have died, to a younger and more diverse leadership. I have held the lead minister position for the past eight years. I feel supported in my leadership and expected that those who participated in my research wanted to share in this project for reasons beyond feeling in any way pressured by my position or personally by me to do so. Since I am a pastor at heart, I take spiritual formation of the congregants seriously. Every Christian has the responsibility for continual spiritual formation, but especially the spiritual leaders who are to lead and mentor the believers in the congregation. It is impossible to mentor everyone. However, a pastor can mentor and encourage spiritual formation among the elders and other spiritual leaders within the congregation so that they have the confidence to mentor others.

OPC is located in an affluent neighbourhood in London. There is some subsidized housing within two kilometers of the church where some of our newer members live. The immediate neighbourhood is middle to upper class. We also have people attending OPC from all over the city. This is an increasingly ethnically diverse congregation. For example, about 10 percent of our members are from Korea. The church has new members from various parts of the world and is gathering a rich variety of worship backgrounds which enriches the worship services and community fellowship. There are congregants from worship backgrounds, which places a higher emphasis on prayer and obedience to Christ's

call to share the Good News. This attitude has been helpful in encouraging congregants in spiritual disciplines, such as meeting together for prayer, studying the Bible together, and organizing spiritual retreats every year. In recent years, the congregation has also gained more interest in reaching the immediate community around the church.

Methodology

I used a qualitative approach in my research project, and drew insights from action research, but did not use action research. The participatory and democratic component of this research gave me insight into how these spiritual leaders interacted with one another as they participated in this practice as a group. My observation of how people respond similarly and differently has helped to encourage and equip me more as a pastor to help others in spiritual formation.

Coghlan and Brannick explain that the end goal of action research is “the flourishing of individual personas and their communities” (2014, 5). Though my field research project is not actual action research where there was a collaborative effort among participants in doing the research, I used insights from action research to work on the goal of change in the depth of awareness of the presence of God in the spiritual leaders of my congregation. When I reflect on what it means that an individual and their communities will flourish, I have a vision of unity where one’s needs do not supersede the needs of others and of the whole community. This means that through the process of intentional reflection on theory and practice, individuals and communities are led to practical solutions to serious issues that significantly concern people. These practical solutions give

confidence and help people thrive by giving individuals and communities a clear path to see success by their own efforts in mitigating issues which have been barriers to unity and growth in the past.

The focus of my project was to help the leaders of OPC become more aware of the presence of God everywhere in their daily lives. This project built on the awareness of God that the leaders already possessed as they led the congregants under their care. The data collected from the spiritual leaders of the congregation were helpful to discerning the change in the leaders' awareness of God.

Warner defines the Examen as, "The Exercise used to help people to review and explore their life, seeking to discern what God has been up to and how well they are able to cooperate with God" (Warner 2010, p. 29). The version of the Examen used in this project was a spiritual practice in which the participants from OPC engaged by answering the same set of introspective questions every day for a period of eight weeks. The participants were asked to put time aside each day and reflect and pray about their day (previous 24 hours). (See Appendix A for Research Project Phases and Timetable).

The daily questions are listed below with a rationale for why they were chosen:

1 Where were you surprised today? God is a God of surprise. God will appear sometimes when we least expect it. We know from the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that our Lord surprises us and works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform (Romans 11:33)

The participants are asked to recount their surprises during the day, to reflect on the surprising circumstances of that day, and to help them begin to notice God in these surprises.

- 2 *Where/How did you experience joy today?* God wants his children to experience joy. Joy is the second listed fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22). The Bible speaks about joy as foundational to the Christian faith (Psalm 16:11, John 15:11, John 17:13). Joy is directly connected to the good life. Those who experience joy as Christians would want to search for it and experience it. The participants are asked this question because God's grace is abundant each day, but one can easily be distracted and not notice or remember experiencing God's grace. This question builds the practice of attentiveness to joy, pointing one back to God, the source of that joy.
- 3 *What pointed you towards God today?* On a daily basis, Christians can easily be distracted by the cares and concerns of life. People can be professing Christians but not practicing Christians because of these distractions. With a nudge to be pointed to God, the participant gets into the habit of integrating God's presence in the mundane of daily life. This daily habit of being pointed to God will help one stop and reflect on how their practices in daily life are consistent with one's union with Christ or not.
- 4 *What pointed you away from God today?* This question was chosen because ungodly actions are present in one's life each day. It is

important to name them to become aware. When one is aware, they can then do something to counter what pointed them away from God. This could be a personal confession to God, or an ungodly action in the world which needs healing through our prayers and actions.

Methods

I was accountable to the Session for this research project. They gave permission to engage Session elders and other spiritual leaders in this project. I invited the session elders, staff, and other identified spiritual leaders in the congregation to be involved in the project. I sent a recruitment document to the potential participants to inform them about the project and answer any questions (Appendix B). The recruitment document helped potential participants discern whether they wanted to be part of the study. In my position as the Lead Minister and the researcher, a natural power imbalance existed. To address this power imbalance, I engaged a recruiter, who was a trusted member of the congregation not otherwise involved in the project, to recruit the participants. The recruiter received the participants' decision and reported back to me. I held an open meeting in September for those who agreed to participate. I explained the project and answered questions. The spiritual leaders who chose to participate were given a participant information sheet (see Appendix C) and were asked to sign a participant informed consent (see Appendix D). The participants had access to aggregate results and reports.

The identified spiritual leaders were also congregational leaders who through experience with spiritual disciplines such as prayer, praying the labyrinth,

and Bible study were likely to be more receptive to the value of the Examen. Ignatius of Loyola, who wrote *The Spiritual Exercises*, (Ignatius Spirituality, 2021,1) emphasized that the practice of the Examen was central to all the Spiritual Exercises. As noted earlier, Ignatius would not excuse his followers from the prayer of the Examen.

The reformer John Calvin, who wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Calvin, 2014), was the leader of the Calvinist movement from which the Reformed and Presbyterian denominations originated. He was a contemporary of Ignatius of Loyola and studied at the same institution.

Ignatius entered the college Montaigu, famous for its dour scholarship and discipline, as an external student. He was not sufficiently advanced in elementary grammar to be admitted as a regular “internal” student. John Calvin had left but a few months before, it is interesting to speculate that the two may have met in the course of the next five years, as Calvin visited the city frequently until 1533, but neither mentions any such meeting. (Thomson 1963, 619)

Ignatius of Loyola experienced his conversion in the context of the Benedictine monastic community. Similar to Ignatius, John Calvin had a high regard for Benedictine Monasticism.

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants owe much of their understanding and practice of scripture meditation to Benedict. Yet few Protestants are aware that figures such as the great Reformer John Calvin and the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter advocated a method of reflective meditation with scripture that is directly derived from Benedictine practice. (Thompson, 2014, 22)

Although Calvin valued this meditative movement, not all Reformed and Presbyterian denominations have taught their congregants the value of exploring spiritual disciplines in their daily lives. Presbyterian and Reformed theology has been generally noted to be centered on cerebral knowledge about God and

theology with less emphasis on spiritual development and transformation of the heart. Part of the push back towards the practice of spiritual disciplines is historic, dating back to the Protestant Reformation, when anything that had Roman Catholic roots was treated with a measure of suspicion. However, I have experienced a greater openness to the daily practice of various spiritual disciplines. Too often the focus among Christian leaders has been more on the problems and less on God's grace and the joy of our ministry. Examen is an appropriate spiritual practice, encouraging an awareness of God's grace in all things.

We live in an individualist culture that sets up congregants to expect services from the church to meet their individual needs. A change from consumer Christianity to an increasing emphasis on serving others in the church and in the community has created some discomfort within the congregation. However, I did not sense this discomfort among those who participated in the field research project.

I needed someone to help me analyze the data so I approached a trusted congregation member who had past research experience. I received this assistance from, Susan (pseudonym) who also signed a confidentiality agreement to analyze the data from the participants (Appendix E). Susan was also the person to whom participants could reach out if they had questions or concerns about the project.

As teaching elder, I provide vision and leadership for Ruling Elders. Above all, however, my relationship with the Ruling Elders is to empower them as elected representatives of the congregation to spiritually discern the way

forward as Christ's church. The spiritual leaders of the congregation see the lead pastor as their spiritual mentor. To the ruling elders of the congregation, the pastor's role is to provide an environment in the monthly meetings where ideas can be expressed freely and confidentially without fear of personal judgment in order that the decisions made may reflect healthy group discernment. On a personal level, I try to engage personally with each of the eighteen elders regularly at the monthly meetings or in other opportunities in the life and ministry of the church.

In terms of the eight staff of OPC, my connection with them is on a regular basis ranging from almost daily to once a week (depending on whether they are full-time or part-time staff). To the staff, the pastor is a supervisor and spiritual mentor. Since I have a regular connection and I am a spiritual mentor to these spiritual leaders, they would naturally take the benefit of their spiritual growth from this research project to those under their pastoral influence. The other eight participants who were not ruling elders or staff were chosen because they displayed a desire for participating in spiritual practices. I had been in a closer relationship with these individuals because of their participation in the various ministries of the congregation such as Bible study leadership, participating in the prayer ministry, spiritual retreats, walking the labyrinth, etc.

As mentioned previously this research project measured short-term spiritual formation of individual spiritual leaders in the congregation. The project explored how the Examen moved the spiritual leaders of OPC towards a deeper awareness of God in daily life. With this increased awareness, the Examen would

be a means to help the spiritual leaders move Christ closer to the center (the hub) of their daily activities where they are closer to their true self in Christ and in union with Christ. Thomas Merton writes about the identity of the true self:

My discovery of my identity begins and is perfected in these missions, because it is in them that God Himself, bearing in Himself, the secret of who I am, begins to live in me not only as my creator but as my other and true self. *Vivo, iam non ego, vivet vero in me Christus (I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me)*. (Merton, 2007, 41)

I expected that these spiritual leaders would have chosen to do the Examen with another person to keep each of them accountable to the daily task and because I had been doing the Examen with my wife Jackie for the past two years and was accustomed to that practice. However, only one of the participants chose to do the Examen with a partner.

The field research project proposal was finalized by September of 2019. I received approval from the Ethics Board on September 6, 2019 (Appendix F). Before the research started, I held the first consultation group session which functioned as an introduction to the research. Participants were able to discuss questions, comments, and concerns. Midway through the research, a second consultation session with all participants was held to discuss the participants' experiences with the Examen. A third consultation group meeting was held at the end of the 8-week research project.

