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Tyndale University

Deep Roots in Christ:  
An Exploration of Spiritual Formation  
Through Habits in College Ministry

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

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Toronto, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

In this Research Portfolio, the author examines the role of habits and rituals in spiritual formation. The specific focus of the work is on the potential impact of ancient spiritual practices in the lives of contemporary students at an undergraduate institution. The author presents this topic through three primary movements. First, the author explores aspects of his personal spiritual journey through an autobiographical chapter. These reflections introduce the author's call to ministry and share some foundational thoughts on spiritual formation as both key turning points and habits that ignite and sustain such experiences. Second, the author develops an organic framework for spiritual formation through habits focused on the image of a healthy tree. The model builds upon John Wesley's Means of Grace and James K.A. Smith's work on habits. Finally, the author reports on a research project where he invites current undergraduate students at Houghton College to participate in the practice of *Lectio Divina* to better understand the potential impact of habits on spiritual formation with contemporary college students. The research suggests that habits and ancient spiritual practices are indeed reliable pathways to experiencing God's love for the contemporary undergraduate student.

## **DEDICATION**

This portfolio is dedicated to my loving wife, Heidi. Your generous love and unwavering support has made this project possible. Thank you for being my best friend, my biggest cheerleader, and a partner in ministry who brings out the best in me. At every step in ministry you have been by my side. You are a true blessing to me and have richly blessed all of the students we have served over the years.

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## GLOSSARY

**Emerging Adult or Late Adolescent:** These sociological categories refer to the time period in an individual's life directly after high-school. Usually, this time is characterized by a new level of independence either at an undergraduate school, the military, or launching from home. In recent years, sociologists have recognized an important shift in the length and significance of this transitional time period.

... the last fifty years have witnessed a gradual delaying of traditional adult milestones. Sociologists have marked this shift by monitoring five key social events: leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children. The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy reports that in 1960, more than two-thirds of young adults had attained all five of these markers by the age of 30; by the year 2000, this was true of less than half of females and less than a third of males. (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 2)

For the purposes of this document, Emerging Adult, Late Adolescent, and College Student may be used interchangeably to represent the same group.

**Christian College:** Working in the United States, the term Christian College is a bit unique from Canada. The school where I work is a fully accredited, private, four year school which offers Bachelor's degrees in over 40 majors. Students can study engineering, art, education, music, theology, communications, history, business, and etc. all within the context of a Christian community. The distinction between College and University in the States does not correspond to the

distinction in Canada. For my purposes, “college” will refer to my specific ministry setting at Houghton.

***Lectio Divina (Divine Reading):*** Refers to the ancient spiritual practice of reading the Bible with prayerful reflection and contemplation. There are a number of traditions which make use of this practice all with particular emphasises. For the sake of consistency with this project, I referred primarily to the work of Evan B. Howard and Jim Wilhoit in their book *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (2012).

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**  
**DOORBELL MOMENTS AND QUESTIONS**  
**OF FORMATION**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5,6 NIV)*

The doorbell, a widely recognized sound, can elicit a whole range of reactions. For my family, the doorbell has long served as an invitation to adventure. When the doorbell rings at our house, we find it impossible to predict what exactly is waiting on the other side of the door. We have, however, come to expect these moments to be where our calling to serve young people is brought into action. For two decades my ministry with adolescents has included a house closely connected to the location of my work. We have lived in the corner of church parking lots, surrounded by neatly marked asphalt and learned to enjoy visits from friendly parishioners peering into our windows early Sunday mornings. We spent many years living in college student housing, our only neighbors 18-22-year-olds, chuckling each time the fire alarm was tripped by their developing culinary skills. For years, those we serve have regularly shown up at our door.

There are times when these unexpected guests bring great joy: an engagement announcement, a basket of baked goodies, news of answered prayers, and even some great practical jokes. Just as often, the doorbell announces the arrival of misfortune: broken relationships, health emergencies, wrestling with sin, thoughts of suicide, and the loss of a loved one. This two-foot square space of immense hope and real tragedy is the stage for my ministry. In one sense, having seen it all, I feel mostly prepared for whatever may stand in waiting as the doorbells' chime slowly subsides. And yet, I am regularly surprised by the immediate needs presented when I swing open my door.

These doorbell moments are a snapshot of what ministry with adolescents looks like: dramatic, unexpected, and desperate for encounters with God's grace. Each time I respond to the needs in front of me, I am forced to consider how God's love can be shown to this young person. Over the years, I have come to recognize the inadequacy of simple answers in these times of need. Working with students has regularly pushed me to consider the deeper issues which drive and impact these doorbell moments. Whether an impromptu visit, a planned meeting, or a desperate text, when a student reaches out I am faced with a question of spiritual formation. The following portfolio is shaped by my desire to better understand the ways God may work to shape the spiritual lives of students during their years of undergraduate studies.

In a sense, my ministry has called me to stand frozen in time. While my spiritual life, faith in Christ, family, and ministry experience has matured, I am

regularly called back in time to serve in a specific season of human development. Twenty years after graduating I have yet to leave college and absolutely love every bit of it! My call to ministry has been focused on adolescents from day one. There is a bit of irony baked into this statement as I pinpoint this call to a time when I, myself, was just sixteen years of age. Growing up in the church, I felt an important sense of belonging each time I engaged with my local congregation. Even at a young age, I knew the work of the church was desperately needed and could easily imagine myself in a place where my gifts could help meet those needs. My educational endeavors and career choices have reflected my commitment to this calling. For over 11 years I served in the traditional role of a youth pastor in the local church. In the most recent 10 years, I have lived and worked with students on a college campus.

For some sociologists, my particular location for ministry is a season in life characterized by incredible opportunities, as the future appears open-ended for emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). For other scholars, this is a troubling time in life surrounded by poor decisions and high-risk behaviors (Smith, 2011). These observations are not mutually exclusive and, in my experience, often co-exist simultaneously. As I have given my life to individuals in this transitional time, my heart regularly considers how I can help to create an environment where God's voice of love can speak into the lives of students. How can I be a partner on this journey towards adulthood in a way that allows the Spirit to bring shape to a student's life above the often destructive voices of their surrounding world? How

can I lean into all of the beautiful opportunities as students seek to make a lasting difference in the world? How can I be a part of creating the climate which aids the gospel in making a mark during "an important moment in which beliefs, perspectives, and habits are being etched within the soft wax of life" (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 10)? Over time I have come to recognize that the answers to these questions require sincere reflection on spiritual formation with college students, as human beings poised along the fine line between opportunity and danger (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 4-5).

My current ministry setting is Houghton College, a small private Christian college in the rural southern-tier of Western New York. My role in campus ministry invites me to spend the majority of each day with students. Because of the nature of a small residential college campus, my job expectations span from teaching and preaching to mentoring and supervising. It is a special privilege to share life with the students I am called to serve.

In my work at Houghton, I am keenly interested in understanding how ministry in a residential undergraduate setting may best create a culture conducive to healthy and holistic spiritual formation for emerging adults. The inexhaustible energy and acute awareness of current fads typical of college students may lead some to believe effective ministry must be ecstatic and primarily concerned with popular cultural movements. As demonstrated in the Frontline documentary, *Merchants of Cool*, adolescence is the focal point of rapidly changing consumer trends and fads (Frontline, 2001). However, I propose there are time-tested and

reliable pathways that can help students connect their current season of growth with God's loving formation in their lives. For me, the way forward in ministry to this generation is deeply rooted in the past. Spiritual formation with contemporary college students is about moving slowly and thinking deeply. Increasing depth in spiritual growth means movement beyond what is trendy and energetic. The needs for today's students are profound enough that the response must be rooted in a place of strength. As I will explore more fully in this portfolio, I am confident that ancient spiritual practices and liturgical rhythms must be considered for healthy spiritual formation with today's undergraduate students.

While I grew up almost entirely in the Presbyterian denomination, I find myself working and teaching at a school in the Wesleyan tradition. This relocation across theological camps was an intentional move as I, throughout my time in seminary, personally found a home within the heritage of John Wesley. As I explored the intersections between my ministry with adolescents and Wesley's writings I was attracted by three primary features. First, Wesley's reflections on sanctification and life as a Christian offered me an important image of hope. As a pastor caring for young adults amid a life transition, I was captivated by the idea that true spiritual growth was indeed attainable along with the possibility of freedom from the bondage of sin. "He [Wesley] assumed that God's love was potent enough to transform both individual lives and the life of the world" (Chilcote 2004, 45). Wesley spoke often about salvation as both freedom from the bondage of sin as well as the consequence of sin (Wesley, 1967). In my work with

students, Wesley's presentation of sanctification is a much-needed image of hope. Second, Wesley's in-depth work with the early church fathers and various traditions throughout church history resonates with my ecumenical tendencies. "Not only did Wesley bridge the gap between evangelical and Catholic; he also opened up the possibility of dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox tradition... (Chilcote 2004, 29). As I serve a diverse population, Wesley establishes a theology that invites many traditions to the table. The bits of my own faith, picked up from various denominations, fit well within Wesleyan theology. Finally, as someone who has always enjoyed the classroom and who currently works at an academic institution, Wesley's connection between the head and the heart has become essential. As I will explore more fully in Chapter 3, Wesleyan theology integrates the head and the heart into a beautifully balanced whole. These original interests in Wesley's work have only strengthened over the years. However, I am thankful to be a part of a school where the theological convictions serve more as a framework of support rather than a guideline for indoctrination. My ministry does not require me to convince all students of a particular theological stance.

In addition to the works of Wesley and the ministry setting of a college campus, two primary themes will carry much of my thinking. First, spiritual formation resulting in lasting change is essential for experiencing life as God designed. Second, our spiritual lives are impacted significantly by everyday rituals and rhythms. Even small habits carry a great deal of inertia over time. The first theme is connected closely to the works of M. Robert Mulholland, Jr.

Mulholland, a New Testament scholar, who brought together his expertise in Biblical exegesis with personal reflections on life with God. Throughout his writings on spiritual formation, Mulholland presents an image of life with Christ as revealed in the New Testament as one of radical transformation over the long term—not just altar call moments. Reflecting on the words of 1 John 1:9, Mulholland concludes:

I realized for the first time that God’s purpose for us was not simply to forgive sins but to transform our false self—to cleanse all its unrighteousness, to make us righteous, to restore us to our true self in loving relationship with God and in being Christlike in the world. (Mulholland 2016, 23)

Mulholland’s works and teachings were important in my own spiritual formation as a college student and continue to help shape my work with students today.

The second theme is deeply indebted to the writings of James K.A. Smith. Smith is a Reformed philosophy professor who has brought the importance of habits, rituals, and liturgy into the forefront of current discussions surrounding spiritual formation. Smith’s work has helped me to build upon the head-heart connection, I so appreciate in Wesley, by incorporating the practices of the body. Smith’s proposals will be further explored in Chapter 3. However, the following quote provides an adequate summary: “In short, if you are what you love, and love is a habit, then discipleship is a rehabilitation of your loves. This means that discipleship is more a matter of *reformation* than of acquiring *information*” (Smith 2016, 19).

Building upon Smith's work, the term "habit" is used primarily in this portfolio and is done so with intention. In his book, *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith introduces the concept of *habitus* from French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (Smith 2013, 79). While not fully exploring the entire argument here, the concept of *habitus* enriched my understanding of the importance of habits within spiritual formation with a special recognition of the role of community in shaping our life's aim. "Note that *habitus* is shorthand for what he [Bourdieu] calls a 'system of structured, structuring dispositions.' But dispositions toward what? Well, dispositions to *construct* (or constitute) our world in a certain way. We aren't just blank slates that passively 'record' the world..." (Smith 2013, 80). The word "habits" fits well with my current ministry context and echoes this important larger concept of *habitus*.

Finally, Smith's familiarity with the Christian college campus originally brought me to his works, but the content has become particularly important in my life and ministry. As I have processed his works over time, Smith's writings reach into all aspects of the college life and have helped me to understand how spiritual formation cannot be simply a garnish to the buffet of offerings at an undergraduate institution. While I believe with certainty what I am uncovering in this portfolio holds true for the faculty, staff, and students at all Christian higher education institutions, this work will focus primarily on the student experience at my current school.

I am confident my work in this portfolio has sharpened my understanding of spiritual formation in the lives of college students. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, I believe this work can be helpful for those who serve students beyond my distinct ministry setting. However, the particular reflections and conclusions which follow are inextricably connected to my faith tradition and place of ministry. Writing from a North American Protestant context, within the halls of a Liberal Arts college, sponsored by a particular denomination, will impact the goals and structure of my work.

It is my desire to present my work with transparency in order to indicate places where I recognize certain limitations. As I consider this portfolio as a whole, I can identify four immediate examples. First, in the space provided I am unable to provide a detailed presentation on all aspects of spiritual formation with emerging adults. The scope of that particular subject is far too vast and nuanced to address here. Rather, I will be concentrating on some important facets of formation with students as I consider my current ministry setting. Second, much of my work will point towards the importance of habits and rituals in spiritual formation. I center on one specific practice over a short period of experimentation. There is certainly the possibility of a wider study in this area. Additionally, I make mention of how daily habits can bring about counter-formation or growth in a direction away from God, but I do not research specific practices that may fit this criteria. Third, because much of my work is woven deeply into my ministry setting there are some limitations in the breadth of

impact. For example, some of what my research project uncovers may be influenced by the specific demographics at Houghton College. I am unable to say for certain how well this work will translate to a school that is, for example Roman Catholic, less residential, or much larger in population.

The writing which makes up this portfolio happened simultaneously with my own spiritual journey. Thankfully, as I read, researched, processed, and wrote about the discipline of spiritual formation throughout my studies at Tyndale, I experienced tremendous personal growth. This portfolio reaches beyond a summary of my academic progress and serves, more appropriately, as an artifact representing an important time of growth in my own life. One final theme, which will become apparent in the following pages, is a direct consequence of my own recent spiritual formation.

Much of the language in this portfolio reveals organic imagery and unconventional classifications. As a stereotypical firstborn, I gravitate towards clean lines and predictable categories for organizing. Over these past few years, I have come to realize my attempts to bring my penchant for neatly arranging all of life into the world of spiritual formation comes with obstacles. I have been reminded time and again that God's work in the lives of humanity is dynamic, creative, complicated, and messy. I am finding a new place of comfort in God's organic movements. There is a newfound balance in how I understand the role of categories and models along with the creativity of God's grace. This is not an

extreme departure from my manner of thinking, but an openness to a way of understanding the spiritual life that I would not naturally pursue.

The actual structure of the portfolio reflects the organic themes which have become an important part of my personal journey. The work required for Chapter 2, which shares part of my spiritual autobiography, can be likened to tilling up the soil of a garden. As I reflected on my life with God, I was uncovering portions of my soul I had not touched in some time. The work of personal reflection is not necessarily neat and tidy, but essential in preparing for my life in campus ministry.

Chapter 3 presents a model of spiritual formation, which is a product of my efforts to make sense of my personal spiritual journey and my current ministry setting. In my mind, the model is similar to a gardener making rows in the freshly tilled soil. This step brings some structure out of the mess created during the tilling process. Using the image of a tree for this model, I draw attention to the root system, highlighting how spiritual formation must include growth in the hidden places of one's life.

Chapter 4 reports on the research project conducted in my current place of ministry. This research was a direct result of the thinking done in the previous two chapters. My research invited students at Houghton to experiment with integrating the habit of *Lectio Divina* in to their weekly routine. Following the gardening theme, the research represents the moment a gardener plants some seeds and waits patiently to see how they grow.