The recruiter approached the identified spiritual leaders of the congregation to ask if they would be participants in the research project. He handed them copies of the participant information details for the Examen which included instructions, expectations, options to participate, the ability to exit research at any time, and sign a consent form. Eighteen individuals agreed to

participate and signed the consent forms. Two of those recruited were willing to participate in the research project but withdrew before the research project started, due to unforeseen circumstances.

Pre-interviews were conducted with sixteen potential research participants, and by the end fifteen participants were still willing to do the experiment. Ten of these participants were woman and five were men. Two of the participants were in their forties, one was in their fifties, five were in their sixties, and seven were in their seventies.

There were three sets of data collected over the eight weeks of the research project. A list and brief description of the data-gathering instruments can be found in Appendix G. Data collection procedures with questions can be found in Appendix H. I chose to use three methods of collecting data because it provided a richer diversity of data.

Personal interviews with each participant were conducted at the start and end of the project. As mentioned, three consultation sessions were also held with the participants at the start, midpoint, and end of the project. Each participant kept weekly summaries of their daily entries. If the participant preferred not to use email to send the weekly summaries of their responses to the four Examen questions, then the research assistant would speak with them directly or over the phone. The method of providing the weekly summary of observations was up to the individual. Every day for eight weeks, the participant practiced the Examen once a day by prayerfully reflecting on the questions about their day and their awareness or lack of awareness of God's presence. During the consultation

groups, the research participants shared their experiences openly with one another. As the researcher, I led the meeting with questions to frame the conversation for these groups.

The consultation groups provided an open forum for people to express opinions and learnings about the Examen and for others to listen in and learn from others' experiences. Pragmatically, I could answer a lot of questions and field concerns in a more efficient manner. These consultation groups provided a space for collaboration of the participants consistent with the intent of Action Research. Consistent with my ministry context, the consultation groups provided a space for the spiritual leaders to speak openly and intentionally about spiritual formation. These meetings provided data for the research.

Personal interviews were chosen to provide a baseline of where each participant was according to their spiritual formation. The method of having one-on-one interviews was consistent with my ministry context because I meet with the spiritual leaders on a one-to-one basis when necessary. The final interview, once the project was completed, was to ascertain change in the participants' spiritual formation over the course of the project.

Weekly summaries of the regular daily reflections of the participants over the course of each week were provided. The weekly summaries included a requirement to encourage the participants to focus on the daily task of the four questions of the Examen. The summaries may have helped enhanced their accountability to report on their daily practice. The intent of the summaries was to not only provide data, but also to enhance participants' ability to stay disciplined

on the project. This is line with my ministry context as I am called as a pastor to engage participants in spiritual practices that will equip and nurture growth.

The data was analyzed in a comparative way. The comparative analysis was not simply comparing one participant to another. Rather, the comparison looked at the participants' developments through the weekly reports, the personal conversations, and the group discussions. I endeavored not to be biased in terms of what I already knew about the person and have foregone conclusions. However, my pre-existing knowledge of a participant was also helpful in discerning the possible changes occurring in the participant through the practice of the Examen. I could only identify individual responses through face-to-face meetings and interviews.

When the data was received, the research assistant helped to analyze the data. Consistent with the deductive approach for qualitative data analysis, I was testing the idea that the practice of the Examen would deepen the awareness of the presence of God in the participants. The majority of the data was qualitative in nature. (Qualitative data is non-numerical data which captures concepts and opinions.) I also used a small amount of quantitative data. (I used a Likert scale to quantify data received in the one-on-one interviews.)

I organized the data in themes to categorize the data. The data was read over many times before any decision was made on organizing it into themes. With successive reviews, the themes emerged, and categories were created. As my research assistant and I became familiar with the data, repeated words and themes emerged. This made it clearer how to organize the data, and led to the findings.

As researcher, I met with the participants at the end of the first and second month in consultation groups. These were not focus groups. Focus groups are actually consultation groups without responsibility, as Coghlan and Brannick (2014) explain: “If you hold meetings to elicit views in the organization, these are not focus groups, as the participants are members of the organization and you are intervening in their thinking and creating expectations” (Coghlan and Brannick 2014, 91). The researcher also participated in informal conversations with the participants. I kept track of these informal conversations through notes written after the conversation.

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

Engaging with spiritual leaders to promote spiritual formation in the congregation is a natural part of the work of any pastor. However, it also has its obstacles. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) give insight into overcoming these obstacles. They write about the dual role the pastor has as both a researcher and a member of the organization that is being researched. This challenge needs to be intentionally addressed. If it is not handled well, the roles and organizational politics could be destructive to the organization and the project. Coghlan and Brannick help the researcher keep in mind their personal biases which may skew outcomes if not kept in check. Another factor is the power imbalance that exists between the congregants and the pastor.

I was aware of the power imbalance in my role as lead minister and acknowledged that to the participants. The style of my ministry was already naturally collaborative. It has been my practice to encourage those who serve

others in the congregation. In my introductory comments before the spiritual leaders decided to participate, I was clear that while I valued the participants' comments and collaboration in this project, there was no obligation to participate. People chose not to participate for various reasons.

The congregation of OPC was familiar with my ministry. As indicated through their positive feedback, the congregation was also aware of my desire to be present and help them grow in their faith formation through Bible studies and worship and outreach events. I appealed to the spiritual leaders to participate in the project, not merely because it was my pastoral desire, but because the Examen would be able to create more space for God when one's faith was so easily distracted by life. The church would naturally benefit if the spiritual leaders increased their awareness of God. I reiterated that even though I feel there is benefit in doing the project, I did not want anyone to feel pressured into participating. Moreover, it is not ethical or Godly to pressure someone to participate against one's will. The potential participant's freedom of choice was upheld to ensure that the recruitment process was ethical. I reassured the participants that they would not be penalized in any way if they chose not to participate in the project.

I have a position of authority over my staff. My servant leadership style has developed into a relationship with the staff that is collaborative. In spite of my efforts in mitigating the power imbalance between myself and the participants, I still have a measure of authority over them. My intention has been to diminish the imbalance as much as possible. To that end, since I was their work supervisor, I

was not the one to recruit them for this research project. A trusted member of the congregation was engaged as the recruiter for the project. My relationship with the session elders has never been authoritative; rather, my goals have been simply to moderate meetings, encourage ministry visioning, and advise them on pastoral issues. The other spiritual leaders have simply seen me as their pastor, who encourages them to develop their spiritual gifts. Regardless of my style of leadership, the power imbalance has always existed. The power differential is real regardless of my awareness of it. To prevent this from becoming a factor in this study, the participant needed a way to stop participating without my knowledge. The participants had the option to do so through a person in the congregation to whom they could report (an appointed individual other than the researcher).

The research assistant was available to those who had a concern but may not have been comfortable speaking to me. I was certainly available for conversations after worship services, through email, or by phone. I worked at ensuring that all participants were comfortable and assured them that they would have access to someone for all their questions and concerns. In the consultation group sessions, participants could air their questions and concerns so the other participants could hear and reflect on these questions and concerns from their own experience with the Examen.

All ethical protocols were observed, which included compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Ethics 2 (TCPS2). The proposal was reviewed by Tyndale Seminary's Ethics Review Board. Ethics approval was received (see Appendix H). For further details of how the recruitment process

facilitated these ethical commitments, please refer to the participant information letter and consent form in Appendix C and D.

Findings, Interpretation and Outcomes

The following section explains the process of how the data collection instruments were used and the findings, interpretation, and the outcomes which evolved from that data.

Though the main intent of my research was not to study the uniqueness of each group of spiritual leaders as compared to the others, it was helpful to note how the different groups engaged in spiritual disciplines, and it helped identify how to minister to them differently going forward. The Session Elders generally approached the Examen as a new assigned task in addition to their regular daily duties. Most of the Session Elders had not been engaged with spiritual practices other than daily devotions, reading the Bible, and attending worship. The Session Elders who participated were curious. Only two of the eight staff members participated in the Examen. The two staff members who participated came from a Roman Catholic background where such spiritual practices were more common. The other group of spiritual leaders were generally more familiar with spiritual practices, specifically the Examen. All of them had more free time and understood what the Examen was all about. They were familiar and comfortable with spiritual practices.

Pre-Interviews

During the pre-interviews, the following questions were asked to determine how each of the participants were already engaged in regular spiritual

practices in their daily life. The answers would give the project a baseline of their spiritual formation to then track throughout the project.

1. What spiritual practices are you presently engaged in?
2. Which spiritual practices have been helpful in becoming aware of God's presence?
3. Are there any factors which have prevented you from experiencing the awareness of God? If so, what are they?
4. What could you do to improve your awareness of God in everyday life?

The participants' responses to the first question were not surprising. They were presently engaged in worship, prayer and scripture reading. A few of the participants were more deeply engaged in spiritual practices than others, such as regularly attending Bible studies throughout the year. One participant had participated in an Examen in the past. As the participants were the spiritual leaders of the congregation, these responses were expected.

Personal devotions, prayer, scripture reading, worship, Bible study, journaling, mentoring, and walks in nature were all reported as spiritual practices that the participants saw as helpful in becoming aware of God's presence. Distractions and busyness were the main factors that prevented participants from becoming aware of God's presence. Fear, divorce, loneliness, watching the news, and praying infrequently were other factors mentioned that hindered participants from experiencing a greater awareness of God.

When asked what they could do to improve their awareness of God, participants listed different practices: increasing quiet time with God, starting this Examen project, journaling, practicing patience with other people, starting a different spiritual practice, prayer on their own and prayer with others, memorizing scripture, and serving more. One person shared that they could do

nothing more to improve their awareness of God. With this experience and belief that they would not gain awareness of God’s presence by engaging in the Examen project, they still desired to test that belief by engaging in the Examen. Overall, it became evident that there was a desire among the participants to improve and deepen their awareness of God in daily life.

Post-Interviews

These interviews were conducted at the end of the eight-week period. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis and the participants were asked six questions, listed in Table 2. I asked the participants directly how their experience of the awareness of God in their lives changed. They rated the extent of change from zero (no change to five (major change).

Table 2: Post-Interview Questions

1	For each of the following questions (A-D), how has your awareness increased on a scale of 0-5 over the past eight weeks of completing the Examen? (0 – No change in awareness to 5 – Major change in awareness)
	A. Where were you surprised today?
	B. Where/How did you experience joy today (How was God present at that time?)
	C. What pointed you towards God today?
	D. What pointed you away from God today?
2	What was the most difficult part about doing the Examen?
3	Do you think doing the Examen helped you become better equipped to help other people in the congregation with spiritual formation?
4	How would you improve this experience?
5	Do you desire to do the Examen daily after the project is finished?
6	Do you wish to encourage others to participate in the Examen?

Question 1 was intended to measure the change in the participant's awareness of God. This data was collected from 14 of 15 participants through the participants reflection on each of the four daily Examen questions over the eight weeks. The charts in Figure 3 show the findings from Question 1.

There was a range of responses as to how the participants changed, as shown in the four figures. These interpretations are based on participants' self-awareness of change over the eight weeks of the Examen. For question 1.A, "Where were you surprised today?" only one participant saw no change in their awareness of God. The other participants saw growth in their awareness of God, with 50% seeing moderate to major change (as seen in the range of 3 and 4 in Figure 3.A). This Examen question did not specifically name God, but it was a general starting question for the participant to begin noticing something unique about their day.

Although one could view a bias in this question, arguing that the question leads to this favourable outcome, the option to choose no change was clearly given to the participants. Thirteen out of fourteen participants who commented said that they had become more aware of the daily surprises of life. In all cases, names have been changed and pseudonyms are used. Perhaps participants began to see daily surprises because the question reminded them to look for surprises. Looking for surprise started to become a habit. These were some of the comments: "It broadened the scope of surprise" (Hannah); "It became easier to spot the surprises as the Examen was practiced" (Mona). Others struggled with

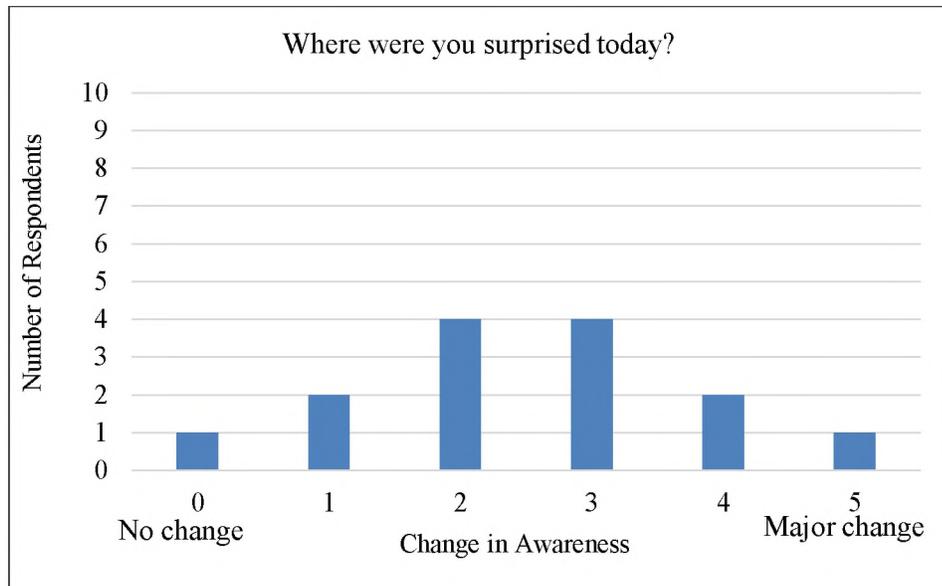


Figure 3.A.: Responses to Post-Interview Question 1.A

Note: The vertical axis indicates the number of participants who reflected on their change in the awareness of God in daily life. The horizontal axis indicates their level of change.

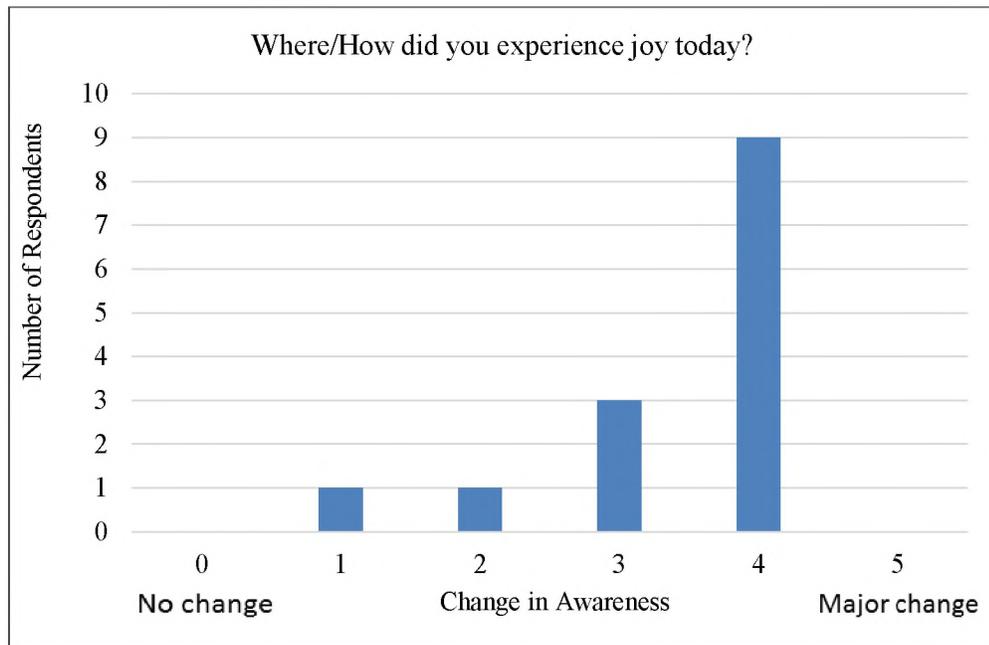


Figure 3.B. Responses to Post-Interview Question 1.B

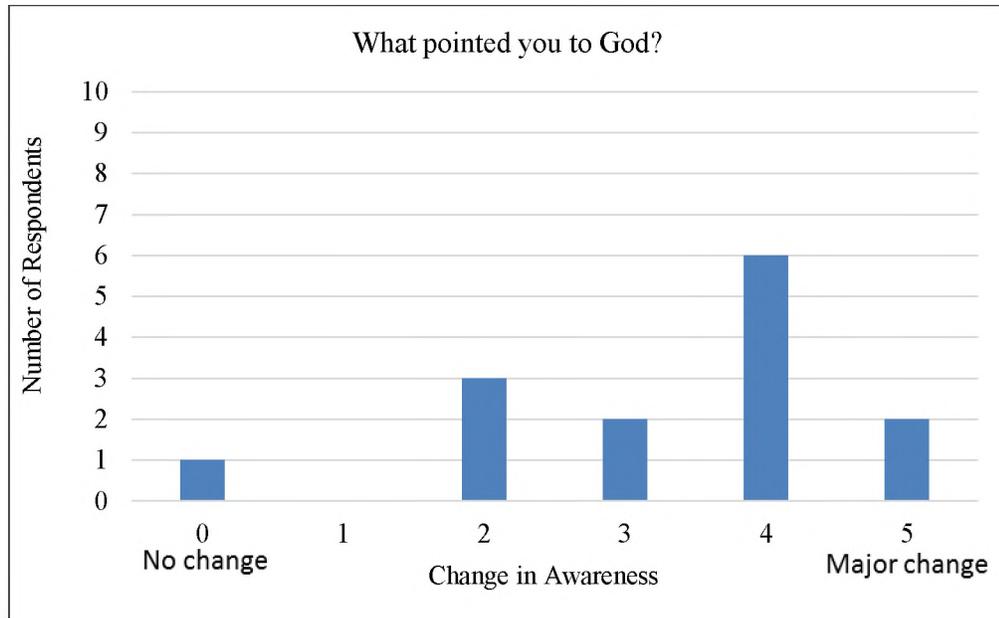


Figure 3.C. Responses to Post-Interview Question 1.C

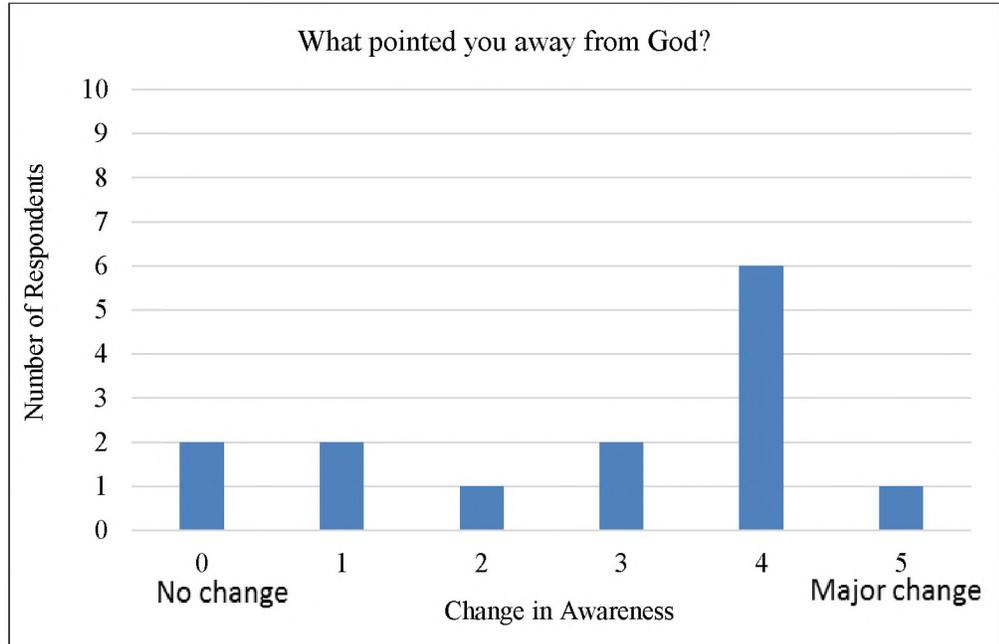


Figure 3.D. Responses to Post-Interview Question 1.D

this question and commented that surprise and joy can be similar. In the practice of the Examen, the participants desired more awareness of God and this question helped them do that. Another participant commented, “It has made me look harder for the surprises of the day” (Deardre). The joy of being aware of surprise motivated this person to search.

Question 1.B, “Where did you experience joy today?” showed the participants’ growth in their increased joy due to their awareness of God. Only two participants showed little awareness of growth in this question (Figure 3.B). Here are some examples of those who benefitted from this question: “By answering this question, I have more of a feeling of God” (Dean). “When looking for it, I was even able to find more joy” (Jessica).

Just asking the question helped the participants consider joy in a typical day. One participant stated that he had some challenge identifying joy, so he decided to “dial joy back down” (Alex). In other words, he previously had a high expectation of what constituted joy. By dialing it down, he was able to see it more. Another participant commented, “Joy comes to me easily. It is easy to be joyful” (Ada). Since it was in the forefront of their mind, it was easy for them to find God in joy. The awareness of God became greater to another participant, who said that they “could bring the word ‘God’ into ‘joy’ more” (Ben).