The questions presented when considering spiritual formation during college are complex and significant. However, as I integrated personal reflection, sincere study, and research I have become convinced of the remarkable ways God is at work during these formational years. The following pages will invite readers to get a peek into what I am discovering about spiritual formation in the lives of contemporary undergraduate students.

## **CHAPTER 2: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

### **SEEDS OF GRACE**

*His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3 NIV)*

#### **Diversity at Home**

At first glance it would be easy to see me as a stereotypical white American male. I was born in small town West Virginia. My skin is so pale that I spend half of my time in the summer rolling around in SPF 50. My favorite foods are hamburgers, watermelon, French-fries, and corn on the cob. Many aspects of my appearance fall well within an expected norm. And yet, I was raised in a family that existed far outside the boundaries of what is deemed typical.

I had my own room for less than 18 months of my life. My brother, Timothy, came onto the scene at an early enough age that I have no memory of life without him. In typical sibling fashion, we bounced between best of friends and worst of enemies a thousand times each day. Even if we were hesitant to admit it out loud, secretly we both loved having a built in play-mate and we navigated life attached at the hip. In public we were often mistaken as twins, but

being proud of my title as older brother, I always made sure the confusion was quickly corrected.

My brother and I were no strangers to smaller kids. To supplement the family income, my mom offered daycare in our small apartment. When my parents came to us and shared their desire to adopt a baby girl from Korea, it naturally seemed like a great idea. Having a baby around to play with was no big deal and adding a sister to our crew seemed exciting. I suppose as a kid, the whole idea of adoption seemed exotic and fascinating. At the age of 9, I had no thoughts about the complications of international adoption nor of an interracial family. The brokenness surrounding issues of diversity which plague our world today had not yet reached my young soul. It seemed natural to open my heart to love another sibling no matter how they arrived to our house.

In January of 1988, Sarah came home and joined our family. I can still remember the smells and sounds of JFK airport that winter as we huddled around a window which overlooked the international gates. After an endless wait, we saw a small group of orphanage workers carrying babies as they walked the promenade below. My mom was convinced she was able to spot Sarah. I simply trusted that a mother's intuition was a power beyond my reasoning as the rest of us saw no one distinguishable in the crowd. That day was one of those childhood memories that has been seared into my mind with unique clarity. I remember thinking the first days with Sarah felt no different than bringing home any new

baby. Even as a small boy, I was coming to understand how love is a divine gift able to transcend biological ties.

That January day in New York City was the start of an entirely new season for my family of origin. We welcomed home a baby for whom we had been praying, while my parents ended up with more than they originally bargained. God had planted in them a calling to adopt.

Over the next decade God added to our family with six additional siblings through adoption. I grew up as the oldest of nine kids in a family where my white skin was the minority. All seven of my adopted siblings represent different races and ethnicities: one sister from Korea, two African-American brothers, two African-American sisters, and two bi-racial sisters. Throughout my adolescence my family appeared in local newspapers and on brochures for adoption agencies and learned to accept confused glances whenever out in public. All of this was my “normal” until I launched from home and made my way as a young adult, when I quickly realized how my family of origin had uniquely shaped me.

I once had a professor refer to family as “sacred pedagogy.” Through the relationships we have with parents and siblings, we enter into God’s classroom where we learn so much about God’s design for life and God’s love for us. Being from a large, tight knit family, I know full well that each of my siblings have shaped my life and my soul in ways that I am not yet able to fully realize. Together we learned to share, to communicate, to forgive, to do without, to celebrate others, to mourn, to intercede in prayer, and to laugh freely. The

landscape of a large family can sometimes be tricky to navigate, but I cannot imagine my life any other way. Being immersed in a life where my parents fervently followed a call from the Lord, even when it was costly and difficult, left an imprint on my heart still easily recognizes today.

For having lived this life, racial reconciliation is something I desire more than I can easily express. My heart aches knowing that some of the people I love most experience this world differently than I do because they are people of color. The rhythms of life in a large multiracial family have shaped my sense of calling, my image of the gospel, and my ministry today. I continue to find it fascinating to consider the decisions that were made outside of my control which God has used to shape me and to draw me toward God's self.

Just as my family's diversity has shaped my life, I am in awe at the dynamic and complex avenues God has moved in my life. The remaining snapshots from my personal spiritual journey will highlight the incredibly diverse ways God has worked in my heart.

### **There is Power in the Pulpit**

Growing up, Sunday morning worship was a priority for my family. During my years in grade school, my father managed a large department store and would regularly work late on Saturday evenings or have a full day of work on Sunday. Even with the difficulties of his schedule, we rarely missed church. Despite both my parents being raised in homes where faith was nominal and

connection to the church was out of a sense of duty, my parents managed to appropriately prioritize church.

For much of my childhood we lived in Ithaca, New York, a college town situated in the picturesque Finger Lakes region of the state. While I was not fully aware of it as a child, part of Ithaca's culture is the widely accepted secular mindset. I can remember being just 7 years old and discovering that my family's involvement with church was unique. I arrived at school one day with bread in my lunch box that was left over from communion. My parents had volunteered to make the bread for the Sunday service and had made plenty of extra. Packed in my lunchbox was unconsecrated bread uniquely shaped like a pita. When my friends asked about my bread that did not resemble the bleached white pre-sliced delight we were used to, I confidently responded with, "It's church bread." I quickly discovered, to my chagrin, that no one knew anything about church bread and the only friend who even attended any worship service was Jewish. It was the first time I realized that going to church made me different. While our patterns as a family were rare, we were at church every Sunday for worship and almost every Wednesday for mid-week service, on occasion walking almost four miles with my little brother and mom, a potluck dish tucked under her arm.

If, as a child, I had been told that there were buildings larger or more ornate than the First Presbyterian church we attended, I would struggle to fathom. I have not been in that church for nearly 25 years and yet can so clearly see it all in my mind's eye. My brother and I, along with a few other kids our age,

would spent hours running around the endlessly large building. We knew every back staircase, secret bathroom, and miniature doorway leading into storage rooms. I feel certain that today I could quickly find my way around that impressive building, maybe with a little less mischief in my bones.

The sanctuary was especially impressive and did well at imposing a sense of awe. Rows of pews stood in perfect formation. Marble columns reached so high it tired a neck to look at them, each capped with intricate carvings. Ornate decorations on the ceiling looked to me a bit like heads of cabbage. I used to try and count those ceiling decorations during services but always lost interest after a hundred or so. The front of the sanctuary included an altar table, pulpit, lectern, and choir loft laid out with clear intent. I can still imagine the faux brass organ pipes that resembled writing implements for a storybook giant. Every part of the sanctuary drew the attention of even the casual visitor forward and up. This was a space designed for worship, where everything sacred seemed simultaneously far off and present.

While the theological convictions of this particular faith community existed outside of orthodox Christian beliefs, God's ability to grab my heart cannot be overstated. I have fond memories of the Sunday school teachers, community service events, children's hand bell choir, and beautifully orchestrated worship services. Even though a number of the adults speaking into my life would easily admit that the Bible stories they taught me as a child were simply myths with good moral lessons, those stories were seeds being sown gently into my

heart. The rituals of my life at this church impacted my heart and my calling to ministry finds its roots in this congregation.

At the age of 10, I was asked to participate in leading a special service in which a number of children were involved. I was given the Call to Worship, a brief responsive reading at the beginning of the service. The preparation I received focused on reading slowly, microphone usage, and annunciation. I had not been given any concept of the liturgical significance of the role I was playing in the service and yet I seemed to discover this all on my own.

Being at the beginning of the service gave me the chance to sit up on stage in one of the ornate chairs usually reserved for the pastor. Watching the opening of the service unfold from a whole new vantage point was mesmerizing. Somehow, as I sat there, my nerves began to fade as something deep within my soul began to unfold. I was experiencing feelings that were completely new and yet I was certain I was in a place of belonging. Stepping up to the pulpit I was just tall enough to see the congregation. As I read out a few words and heard a choir of voices respond in unison, something electric happened in my being. I would have struggled to put words to it at 10, but I felt like I had found my purpose in life. I felt drawn to providing leadership to a worshipping body, being a person who helped bring people into God's presence, and looking out over a body and feeling compassion for all of them.

From that day forward I have not been able to shake this deep sense in my soul that I am most at home when shepherding people to the loving Creator God.

The routine of attending church prepared me for this moment. Following this event, I adopted some new regular activities as I began to seek out additional opportunities to engage in the worship service. Even at a young age, I started to collect cassette tapes of the worship services so I could re-listen to the sermons.

My family's commitment to regular church attendance put me in a place where God's grace was regularly considered. While it would be a good many years before I could clearly articulate the importance of liturgy in worship or even this calling, my heart was prepared to understand God's call clearly. Through my regular participation in local church, the deep places of my soul had been impacted and shaped. I felt compassion as I looked out over the congregation because I saw the faces of people whom I had spent years getting to know. I felt comfortable standing in that pulpit because the pastor who normally occupied that space knew my name. Even through passive participation in the local church I had been shaped deeply.

### **Where am I?**

My feet pound against the wall. I didn't expect anything to be preventing me from hopping out of bed, but I can't seem to figure out my surroundings. Bringing myself into the realm of the awake, I squint and look around a dark room barely able to make out shapes. My pre-teen brain slowly becomes alert and a moment of clarity hits me. We just moved and I am in my new bedroom. It is the middle of the night and my body has alerted me of my need for the bathroom. Unfortunately, the lack of light, army of half unpacked boxes, and entirely new

floor plan make this trip a bit of an adventure. While this specific night sticks out in my mind, waking up in a new house was a regular occurrence. By the time I left for college we had tallied up 20 moves.

My parents were always open and honest communicators to the nine of us kids. Each move came as no surprise as we faced financial issues or simply outgrew our current rental. The majority of my childhood was spent in apartment complexes. The smaller spaces never worried me much because just beyond our tiny abode was an expansive property loaded with friends, playgrounds, a pool, and endless opportunities for exploration and play.

Living in a complex comes with the understanding that this is a temporary housing situation. My parents were always on the lookout for our next possible move. So it came as no significant surprise when we held a family meeting to discuss plans to relocate to Florida from New York. My dad came upon a job opportunity which seemed to make sense. My siblings and I had never been to Florida, but assumed palm trees, Disney, and beaches would suit us well.

Countless hours were spent preparing for this relocation and a new life in Florida. We sold furniture and said goodbyes as we prepared for our new homestead. None of us expected our return to the north in a matter of just four months. The entire experience was a complete flop on every possible level. I became so frightened of attending school that I was physically ill most mornings and unable even to get on the bus. But I thank God regularly for that time in Florida as it was during this move that my parent's priority to attend church

landed us in our first evangelical congregation. Up until this point we had been attending mainline churches with leadership who felt most at home with a theology situated outside the bounds of creedal Christianity. My parents did not know the difference between the various strands of Presbyterianism which landed us in a theologically conservative congregation where the Bible was recognized as reliable and Jesus' ministry essential. Just as we had in New York, we jumped in wholeheartedly with church involvement. But this time we were jumping into an entirely different culture.

I don't think as an 11 year old I could have named the variances at this church in Florida, but I knew I was experiencing something different. Our new church family approached faith with more sincerity and less suspicion. The youth we were often reading the Bible and praying to God, as if both were reliable sources. God did incredible work through my parents during that brief stint in the sunny south. Their faith moved quickly from moralistic obligation to a deep personal relationship with Christ. This change in my parents' hearts precipitated the events which would lead to me accepting Christ. Those few months in Florida adjusted the trajectory of my journey just enough to make a difference for which I am still grateful today.

Other than this adventure in Florida, none of the moves stand out with any sort of massive learning or growing experience. Yet strung together as a whole, these experiences were part of the ways that God was shaping me during my younger years. Beyond the obvious lessons of adaptability and skillfully

squeezing furniture up complicated staircases, there is much I gained from these constant moves. As I understand my faith as a journey, these repeated moves regularly provided me with the gear and resources needed for the path which lay ahead. The rituals of relocating home grounded my heart in spiritual realities.

Throughout these relocations I learned a profound sense of trust both in my parents and for God's presence in my life. Even when the circumstances were less than ideal, I knew my parents were doing everything possible to care for the family. Without the ability to connect the feelings of home to a particular house, I recognized the importance of the relationships within my family unit. This served me well on the three extended occasions when we had no home to call our own and needed to live with people from our church. Home was a place so rich with God's grace that being houseless was seldom met with any significant frustration. Throughout these seasons, God worked in my heart to help me understand God's real presence in my life. While some of the complexities of relocating so often are fresh in my memory, so are the many ways I experienced God's love each day through my family and friends. Even in the midst of transitions and moves, I began to trust God's love as constant and unchanging.

### **Planted Seeds Begin to Sprout**

Even growing up in the church, I had never been around such a large gathering of people who took their faith seriously. My parent's faith had grown and I was confident in the sincerity of their belief. However, for me it took a while before I could truly integrate my parent's faith with my own decisions. Up

until my teenage years the church, the Bible, and Jesus operated largely as a decorative garnish for my life. When I was invited to join the new youth group on a trip to a Christian music festival, I could scarcely imagine what exactly would unfold in the days to come. Getting to spend a few days camping at an amusement park and attending concerts seemed like a fun time. And while I was right, it also served as the place where God decided to get a hold on my heart.

It was 1993 and the height of Christian music festivals. I was just about to enter high school, having returned to New York from our stint in Florida two years prior. I had not yet attended any sort of gathering with the youth group at this new church and was now taking my first trip, my brother as my only known companion. While I was familiar with this particular amusement park setting, I had never heard of this event called Kingdom Bound.

I can remember looking around at the crowds the night concerts began and being amazed. I had no idea there were so many Christians and felt a little like I was visiting an entirely new group of people. I understood some of their customs and language, but not all of it. People were raising their hands, something my mainline childhood church had not introduced, wearing cool Christian t-shirts, and singing songs I had never heard of before by heart. To be fair, it would not be long before I felt at home in this community, but the first go around was a lot to take in.

While that youth group trip was full of entirely new experiences, some friendly peers made sure I felt welcomed and comfortable. One in particular,

Elisa, introduced herself on the first night and invited me to join her and some others in exploring the park. Amazingly enough, Elisa and I have maintained our friendship over the years. Today, she and my wife, Heidi, are the closest of friends as am I with her husband, Jordan. Our two families travel together and share in life as we each raise a set of four kids.

While at Kingdom Bound, much of the day was spent hopping between roller coasters and keynote speakers. But each night everyone gathered in front of one large stage to hear the headline band. Waiting for the band to arrive was painfully long, especially because there was a sermon for all to endure. I was not used to hearing sermons more than once a week and had never sat through a preacher who could stretch out a message to longer than 15 minutes, let alone an hour.

Despite my limited attention span, as I sat in the sea of people waiting impatiently for the concert to start, I began to actually listen to the preacher. The message was a detailed retelling of the Passion Week and Crucifixion. While I was well versed in the events which dotted this part of the church's calendar, I had never heard the story told with such clarity. Somehow, in the midst of this sermon, Jesus seemed real and these events in His life uniquely important. I was flooded with a sense that every Bible story I had learned growing up in the church actually had personal significance. As if a thousand piece puzzle instantly snapped together, the grand narrative of the gospel was brought into life-altering

clarity. I could feel the movement of this narrative and wanted to be swept up into God's story.

I had never sat under an altar call before. As the preacher concluded his message and invited people to stand, I felt a burning in my bones. I peeked up from the customary closed eye, head bowed position, and saw a sprinkling of people standing. I knew I had said a prayer of surrender for the first time in my life. I had met the exact criteria the preacher laid out for those who should be standing, but I simply could not. I was frozen, worrying about what others might think. I have no doubt I accepted Christ that night and my decision was sincere. While the newness of the whole experience and my lack of close friends left me too afraid to actually stand, I look back on that night with no regret.