Question 1.C asked, “What pointed you to God today?” The answers showed growth, with 10 of the 14 participants ranging 3 or higher in their responses (Figure 3.C). One individual had no growth in this area, and three participants indicated only 2. In response to the data from this question, the

participants were then asked how this direct question of naming God's presence challenged the participants not only to identify where they see God, but also be aware of the things that point them towards God. Here are some examples of an enlarged and an enlarging perspective of God from the participants:

“Pointing to God helped me see God in more things, and it helped me pray for people” (Lillian).

“I became more aware of what was taking over my mind and what was pointing me towards God” (Bertha).

“I could not, not see God throughout the day” (Camille).

“I have become more aware in seeing the connection between my other devotions and the Examen pointing me towards God” (Deardre).

“By asking this question, I became more aware of exalting and praising God” And, “It took time to get used to asking the question, but then it became more natural as time went on” (Hannah).

With the repetition of the Examen, Hannah noticed it becoming more than an exercise, but a habitual daily rhythm in discovering what points her to God. One participant said, “This question was helpful even though I get bored asking the same question over again. I need change and diversity” (Camille).

It is not surprising that the practice of the Examen can lead one to boredom because of its repetitive nature, and it takes time before that repetition brings benefits. There were comments from other participants of much work and not enough rewards, especially in the beginning of the eight-week research. The participant concluded that she will not continue with the practice of the Examen but was glad for the experience. Another participant did not find this question particularly helpful for her because it was more of the same of what she was already getting in her other spiritual practices. She explained, “I didn't need to ask

this question because I am so involved in other spiritual practices and contemplation that to ask this question did not make me more aware of God” (Effie). The participants shared in the group meetings that the benefits of the Examen came in other aspects of the research. One participant noted, “The consultation group helped me answer this question better after hearing others talk about what pointed them to God” (Dean).

Question 1.D asked, “What pointed you away from God?” The question increased the awareness of God for 9 of 14 participants, with the majority experiencing a change in the range of level 3 or more. Some found it helpful to reflect on what pointed them away from God, as it allowed them to see their own vulnerability, sin, and need to rely on God. With this sense of vulnerability also came an overwhelming awareness of the ongoing pain, suffering and injustice in the world. One participant articulated it this way: “This question was not helpful. It made me feel more helpless, that there is no ability on my part to impact change” (Camille). Another participant was afraid that if they focused on this question, it could lead to doubt and the questioning of God’s sovereignty and power: “When something goes wrong, I do not question God” (Ada). Generally, this question motivated participants to be aware of where God’s presence was less evident in their life. Through this examination process, the obstacles to faith in God became apparent. One participant said, “I have become increasingly aware that I am easily distracted and pointed away from God” (Jessica). This showed the researcher that self-knowledge came through by asking this Examen question. Here were some of their responses:

“When I looked for what pointed me away from God, it then pointed me again back to God” (Freda).

“The parameters of what’s pointing me away from God have become wider ... when something of concern happens, the question makes me stop and reflect” (Deardre).

This question may have been the most difficult and less comforting for the participants, because pain and sin in the world often leads to more questions and worry. Even so, despite discerning where God was perceived as absent, most of the participants indicated a change in their awareness of God in answering this question. This question challenged the participants to see where they were vulnerable and not in control, and it drew them to rely and trust a little more on the omnipresence of God.

Immediately after analyzing the daily Examen questions, the researcher continued the interview by asking the participants the remaining reflective questions. Question 2 asked, ‘What was the most difficult for you in doing the Examen? Almost all the participants agreed that it was difficult to change their normal routine and stay with this new routine. Early in the research project, there was concern that the weekly summaries were too rigid and restricted to only the four questions of the Examen. Here are examples of the difficulty experienced by the participants and the variety of responses:

“Getting in the routine of doing it” (Jessica).

“Taking the time to do it in our busy lives” (Lillian).

“Thinking about it every day - It started getting easier” (Bertha).

“After four weeks started to lose focus” (Camille). (This participant said she needs more variety.)

“The first and last question” (Ada).

“The questions themselves were restrictive in the beginning” (Hannah). At the end of the research project, all but one of the participants appreciated the value of this restriction in keeping the participants focused. It also helped the researcher to obtain more focused data. The consultation groups between the researcher and the participants played a role in helping the participants understand the necessity of ensuring integrity in the data.

Question 3 asked, “Do you think doing the Examen helped you become better equipped to help other people in the congregation with spiritual formation?” The responses were overall positive, since the participants felt that they were more equipped to help others in the congregation on their journey of spiritual formation.

“Yes, I now see God more in the minutiae of life. In other words, if I see God more, I have something to share with others” (Alex).

“It was definitely helpful. You could see more and more and share naturally” (Cornel).

“Yes, but I still do not feel that I can” (Jessica).

“I would not say so – I have more qualifications. It has always been a part of me – that I am looking for opportunities to talk spiritually” (Ben).

“I hope so. You feel you have more tools to reach out and provide pastoral care” (Lillian).

One participant explained that doing the Examen was not helpful to their spiritual formation. The participant explained that he saw God already in nature, through his hobby of photography, and that he did not need the Examen to help him.

Question 4 asked: How would you improve this experience? The suggestions for improvement of the experience of the Examen are helpful for my

future preparation when I lead subsequent Examen practices in my congregation.

For example, I have learned where participants were not always clear about what I was asking them to do. Here are few examples of suggestions from the participants:

“The Examen is a good introduction. However, one needs to continue to meet in small groups for accountability” (Mona).

“If the questions were a little more detailed, it would help me get into the process. Maybe putting more in between steps would be helpful” (Jessica).

“This is a good practice. As a suggestion, I would like to hear more talk about the trinity” (Hannah).

For the majority of the participants, the eight-week practice was positive.

Question 5 asked, “Do you desire to do the Daily Examen after the project is finished?” Generally, the participants desired to continue the Examen. Only three of the 14 participants interviewed did not plan to do it again. As mentioned above, one of the participants said the Examen was not helpful to his spiritual formation. Another participant, Ada, found it too far out of her comfort zone. She explained, “It is good thing because it is a discipline, but it is the hardest thing I have ever done.” A third participant explained that they got bored of the questions in the fourth week and needed something more varied: “I will move from one to another practice but will come back around to this one” (Camille).

Question 6 asked, “Do you wish to encourage others to participate in the Examen?” With this question, all the participants who were interviewed would recommend the Examen as a practice for going deeper into one’s faith.

“Yes, it is a good practice because it teaches discipline” (Ada).

“For new people, not so much. For those who desire a deeper faith, yes” (Deardre).

“It depends on the needs of the person” (Cornel).

“Yes, I would suggest it to someone who wishes to grow in their faith” (Freda.)

“Yes, it is a positive practice. It cannot be negative” (Mona).

Just by participating in the Examen, these participants are better equipped to discern whether an individual they know would benefit from such a spiritual discipline.

Three Consultation Group Meetings

During my research, the researcher and participants met for three consultation group sessions which had the purpose of sharing what they learned as individuals and gaining insight into their own experience from hearing others experience with the Examen.

Consultation Group 1 – September 30, 2019 – Information meeting

This information meeting was an orientation for the participants. This meeting functioned as a time for clarification and general questions about procedure and expectations before the project began. At the end of the meeting, all the participants articulated that they were ready to begin the Examen.

Consultation Group 2 – October 29, 2019 – Mid-study consultation

This meeting gave an opportunity for participants to come together and discuss the following questions.

Question 1: What are you finding difficult/barriers in doing the Examen?

A participant asked whether they could reflect on being aware of God without answering the specific Examen questions. Some had concerns that they

would not always have answers to the questions. There also were concerns about it becoming too repetitive.

Question 2: What are you finding helpful about doing the Examen?

The participants found it helpful that they committed to being participants for the eight weeks and therefore kept themselves accountable. Without the commitment, it would have been easy to stop and miss the apparent benefits of the practice, which are not always as evident at the early stage of the practice.

Here are some comments about what they found helpful.

“Setting aside a certain time a day, and having no choice to do it, committed to intentionally doing the Examen every day” (Freda)!

“After the first month, the journaling has opened up new areas of thought and reflection ... it makes you focus on your day” (Effie).

Question 3: In your view, what are the barriers to doing the Examen?

It was not surprising that some participants were frustrated with adding weekly reflections into their already busy lives. They first acknowledged an understanding of the rationale, but only later with daily repetition did the participants accept and appreciate the structure. Here are the responses:

“Too structured” (Hannah).

“I didn’t like the email that said we had to respond to the four questions in our summaries” (Effie).

In the consultation groups, a number of the participants had difficulty answering the fourth question of the Examen. Among the participants, there appeared to be differing interpretations of the question “What pointed you away from God?” Some struggled to answer the question. One participant noted: “I found it hard to find what pointed you away from God” (Ada). In addressing their different

interpretations of this question, I explained that all of the things that point one away from God are relevant whether they come from within one's self (such as confession of sins) or outside one's self (ungodly behaviour of others).

Question 4: In what way is journaling helpful or not?

Some people did not like to journal. One participant handed me back an empty journal. Most of the participants did not use the journal on regular basis. Those who used the journal thought it was helpful in reflecting on their experience each day and week. The journal was another opportunity or tool for them to utilize, if they found it helpful to reflect, by writing down their thoughts.

“It was helpful to look back over the journal and see the change in my life” (Mona).

“The weekly report makes you reflect on the last week” (Cornel).

Question 5: Any other reflections you may want to share?

One participant said, “I feel the presence of God in world events, global warming, people's lives; I have been listening and praying more attentively” (Mona). The Examen appears to have expanded this participant's worldview of God's presence beyond her individual daily experience of God's presence.

Consultation Group 3 – Nov. 24, 2019 – End of Study Consultation

The purpose of the final consultation group was to compare the participants' engagement with the Examen from the beginning to the end and to share these experiences with the other participants. Five questions were used to guide the discussion.

Question 1: How does the Examen make you more aware of the presence of God in everyday life?

Several participants voiced the fact that setting aside a specific time intentionally to reflect on how God was present during the day increased the building of a spiritual discipline to carve out time in a busy day which otherwise would not happen. As one participant commented, “The Examen helps bring you closer to God” (Bertha). There was a growing consensus during this meeting compared to the previous meeting that the way the Examen was structured was helpful when they became more familiar with it. This was expected. New practices outside one’s regular routine may create a certain amount of angst until the practice is integrated into one’s daily life.

One participant stated that “doing the Examen with a partner” (Dean) helped them stay focused on God every day. The partners kept one another accountable. Dean was the only participant who stated that his partner was important for him to stay focused. As the researcher, I had expected that more would want to practice the Examen with a partner to help keep them accountable. I was surprised to learn that most participants engaged in the practice on their own and were able to stay focused without the need of another. I was surprised merely because I had done the Examen with my wife and had appreciated the mutual accountability to not miss a day. This helped me understand more fully that my own expectations for engaging the Examen with another was more a personal preference. In the future, it will be important for me to be cognizant of diverse ways in shaping and training others in Spiritual Formation.

One participant identified the external pressure needed to receive the benefits of the Examen: “Being a participant forces you to do it” (Mona). The

initial commitment to the project made it difficult for the participants to quit the experiment, even though they were free to do so at any time. Through the exercise of becoming more intentionally aware of God, the participants received help from God to be more aware of God's presence. As one participant noted, "Awareness is the key to what points you to and from God" (Alex). Increased awareness of God was the catalyst for seeing the presence of God.

Question 2: What part of the Examen helped more for spiritual growth?

The participants said that the general practicing of the daily Examen led to prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. As one participant noted, "It led me to take time to listen to God more intimately" (Lillian). In the practice of the Examen the following participant found they were taking the focus off themselves to focus on God: "It has made me stop asking for things, but to instead sit and listen more" (Mona). The practice of the Examen moved one participant from focusing on oneself to their prayer for others: "The Examen helps me listen more and brings my mind to pray for other people" (Freda). At times this participant noticed thoughts about scripture: "Sometimes scripture would pop up when doing the Examen" (Hannah). Daily repetition of a task over a period of time helps one to commit it to memory and build a spiritual habit. This participant jokingly noted that because of the repetition, "We will never forget these questions" (Hannah)!

Question 3: Which of the four questions was your favourite?

The question, "Where/How did you experience joy today?" This question seemed to create a lot of response. It was therefore one of the favoured questions. Everyone desires joy because it makes them feel good and increases their

contentment. God is a God of love, and that leads to joy. Therefore, where genuine joy is found, God is present. It was shared that being aware of the presence of God gives joy. Another favourite Examen question was: “What pointed you towards God?” People were excited to share what pointed them to God because the question brought the concept of God from an academic exercise to a regular life experience. This question was helpful for the spiritual leaders, because on a general level for people from the Reformed/Presbyterian denomination, academic head knowledge of theology has been highly valued over the heart knowledge of knowing God personally.

Question 4: Do you find your spiritual reflection increased?

There was a consensus among the participants that the Examen slowed down their daily pace of life because they had to answer the questions. “Having the questions inside my head throughout the day helped force me to reflect on them” (Hannah) stated a participant. “Just by doing the habit of the Examen, you are reflecting more,” (Dean) voiced another.

Question 5: What does ‘pointing away from God’ mean to you?

The participants wrestled with this question more than any other. Some took it as thinking more about injustice and unkindness in the world. Most people took it as reflecting on what personally pointed them away from God and not in the broader sense of world issues. This question shows how individuals saw God or are pointed away from God in diverse ways. Since the question could be interpreted in different ways, it became confusing for some. The question often led the participants to confession and prayer: “It does not mean doubting my faith

Table 3: Daily Examen Questions

1	Where were you surprised today?
2	Where/How did you experience joy today? (How was God present at that time?)
3	What pointed you towards God today?
4	What pointed you away from God today?

but looking at myself and what could be detrimental to my spiritual life” (Deardre). Participants’ reflection on this question raised doubt and wonder about where God was in the midst of so much suffering. One participant commented: “God chooses not to intervene. I feel so helpless” (Camille). The acknowledgement of one’s own vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of evil is a healthy awareness. The participant questioned their own personal responsibility to things not going well in the world. This questioning helped participants be led to action in the name of Christ.

Weekly Summaries

The participants received a journal to record their responses each day. Journals would be viewed only if the participant desired. At the end of each week, they were asked to reflect and summarize their experience for the week. They submitted these weekly summaries. The weekly summaries were a report of how the participants answered the questions in Table 3 about the Examen in the previous week. The required summaries were to be one paragraph in length. The participants had the option to submit their entire journal to the researcher at the end of the 8-week period. Only one participant chose to do so. The weekly

summaries were a report of how the participants answered the questions each day of the Examen during the previous week.

There was a consensus among the participants in the consultation group meetings that the weekly summaries were an important part of the process of the Examen. It kept the participants accountable to respond to the questions on a daily basis. Nine out of the fifteen participants completed all eight weeks of the summaries. Two participants provided seven summaries, two wrote six summaries, and two only did four (one half) of the requested summaries. This suggests that the participants were diligent in completing the summaries. The commitment was strong, with all but 2 completing from 75% to 100% of the summaries. The participants were required to summarize their Examen observations from the previous week and submit them to my research assistant. My assistant would erase the names on the summaries and identify participants with a number in order to allow the participant freedom to express in the knowledge that the researcher would not be aware of the participant's identity. My assistant and I took these summaries and coded them into the 16 categories listed in Table 4. The first four categories listed were generated by the four Examen questions. Generally, participants made responses to each of the four questions and the data was placed in these categories. In addition to responding to the four questions, the participants shared deeper insights which arose from the four questions. Each of the participants reflections were read separately several times and prayerfully discerned before potentially being assigned to one of the spiritual and emotional themed categories. The first weekly summaries were

Table 4: Categorized Themes

Surprise
Joy
Pointing to God
Pointing Away from God
Spiritual Enlivening/Energizing / more aware of God
Discernment/Theological reflection/Good vs Evil
Enlarged compassion and social justice
Gratitude
Peace
Desolation, Sadness, Questioning God
Fear/Vulnerability/Humility
Anger/Frustration/Wrestling with God/Anger at self
Hearing a Word from God/Listening to God
Increasing Frequency of Sense of God's presence
Issues of Faith/Desiring God/Less of me and more of God
Greater Desire to Nurture Spiritual formation in others

shorter responses with fewer categories. Into the subsequent weeks, there was a greater volume in terms of the amount of data the participants provided. The greater amount of data also generated new themes.

Up to this point, I used pseudonyms to identify participants because I was aware who had given me the responses in the personal interviews and in the consultation groups. The pseudonyms protected the identity of participants. The data from the weekly summaries was numbered by my assistant to keep the responses anonymous. I was not given the identity of the numbered participants.

A change in awareness and desire for awareness is hinted in the following weekly summary comments by the participants. This awareness declared by the following two participants show a sense of progression toward experiencing God in moving them toward the true self.

“I began to ask for awareness during my prayer time.” “I had more awareness of God’s presence through all kinds of events.” “If God is in the

little things, he's in the big stuff too." And, "I had a growing sense of God's presence in both good and bad times" (PPT 1).

"I noticed nudges from the Holy Spirit." "I was more aware of outdoor activities pointing me towards God." And, "I was more aware of God's presence helping me resist temptation to gossip" (PPT 2).

One participant in particular showed an awareness of God on a daily basis and goes into detail about their daily encounter with God: "I already had a habit of spending time with God, but now I am sensing God's presence more in daily life and in more spontaneous prayer" (PPT 11). Another participant recognized that their awareness of God had enlarged beyond themselves. They noted, "I became more aware of God's presence in other people's lives and in different circumstances" (PPT 1).

In their summaries, some of the participants vocalized growth in their awareness of God and the importance of the Examen to help them to be mindful and focused each day. For example, one participant noted, "The Examen has reminded me to get into a new routine to stay closer to God" (PPT. 3). Another added, "It pointed me to God through focus on sensing God's presence through the practice of the Examen." (PPT 10). One more participant noted that they are learning to focus more on all daily events, "Examen questions helped me to focus more on God's presence in small daily events as well as dramatic ones" (PPT 11).

The data suggest that these participants have found an effective tool or a means of experiencing God's grace to maintain and deepen their personal spiritual formation. The practice of the Examen during this research project has encouraged the participants to be self-aware of what they are doing to distract themselves from seeing God's presence. The Examen project also helped the

participants practice with the Examen questions to intentionally open up space for God's presence in their lives. By intentionally focusing on God, the following participant has hope and trust for God's healing in their life: "Frustration and anxiety lead to impatience with others and away from God. By slowing down and focusing on God, we can let go of these emotions and trust everything will turn out" (PPT. 10). This comment points to a desire for God to change them. The implication is a desire to surrender from the false self, trust in God, and move toward the true self in union with Christ.

The participants regularly noted many distractions pulling them away from being aware of God: "During busy weeks, sometimes time goes by without awareness of God" (PPT. 9). Time is a gift from God and a limited resource. In deepening the awareness of God in one's life, one is increasingly motivated not to waste time.

In determining the deepening of awareness of the presence of God in the daily lives of the spiritual leaders of the congregation, the data revealed that not all the participants directly stated in their summaries that they had grown in their awareness of the presence of God in their daily lives. As mentioned earlier, the participants were rating the extent of change from zero to five. All participants in varying degrees communicated in the data that they are listening to God, or heard a word from God, or God has communicated to them. In other words, the desire to listen to God combined with the practice of the Examen helped to build the habit of searching for God. One could say that in listening to God, the participants'

communication with God has deepened. The comment below may be suggesting a desire by the participant to move closer to the true self in relationship with God:

“I began to ask for awareness during my prayer time” (PPT.1).

The following participant is referring to one of the parts of their life (one of their spokes) in which they are living toward their true self in union with Christ and listening to the Holy Spirit prompting them.

“In family gatherings and random encounters with people where God came up in conversation – I was feeling God was prompting me to continue these conversations. I feel God is prompting me to build stronger community in these conversations of faith” (PPT.6).

The following participant has shared that they searched for God’s voice. The individual has tried to hear God and has experienced God’s word in silence. “I was surprised by the word of God in stillness” (PPT. 7.). Another participant was hearing God prompting them toward their true self. “I felt God speaking to me about being spiritually authentic” (PPT. 7).

This next participant expressed their awareness of God’s presence through scripture and listening to God pointing them to be thoughtful and caring of others. Relationships (a spoke on the wheel of their life) comes out of the hub where this participant is in union with Christ and growing more deeply toward the true self.