Interestingly enough, in the crowd that night was my future wife, just 14 herself. Neither of us could ever have imagined that our spouse was seated somewhere in that arena, nor that God would bring our lives together in a matter of 4 more years. Never would I have believed that 18 years after that evening I would be standing on that exact same stage, my wife and kids in the background, sharing a snippet of my story and the ways God has walked with me on my journey.

### **God is Truly Triune**

If the church was open, I was there! The church my family attended during my teenage years was my second home. Following my experience of accepting Christ, I dove headfirst into my new community of faith. Despite it being a 20

minute drive from our house, I was at the church multiple times a week. My brother, a friend, and I voluntarily mowed the three acre lawn. I worked with one of the deacons on fixing up the church buses. I helped to make coffee on Sunday mornings, and happily shoveled walkways in the winter. If the youth group was even thinking about meeting, I was the first to show up. While my actions could sound impressive, they were not entirely altruistic. I loved being at church because it was a place of belonging. This was a place where I felt like I could be myself, have fun, and find purpose. I needed to be at church more than any of my services were needed. This search for belonging is universal during adolescence and keenly felt by a people-pleasing extrovert like myself.

As the teenage years rolled around, the anomaly of my faith amongst my friends brought about some complications. I believed that my faith in Christ was an essential part of my identity but struggled when that identity left me judged and excluded. The regular mocking of my faith by teachers and peers left me quite sensitive to other's opinions. I so badly wanted people to know I was just a normal kid who could have fun and be cool even with Jesus. While it was not easy to sort all of this out, I am thankful that I never once considered walking away from my faith. Instead, I dug deep into the friendships connected to my church and my life with Christ.

When my youth pastor asked if I wanted to attend a special week long training in Canada for evangelism, I said yes without a second thought. Beyond the dates of the trip, I really had no idea what exactly I was signing up for. I

simply knew that I would get to take a trip with some of those friends who were most important in my life.

After arriving in Toronto, I learned this particular program was run by Sonlife ministries. Known as Sonlife Evangelism Mission Project or SEMP, the focus of the week was to train teenagers in evangelism and to send them out on the street for practice. In the world of youth ministry in the 1990's, the primary Christian narrative put a huge priority on evangelism with street evangelism as a merit badge for the truly committed Christian. Desperately wanting to feel an authenticity in my faith, the idea of doing something courageous was wildly attractive. At just 15 years old, I was walking the streets of Toronto looking for people I could approach and ask if they wanted a relationship with God. I did this for two summers and, when I think back on some of those bizarre interactions, my heart simultaneously smiles and cringes. While I had some conversations that stick with me to this day, I never led anyone to Christ using my five-minute sales pitch. However, I did get kicked out of a few shopping malls and received some taunting, adding to the sense of earned merit.

Each evening we would close with a large group gathering. The format was typical for any youth group meeting at the time: crazy game, funny announcements, happy worship songs, and a challenging talk from one of the speakers. Most of these evenings are simply a string of blurry memories. I cannot remember any of the worship songs, I do not know who was speaking, nor do I

recall the content of the evening talks. And yet, during one of the evening services I had one of the most gripping encounters with the Holy Spirit in my entire life.

Even as the years have passed, the feeling in my heart from that night are still easily accessible. The evening preaching was on the Transfiguration. I struggle to recall any of the points from the message, but somewhere in the middle of the talk I felt “my heart strangely warmed.” While I would not become aware of that historic phrase for many years to come, it is the best way to describe the experience. In this moment my whole being became overwhelmed with the real presence of the Holy Spirit. I knew this had little to do with the week’s training, evangelism, fun games, or even my friends. I did not at the time have the categories to clearly explain what was happening, but God’s presence became more real to me than I had ever experienced or imagined. I felt simultaneously overwhelmed and completely comforted. We closed the evening with singing the chorus, “I Love You Lord.” I remember struggling to get the words out as I felt a desire to communicate my love for God with a deep sense of urgency and authenticity.

After the group gathering my youth pastor pulled those of us from our church together to debrief. I sat there silently, unable to speak, while others shared. I could not put words to what I was feeling and was afraid to try. When it was my turn to share, I opened my mouth and, when no words came out, began to cry. I could barely get out an explanation that I was crying tears of joy. I never could express appropriately what I was feeling that night, simply telling my

friends I felt God's love in a new way. Once again I benefited from years of rituals and rhythms which had prepared me to encounter God. Being raised by parents who integrated faith into daily life and prioritized involvement with a local church, along with my familiarity with the Christian narrative, allowed my heart to be in a place of receptivity that evening.

That experience remains significant to this day. This encounter with the Holy Spirit was a bit of a tipping point in my faith. Similar to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, I had reached a place where turning back no longer seemed like an option. While I still struggle worrying about others' opinions of me, I found a confidence in my faith which was unshakable. Since that meeting with God I have never once turned back. While my journey with Christ has never been a linear climb, it has always been *with* Christ.

As with many mile markers on my journey, God has brought this experience back into my life with incredible clarity. As a 15 year old boy I had no idea that night the call God would place on my life. I never could have imagined I would pursue a life of ministry. It would have been impossible to even consider that I would be studying spiritual formation 23 years later at the same academic institution which hosted those summer evangelism trainings. My most significant episode with the Holy Spirit took place in the chapel at Ontario Bible College on Ballyconnor Court, the school which would become Tyndale. I never once set foot into that building again before they tore it down, but every time I am on Tyndale's campus I feel a deep sense of significance.

## **Striking Out on My Own**

If I am being honest, my college search was informed more by popular culture than appropriate critical thinking. Sifting through the endless options of schools, I used two primary filters. First, I planned to major in youth ministry, a criteria which narrowed the possibilities substantially. Second, I wanted a “real” college experience. Having been fed a healthy diet of American media, I was determined to experience all that college had to offer, albeit a bit tamer version with my decision to attend a Christian school. In truth, the best I could do was mash together the behavioral expectations handed to me by my faith community and the larger cultural ideals of the college experience. I was truly the product of two populations with competing agendas for my young adult life.

I cannot say that I spent much time in prayer over the whole process nor did much of the customary research. I turned down an offer to attend a highly competitive Bible school for free because the student experience seemed too far from what I expected. Instead I ended up at Geneva College in western Pennsylvania. Looking back on the whole process it is hard for me to admit that Geneva rose to the top of my list because the application was easy and it boasted a football team. I actually never played football beyond my own backyard, but the presence of this sport exemplified the “college experience”.

During my visit to Geneva as a prospective, the residence halls were overflowing with guests. I was placed in a college-owned house just across the street from the main campus. This house was a far cry from what I imagined a

college visit to look like. While appropriately dilapidated and decorated in the college motif, the residents were a part of a discipleship living-learning community. This was a select group of students who desired to spend their sophomore year of college focused on growing closer to Christ. Everyone was particularly hospitable and, while I was not particularly enamored with this living arrangement, I was thankful to have met some nice people.

The next morning I enjoyed processing my various thoughts about the visit over breakfast with my parents. It happened to be the day of their 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. I will never forget their willingness to sacrifice a special outing for the sake of my haphazard college search. Nothing in the conversation with my parents was particularly striking, but as I tried to unpack the bizarre dichotomy in my head between “real college” and “Bible college,” my mom brought up a story from her years as a young adult. Well before I was even a thought, she had travelled from her home in the suburbs of Chicago to the same town of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania to visit a friend from Girl Scouts. She recalled sitting on the friend’s front porch, smoking and making fun of the college across the street. Her friend informed her that, at that time, students at Geneva were not allowed to drink, smoke, dance, or even play cards. My mom went on to explain that she felt like this current visit gave her a much better understanding of Geneva and of the types of rules which created space for healthy community. While some of the rules she made fun of decades ago were still in place, she had grown in her

faith in a way which helped her understand the importance of guiding rules and healthy life together.

Following our breakfast discussion the three of us wandered across the street to retrieve my belongings. As we approached the house my mom stopped dead in her tracks and grabbed my forearm. “Oh my gosh, J.L., this is the house. This was my friend’s house.” It seemed so much more than a coincidence that God pulled together my concerns with selecting a college, my abnormal housing arrangements, and my mother’s one trip to that same town more than two decades before. I left that trip confident I had found the place God wanted me to study youth ministry.

The maturity I lacked in making this decision seemed to create more space for God to impact my life. Like many other parts of my journey, this would not be the last time God would use a seemingly insignificant space to later orchestrate something substantial in my life. God’s work has always been dynamic, complex, unexpected, and sometimes messy. But it has always been good.

### **Someone to Journey With**

My parents never made denominations out to be a big deal. My mom’s upbringing in an Irish Catholic family and entire education in parochial school pushed her to make the discrepancy between Catholic and Protestant clear. After that, I never understood the distinctions across the Protestant family tree until I climb out onto a specific branch.

Transitioning to college at Geneva was not unlike any other freshman experience. I enjoyed making new friends, felt homesick, ate a ton of cafeteria food, and learned to read and write more than I ever thought possible. One of the most unique aspects was adjusting to the community expectations which were directly connected to the sponsoring denomination. Geneva is the college for the Reformed Presbyterian church, a fairly small denomination with particularly conservative stances. While the Reformed Presbyterian roots touched many parts of campus life, their stance on worship greatly impacted the student experience and played a significant role in my life.

Twice a week we gathered for chapel in the school's gymnasium. The regular chapel requirement was not at all bothersome to me. Having come to appreciate regular worship through the commitment exemplified by my parents, I actually enjoyed hearing various speakers and joining together with the student body. I never would have imagined in high school that an academic institution could gather around a worship service. What bothered me, and created much complaining amongst the student population, were the policies which framed the format of worship. In the Reformed Presbyterian church, worship has two specific rules. First, only men preach or speak. Second, all singing must be lyrics from the Psalter and without musical accompaniment of any kind. Students would often chuckle when the hymn text would come from sections of the Psalms directly referring to the use of instruments. This irony is like candy to college students who are just getting the training wheels off their critical thinking skills. Sadly,

most of us lacked the maturity to actually consider the value of this particular style for worship.

Recognizing that this format of worship would be a stretch for a large chunk of the student body, the school used their best rationalization to create an alternative. Some chapel gatherings were within the Reformed Presbyterian tradition. Other gatherings, taking place at the same time, in the same location, and offering the same chapel credits were called “convocation.” Students flocked to convocation because the singing was lively and the guest preacher could come from outside of the school’s faith tradition. I fell right in line with the college’s logic and always kept convocations as a top priority on my calendar.

Shuffling along with the crowds into one convocation the fall semester of my freshman year, I had no idea my life was about to change. A female student who I had noticed in class was giving her testimony. Other than recognizing her by face, I knew next to nothing about this young woman. As she shared a story about God providing a miraculous healing in her life, I was awestruck. She was articulate and sincere in her message. Her stage presence commanded respect and attention with an authority and confidence that was beyond her years. The ways that she integrated circumstances in her life with a sincere faith in God captivated my heart. As a ministry student and a person well acquainted with the difficulties of preaching well, I wanted to congratulate this fellow students and share my appreciation for her story. Despite my 18 year old heart being a bit girl-crazy, I

quickly accepted the fact that this particular person was way out of my league and never even attempted to approach her in class following that convocation.

Shortly after this service, during my drive home for break, I shared with my dad the testimony I had heard. I told him I hoped to marry a person with the level of faith and sincere love for Christ I saw on display that day, never imagining that the young woman who delivered that testimony would one day actually become my wife.

The beginning of the spring semester brought with it a sense of new opportunity. College felt familiar in a way that allowed me to dream a bit about how I hoped to engage with this community surrounding me. During the first few weeks I received news of the Discipleship House accepting applications for the following year. I went to the info meeting and subsequently applied. I knew I was interested in discipleship and had a sort of personal nostalgia connected to the physical house where my mom and I had each stayed.

As it turns out, the girl from the convocation was also interested in applying for the house. We both were unsure about the prospects of moving out of the dorms and shared these concerns with our friends. Through a friend we had in common, we were encouraged to talk about the house, our reservations and concerns. That was our first real conversation. I can't remember much about everything we talked about, but I remember ending it feeling all *twitterpated* and starry eyed.

I had heard that Heidi was not looking for a boyfriend and was planning to avoid dating relationships for a while. I didn't really pay attention to her plans and pursued her with an endless tenacity. I was caring and thoughtful, but I was not going to give up.

We officially started dating on the night of February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1998. We were studying for a test that was being given by a husband and wife faculty team known for impossibly difficult grading. I think Heidi was sincerely interested in focusing on the studying at hand while I struggled to see the importance of preparing for the exam with the hopes of a relationship consuming my mind. We were hours into studying before I mustered up the necessary courage to ask Heidi if she wanted to date me. I will never remember anything from that class nor those tests, but the conversation that night is a truly precious memory.

We dated steadily throughout college and enjoyed a significant amount of time together as we shared the same major. Somehow we convinced our parents that getting married while still in college was a reasonable decision. We were engaged on May 13, 1999, with the proposal taking place on the shores of Cayuga Lake, the spot of my baptism just a few years before.

We were married in July of 2000. I was not yet 21 and unable to drive the rental car on our honeymoon! The early years of our marriage and ministry together were beautiful and complex. In many ways Heidi and I feel like we did a lot of our growing up together. Working with college students now I can hardly wrap my mind around how young we were when we said, "I do." And yet, if I

was going to embark on this adventure I am so thankful I got to do it with that girl who had me awestruck with her love for God before I even knew her name!

### **Life is Precious**

The Pennsylvania turnpike does not offer drivers a straight mile for its entire length. Despite the money earned every day by the obnoxious tolls, the road is designed almost as if inconvenience was a primary goal. The left lane provides a shoulder of a mere 6 inches before hitting a concrete barrier. The right lane attacks your slightest drifts with teeth jarring rumble strips.

The 50 mile stretch of this maddening road connecting Beaver Falls and Monroeville was known well by Heidi and myself. Our first year of marriage was also our last year of college. While we served at a church in the eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh, we took classes in a county situated to the north. Each day we would hop into our plum purple Chevy Cavalier and wind our way to and from home and school.

As much as I loathed that drive, the hours we spent commuting at the onset of our marriage was more special than I would realize at the time. The days in the car regularly provided space for good conversation. Newly married we would talk about dreams, work out disagreements, and commiserate on daily frustrations related to school or ministry. Some may imagine that two newlyweds working in the same office and taking classes together while sharing text books is a recipe for disaster. For us, it was a catalyst for growth. During these drives the seeds were being planted for a deep and lasting relationship.

In the spring of 2001, one of these daily commutes involved a conversation which carried more significance in the years to come than we could have dreamed. As we were facing graduation and had already resigned from an unhealthy ministry post, our minds were focused on the next chapter in our journey. Daydreaming was easy on those drives. The life that laid before us seemed to contain infinite possibilities. With wide eyes, the two of us came to the conclusion that the best way to imagine our lives and calling to ministry was to offer ourselves fully to the plans of God. We agreed that our marriage would be marked by following God wherever He would lead and with whomever He asked us to serve. While we said those words with all sincerity, we could not have known the level of naiveté in our commitment at that time. Committing our lives to God during a season of health and prosperity came at little cost. A mere fifteen months after this conversation, those words became like concrete fixed deeply in our souls.

The year after graduating from college moved quickly. In an effort to recuperate from time spent serving under a toxic senior pastor, I worked part-time at my home church while picking up other jobs to help pay the bills. Heidi and I both enjoyed being geographically close to my younger siblings while anticipating a call to a new ministry by the end of the year. Throughout the year we held on to that desire to follow God. Somewhere along the way it became clear that the first step in our journey would be a move to Kentucky for seminary. As we prepared for the move, I felt confident in my choice and in the timing for

seminary. At this point in our lives, I felt certain this following God thing was a walk in the park.

As summer approached and we shoved all our worldly possessions into boxes, we made an effort to say goodbye to friends. On one such gathering, we were hiking one of my favorite trails from my childhood at a state park not too far from our house. As we walked along the winding path through a beautiful gorge, the scenery slipped out of view as anxiety crept in. Somewhere during the hike, Heidi nonchalantly swept her hair back and recognized a different feeling as her fingers brushed along her neck.

We had recently completed doctor's appointments before leaving our jobs and health insurance. Heidi had been given a clean bill of health a matter of days prior. But something had changed. On Heidi's neck, an unexplained lump had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. We spent the rest of the evening hanging out with friends, trying to push to the back of our minds any significant concerns. But the reality was we were terrified and at a gut level knew something was not right.

The timing, in our opinion, could not have been worse. We were entirely set to move, our resignations had been handed in, our apartment leased out, the moving van booked, and our new place already on hold with a security deposit. We were following God on the path we felt He had carved out just for us. We were confident of His direction and this lump did not fit into our plans.

Recognizing that our health insurance would be running out soon, we made an appointment with the doctor. The flurry of appointments which took

place the next week and a half was unlike anything either of us had experienced. At each appointment the doctors were kind and often reassuring, but in my heart I was frightened. As we advanced through the ranks of specialists I became less and less worried about any plans we had and was deeply concerned for my wife. I told God this could not be happening, as we were young, in love, and faithful Christians serving in ministry.

The final diagnosis came back and the worst case scenario presented to us by the physicians came true. Cancer. No one prepares you to walk with your wife, at the age of 22, through a battle with cancer. It's hard to describe the ache in my heart, the overwhelming sense of fear and the angry questions I wanted to hurl towards God. I can recall moments when I so deeply wrestled with the problem of evil in hopes of better understanding this situation that it felt physically exhausting. In other moments, I was petrified. Somehow in the midst of all of this, the love of family and tangible support held us strong. Prayers of others provided a sense of peace which I had only read about in Scripture.

The physicians who cared for us were a marvelous balance of thoughtful and gifted. Heidi underwent a successful surgery removing the tumor and her thyroid. She was released from the hospital the day of our second wedding anniversary. We celebrated that special day with no jobs, no home of our own, and the abandonment of our once crystal clear plans. And yet, we were at peace. We came to realize the precious nature of life and I learned a significant truth which lives deeply in my heart to this day. All which truly matters is too easily

neglected. Following God with the abandon we so casually talked about in that car ride a year-and-a-half prior became as solid and foundational as rock on which to build our marriage. Not two years into our marriage we both discovered that we had absolutely nothing else to hold on to and nowhere else to turn but God.

As I look back on this season I am stretched by an inherent paradox. Walking with Heidi through cancer is a journey I never want to face again. However, at the same time, I would never want to sacrifice all that I learned through that time and the abundant ways our marriage grew. It was the interruption to the expected, being forced to abandon all which I believed to be safe, and the uninvited catastrophe woven together to create conditions for God to work in the deep places of my life. I could no longer hold on to any of the typical cultural idols of security and comfort which I believed would sustain me. It was not enough to believe everything would be okay simply because I was a Christian in ministry. Through this battle with cancer I realized the only source worth holding on to is God.

We did eventually make it to Kentucky. God orchestrated a number of opportunities which allowed us to pull the pieces of our plan back together without too much delay. Our time in Kentucky is full of special memories and signs of God's goodness. Our favorite day was Good Friday, when we received the official news that Heidi's surgery and subsequent treatments had worked and she was entirely cancer-free.

## **I Love Peanut Butter and Jelly Any Time of Day, Almost**

The tunnels: a place I had never heard of until a few days prior. And yet, I found myself spending countless days, alone in those tunnels. While I was there I did my best to make the situation tolerable. But I hated it. I suppose I could have seen it as a type of spiritual hermitage, but I was not in the right frame of mind to see much other than irritation.

Directly after Heidi's cancer diagnosis, our neatly organized plans for moving to Kentucky and starting seminary crashed around us. Like a jigsaw puzzle tossed onto the floor, the pieces were all just lying about in a pile, unrecognizable to the original design. In a flurry of medical plans, we threw all of our belongings into storage and moved in with my in-laws. While we desperately wanted to be in our new apartment, we knew that our current journey would require a support network surrounding us. Fortunately, Heidi's treatment was scheduled without trouble and took place in a reasonable timeline. But even in the 4 short months, we had to figure out how to manage the costs of our new apartment, gap health insurance, and other expenses without any sort of employment.

My father and mother's examples throughout life always showed a resilience in the face of uncertainty. I was taught to accept the situation and do the work necessary no matter the circumstances. With this work ethic etched on my heart, I reached out to a temp agency. As a recent college graduate with a year of professional work experience, I walked into my interview with a certain level of

arrogance. I passed the typing test with flying colors, had witty answers for any question thrown my way, and expressed willingness to serve at any type of organization.

The excitement of the caller ID indicating the temp agency was reaching out was quickly squelched when I heard the details of my placement. I would be working at a factory producing food condiments. From 10PM-6AM, I would be on an assembly line watching mayonnaise, mustard, jelly, and peanut butter in production. The only requirement for the job was to pass a drug test by providing a urine sample at a doctor's office. My inflated sense of self-worth was popped like a balloon. I knew the specific circumstances of my life at the time left little room for pity, but I couldn't help but feel like nothing was going right.

Each night as I headed into work and donned my hard hat, hair net, and earplugs, I struggled. I looked around at my new place of employment and knew I was doing nothing of value. Selfishly I thought I had more to offer this world. I had a calling to ministry that was being wasted on a factory job. When I was assigned the tunnels, a stretch of more than 300 feet of conveyor belts needing constant supervision and maintenance as cases of hot jelly rolled by, I felt as if I had been sentenced to some sort of purgatory. Each night as the mind numbing hum of conveyor belts loaded with cases of freshly packed jam consumed my senses, I argued with God. He knew I had been faithful even when Heidi faced cancer. He knew my heart's desire to be with people, to build relationships, and

invite them into life in the Kingdom. I could not accept my banishment from any human connection.

Most nights I felt like I was being punished. I would read books for seminary during my breaks while struggling to hold back the tears. My heart ached to live out the type of ministry displayed in my reading. But as I marched off to the tunnels, I knew I was not only away from ministry, but headed into hours of isolation. As an extreme extrovert I cannot point to another time in my life when I spent so many of my awake hours in silence. I simply had no one to talk to. There was no one with whom to talk, nor a single person in the factory who even knew my name. Only my supervisor was even aware I was in the tunnels. I would show up to work, punch in, and simply disappear into isolation, feeling completely and utterly alone.

Up until my last day at the factory, I never looked forward to heading in to work. But, looking back, that time turned out to be a gift. Growing up with a baseball team worth of siblings, I had never spent that much time in solitude. Each night as I struggled with God in the tunnels, God met with me. With a new level of intensity, God was preparing my heart for what lay ahead. I thought my time in forced isolation was simply something I had to endure before arriving at seminary, the destination I deserved. Instead, that time was an essential component in preparing me for the formation God had in store throughout my studies. The scope of my seminary experience and my life in ministry were greatly impacted by those 4 months in solitude. God met me in ways that I needed

desperately but could not recognize on my own. I was able to process the journey with Heidi's cancer, my call to ministry, and my frustration with the evil in this world. I honestly hated every minute of it while I was there, but I still see the ways in which God used this time to prepare me for the years of school and ministry ahead. In those hours of solitude, my heart had the necessary space to hear clearly God's gentle words of love. Today, that sense of God's love is a bedrock to my faith and ministry as God's work in my life continues to be both mysterious and complex.

### **Grand Views**

It feels like I am walking in a real life Bob Ross painting. My path is well-trodden, winding with just enough regularity to be interesting. I am surrounded by lush green trees and deep woods. I venture onto a simple pedestrian bridge over a calmly flowing creek and stop. For a person who loves the outdoors, the beauty stretches my senses' capacities to take it all in. It was less than six months before we moved to Houghton, NY that Heidi made me promise we would never live in this town. Honestly, neither of us were looking to live in a rural community, more than an hour removed from most modern conveniences. While we made the decision together with clarity and confidence, every morning and evening I would walk the same tree lined path and wonder how exactly we got here.

Almost a year before our move, the two of us began to sense an interesting shift in our calling. Looking back there are countless threads woven together in a beautiful tapestry, but at the time they seldom made much sense.

It was the fall of 2009 and we were just weeks away from welcoming Sadie, our second child, into the world. The work environment at the church I was serving was becoming more complicated by the day. I maintained my love for ministry, but awoke each day with a sense of dread as I considered entering the dysfunction that existed in the church office. While toxic was the word best used to describe the office culture, it mirrored precisely what was happening in our own home.

While living in the church parking lot had its perks, living in a house the church voted to demolish 16 years prior to our arrival created some serious struggles. For seven years we were able to make a warm home in that place, but issues continually arose. In this season we discovered significant areas of dangerous mold in the basement. One young child with asthma and Heidi pregnant with our second, we had to leave while the complex abatement process took place. I was frustrated that we could not simply experience a straightforward pregnancy. I told God that while I appreciated the ways we avoided a repeat premature birth, I was a bit bothered by being homeless just weeks before the delivery.

Our only option at the time, we moved into an apartment above the office of a church volunteer. The space was adequate for a temporary spot, both simple and small, yet more homey and spacious than a hotel room. The apartment was part of a small satellite campus for Houghton College. While Houghton was almost an hour's drive away, this campus was inherited by the college a number

of years before and remained open for an adult degree completion program. As a result, other than the signs at the entrance, nothing on this campus was obviously recognizable as a college.

One evening the campus outside was unusually active. Peering through the windows I saw a rather large group of traditional college students milling around, laughing, and enjoying life. I stepped out and discovered that the group was the Houghton College choir on a weekend retreat to kick off their academic year. Scheduled to sing at some churches in Buffalo, they would be staying at the satellite campus for the weekend.

As the lively noises familiar to undergraduates animated the spaces around me, my heart was full. I was not sure why before coming to a moment of clarity. I felt God speak to me in a way that has only happened a few times in my life. I was certain God was telling me to be prepared to work with college students. I was afraid to let go of my life as a youth pastor, having only known this brand of ministry. And yet I felt a clear sense of calm and confidence in God's leading. I often have experienced God's direction through an inner calm as I approach decisions. My mind is always racing with possibilities when I enter a moment of choice. Often this routine will lead me to a place of anxiety as I repeat the mistake of trusting my own decision making. The lack of this anxiety reveals to me God's supernatural presence and allows me to move forward with confidence.

After a short stint in the Houghton College apartment, we moved back into our now mold-free parsonage for the last weeks of pregnancy. While Heidi and I

had full trust in God, we experienced heightened nerves throughout this pregnancy. We knew how suddenly issues could arise and the complications with the mold did not help. However in early October of 2009, our hearts were full with gratitude as God blessed our family with the sweetest baby girl we had ever laid eyes on.

With a new baby in the house, I now had plenty of hours both night and day to think and pray. Over the next several months, I continued to receive confirmation through various circumstances, conversations, and times in prayer. God was shifting my call from church-based youth ministry towards campus ministry with students. I was confused and scared by the responsibility of caring for my expanding family with no clear path forward.

In the spring of 2010, a new vision began to emerge. The work environment at my current church had dissolved beyond the point I could have predicted. One of my children became sick and spent three weeks in the Intensive Care Unit. Anchored to the hospital chair beside my child, I was spending a great deal of time reflecting on all my priorities in life.

It was another sleepless night in the hospital when, around 3:00AM, Heidi and I began discussing and searching for our next step. During that late night chat, Heidi shared a job opening she found as an Admission Counselor at Houghton College. It was a job I was not sure I wanted, a town neither of us desired to live, nor a college either had attended. Yet, it seemed to both of us like applying was the right thing to do. Throughout our marriage God had grown both

of us in our ability to discern His voice. As we talked and prayed, we realized we were not looking for a quick escape but answering a call. While on paper there was a great deal that did not make sense, the sense of peace we felt was clear in both of our hearts and minds.

In July 2010, we wrapped up at the church with one last mission trip before loading up a moving van bound for Houghton. The first few months were an absolute whirlwind. As we all settled into our new routine it became apparent that we were not in a place of longevity. That winter we both experienced a deep spiritual depression. My heart felt homesick, but not for any physical space. This was a sense of being lost unlike I had ever experienced. My job was not miserable, but lacked a fit within my calling that gnawed at my soul. Our temporary housing was warm and happy, but we had not developed any core friends with whom to share life. Most days my heart reflected the weather outside: isolating, dark, and cold. As the winter dragged along, so did our sense of despair. We were ready to leave, but had no idea where we could go. Heidi and I were both confident in God leading us to this place, but we felt like we had since been dumped in an alley and forgotten.

As spring rolled around the increase in sunlight and warming temperatures gave us a renewed sense of vigor. While we were still certain that our time in Houghton was expiring, the signs of new life provided a sense of hope. We had created healthy patterns for life and could sense God's presence as we went about these new rituals of work, rest, worship, and fellowship. Although I cannot

remember the exact date, early spring brought forth a conversation which led to an important pivot in our lives. Heidi and I were discussing our possible plans for the future and the difficulty we were having imagining the path that lay ahead. I have always held a confidence in Heidi's intuition. While she would likely deny any special ability to hear God's voice, I am certain she has been given a gift of discernment. Heidi operates out of unshakeable core beliefs in her faith, so I see her word as uniquely trustworthy in times of decision. It was during this conversation that Heidi presented a vision of us staying in Houghton. She felt that our time in this new town was not yet finished. While she had no sense of a specific opening, she shared a vision about creating a ministry which would allow us to live in community with students while investing in their daily lives.

It was a matter of months after this conversation when I felt like I hit another wall. My work in admissions was becoming less sustainable and I had no concept of how we could move forward. I had a conversation with God which included a heartfelt surrender. In that moment I felt like Moses at the Red Sea, unable to see the way across and frustrated by the impasse. While I did not know which way to go, I had established honest prayers as a part of my regular relationship with God. The day after I offered up this prayer of defeat I receive a call from a colleague on campus. He was inviting me to consider a job which would allow me to live with students and minister to them within community. The details of the job were better than I could have imagined. The vision which

Heidi casted for our ministry was coming into full focus. God had provided a way forward when I could see no way.

### **God-Sized Beauty in Small Packages**

The medical adventures which surrounded my entrance into the world of fatherhood left a unique mark on my soul. Before arriving at his third birthday, Silas had accrued more surgeries, time in intensive care units, and visits with specialists than many people experience in a lifetime. I operate with a baseline sense of gratitude for days when we experience health. Spending over 130 days by the bedside of a loved one in the hospital has shaped my life's priorities. While it has been almost a year since last hearing those all too familiar beeps from a monitor or sniffing that recognizable scent of sanitizing soap, life inside a hospital is etched deep into my psyche. Each day I am aware of the fragility of life and of children as a true miracle. While I can now write about this with confidence, for so long I lived in fear.