“Paul’s doxology in Romans 11, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God’ always gives me a feeling of awe, and it permeates my mind and spirit. It reminds me to be thoughtful and caring towards others and persevere in studying scripture, which should keep me from wandering away from God.” (PPT. 8)

The following participant is opening up opportunities through scripture reading, study and prayer to listen to the voice of God. They have noticed a greater intentionality in themselves to know God. “I have a stronger desire in reading the

word, study and prayer ... My prayers are more intentional, continuous and spontaneous throughout the day” (PPT. 11). Another opens up the opportunity to expect God to speak with them each day. This participant enjoys being in the true self with God. “What a wonderful God; I feel blessed when Scripture and prayer in the morning opens line of communication with God for the rest of the day” (PPT. 13).

The following participant listens to God and is confident of God communicating a word of peace when the participant is helping a friend. This shows God working through the participants ‘spoke’ of relationship to bring healing.

“I turn to God with friend’s problems, and God gives me peace” (PPT. 14).

Another listens to God through the music in worship. This habit of listening to God in worship music is a well engaged spoke in their life, and keeps them closer to the true self in union with Christ.

“I hear God when singing anthems in worship – “creation will be at peace.” I believe this promise from God” (PPT. 16).

The following participant listens to God in various activities (spokes) in their life leading them to a greater experience of God.

“I listen to God in giggling kids, crunching leaves, having quiet for homework and some sense of peace writing in my journal” (PPT. 17).

When commenting on listening to God, a participant wrote: “I was talking with God about frustrations with selfish people” (PPT. 5). They then wrote at the end of that week, “I generally felt the presence of God more this week than before.”

The participant was talking with God about frustrations, and then later that week

felt a deeper presence of God than before. The participant felt comfort in communicating with God despite this ongoing frustration.

Every participant gave a comment of gratitude. Some submitted entries of gratitude almost weekly. In asking oneself the four Examen questions and thus searching and being more aware of the presence of God in daily life, the participants expressed thanksgiving to God for God's presence and gifts. Being aware of God's presence in everyday life led to thanksgiving in the participants who noticed that they were not alone.

“I feel gratitude for God's blessings all around” (PPT.9).

“I am grateful for the growing sense of God's presence” (PPT. 11).

“I feel gratitude that God is with me” (PPT. 12).

“I am grateful for reminders of God's presence and answers to prayer” (PPT. 13).

This communion with God through the practice of the Examen has been a source of joy. The gratitude of God's gifts to the participants has produced a sense of well-being. The Examen helps those who participate to stop what they are doing and take some time each day to first look at their day and then reflect upon the events of the past day and remember the benefits of the day.

“I am thankful for my job and being aware to thank God for it during the day which gives me peace and contentment” (PPT. 3).

“I feel gratitude for the joy and little things in life” (PPT. 10).

“I am grateful for the joy of deep friendship. I am trying to be grateful for each day (so many people complain about things) and for how God has blessed our group of friends” (PPT. 14).

“I am grateful for each new day” (PPT. 16).

In the practice of the Examen, the participants were reminded of the gifts God had provided each day to sustain their lives. Below are some examples of enduring gifts (not to be taken for granted) of God's grace. The joy of these gifts of God's grace can be experienced on a daily basis if one pays attention.

“I am thankful for the blessing of joy” (PPT 2). (The participant may have taken joy for granted, not realizing joy as a gift from God.)

“I am thankful for God's grace and love for my family” (PPT 5). (Examining oneself on a daily basis helps stimulate awareness of the gracious gift of family God provides.)

“Gratitude for the gift of listening and of Presence” (PTP 7). (This participant has a deep sense of God's presence and is grateful for engagement with God who is always available.)

“I am thankful for my wife's friendship and fellowship” (PPT 8).

“I am grateful for fall colours, catching up with old friends, family, and doing ministry (PPT 17). (This participant was content in ordinary parts of their life: in the beauty of God's creation; their relationships, and in their ministry to and with others.)

Another participant expressed the scope of God's presence from merely being aware of God in the good times to also being aware in the difficult times. This perspective stimulated gratitude to God: “I am thankful that God is present both in positive and negative times” (PPT 1). By having this perspective, the grace and joy found in God is also present in times of darkness and fear.

There has been a shift in varying degrees for all participants in terms of deepening their awareness of God in their lives. There was a greater self-knowledge which became noticeable. With this enhanced self-knowledge, the data may suggest the participant is moving closer to the true self and union with Christ. Here is an example of a participant explaining how a change happened in their life over the eight weeks:

“I have been reading a devotional for many years and I find it interesting and thought provoking, but it has not changed me because I think I had not invested myself. By participating in the Examen, I had to dig deeper. It was harder work, but through that hard work of investing myself, I have been changed” (PPT 10).

Summary

The practice of the Examen with the spiritual leaders of OPC was an attempt to help deepen the awareness of God in the daily lives of the participants. To that end, the participants engaged in the same activity every day for an eight-week period to build a habit of awareness of God through repetition and reflection. With each passing week, the participants became accustomed to the routine of daily reflection with the four questions provided. In varying degrees, the participants found that the routine of daily reflection with these Examen questions was helpful for them to reflect on the presence of God in their daily lives. This routine has deepened the participants’ awareness of the presence of God at times, both in positive and challenging times, and in places in which they may have found themselves in the routine of daily life. With the enduring habit of the Examen, the spiritual leaders should be better equipped to receive and experience the grace from God in Jesus Christ. The spiritual leaders may then exhibit increased confidence to lead the church and individual congregants into an exciting and joyful experience towards deepening their awareness of God and guiding them to move closer to their true selves in union with Christ.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The process of completing my spiritual autobiography was formative, because in the reflection and examination of my past, insights into how I was spiritually shaped became evident. Grace was present throughout my formative years, and in reflecting that grace, I have developed a spirit of gratitude to God that has become a larger part of my life. In my own experience this gratitude has resulted in joy.

In knowing how I was formed and looking towards a model for spiritual formation for my congregation, I kept in mind that intentional teaching and mentoring of the congregants towards spiritual formation in the image of Christ will resist the formation congregants experience from the secular culture in which they live. A person's identity in today's culture is too often directly connected to their actions, successes, thoughts, or opinions. These are symptoms of a false self which is ego focused. In practicing my model of spiritual formation in the congregation, I emphasized how the church is to resist the false self motivations for the good life as found in our culture. Greed and self-gratification are part of Western society and can be resisted with a spiritual formation where Christ becomes the center of one's life. This will influence all the other parts (spokes of the wheel) of one's life.

Mulholland (2016) focused on the problem where the self is the center of one's life. Mulholland refers to this as the false self: "When we operate as a false

self, the natural world becomes a commodity. Natural resources are used and abused to satiate our false self's compulsive need for more resources, more possessions, more control" (Mulholland 2016, 39). Mulholland teaches that the true self is centered in Christ. When one has the will to form towards the true self centered in Christ the compulsive needs often diminish. However, at times individuals can be aware of the true self but continue to ignore it. The false self conflicts with a Christian's spiritual development because the false self desires to place self rather than Christ at the center of one's life. In my model for spiritual formation, I have emphasized that Christ is the center and telos of Christian spiritual formation. Mulholland's claim about the false self is directly connected to my research model. The liberation of one's life from the false self is also evident in my research project, which demonstrates how the Examen helps one move towards the true self by noticing the presence of God more.

Smith (2016) claims that we are what we worship. The pull of desire combined with the power of habit influences each person both toward God and away from God. Smith helps one be aware of and reflect on what they love. He encourages his readers to consider what needs to be the focus of their love and how they can learn and have their hearts reshaped to love God. This was helpful to the Examen project because Smith's message about habits encourages the reader to find habits which can help to reshape their hearts towards God's grace.

A person is to see and experience life as a free gift of God's grace. Grace – God's steadfast love in spite of our sin – is evident in our practice of the sacraments. The habit of practicing the sacraments instills the grace of God in

one's heart. The practice of the Examen among the spiritual leaders was a process of building a habit of becoming more aware of God in daily life and opening the potential for that awareness to penetrate and change the heart.

The practice of the Examen can act as a means of being more aware of God's presence and therefore better able to receive that joy. Furthermore, the practice of the Examen has helped the participants to reinforce the awareness that God is present in all things. However, the practice can also call into question where God is amid suffering. This is not necessarily detrimental to the goal of increasing the awareness of God, but it encourages one to go deeper into pondering where God is at the time of suffering. Christ is in the midst of the suffering because he suffered and died on the cross to defeat it once and for all time. Moltmann writes, "In the Old Testament, it is God's turning towards his people and his shining countenance that provokes joy" (cited in Volf and Crisp 2015, 3). Moltmann uses the example of Psalm 16:11: "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Warner (2010) articulates that the Examen helps one find God in all things and become aware of things in one's life which hold one back from experiencing the freedom of saying "yes" to God. This saying "yes" to God as opposed to saying "yes" to oneself is connected to Mulholland's thesis about the true and the false self. The truer the self is, the more aware of the presence of God. The petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done," is Jesus reminding us of our

identity as loved children of our Father (God). Knowledge of that grace encourages us to know our true selves and to say “yes” to God.

In his grace, God already loves each one of us. In our spiritual practices, we become more aware of the presence of God and will be able to receive this abundant gift of grace. In receiving this gift of God’s grace, we receive it with gratitude and respond with joy to pass it on to others. The idea is not that one tries harder to become a better Christian. Rather, the discipline of spiritual practices develops the habit of being aware and desiring God’s grace. This will therefore clear the obstacles which hinder God from penetrating our hearts. Once the habit is established, the Holy Spirit will more naturally work through us. In spiritual formation, we free the Holy Spirit to do the work of grace in and through us to others.

As one ponders the freedom associated in being spiritually formed in the image of Christ, joy and gratitude emerges from within our hearts. With the awareness of God’s steadfast love to us, with gratitude and joy, we reciprocate with love for God and for our neighbour. Smith (2009) states succinctly: “Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love” (2009, 32-3).

I have endeavored to deliver opportunities to my congregants through interactive Bible studies and a sermon series. But until people engage in spiritual practices for spiritual formation, they usually will not have Christ firmly at the

hub of the wheel. Rather, He will just be one of the spokes on the wheel of life. In engaging a model of spiritual formation, one cannot expect to have the end result that all who participate are moving towards the destination of spiritual formation merely because it is made available to them. The Holy Spirit does the work of changing hearts. My responsibility as a pastor is to embody God's grace and open up opportunities to make that journey of spiritual formation more accessible to my leaders and my congregants. To that end, through my Doctor of Ministry project, I identified fifteen spiritual leaders in OPC who were willing to engage in the Examen for an eight-week period with the goal to deepen their awareness of the presence of God in their daily lives.