Until the journey with our firstborn, Silas, Heidi and I assumed medical issues were something that happened to other people. Living out of a sense of standard human innocence, we never actually believed that having kids was a risky decision. When the reality of an extremely rare medical diagnosis with a possible genetic link hit us, any sort of ignorance evaporated almost immediately. Heidi and I had countless conversations about balancing risk with faith in God's goodness. We visited expert physicians who were unable to provide adequate

relief. I can remember my heart feeling tired from the constant wrestling match. It felt like I was daily asking a string of questions about trusting God versus taking undue risk. I have never liked seasons of indecision, but this one certainly pushed me to the depths of prayer.

Looking at my four wonderful children now it is hard to think about a time when I was paralyzed with worry about even attempting to bring them into this world. The space here does not allow for me to share the details of each child's arrival, but I must point out a few important facets. With each pregnancy we were in a season of sincere prayer and discernment. Even though God had been faithful to heal Silas and had protected each subsequent birth, we lived with a core sense of worry. I am thankful for the ways our anxiety pushed Heidi and I to pray faithfully for each child. I appreciate how each pregnancy was seen as such a gift that we treated the journey like it was the first time all over again. Each child has a special story about their birth announcement, gender reveal, and name selection. As we added to our family, Heidi and I marveled at the ways these little lives were teaching us about trusting in God.

Understanding God as Father has always been a significant piece of my spiritual life. The ways my father poured into my life easily transferred to my understanding of God's abundance. Once I became a father I was overwhelmed by the sense of love which automatically developed for my children. Each day I am moved by the ways that every one of my children reveal new aspects of God's character to me.

Silas has an inner strength and courage that inspires me to face life's difficulties with confidence. He also brings a sense of ingenuity to all situations in a way that truly reflects God's image as Creator. Sadie has a sweet spirit that helps me to see the need in others. At the same time, Sadie's natural ability to serve challenges me to move from empathy to action. Corinna bursts forth with true joy in a way that makes even gloomy days seem bright. She delights in all that life has to offer and teaches me gratitude in new ways. Lawson has a sweet trust in others along with an adventurous spirit. He has been full of surprise from the very beginning. He reminds me of God's delight in others and helps me to see the beauty which is always around me. Lawson, a constant reminder that God's ways are higher than our ways, allows me to delight in God's wisdom.

Being a father to these four incredible people is one of the most significant formational experience in my spiritual journey. Each and every day through the normal routines of making breakfast, wiping noses, and cleaning up spills, I am invited to understand new depths of love while challenged to live up to the person God has created me to be as I serve as an example for them in His love.

As I serve in campus ministry, the images in Scripture of God as a loving father regularly come to the surface. Experiencing the intensity of my limited and finite love for my own children has allowed me to gain a significant appreciation for the eternal and infinite love God must have for the students I work with, each of them God's children. The following chapter will explore further how God's

love can be experienced in the lives of today's college students as I present a model for spiritual formation.

**CHAPTER 3: A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL  
FORMATION  
HABITS WHICH NURTURE THE HEART**

*Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which  
yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3 NIV)*

**Model Introduction**

Resources developed and marketed as aids for spiritual growth are ubiquitous. Local church calendars are loaded with programs and gatherings all promising the opportunity for growth in one's faith. Working full-time with emerging adults on a Christian college campus, I witness this desire for spiritual development taking place at high speed. Students desperately want to take hold of their newly minted independence and yearn to experience significant faith development in short order. With goals set high, most of these attempts are met with disappointment and exhaustion. In my experience, students will often use

words such as “dry” and “empty.” Somehow the map they have been given as a guide for spiritual growth fails to lead to their desired destination.

Gary Thomas recognizes a primary source for the conundrum I regularly witness.

Over and over again we give Christians the same spiritual prescription: ‘You want to grow as a Christian? All you have to do is develop a thirty- or sixty- minute quiet time and come to church every Sunday morning.’ All too often, Christians who desire to be fed spiritually are given the same, generic, hopefully all-inclusive methods-usually some variation on a standardized quiet time. (Thomas 1998, 14)

The fascination with commodity in the modern West has led us to package up spiritual formation in tidy, deliverable, universal methods. As a result, many approach spiritual growth as consumers with a particular outcome in mind as opposed to coming to God with an attitude of surrender. Yet personal experience shows, “God is endlessly creative. No two humans have exactly the same story about how they discover or receive God’s unconditional love” (Demaray and Johnson 2007, 8). As a result, attempts to neatly categorize spiritual formation as a marketable product often fall short.

On the other end of the spectrum, the dynamic nature of spiritual formation produces a process which can often seem unpredictable. Throughout the biblical narrative and all of church history, there are stories of individuals who face similar circumstances yet take diverging paths. Saul and David were kings both anointed by God and who shared in an earnest desire to serve God in their kingship. However, Saul’s story is one of spiritual rot and demise while David moves beyond his failures to become the king in the Messianic line. Eli’s sons

and Samuel were both raised in the temple and surrounded by the rituals of the faith. Once again, Eli's sons use their position for evil and face judgment while Samuel is an honored prophet of God. Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees both hear the same words from Jesus and are invited to respond. Somehow Nicodemus seeks out Jesus in the night and later is one of two men named as helping to care for Jesus' body at his burial. These comparisons become more complex as we recognize the distinctions are not always between "good" and "bad." For example, Peter and Paul both serve as outspoken apostles and leaders in the early church. However, each of them require distinct encounters with God in order to expand their ministry to the Gentiles. Stories like these, and even my own personal faith journey, can lead one to believe that spiritual formation is at best unpredictable and at worst untrustworthy.

Attempting to oversimplify and commodify the process of spiritual formation can lead to an empty and dry faith. Accepting the unpredictable nature of God's work in one's life can produce a level of anxiety that prevents some from even endeavouring to pursue life with God. Focusing on either of these two extremes for too long can conjure up questions which are intimidating if left unanswered. Ultimately, certain types of questions must be asked. Is there a trusted road map which leads to a fruitful relationship with God and true personal transformation? Is faith formation truly untamed in a way that leaves it to operate as some sort of cosmic gamble or is there more of a trusted design in place?

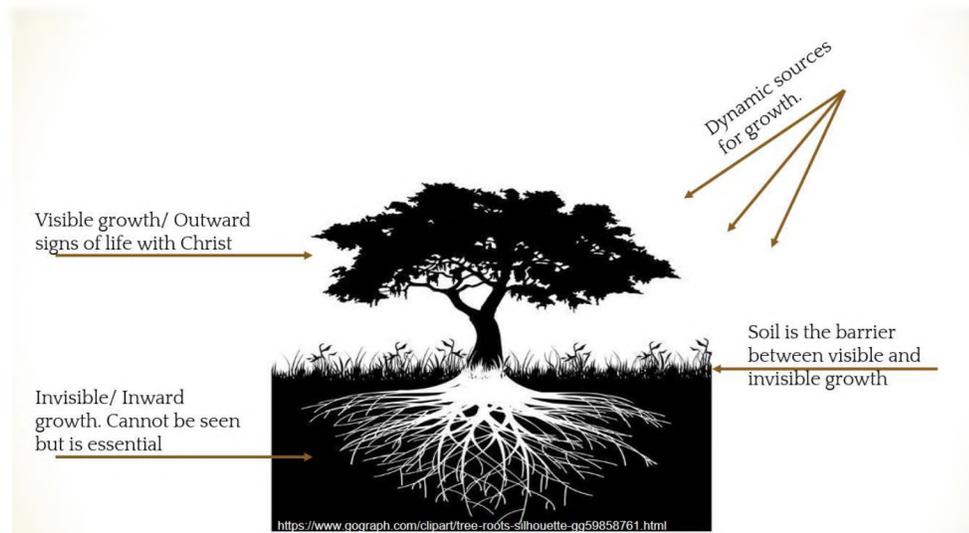
The preceding questions are further complicated by the wider culture's adoption of a faith which minimizes the role of spiritual formation. In his seminal work on the spiritual life of American teenagers, Christian Smith coined the phrase, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (Smith 2005, 162). After conducting thorough research, Smith concludes the de-facto religion among young people today is ultimately a "divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness" (Smith 2005, 124). Smith's summary encapsulates well some of what I experienced in my own adolescent faith journey, as well as my current work with students. If God is far-off and removed from everyday life and faith's primary emphasis is on good behavior, then why pursue spiritual growth? If one seeks out spiritual formation, a faith of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism offers little direction. The questions I needed to navigate during my own faith formation and the regular questions I hear from those in my place of ministry are essential but, thanks in part to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, often feel too complex for one to know where to even begin.

Fortunately, it seems clear through Scripture and church tradition that there is indeed an accessible and reliable path to true spiritual formation. In fact, it can be argued that God's deepest desire is to ensure all of humanity find the fullness of life offered through God. "God sees more in us than we see in ourselves. He [sic] sees the fulfillment of his original purpose for our lives: the restoration of us in his [sic] own image" (Van Dussen 2018, xvii). Jesus is confident that even the worst of sinners can access true formation (Mark 2:17 and

Matthew 9:12). He proclaims that people as innocent as children hold a special claim on the Kingdom (Luke 18:16). Of course, Jesus recognizes the potential for various outcomes exists. This is best described in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. An essential component in the parable is understanding the possibility for different types of soil and what factors contribute to healthy “soil,” representative of a heart able to receive Christ’s words.

In developing a model for spiritual formation, I propose that spiritual formation is an essential process with a trusted pathway that is simultaneously accessible and dynamic. While the total project of spiritual formation can, and has, filled the pages of volumes of books, I hope to focus on a particular facet which both reflects my personal journey and relates to my current ministry setting. A trusted way to experience spiritual formation which allows God’s creative work to take root in one’s heart can be found through habits and rituals. *Spiritual formation changes people more into the likeness of Christ and takes place as a person engages with intention in holy habits and rituals in which God’s grace can work.* There is a beautiful balance between the responsibility of the individual and the grace of God which is simultaneously mysterious and entirely trustworthy. The term “holy habits” has been selected intentionally. This type of spiritual growth, or sanctification, is regularly identified as “holiness” in the Wesleyan tradition. Additionally, as stated in Chapter 1, the term “habits” echo the larger concept of *habitus* and formation through practice. Thus, the process of becoming more holy includes “holy habits.”

The concepts of this model will be best understood using the visual image of a tree. The details of this imagery will be explored as the principles of this model are unpacked, but the foundational image is being included now to provide a visual for what lies ahead. (See Figure 1)



**Figure 1: Model of Spiritual Formation**

It is my proposal that a focus on habits and rituals is of particular importance in our contemporary Western culture as well as in my ministry setting. We live fully in a “post-Christian” society where the predominate voices and natural habits do not line up with the values of the Christian faith (Morgan 2013, 23). In my ministry with college students the recurring cultural values of consumerism, vanity, sex, and personal success are prime examples. Students easily adopt a vision for a good life with roots in some version of the upper-middle-class American dream. Christian Smith summarizes this perfectly by

describing the predominate life goals as, “Get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease” (Smith 2011, 236-237). The cultural ideals are largely selfish and wasteful. As if on autopilot, our culture finds it entirely normal to expend incredible amounts of energy on constructing a personal kingdom of comfort and pleasure. This is just a small example of how current cultural values do not integrate with a faith of stewardship and selflessness.

The church has persisted throughout eras when a larger cultural morality is unaligned with core Christian values and it continues to be essential for conversations around spiritual formation to pay close attention to the current state of affairs. The intentional engagement in spiritual habits necessary to bring about deep formation will require a certain level of personal determination and tenacity along with God’s grace. The habits and rituals which most easily impact a person’s faith are not a part of our cultural norms. In fact, the popular cultural rhythms are more likely to steer someone away from growth in Christ than at any time in recent history (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 18). Even as Christians we happily invite Jesus to bless our venture into worldly success as long as Jesus does not require anything too inconvenient.

Focusing on habits as part of healthy spiritual formation is of particular interest as I work with emerging adults living on a Christian college campus in this post-Christian culture. In his seminal work on emerging adulthood, Jeffrey

Arnett is convinced the season directly after high school holds unique ability to impact the trajectory of one's entire adult life. Arnett describes the post-adolescent journey as "...the age of possibilities, when hope flourishes, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives" (Arnett 2004, 8). The patterns established during this season of life hold great potential in either forming or de-forming a young person's soul.

In order to share my vision for true spiritual formation through intentional engagement in holy habits and rituals, the following work is organized into four primary sections. First, a brief overview of the human condition. Developing a model of spiritual formation requires some foundational understanding of the aim and object of formation. Second, a theological understanding of spiritual formation through rituals. In order to focus in on the function of formation, we must provide some scaffolding to build upon by exploring how everyday rituals contain incredible potential. Third, the synthesis of these topics into imagery for formation. The imagery will bring together all of the previous content into a cohesive model illustrating the mechanics of spiritual formation through habits. Finally, a concluding application for my ministry context with college students on a Christian college campus and how this framework will play out in my daily ministry. By design, scriptural reflections will be woven into all of these sections.

### **The Human Condition: Made for Formation**

When each of my four children was born, their identity as a child within our distinct family included a depth beyond what they could fully understand.

Even before taking a breath they were deeply loved and surrounded in anticipation. Each of them was presented with a name of significance and welcomed into a home prepared specifically for their needs. As newborns, it was impossible for my children to fully understand these aspects of their reality and yet every bit of it was true. Similarly, all of humanity exists within a set of conditions which are universal and foundational. Whether one is to believe it or not, the creation narrative recorded in Genesis describes core truths of what it means to be human and helps to frame all of life.

The human condition as revealed in Genesis paints a picture that is beautifully complex and boundless. Even before humankind is created we learn God is forming the world by using incredible power driven by loving intention. The place prepared for humans, one of order and beauty, is born out of God's creativity and goodness. Humanity was being cared for by a loving God even before creation. "... you and I were 'spoken forth' out of the heart of God's love before the foundation of the world" (Mulholland 2016, 71). It is important to note, God's love is not to be understood merely as an emotional state. Rather, God has a sincere interest in and commitment to the welfare and flourishing of all human beings. Within this newly designed order, humans are special; the only part of creation made in the image of God. This often quoted tidbit is essential in understanding the nature of humanity and the aim of all formation. "The *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in

God's rule or administration of the earth's resources and creatures" (Middleton 2005, 27). Humans are set apart by God for a special purpose within the creation. At the conclusion of this creation narrative, all is right and in place. The earth is in perfect balance, humans are in place to steward and co-labor in creating while God is in an intimate relationship with all God created. There is health and wholeness in the relationships between human and God, human and creation, and human with human.

As the story unfolds, we learn that humanity decided to rebel against God's masterfully designed plan bringing great consequence. The Fall of humanity impacts every aspect of the original creation and mars the healthy relationships which defined human existence. Part of what it means to be human is to be living with the consequences of this rebellion. Even if not articulated clearly, humans know deeply the situations surrounding them are outside of what is best. Humans are designed to be in harmonious relationship with God, others, and creation. However, the realities of daily life reflect the depth of brokenness within these essential relationships. Humanity has the capacity at any time to live out its original design or to embody the sin which has mangled that design. As humans, we are living in a condition that simultaneously reflects pieces of our original purpose and our brokenness.