This research project measured short term spiritual development of individual spiritual leaders in the congregation of OPC. The project was valuable because of the potential for spiritual growth among church leaders. Most of the spiritual leaders who participated were motivated to consistently stay with the research for the full eight weeks. Among all the spiritual leaders invited, it appears their motivation came from an authentic desire to deepen their relationship with God. However, this project presented a challenge to some of the participants. For example, one of the participants stated, "This is the hardest thing I have ever done!"

The participants, to varying degrees, were pleased that they participated in the Examen. Since the participants were all identified spiritual leaders in the congregation and had clearly expressed their desire to participate, this was not a surprise. Since the desire for increased awareness of the presence of God was

evident, the spiritual leaders were generally intentional about engaging faithfully each day.

This project has, for the most part, resulted in my expected outcomes. The personal and spiritual diversity of the participants has met the expectation that even though the Examen is an effective practice for spiritual formation, it is one of many means for spiritual formation depending on the needs of the individual. As with most spiritual practices, some participants found it very helpful, while others found it only moderately helpful. Each of the participants articulated that they benefitted from engaging in the project.

In terms of the completion of this project and my ministry going forward at OPC, the spiritual leaders who experienced the Examen have, to varying degrees, expressed a change in their awareness of God's presence in daily life. In this experience of greater awareness, the participants are better equipped and motivated as leaders to point others to see the presence of God in their lives. The spiritual leaders now have the Examen as a valuable tool to lead others in recognizing God in the mundane of life and to encourage others under their care to engage in spiritual practices. As the pastor of OPC, this has given me increased confidence in the lay spiritual leader's ability to walk alongside me more closely and thus form a more effective ministry team in leading the congregation towards spiritual formation. To that end, the participants have articulated that they are listening to God more and are aware of God's presence and direction for them as spiritual leaders. I wish to re-emphasize that the goal is not that these spiritual leaders and Christians in general are to continually try harder and tire themselves

to have a deeper relationship with God. Rather, through building a habit of spiritual practice, the spiritual leaders will more naturally notice God's presence in everyday life and respond with surprise and joy. They were then able to respond with gratitude about this good news of great joy and share it with others. The desire to share this good news would be an area for further study.

In the practice of the Examen, the questions "Where is one pointed towards God" and "Where does one feel pointed away from God?" encouraged the participants to reflect on what was blinding them from seeing God in daily life. This daily self-examination of the Examen benefitted the participants in knowing it is important to slow down, be patient and take the time to examine their own lives. The participants also noticed and became aware of what they were doing to distract themselves from seeing God. Some participants shared that this led to confession and prayer for patience to slow down and look and listen. After a day of examination, one learns a little more about how much or how little they are listening to God in their daily encounter with life. The regular experience of the Examen each day builds on the existing knowledge of God and deepens the awareness of the presence of God in their daily lives.

The eight-week Examen practice among the spiritual leaders in the congregation of OPC was helpful to the participant's growth and knowledge of God's omnipresence in the world and in their personal lives. Deeper knowledge of God's presence mattered to the participants, because they were more aware of God's loving presence and deep concern for even the trivial aspects of their daily life. God's loving presence was not something the participants manufactured

through the practice, but rather God's presence is a pre-existent gift. The participants saw this gift more clearly as they practiced the Examen and in turn became grateful for each day. A greater awareness of God's presence mattered, because the participants experienced a joyful awareness of God's love for themselves and for others.

Leaders have been given a taste of the joy of spiritual discipline. This research project will be embedded in their memory as a good experience which I hope has planted the seed for further spiritual formation. As the pastor who is to equip the saints for service, I have worked towards that goal in providing some fertile ground for the leaders to continue in forming their awareness of and relationship with the Lord. This spiritual discipline of the Examen helped the participants move Christ closer to the center of their hub.

Not all the participants are planning to continue the Examen, even though they have expressed their desire to continue with some practice of spiritual formation. However, the practice of the Examen has provided them with a springboard for their further growth. I have learned more deeply that the Holy Spirit changes lives, and my role as a pastor is to provide the environment and the fertile ground to encourage growth.

The consultation groups provided an important part of the experience in terms of participants hearing from each other about their experiences of God and learning from that. Engaging in spiritual practices intentionally calls God to be present in one's life. One of the central purposes of any congregation is to encourage one another's knowledge of God – not only in terms of academic

knowledge but also in heart knowledge which entails deeper connection with our loving and faithful God who is always present, and always faithful in providing for all our needs. The Examen is a bridge rather than a wall for those wanting to help others with spiritual formation. The Examen gives congregants and spiritual leaders non-threatening questions to ask as a springboard for spiritual conversations. Most individuals can relate to the concepts of joy, surprise, and talking about the best part, and the worst part, of the day. There is an opening for someone to be formed and someone to do the forming. The questions open up a space in which the Spirit is already present and able to move.

I would like to study more about how people are formed. This Examen project has initiated in me a greater desire to understand spiritual formation. I have been intrigued with how God's grace and gratitude frees the potential for joy. I acknowledge that it is a personal quest to understand joy and spiritual formation in a deeper sense. This enjoyment of increased awareness of the presence of God has been a motivation for the participants to want more. Certainly, spiritual practices help us to take time aside to be silent and listen to our loving God who wants to know us. Yet how does one maintain that good news of great joy that is for all people? Why are so many Christians not as joyful as one might expect when the good news of the gospel liberates people from death to new life? We certainly need to regularly engage in spiritual practices along with the daily practice of prayer and reading scripture to sustain our joy in the Lord. How are people motivated to share that joy?

I would like to explore how people are spiritually motivated and how they become better equipped to experience their true selves in union with Christ. Spiritual motivation varies among people, but most are motivated to be loved and valued. Having a greater understanding of how people are spiritually motivated will lead to a greater awareness of how individuals are spiritually formed. I am considering a bible study or book study within the congregation to explore this idea of spiritual motivation.

The Examen can be a catalyst for people to build the habits of reflection and examination to enhance their awareness of God's presence in their daily life. The next step beyond awareness is to know God beyond knowing in the mind, and transferring that awareness to a change of the heart where Christ becomes the center and they live in union with Christ in all dimensions or spokes of their daily lives. I would consider creating a project for participants which would have a contemplation aspect combined with a serving others component. I could explore how awareness of God in daily life combined with an emphasis on contemplative prayer and service to one's neighbour could move one towards a deeper knowledge of God and union with Christ.

This portfolio presents the use of the Examen as a spiritual formation tool that helps participants keep Christ at the center of their lives by daily, prioritized, and intentional reflection. This reflection allowed participants to experience God's grace on a daily and ongoing basis which increased participants joy of knowing their true selves as beloved children of God. This research shows that the Examen is an important spiritual formation tool that can be used in congregational

settings for Christian spiritual direction practices, education, and spiritual formation.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Project Phases and Timetable

June 2019	The session and the staff were introduced to the research project. The research project proposal and the Review Ethics Board applications were completed.
August 2019	The other spiritual leaders in the congregation were introduced to the project.
September 2019	Confirmation of approval was given by Tyndale University for the project to proceed.
September 2019	Received confirmation from the prospective participants.
September 2019 Last Week	Introductory session with the participants was conducted, where the researcher distributed Examen questions. Journals were supplied to participants.
October 2019 First Week	The participants started their eight-week journey with the Examen.
October 2019 Second Week	The first weekly summary and document data were collected.
October 2019 Third Week	The second week summary and documented data was collected. The researcher checked in with participants through email, by telephone, or in person.
October 2019 Final Week	The researcher held a consultation group with all the participants for feedback and suggestions.
November 2019 First Week	The researcher integrated helpful suggestions for the project.
November 2019 Second and Third Week	The researcher continued regular consultation with participants and began to identify patterns.
November 2019 (fourth week)	Consultation group occurred with the participants. The participants were debriefed on their experience with the Examen. Their comments became part of the data going forward. The data was collected and analyzed.

Appendix B: Recruitment Document for Participants

The Examen has its biblical foundation from Psalm 139: *“Lord, you have examined me and you know me. You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts... Examine me, O God, and know my mind; test me, and discover my thoughts. Find out if there is any evil in me and guide me in the everlasting way.” (Psalm 139:1-2,23-4)*

I have asked the recruiter, a member (and a former elder on the session) of Oakridge Presbyterian Church, to ask you if you would be willing to participate in this Research Project. The Research Project recruiter has been asked to take this role because of the potential conflict of interest from a power imbalance due to the fact that I am the researcher for this action research project and simultaneously the lead minister and head of staff at Oakridge Presbyterian. The Research Project recruiter will be in touch with you in September. Those who are invited to participate are from the spiritual leadership of the congregation. The participants will come from the session, the staff and other identified spiritual leaders in the congregation.

There is no obligation for you to participate in this project. Although I feel there is benefit in being part of this research, please do not feel that it is an obligation. There are many reasons for people not to participate, and they will be respected. I do not want anyone to feel pressured. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will be free to withdraw at any time, for any reason and without prejudice. If you would like to do the Examen but not be part of research, you are certainly free to do so as well.

The practice of the Examen is in line with the ministry to which I have been called in the congregation, specifically with Oakridge Presbyterian Church. My call is to equip the members and adherents for Christian spiritual formation and to help them identify their God-given gifts. With this ongoing formation, they become better equipped and confident for service to others in the congregation, in the community and in the world. In order for me to accomplish my call to help form others in faith, it is important that I focus on the spiritual leaders of the congregation. They will then be more equipped to help spiritually form others in the congregation towards the likeness of Christ. The idea is not that Christians are to continually try harder to have a relationship with God. Instead, the goal is to build a habit, through the spiritual practice of the Examen, to naturally notice God’s presence in everyday life. With this noticing, Christ will move closer to the hub of their personal lives rather than becoming positioned more towards the periphery.

The Examen is meant to help us pray. Prayer communicates to God through listening and speaking. The practice of the Examen can bring you more naturally into prayer because you are examining God's presence in your day. When you prays, you are acknowledging the presence God who hears and speaks to you. After you have completed the Examen for the day, I will ask you to spend some time in prayer where you will reflect, speak and listen to God. This prayer could include your reflections of the day and other things you usually pray for. Many people do the Examen at the end of the day, but it can also be done at any point as you reflect on the past 24 hours. I expect that you will spend about 20 minutes a day to do the Examen.

Before beginning the Examen, you may want to either light a candle or put on a lamp and say, "Jesus, light of the world, shine upon us and give us your peace." At a specific time of day (your choice of time), with a partner or on your own, I will ask you to answer these four questions:

1. Where were you surprised today?
2. Where/How did you experience joy today? (How was God present at that time?)
3. What pointed you towards God today?
4. What pointed you away from God today?