While sin is present in all of humanity, the bodily experience of humanity is not essentially sinful. DNA, skin, saliva, leg hair, messy diapers, and morning breath cannot be sinful or Jesus incarnate could not have been fully human and

fully God. Referred to by Paul as “the second Adam,” (Romans 5 NIV) we can understand Jesus as an example of life according to the original design. Jesus as sinless means he was in perfect relationship with God, others, and creation. Jesus, who embodies the perfect design in place before the Fall, is the living example of what a human can look like living after the Fall. Jesus’ proclamation as “...the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6 NIV) is often misunderstood to be a limiting concept. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 NIV) is sometimes seen as Jesus, the cosmic goalie, keeping people away from God until they meet Jesus’ demands. But the incarnation is about making a way to God, not limiting our access. Jesus is the only way to God not in a preventive sense, but in an opportunistic sense. Jesus has knocked down the barriers and cleared a path to God. Jesus shows us the way to live in line with God’s design and introduces the possibility for transformation empowered by the Spirit. Jesus’ incarnation provides incredible hope as it demonstrates the possibility of living within our original design. Life for humans, just as God envisioned, is entirely possible through the work and person of Christ.

While foundational aspects to the spiritual condition of humans are universal, the journey of spiritual formation can be quite distinct for each person. As individuals, God’s creative nature has granted each and every one of us the possibility to grow more into the life God desires or to grow away from that ideal design. The human condition is dynamic, in part, because formation is inescapable. We are always changing:

Human life is, by its very nature, spiritual formation. The question is not *whether* to undertake spiritual formation. The question is *what kind* of spiritual formation are we already engaging in? Are we being increasingly conformed to the brokenness and disintegration of the world, or are we being increasingly conformed to the wholeness and integration of the image of Christ? (Mulholland 2000, 26).

This concept has been essential to the church for over two thousand years.

Thomas Oden, citing early Christian documents, writes,

Classic Christianity rejects ‘any view of justification which divorces it from our sanctifying union with Christ and our increasing conformity to his image through prayer, repentance, cross-bearing, and life in the spirit’ (Gospel of Jesus Christ, Affirmations and Denials 15). (Oden 661, 1992)

Thus, developing a clear understanding of spiritual formation is essential because the process is central to all of humanity. The human condition is, without exception, one of spiritual formation.

The concept of inescapable spiritual formation shows up throughout Scripture and is revealed quite clearly in John 15. The Gospel writer records Jesus’ seventh and final “I Am” statement as Jesus referring to himself as the vine and his followers as branches connected to the vine. This imagery highlights the concept of unity with Christ when addressing formation, as all branches reflect the specific type of organism to which they are connected. Additionally, a vine and branches give a nod to the notion of continual change. Plants cannot stay stagnant, experiencing growth or death. Unlike the popular Christian rhetoric, there is no plateau to a life of faith. Like branches, we are continually in the process of growth or death. Additionally, horticultural imagery recognizes the

importance of numerous conditions surrounding a person's path to growth. The factors which impact the ability for a plant to be nurtured parallel the various means God uses to develop our souls.

Much of what has been presented thus far seems individualistic. While the distinctiveness of the individual is important in understanding the human condition, one's need for community is vital. Turning again to the *imago Dei* for guidance we are reminded that God is the community of the Trinity from the beginning. The statement about being created in God's image refers to God in the plural. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'" (Genesis 1:26a NRSV). Humans are made for community because God is in community. Humans are made for love because God is in a loving relationship as a triune being. Therefore, speaking of formation exclusively as an individual pursuit is insufficient. As Dallas Willard wisely states, "Spiritual Formation, good or bad, is always profoundly social. You cannot keep it to yourself. Anyone who thinks of it as a merely private matter has misunderstood it" (Willard 2002, 182). This relational aspect of spiritual formation is woven into the nature of human beings. In the creation narrative recorded in Scripture, even before the Fall, God declared it "not good" for humans to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Additionally at the start of Christianity, Jesus calls forth two disciples (Matthew 4:18-20). At the moment of inception, following Christ was a communal experience. Beyond the design of humanity, all of nature reflects the inherent need for community. "Just as an organism isn't ultimately about subatomic

particles or even cells but rather about chemical *connections*, so too the church isn't reducible to individuals... We aren't called to exist as isolated units who love God in distinction from those around us" (Hill 2015, 28). It is not enough to simply say that an individual needs a community in order to appropriately experience personal formation. Personal formation is inextricably connected to community. Relationship with God and with others is woven into our very design as humans.

Considering the importance of community, it must be understood that there is no clean separation between the individual and the community. Rather, "There is a mutual shaping between individual self and corporate self. Just as individual self is shaped in context of social realities, so also social realities are formed in the context of the lives of the individual people that form the community" (Howard 2008, 98). While this mutual shaping can be complicated, it is also a place of great potential and persistent beauty. Throughout the church's history, various communities of formation have developed, with many operating for centuries. As we explore the role of habits in formation, it will be key to recognize the ways we are shaped by personal habits as well as the rituals of a larger community.

In summary, the human condition is anchored in two primary statements. First, humans are fearfully and wonderfully made as individuals, designed for community in the image of a loving, triune God. Second, humans are constantly being formed either towards their original design or away. Understanding the

conditions which impact the formation of a human is central. Working with students during an age of identity formation, the question of impact becomes of paramount importance.

### **Theological Underpinnings of Formation Through Habits**

The exploration of the human condition provides a big picture framework for how God acts in people's lives. In order to flesh out a model of spiritual formation, one must consider how to organize and categorize the movements of God. If we want to experience trusted paths of spiritual formation, we must consider carefully how God works in the world. This work is most commonly referred to as theology or theological reflection.

God is not a theologian but a minister; God acts for the sake of making Godself known to the world. God acts so that creation might be reconciled to God, that all might live in the redemptive love of God. To say that God is active in the world is to assert that God is ministering to the world. Everything we know about God is knowledge that flows out of God's actions. Theology at its most basic (and most profound) is passionate reflection on God's action.... (Root 2012, 55).

This work is not a narrowing of God's activity, but rather bringing in a level of organization which broadens our understanding.

If we accept a baseline understanding of people as continually changing and growing, either towards God or away, the distinction between the directions becomes vital. Spiritual formation is not a choice we must make. Formation takes place regardless of our agency. "The only choice we have is whether that growth moves us toward wholeness in Christ or toward an increasingly dehumanized and

destructive mode of being” (Mulholland 1993, 24). We must then identify what choices impact the direction of our formation.

It is tempting to offer a solution dividing people purely based on faith, stating that those who say they believe in God are growing towards God while those who lack faith are growing away. As stated earlier, spiritual formation presents in a much more complicated fashion. Even the casual observer can recognize the limitations of this simplistic duality. Anecdotally, we all know people claiming faith in Christ yet reflecting a life to the contrary and others who have no faith seeming to walk in step with Jesus’ teachings.

John Wesley highlights the complexity of true faith in Christ well in his sermon, “The Almost Christian.” Wesley compiled an anthology of 52 standard sermons. “The Almost Christian” is number two in his collection following in importance only to “Salvation by Faith.” Wesley’s standard sermons are not merely a collection of his best works. Instead, Wesley organized these 52 messages to be a thorough exploration of the doctrinal content he felt essential to all Christians. Wesley was precise in his choice of these sermons and desired they be read widely. In the introduction to the sermons Wesley writes, “Every serious man, who pursues these, will therefore see in the clearest manner, what these doctrines are, which I embrace and teach, as the essentials of true religion” (Wesley 1967, XIX). For those in Wesley’s theological tradition these sermons are important texts.

According to Wesley, the “almost Christian” is recognized by clear outward displays of faith in Christ. Wesley’s list includes honesty, godly living, abstaining from drunkenness and gluttony, engaging in all important spiritual practices, regular prayer, and a desire for genuine faith (Wesley 1967, 13-14). The full descriptions in the sermon characterize what many would call a healthy Christian or markers of good Christian character. For Wesley, though, true faith is better known as the “altogether Christian.” This Christian is defined not by outward lifestyle choices but by the inward change of the heart. The “altogether Christian” is driven by a love for God and a love for others. “Such a love of God is this, as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties” (Wesley 1967, 15). Wesley’s concern is to ensure outward practices are connected with changes in one’s heart, not simply demonstrating your faith for the sake of recognition. Wesley supports this proposal through an important exploration of Scripture and personal reflection on his own spiritual journey from “almost Christian” to “altogether Christian.”

Wesley’s focus on love makes sense when we consider spiritual formation to be the journey of recognizing and growing into the image of God in our lives. We are created in the image of a loving God and experience this love by living out life as God designed. As 1 John 4:8 states, “...God is love.” The essence of God, whose image we carry, is that of love. If our formation is meant to point towards the likeness of God, love is foundational to every aspect of how we

describe spiritual growth. “The source of a loving union with God lies in God’s unfathomable love for us” (Mulholland 2016, 16). Simply stated, the epicenter of spiritual formation is God’s love.

Unfortunately, in the contemporary West, we have saturated our models for discipleship around the Enlightenment’s focus on our minds over and above our hearts. Even as I work with college students deep in the millennial mindset fraught with suspicion around modernity’s logic, I regularly encounter a view of spiritual formation prioritizing cognition as the most important asset for growth. I have frequent conversations with young adults who believe they can think their way to a deeper relationship with God and regularly receive requests for recommended resources and books. This prioritization on learning for growth is not entirely negative but it is limiting. James K.A. Smith concurs when he writes,

Like Descartes, we view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around our souls or ‘minds,’ which are where all the real action takes place. In other words, we imagine human beings as giant bobble head dolls: with humongous heads and itty-bitty, unimportant bodies (Smith 2016, 3).

Prioritizing the mind in spiritual growth reaches beyond the academy and is on full display when the church equates discipleship primarily with teaching. Church resources and calendars are filled by ministries built around an exchange of information, believing knowledge will bring about transformation. Of course, I regularly observe the temptation to name the college lecture hall as the primary seat for undergraduate shaping. While I do believe there is a great deal of

formation happening in the classroom, we are mistaken when we believe growth is chiefly a result of information being exchanged.

I resonate with Smith's proposal that spiritual formation is not primarily anchored in our minds. Despite the popular view, knowledge alone is limited in its ability to shape one's heart. Being created in the image of a loving God means that intellectual ascent cannot be the ultimate trait of humanity.

Do you ever experience a gap between what you *know* and what you *do*? Have you ever found that new knowledge and information don't seem to translate into a new way of life? Ever had the experience of hearing an incredibly illuminating and informative sermon on Sunday, waking up Monday morning with new resolve and conviction to be different, and already failing by Tuesday night? (Smith 2016, 5)

What we know does not always shapes our lives. People know the harms of smoking and can not quit. Americans are well aware of the need to eat less and exercise more but obesity persists. Students in my community know the story of the Good Samaritan but obtaining this intellectual awareness is not enough to motivate them to actually love their neighbor as themselves.

A biblical and more accurate view of human transformation is connected to the heart, or what we love placed in priority over what we think. "Our wants and longing and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow" (Smith 2016, 2). Humans cannot help but love because we are created in the image of a God who is love. Jesus' first question to his disciples in the Gospel of John is, "what do you want?" (Smith 2016, 1). Jesus knows any object we love will create a desire or magnetic pull towards that love. We all desire something and those desires steer our lives. Knowledge is not

guaranteed to bring about transformation because information does not easily impact our loves. "... Spirit-led formation of our loves is a recalibration of the heart, a reorientation of our loves..." (Smith 2016, 22). God's love and the formation of the heart is the bedrock of all spiritual growth.

This is not a call for anti-intellectualism, but a recognition of the limitations of data and facts to bring about lasting formation. Again we turn to Wesley as a master of connecting the head and the heart. "The uniting of heart and head in early Methodism was one of the Wesleys most remarkable achievements" (Chilcote 2004, 69). In Wesley's writings we find intellectually reliable thinking directed at true transformation. Wesley understood knowledge about God created the space for appropriate transformation by God.

Transformation without knowledge runs the risk of sensationalism while knowledge without transformation is simply vain piety. "For the Wesleys, therefore, vital piety was essentially linked with sound learning" (Chilcote 2004, 75). God works in both our mind and our hearts, but the foundational place of formation is the heart. The work of spiritual formation must be seen as holistic and integrated.

If spiritual formation is a practice of shaping the desires of our hearts, we must consider how this shaping takes place. To put it bluntly, what activities in a regular day are shaping our souls? Considering this question pushes me to explore the role of embodied habits and rituals. To best understand the role of rituals in

spiritual formation we must first turn to the practices of worship. Worship is the place where the rituals of the body shape the mind and heart.

Just as spiritual formation is universal, there is an ever-present nature of worship. Humans, primarily loving beings, cannot help but worship. All human hearts are turned towards some desire. “We become what we worship because what we worship is what we love. As we’ve seen, it’s not a question of *whether* you worship but *what* you worship- which is why John Calvin refers to the human heart as an ‘idol factory’ ” (Smith 2016, 23). Even in Romans 12 when Paul is encouraging Christians to be transformed by the renewing of their minds it is in the context of worship. The text starts out with Paul’s request for believers to offer their bodies to God in worship. Then, the text which deals directly with transformation is passive, “be transformed” (Romans 12:2). The offering in worship is the action of humans, while the transforming of the mind is the action of God received by humans. In Romans 12 the renewing of the mind happens as the heart is directed appropriately in worship.

If worship can shape our mind and heart, it is no wonder spiritual practices found throughout Jewish and Christian history are based around repetition.

We don't know a great deal about the prayer life of ancient Israel, but we do know that it was very customary for pious Jews to interrupt the day to pray at three separate times. The word ‘interrupt’ is too harsh; It would be better to say that the Jewish day was punctuated or ordered by three sacred prayer rhythms. It would have been nearly impossible for Jesus to have been a Jew in the first century, at least a pious Jew, and not to have participated in Israel's sacred prayer rhythm of praying *with* the community of faith (McKnight 2006, 32).

Reciting prayers regularly is not about increasing information but soaking the heart with words that would shape one's desires. This truth reaches beyond traditional Christian worship practices. For example, my passion for my favorite sports teams is an entirely non-rational experience. I do not "think" my way into being a fan, nor can I develop a love for a team apart from my body. To develop this deep love I regularly join the community which surrounds me in practices and rituals that shapes my heart into loving a particular team.

Whether it be for a sports team or my faith, regular small decisions compile into one large passion which has a significant impact on how my life is lived. N.T. Wright states this beautifully when he addresses the issue of how someone develops instinctive moral qualities or virtues.

Virtue, in this strict sense, is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn't 'come naturally' - and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required 'automatically,' as we say (Wright 2010, 20).

I would argue that understanding the power of habit in spiritual formation cannot be overstated. The small decisions of everyday life are of unimaginable importance even if we do not fully realize their potential for impact at the time.

Turning back to Wesley, we find important teaching on this central concept of transformation through love, rituals, and worship. Wesley's Means of Grace: "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men [sic], preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace (Wesley

1832, 187). Wesley's theology addressed a number of aspects related to God's grace, some of which require no initial human action. However, for the purposes here, I am narrowing in on one way Wesley understood God's sanctifying grace to be at work in the lives of Christians who seek to grow spiritually. Wesley believed God's grace surrounded all of human life, but stressed the importance of developing the ability to become aware of God's gifts. With this desire in mind, Wesley named a set of practices he identified as special avenues for God's grace. For Wesley, there is nothing magical about these practices other than the ways God has agreed to interact through them. "While the means themselves were understood to have no intrinsic worth, they were channels by which the Holy Spirit worked to communicate grace for the full work of salvation" (Blevins 1997, 72). There were a large variety of spiritual practices encouraged by Wesley, but the five primary Means of Grace were those demonstrated by Jesus in his earthly ministry and all involved the posture or placement of one's body: The Lord's Supper, Prayer, Fasting, Scripture, and Christian Conference or Conversation (Blevins 1997, 72). For Wesley, Christians ought to participate in the Means of Grace as often as possible. The genius in Wesley's imagery is the mystical balance between God's generous grace and human responsibility.

Wesley held firm to the idea of God's grace being available and flowing all around us. Imagine a deer in the woods looking for a stream of fresh water. The deer is able to experience life-sustaining blessings apart from the particular gift of a flowing water. However, if the deer moves to the place of the water, it will

experience an abundance of blessing. Accessing the stream allows the deer to both receive distinct gifts for life and to become more aware of the gifts already received even before finding the stream. For Wesley, grace is the work of God, but the decision to seek out that grace is the responsibility of humanity. Beyond Wesley, the tenets of this teaching are in line with all of church history's emphasis on spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual formation is primarily a matter of the heart and requires the transformation of one's life in both the visible places of action and the hidden places of desire. The heart is impacted by what we worship and what we worship is shaped by our regular rhythms and practices. Spiritual formation is about engaging in practices where God's grace can enter our lives. God's grace is available, but we must take steps to place ourselves in the way of receiving channels of that grace.

### **Big Picture Synthesis: The Tree**

Up to this point, the bulk of what has been shared has been situated primarily in the theoretical. The various concepts which have been presented explored components of spiritual formation. In order to present a reliable model, the focus must shift now to how to integrate these thoughts into a holistic picture. In an effort to provide a synthesis of the ideas as well as a practical guide I will be unpacking the imagery of a tree and how it can serve to help demonstrate the primary aspects of my model.

In addition to being a commonly known piece of creation, trees relate well to the spiritual life in a way that brings about deep integration. In fact, the entire biblical narrative highlights trees with special significance.

Other than people and God, trees are the most mentioned living thing in the Bible. There are trees in the first chapter of Genesis (v. 11–12), in the first psalm (Ps. 1:3), and on the last page of Revelation (22:2). As if to underscore all these trees, the Bible refers to wisdom as a tree (Prov. 3:18). Every major character and every major theological event in the Bible has an associated tree. The only exception to this pattern is Joseph, and in Joseph's case the Bible pays him its highest compliment: Joseph is a tree (Gen. 49:22). In fact, Jeremiah urges all believers to be like a tree (17:7–8) (Sleeth, 2018).

The potential areas of connection when using trees as a metaphor can be extensive. The focus for the remainder of this section will be specific to how a tree helps to bring clarity to my model of formation through habits.

### Growth is Simultaneously Dynamic and Trustworthy: Diversity

As stated before, God seems to be infinitely creative in the ways God works in individual lives. As a result, spiritual formation can be simultaneously trustworthy and unpredictable. God regularly relates healthy spiritual formation to trees (Psalm 1, John 15, and Galatians 5). I believe this connection is, in part, related to the ways a tree embodies a trustworthy system in a seemingly chaotic process. Two oak trees, even in the same yard, are never exactly the same in size, form, or structure. The development of the tree is constantly impacted by countless environmental factors. In the same way, God does not create a narrow path for formation which can be thwarted by specific external factors. Similar to

the complexity and resiliency of trees, God has designed humans to be able to grow spiritually despite external struggles they may encounter. The multifariousness inherent in spiritual growth gives the Christian hope that no person is too far from the reach of God and there is no circumstance which can entirely prevent someone from experiencing God's transforming love. No matter what circumstances may impact the growth, the end goal for all trees is similar to that of humans to live out the fullness of their original design.

### Dependence on Community: the Forest Ecosystem

Previously, I highlighted the essentialness of community in spiritual growth. Community cannot be seen simply as one of many ingredients for the perfect recipe for spiritual vitality. Rather, community is foundational to the essence of being a human created in God's image. There is no way for a person to grow spiritually apart from life with others. The incarnation demonstrates God is not interested in pulling us away from our world and our communities. Rather, God has entered into our world and our good relationships to help redeem the whole of it.

Like human spirituality, appropriate tree growth and health only happen in community. Even the lone tree in a backyard depends on various organisms in the environment. The root systems of healthy trees in a forest are connected to form a system of mutual support.

...most individual trees of the same species growing in the same stand are connected to each other through their root systems. It

appears that nutrient exchange and helping neighbors in times of need is the rule, and this leads to the conclusion that forests are superorganisms with interconnections much like ant colonies (Wolleben 2015, 3).

The trees in a forest have no interest in pursuing survival of the fittest. Instead, trees live in a system of cooperation which mandates that every individual tree put the community first for the sake of total flourishing. "...the trees synchronize their performance so that they are all equally successful" (Wolleben 2015, 15). The larger trees miraculously are able to recognize if they grow too fast and grab all of the resources the smaller trees will be killed off. Trees put aside their personal good for the sake of the good of the group. "Every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible. And that is why even sick individuals are supported and nourished until they recover" (Wolleben 2015, 4). In the exact same way, the Christian community is meant to a place where personal spiritual formation is grounded in health and inappropriate competition is prevented from creeping in.

Attempting to grow personally apart from community is simply not possible. It is feasible for one to experience a sense of change, but what is actually growing is pride. Personal spiritual growth away from healthy community is about the individual and seldom includes God's design for loving relationships. Spiritual growth which happens entirely apart from the healthy community is at risk of seeing others as obstacles rather than partners. A faith grounded in Christ-centered community allows every person to be seen as valuable. Adults can learn from children, able-bodied people can be impacted by those with disabilities,

pastors can learn from lay people. Just as trees in a forest, the Christian community of faith is not simply a way to experience growth but a required piece for true positive growth. It is important to note the importance of the health of the community as a group centered on the person of Christ. Unhealthy communities can cause a level of de-formation to take place. Even within the church, an unhealthy gathering can draw people away from God.

Robert Mulholland does a fantastic job of emphasizing the importance of others by looking at the Christian virtues highlighted in Colossians 3:12 (compassion, kindness, lowliness, gentleness, and patience).

Once again Paul makes the inseparable connection between our life with God and our life with others. We can put on none of these virtues in a privatized, individualized relationship with God. Each of them is situated in the midst of our often messy relationships with others. (Mulholland 2016, 121)

One cannot demonstrate any of these virtues in isolation. The community is not simply a means to achieve growth in Christ, it is an indispensable component.

Considering the imagery of a tree it is worth noting a fruit tree does not produce fruit for its own sake. As my ecology professor friend Eli often says, “What’s the purpose of an apple tree? ...To produce more apple trees!” (Knapp 2018, 113). Becoming like Christ is not an end unto itself nor a project of personal gain. Once again we must remember, one’s spiritual formation is for the sake of others. “All of God’s work to conform us to the image of Christ has as its sole purpose that we might become what God created us to be *in relationship with God and with others*” (Mulholland, 1993, 40). As we become more of who we are

designed to be we have the capacity to help others realize this same truth in their own lives.

### Dynamic Sources Needed for Spiritual Growth: Sunlight, Water, and Adversity

Trees need a myriad of resources for growth which cannot be produced, only received. Sunlight, water, carbon dioxide, and nutrients in the soil to list a few. While the tree is able to take these resources and turn them into fuel for growth, a tree cannot produce any of what it needs. For much of recent Evangelical Christian history, the concept of spiritual formation has been deeply impacted by the ideal of rugged individualism. Individuals looking to grow in their faith receive instructions which rely heavily on personal effort. As an example, the contemporary Protestant churches in America are largely suspicious of written prayers. When I speak with friends and students they claim reading prayers lack a certain authenticity. And yet, the same people regularly complain about how exhausted they are by their prayer life. “God’s sanctifying work in us is not reducible to our work of moral exercises. No one is sanctified by his or her own will or ego strength or moral power, but only by grace- by God’s unmerited gift” (Oden 2009, 658). This is simply one example of how an imbalance in personal responsibility can be damaging to spiritual growth.

As stated previously, there is a remarkable balance between personal responsibility and God’s sanctifying work. A tree cannot produce the necessary nutrients for growth, but a tree must do the work of synthesizing and absorbing

those nutrients which are offered. The various sources for tree health provide a helpful picture for Wesley's Means of Grace. All of the Means are ways in which humans can receive the life-changing grace God has to offer. The image of the tree reminds all Christians that God desires to share with us the resources of God's grace, we simply need to locate ourselves in the places where God's sanctifying work is already happening.

While much of this model intentionally focuses on the positive aspects of healthy growth, trees provide a great metaphor for the growth that can occur in times of trial. This concept is clearly reflected in Scripture (Romans 12:12, James 1:12, Hebrews 6:11) and often cited between Christians. The imagery of a tree helps to highlight this truth. In an early bio-dome experiment, environmental scientists were perplexed by the lack of healthy root growth in trees experiencing perceived ideal conditions. Further research revealed the tree roots were underdeveloped because there was no wind within the bio dome. The regular force pushing up against the trees yielded the root strength essential for trees to grow without toppling over (Swoboda, 2018). This discovery illustrates the opportunity for essential formation even in the midst of trials.

Healthy spiritual formation is not about creating an easy path, but recognizing the ideal environment for growth requires some times of resistance and struggle. Just as the wind pushing against the body of a tree forces the roots to fortify, personal struggles with the brokenness of this world allow the deep places of our hearts to experience strengthening. Beyond typical struggles there are also

important signs of spiritual growth in times of tragedy, just as forests experience long-term nutrient cycling following a massive fire.

We can hold fast, or rather, *be held* fast. We don't have to deny the senseless horrors of life in order to defend God's goodness. We don't have to understand the mechanics of the universe. But even in the midst of doubt, we can keep tethering ourselves to what is true. (Michel 2014, 102)

Times of crisis or tragedy can force one to recognize their dependence on God. As I have learned through my own life, one quickly recognizes entire dependency on God's grace during times of upheaval.

### Spiritual Growth as Simultaneously Visible and Invisible: Branches and Roots

The Apostle Paul's imagery of Fruits of the Spirit, found in Galatians, highlights the visible ways that spiritual formation can be on display. However, as Wesley's sermon of the "Almost Christian" illustrated, it is possible for some visible indicators of spiritual growth to occur without true transformation. Just as a tree without healthy roots can only appear to be alive for a short time, the same applies to a Christian who is not experiencing change in the hidden places of their heart. While the visible part of all trees may be impressive, the roots concealed underground are significant even though unseen. "Tree roots extend a long way, more than twice the spread of the crown" (Wolleben 2015, 7). The visible tree needs the roots just as the roots need the visible parts of the tree. There is an essential co-dependence where neither part can be ignored.

Similarly, in spiritual formation there is an interdependence between the visible parts of our spiritual life and the hidden parts of our heart. Jesus'

recognition of the widow's offering in Luke 21 highlights this point here. Both the Pharisees and the widow were participating in the public act of giving. However, the impact of the gift was different based on the underlying motives. While giving is still important, it must be held in balance with a heart that desires to be generous. True spiritual formation cannot happen entirely in secret. Just as roots need a tree above ground to receive air and sunlight, a faith built only upon public demonstration can survive for a short while. Fruit must grow out of an entirely healthy system, otherwise it likens itself to a pine tree attempting to become an apple tree by simply pinning apples to the branches.

There are always limitations to creating labels and drawing hard lines when developing a model. As a result, I am not terribly interested in categorizing certain spiritual practices or parts of spiritual formation as public or private. I am, however, interested in expressing the importance of experiencing spiritual growth which transforms the hidden parts of one's soul along with the visible manifestations of one's faith. It seems that the two working together is part of the great mystery of life with God. One again, Mulholland captures my thoughts beautifully.

I hope you are beginning to see that the Christian life in its fullness is far more than being active in a Christian community, affirming a certain set of beliefs or adopting a particular behavior pattern. These are a secondary result of the primary reality of a life engaged in an ever deepening union with God in love. (Mulholland 2016, 19)

For me, the image of a tree helps to explain some of the mystery with concrete realities of a growing relationship with God.

## The Importance of Growth in Hidden Places: The Soil

Soil, not formally part of the tree, is one of the most vital components for healthy tree growth and a primary focus of this model. The soil in which trees' roots extend is essential for life. Without soil there are no trees (Wolleben 2015, 85). At its best, the soil is filled with the essential nutrients for tree roots to extend and flourish. At its worst, the soil is a hardened barrier which prevents any of the required nutrients to reach the hungry roots. Jesus' parable in Matthew 13 of the soil and the seeds delves into what soil might represent within spiritual formation. Healthy soil leads to growth while unhealthy soil leads to death.

With such clear descriptions, one must ask what exactly makes "healthy soil." What factors either allow or prevent a person from experiencing sincere transformation in the hidden places of life? I would like to propose the soil in personal spiritual formation is the place of practices, habits, and liturgies. As stated previously, people change more readily by the directing of their love over their minds. As that which we love shapes our lives, the redirection of our loves will bring about gut-level change, coming most readily through our body's habits and rituals.

James K.A. Smith likens this gut-level knowledge to his childhood ability to navigate his hometown. While Smith could not have given appropriate directions to a visitor based on street names, he knew every inch of his town in his bones (Smith 2016, 138). This illustration highlights an important truth. The more time we spend immersed in a certain reality, the more we will embed that reality

into our “bones” or bodies, and then ultimately our hearts—the hidden part of our life. Developing healthy soil, allowing God to transform the deep and hidden parts of our life, comes through shaping our love by adopting holy habits.

Some may be concerned by the language of habit and ritual. Words calling for repetition may lead to legalism or a faith that is entirely built around performance. However, this apprehension hinges on how you view God’s work in corporate worship.

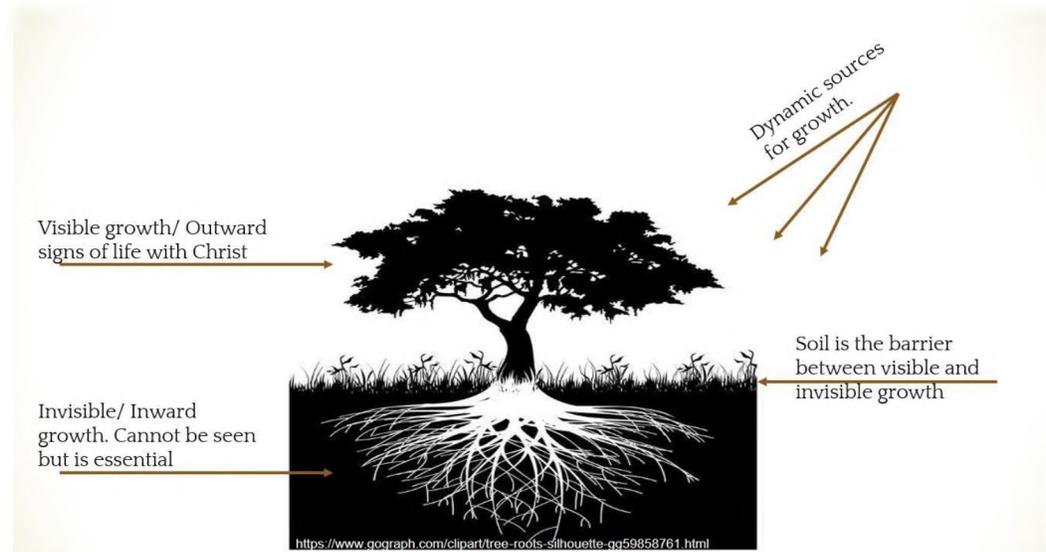
If you think of worship as a bottom-up, expressive endeavor, repetition will seem insincere and inauthentic. But when you see worship as an invitation to a top-down encounter in which God is refashioning your deepest habits, then repetition looks very different: it’s how God rehabilitates us (Smith 2016, 80).