After you have answered these, then you should come to the Lord in a time of prayer.

I will provide a journal for you to write notes of your responses. You can share the journal with me or not – it is up to you.

I will ask you to provide a short summary (one paragraph) of your weekly reflections/insights by the end of each week. You could send it by email _____ or hand it to me personally or put in mailbox at the church in a sealed envelope – whatever you decide. You could also organize a time to give me a verbal report if you wish. All your reflections are kept strictly confidential. If you choose to withdraw from the practice, you can do so at any time without any consequences.

One of our OPC members, Susan Cook will assist me with analyzing the data. Susan will also be a person you contact with questions or concerns. Her email address is: _____. Susan will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Your start date for the Examen is Tuesday, October 1st and will end on Monday, November 25th.

Before we start the project, I will meet with each of you for a conversation about the Examen and answer any questions you may have. I will hold an introductory meeting on September 25 from 7:00 – 8:00 p.m. with all those who have agreed to participate in the project. Participants will be able to discuss and ask questions, give comments and voice concerns at that time. Since this project is participatory, I value your comments and helpful suggestions and will consider them going forward. I encourage your comments, as this is a collaborative project where we will learn from one another.

Halfway through the project on Wednesday, October 30 from 7:00 -8:00 p.m., I will ask the participants to gather with me for a consultation group where we can hear about one another's experience. I, as the researcher, will be able to hear about your experiences and incorporate helpful suggestions going forward. I will hold a second consultation group meeting on Wednesday, November 27 from 7:00 – 8:00 p.m., after you have finished the eight weeks of the Examen. Finally, I plan to meet with each of you for a concluding conversation for final reflections and feedback.

Thank you for considering participation in this Research Project with the Examen.

Blessings.

Rev. Ed Hoekstra, B.A., M.Div.
Project Researcher and D.Min Student.

Lead Minister
Oakridge Presbyterian Church, London, ON.

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Tyndale University

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Section A: The Research Project

The title of the research project is: “Deepening the awareness of the presence of God in the spiritual leaders of the congregation.”

The purpose of the study is to measure the personal spiritual development of the participants so that they may be experiencing a greater awareness of God’s presence wherever they are during the day.

As their Lead Minister and teaching elder (and consistent with my ordination vows), I am to equip the leaders for ministry by engaging them to prepare the congregants for ministry. The Examen functions as a spiritual practice meant to develop the habit of being aware of God in the daily, ordinary and mundane of life. This will therefore allow the participants to engage in ministry more easily. The idea is not that Christians are to continually try harder to have a relationship with God. The purpose is to instead build a habit through the spiritual practice of the Examen to naturally notice God’s presence in everyday life. With this, Christ will move closer to the hub of their personal lives rather than the periphery.

For further information please contact:

Rev. Ed Hoekstra
Lead Minister
970 Oxford St., West,
Oakridge Presbyterian Church,
London, ON. L6H 1V4

Section B: Your participation in the Research Project

You have been invited to take part because you are identified as a spiritual leader in the congregation of Oakridge Presbyterian Church. Your participation in the Examen will begin on October 1, 2019 and run through to November 25, 2019. You may refuse to take part and can withdraw at any time by completing the bottom portion on the consent letter.

I have asked the Research Project recruiter, a member (and former elder on the session) of Oakridge Presbyterian Church to ask you if you would be willing to participate in this Research Project. The recruiter has been asked to take this role because of the potential conflict of interest from a power imbalance due to the fact that I am the researcher for this action research project and simultaneously the lead minister and head of staff at Oakridge Presbyterian. The participants for the project will come from the session, the staff and among other identified spiritual leaders in the congregation.

If you agree to take part, you will be involved in all of the following methods of data collection.

1. Email or other means of weekly correspondence.
2. Attendance as a participant in the consultation group session with all the participants in the study.
3. Involvement in one-on-one interviews with the researcher.

There are no anticipated risks involved in this study. Data collection will be kept securely and then destroyed when the research project is complete. Your participation in the research will be known to the congregation, but all research data collected will be kept anonymous and confidential. This study has been reviewed and approved through the Registered Ethics Board (reb@tyndale.ca). If you have any further questions and concerns during the research project, please contact Susan Cook who has been designated to field any questions and concerns. Susan Cook will sign a confidentiality agreement for her role in this research project.

Please read the attached consent form, where you are invited to express your informed, free and voluntary consent to participate in this study.

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS LETTER TO KEEP
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM**

Appendix D: Participant Informed Consent Form

Tyndale University

Participant Consent Form

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the Project: “Deepening the Awareness of the Presence of God in the Daily Lives of the Spiritual Leaders of the Congregation.”

Main investigator and contact details

Rev. Ed Hoekstra

Lead Minister

970 Oxford St., West,

Oakridge Presbyterian Church,

London, ON. L6H 1V4

Tyndale University, Director of the DMin Program

Dr. Mark Chapman,

mchapman@tyndale.ca

(416) 226-6620

I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in the research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I have provided will be safeguarded. No personal information will be shared.

Total anonymity in this research study may not be possible due to the small scale of the study and the collegial nature of our congregation. Therefore, please do not agree to participate in this research if you are concerned about remaining anonymous. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you will be free to

opt-out of the study at any time without consequence. You are not waiving any legal rights if you choose to participate in this research.

I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

I have been provided with a copy of this form and the participant information sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the Researcher processing personal data I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the research project as outlined to me.

Name of participant
(print) _____

Signed _____ Date _____

Name of witness
(print) _____

Signed _____ Date _____

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP.

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the section below and return to the researcher.

Title of Project: "Deepening the Awareness of the Presence of God in the Daily Lives of the Spiritual leaders of the Congregation."

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Confidentiality Agreement

Title of Research Project: “Deepening the Awareness of the Presence of God in the Daily Live of the Spiritual Leaders of the Congregation.”

Location: Oakridge Presbyterian Church

Official Researcher: Rev. Edward Hoekstra

Action Research Project – Partial Fulfillment of the Doctor of Ministry Program

As assistant to Rev. Ed Hoekstra (the researcher) in this project

I, _____

Agree to the following:

1. I will keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., transcripts, weekly submissions, recorded conversations) with anyone other than the Researcher.
2. I will keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., transcripts, weekly submissions, and recorded conversations) secure while it is in my possession.
3. I will return all research information in any form or format (e.g., transcripts, weekly submissions, recorded conversations) to the Researcher when I have completed the research tasks.
4. After consulting with the Researcher, I will erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the Researcher (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

Data Analyzer - Printed Name	Signature	Date
Witness – Printed Name	Signature	Date

Appendix G: Data Gathering Instruments

Below is a list and brief description of the proposed data-gathering instruments.

1. A weekly submission from each participant regarding their reflection of engaging in the spiritual practice of the Examen. This submission will be about a paragraph in length.

Known reliability and validity issues: We may not receive consistent submissions of participant's reflections. We may receive illogical submissions which are difficult to follow.

2. Non-official verbal one-on-one conversations between the participant and the researcher where questions, comments and other feedback will be received by the researcher.

Known reliability and validity issues: Data may be forgotten or lost when informal communication is frequent or time is too short to record information. Conversations may be recorded differently when too much time has passed from the time of the conversation to its recording.

3. The researcher will schedule three consultation group sessions: The first session functions as an information gathering and participants have the opportunity to ask questions. The second session will occur at the half-way point of the participants' engagement in the spiritual practice (end of October 2019). The third session will occur at the end of the practice (end of November 2019).

Known reliability and validity issues: Some in the group may feel inhibited to speak because of size of the group. They may also be uncomfortable in a group setting. Group dynamics may include people who speak too loudly, too often or who are opinionated, etc. This may influence the reliability of the data received. Group members may be positively or negatively influenced by how others view their experience of the Examen.

4. There will be two one-on-one meetings with each participant for reflection and feedback at the beginning and at the end of the practice (end of November 2019).

Known reliability and validity issues: Some participants may want to please the pastor or themselves and therefore provide more positive feedback in their experience with the Examen than is the case. This can compromise the validity. They may find the Examen difficult or time consuming and conclude that there is no benefit for themselves or for anyone else.

Material Used for Recruitment: The recruitment will be done by one of our church members. The recruiter will supply the recruitment documentation to the potential participants. The recruitment will be done with a personally or on the telephone.

Appendix H: Data Collection Procedures

Interviews: One-on-one interviews between the researcher and each participant will take place in my church office, or at a mutually agreed venue, at the beginning and the end of the project.

Interview questions for participants at the beginning of the Research:

1. What spiritual practices are you presently engaged in?
2. Which spiritual practices have been helpful in becoming aware of God's presence?
3. Are there any factors which have prevented you from experiencing the awareness of God? If so, what are they?
4. What could you do to improve your awareness of God in everyday life?

Interview questions for participants at the end of the Research:

1. On the scale of 0-5, how has your awareness of God increased over the past eight weeks of completing the Examen?
 - A. Where were you surprised today?
 - B. Where/How did you experience joy today (How was God present at that time?)
 - C. What pointed you towards God today?
 - D. What pointed you away from God today?
2. What was the most difficult for you in doing the Examen? What was the most difficult part for you in doing the Examen.
3. Do you think doing the Examen helped you become better equipped to help other people in the congregation with spiritual formation?
4. How would you improve this experience?
5. Do you desire to do the Daily Examen after the project is finished?
6. Do you wish to encourage others to participate in the Examen?

If necessary, the telephone will be means for the researcher to interview the participants at the beginning and end of the project. The telephone may also be used to collect other data from the participants if the data is not available in writing.

Consultation group meeting questions at the end of four weeks:

1. What are you finding difficult about doing the Examen?
2. What are you finding helpful about doing the Examen?
3. In your view, what are the barriers about doing the Examen?
4. In what way is journaling helpful or not?
5. Any other reflections you may want to share?

Consultation group meeting questions at the end of the eight weeks:

1. How does the Examen make you more aware of the presence of God in everyday life?
2. What part of the Examen helped more for spiritual growth?
3. What of the four questions was your favourite?
4. Do you find your spiritual reflection increased?
5. What does pointing away from God mean to you?

Journals: I will encourage the participants to journal every day answering the Examen questions. I will ask each participant to submit to me a weekly summary of their daily reflections. I will ask the participants to email this summary to me or deliver a copy to my mailbox at the church or at home. Verbal reports of their weekly summary will also be arranged with the participant, if that is their preference.

Participant Observation: Participant observation data will be documented from the weekly summaries, planned personal conversations, consultation group discussions and other non-official conversations in person, through electronic media or by telephone.

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