If we believe spiritual formation is about our ability to muster up our love for God, then repetition is frustrating. But, if formation is God’s work and God is ultimately in charge of our shaping then regular repetitive encounters with God is the primary way we experience change. Scot McKnight echoes this sentiment when addressing similar concerns related to the use of prayer books. “We believed, and I joined in with this conviction for a long time, that there was a spiritually dangerous connection between set prayers and impersonal faith” (McKnight 2006, 4). He goes on, “If our prayers have become vain repetitions, it is because our heart is not engaged, not because of what we say” (McKnight 2006, 5). In order to allow the truths of God’s love to seep into our bones, we must surround ourselves with repeated habits and rituals reminding us of this truth.

Constant repetition of unholy habits which point our hearts away from God can also degrade the quality of the soil. Every single day our lives are loaded with rhythms and habits. I regularly talk with students struggling to sense God's unconditional love while the majority of their days are spent assessing the loveliness of their bodies and personalities via feedback on social media. They can tell me logically that they are loved by God but have immersed their hearts, via habit, into a world that constantly tells them love is dependent on the attractiveness of their latest selfie. I have seen first hand how the habits around social media are impacting student's self-image. Issues related to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are on the rise at an alarming rate on campuses across North America (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 59).

Our hearts are constantly being shaped by repetitive, embodied rituals which inform one's vision of the good life and point one toward that end. "Your love or desire- aimed at a vision of the good life that shapes how you see the world while also moving and motivating you..." (Smith 2016, 36). But Jesus clearly points us to the one and only appropriate telos for human life: to love what God loves and to desire what God desires. This concept is important in considering spiritual formation through habits. In order to experience healthy growth leading to the likeness of Christ, one must consistently engage with habits and rituals which create the conditions for God's grace to work in their hearts. Habits which de-form do so without our full recognition as they change our heart's desires.

Allow me to return to the original diagram of a tree (see figure 2), to demonstrate how habits and rituals hold special potential for impact in spiritual formation.



**Figure 4: Model of Spiritual Formation**

God desires for all humans to be made whole and to live a life that is healthy and holy in totality. As Wesley and Smith both argue, the invisible motives of the heart are essential in healthy spiritual formation. Similarly, Jesus speaks regularly to issues of heart. The dynamic sources of growth, discussed earlier, can only nourish the essential parts of the tree if the soil allows. I believe what allows God’s work in our lives to touch the hidden places of our hearts are the rituals and habits in which we engage. While reviewing some of my most significant spiritual episodes throughout my autobiography, most were linked to years of seemingly innocuous routines which prepared me to experience God with significant depth. The work in Chapter 2 focuses on specific episodes in my life,

but each event was dependent on significant rituals taking place for years prior. Conversely, habits and rituals which de-form a person can cause a hardened heart and even limit the potential for change when encountering God's grace.

With the entire structure of the model at hand, I return to my original proposal: *Spiritual formation changes people more into the likeness of Christ and takes place as a person engages with intention in holy habits and rituals in which God's grace can work.*

### **Application of Model in Ministry Context**

While the imagery of a tree provides tangible understanding of the theories behind my model, I am particularly interested in shifting my focus to how this model applies to the lives in my ministry setting. Do habits and rituals actually translate to the spiritual formation of contemporary undergraduate students? Are there special opportunities for spiritual formation through habits during these formational years of late adolescence?

As stated in Chapter 1, for the past 20 years I have ministered continually to adolescents. For many, this is a demographic capable of evoking much anxiety and frustration in our larger culture. For me, this population is in a season of incomparable opportunity in the midst of a demanding life transition. Students are filled with passion, energy, and wonder unlike any other time in life. And yet, there are plenty of moments when these characteristics are pointed in a direction which is unhelpful or even destructive.

Emerging adults have been described as ‘morally adrift,’ devoid of clear boundaries for right and wrong outside of personal opinion. Others highlight their tendency to engage in risk behaviors such as reckless driving, binge drinking, and drug abuse. Many point to their sexually permissive and promiscuous relationships... (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 4).

Despite these struggles, when the vigor of youthfulness intersects the passion of the gospel, the Kingdom of God seems unmistakably near. There is not enough space in this entire portfolio for me to document first hand accounts of students impacting the world as they align their life and priorities with God’s Kingdom. However, it has left me confident of the possibilities for significant spiritual formation during this season in life. The specific setting of the Christian college offers a unique atmosphere for deep spiritual formation.

Historically, the uniqueness of the Christian college has been seen primarily as an academic pursuit built upon the realization of God as creator. In his substantial work, *The Christian College*, William Ringenberg provides the following definition:

A Christian college is a community of Christian believers, both teachers and students, who are dedicated to the search for an understanding of the divine Creator, the universe which he has created, and the role which each creature should fill in his universe. The titles of the specific courses may not differ from those in a secular college. What does differ dramatically, however, is the attitude with which Christian scholars approach their areas of investigation. To Christian learners, all truth is God’s truth, and the pursuit of it is a spiritual quest to understand God better. (Ringenberg 2006, 215)

While Ringenberg does appropriately identify the communal aspect of higher education, this definition reflects the over-emphasis on intellectual ascent as the primary feature of the Christian college. Ringenberg relies on the assumption that

the principal function of every college is the search for knowledge. In doing so, the Christian college becomes a place only slightly different from other academic institutions where knowledge is equally pursued but with different intentions.

In contrast, James K.A. Smith connects the power of habit with the setting of the Christian college.

What's the alternative? If Christian education is not merely about acquiring a Christian perspective of a Christian worldview, what is its goal? Its goal, I'm suggesting, is the same as the goal of Christian worship: to form radical disciples of Jesus and citizens of the baptismal city who, communally, take up the creational task of being God's image bearers, unfolding the cultural possibilities latent in creation - but doing so as empowered by the Spirit, following the example of Jesus's cruciform cultural labor. (Smith 2009, 220)

This vision set forth by Smith is an attractive one because it represents a universal goal in life as a Christian. The advantage of Smith's work, for my setting, is how he recognizes the specific ways in which this goal can be achieved exclusively on Christian college campuses.

The unique nature of residential higher education provides an opportunity to create intentional communities within the dorms that not only gather for Bible study and prayer but also engage in a range of full-bodied Christian practices, including liturgical practices such as prayerful observance of the Daily Office or 'Divine hours.' (Smith 2009, 226)

Smith's ideas allow one to recognize the distinctive strengths of Christian colleges as more than just an avenue for the exchange of information but, instead, whole-person transformation.

Christians who graduate from college primarily with head knowledge about their faith and life will enter a world where their ideas are most likely in the minority. Faced with this new reality, life can be filled with anxiety and the

common response is to either compromise or to see others as threats to the life they are working to construct. However, a Christian who spends their time in college developing a sense of God's deep love can enter a world where, even as a social minority, much anxiety can be avoided due to an identity firmly anchored in regular practices which plant them in God's Kingdom. If one is confident in God's love for them and for others, people with different ideas no longer pose a threat. Even people with vastly different ideals are an invitation for Christians to show God's love.

The organic nature of both plants and spiritual life make the concept of a ministry founded in God's love a logical fit for my model of a tree and soil. Habits and practices which prepare the soil of our hearts to receive God's grace can easily be experimented with in the laboratory of the Christian college community. Spiritual formation for the students with whom I work is less about an exchange of information and more about an invitation to participation. The practices are not the end, but engaging with the practices can lead to a fuller participation in the divine love of the Trinity. As a result, I desire to explore ways to help students engage with spiritual practices within their community: practices that reach all parts of a student's life and may also be applied by professors in the classroom and coaches on the field. Working in a living, learning, worshipping community allows me to consider the important interplay between individual and corporate practices. The possibilities seem almost limitless as I work with college students who live together, eat together, work together, and worship together day

in and day out. It is my current goal in ministry to create an environment where emerging adults are wrapped in rhythms and rituals which regularly work together to cultivate healthy soil, rather than to de-form them according to consumeristic practices driven by digital media. From the classroom to the dining hall, the community should be saturated with reminders of God's love. A community focused on God's love can allow all members of the community to find their identity anchored in the only reality able to provide true meaning, the eternal love of a triune God. With this model as a structure and this desire in mind, I now turn to my research project which attempts to bring these ideas to life within my ministry context.

**CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PROJECT**  
***LECTIO DIVINA AS A HABIT FOR TODAY'S***  
**COLLEGE STUDENT**

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12 NIV)*

The following research project set out to explore how college students experience spiritual growth through regular engagement with Scripture using *Lectio Divina*. The framework of the project was developed with direct awareness of the intersection between my model for spiritual formation and perceived needs within my ministry context.

Reading Scripture is a foundational practice within Christianity and named as one of Wesley's Means of Grace. Within my ministry at a private Christian College, I regularly witness young adults struggling with a desire to engage with Scripture. In this research, 13 students spent four weeks practicing *Lectio Divina*. The research concludes that *Lectio Divina* is a valuable and reliable practice for the contemporary undergraduate student. *Lectio Divina* can bring about identifiable spiritual growth in a reasonably limited time frame and create a positive impact on the overall spiritual health of participants. This research

reinforces the proposals in my model as well as my campus ministry's focus on trusted ancient practices, while providing information on possible ways to expand the current practices.

### **Opportunities and Response**

As outlined in Chapter 3, the opportunity for significant spiritual impact during late adolescence is at a peak. The long-term trajectory for adult life is being calibrated during these years, including spiritual health. Simultaneously, many students I encounter experience a great deal of frustration when trying to take responsibility for the faith formation of young adulthood. It is entirely reasonable for college students to rely heavily on intellectual ascent as a primary way of experiencing spiritual growth. The years after high school are often highlighted by intense academic exploration. Thus, students make a reasonable connection between thinking and spiritual growth. However, in concert with James K. A. Smith's proposals previously explored, I believe the particular strength of working at a Christian college gives me the opportunity to develop this season of learning beyond mere acquisition of knowledge into the experience of transformation. Based on the work of my model, I believe holy rituals and habits allow for important formation in the deep parts of one's heart. As a result, it is essential for my ministry to regularly explore ways to help students engage with spiritual practices within their community.

This project focused specifically on one practice by introducing *Lectio Divina* to a small group from the student body. *Lectio* was selected because of

regular conversations with students over the past 10 years that identified struggles connecting the Biblical text with personal spiritual growth. Additionally, *Lectio* is a practice which has not fully been explored in my current ministry.

As a result, my research explored the experience of students engaging with *Lectio Divina*. Particular focus was placed on *Lectio Divina*'s ability to help students grow in their experience of God's love. My ultimate goal was to better understand the possibility of incorporating *Lectio* practices more widely in our campus community, both curricular and co-curricular, as I strive to support the spiritual development of students within my care.

### **Supervision, permission, and access**

As my research setting and individual ministry is an academic community, I received permission from my college's Institutional Research Board as well as my direct supervisor. My direct supervisor, Dean of the Chapel, is responsible for the entire spiritual life department on campus and provided support and guidance at the time of project development. I also received permission from Tyndale's Research Ethics Board as the overseeing institution.

While I work daily with a large number of students, I needed to ensure I was doing everything possible to minimize any concern with coercion when soliciting participation. As a result, my communication via email and public announcements were reviewed by the Dean of the Chapel who serves as a senior administrator for the college.

## Context

The research for this project took place at Houghton College in Houghton, New York. Houghton is a private Christian college of the Liberal Arts and Sciences sponsored by the Wesleyan Church. Founded in 1883, Houghton is the oldest of the five Wesleyan schools and currently operates with a total student enrollment of 850. The student population currently represents 31 states, 39 countries, and over 30 denominations. While Houghton does not require a statement of faith for admission, the majority of the students self-identify as Christian and intentionally decided to attend a Christian school. All faculty, staff, and students agree to abide by the Statement of Community Responsibility which outlines the standards of living for the sake of the greater community. The primary features of this document find their support in the theological convictions of the Wesleyan denomination. The current edition of the document is readily available on the college's website <https://www.houghton.edu/about/college-profile/community-covenant/>

Houghton has a strong sense of community due to the location and demographics. Houghton is situated in a rural setting within the second poorest county in the state of New York. As a result, the college has almost no commuters making the campus a highly residential body. Based on data from the college's 2019 Fact Book, Houghton's main campus had less than 50 commuters and almost 700 students in college housing. Additionally, over 90% of the faculty and staff live within a 10-mile radius. Finally, the student population at Houghton

comes from a lower income bracket than the average Christian college in the United States along with a higher than average academic standing. The student population I serve comes from humble backgrounds and perform exceptionally well academically.

In my work as the Director of Campus Ministries, I serve alongside the Dean of the Chapel in supporting the spiritual life for all of campus. Together we share the goal of creating space for all members of the community to experience healthy spiritual formation. It is our hope that students will leave Houghton with an identity that is deeply rooted in the love of Jesus Christ, allowing them to go into the world ready to share that love no matter the specific location or the work to which God may be calling them.

This sincere desire for formation along with the rural setting leads me and my colleague to consider Houghton's community as pseudo-monastic. Relying on our Wesleyan heritage and the work of thinkers like James K.A. Smith, we readily identify distinct opportunities for spiritual practices on a residential Christian College campus. As a result, my colleague and I invest a great deal of time in creating space for spiritual practices which we believe will shape the community toward Christ. I recognize Smith does not directly argue for a connection between the monastery and the undergraduate institution. Additionally, we quickly admit there are significant difference between the monastery and the college campus. For one example, the required level of commitment to the community is limited by time and is minimal in intensity by comparison. However, there are substantial

places of overlap which help to guide our work here. Similar to a monastery, the college has a group of people living together, pulled away from some of the world's consumeristic distractions, working together, eating together, and worshipping together. At Houghton, we hold regular times of worship with morning prayer five days a week, evening communion five days a week, and chapel three days a week. As a result of these overlaps, I regularly ask myself what proven practices of monasticism can inform how best to invest in the lives of students.

With this context in mind, my project focused on introducing *Lectio Divina* to students. Currently, *Lectio* is one of the primary practices in monasticism which is not given full attention in our setting. Our morning prayer and evening communion use a lectionary developed specifically for our academic year. Each week there is a theme that fits with the natural rhythms of our life together. Over the course of the academic year, every book in the Bible is cited at least once. During those times of prayer we share in a few moments of silence after each reading, but not a full time of *Lectio*.

### **Model & Other Major Source Material**

The research flows directly from my reflections on my personal journey in Chapter 2 as well as the model of spiritual formation presented in Chapter 3. As I explored previously, I am particularly interested in habits which create an environment for God to work in one's heart. As argued in chapter 3, I believe

practices which can allow for God's grace to impact the heart are of foundational importance.

### Connections with Spiritual Autobiography and Model of Spiritual Formation

In my early years as a Christian, I was part of a tradition which placed a high value on Scripture and preached often the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating one's reading. However, my tradition kept engagement with Scripture entirely in the mind. As I understood it, the work of the Holy Spirit was only revealed by increased comprehension of the text. As a New Testament scholar, Robert Mulholland would describe, I had a predominately "informational" approach to the Bible (Mulholland 2008, 49). I learned to see Scripture as an instruction manual or a guidebook. I read the Bible excavating for clues about how I should carry out my life as a Christian. There was an underlying suspicion around practices which veered from intellectual engagement with the text. The knowledge gained was helpful, but I had no effective method to connect my knowledge with the deeper parts of my soul. When I have shared this piece of my story with students, I find many resonate with this experience. They articulate a desire to grow but admit most of their attempts seem to fall short.

Building upon the concepts presented in my model, this project aims to introduce students to a new method for connecting with Scripture through *Lectio Divina*. Reading Scripture as part of a contemplative ritual weaves together the

soil component of my model of formation with my theological framework of Wesley's Means of Grace.

#### Other Literature and Cases

Understanding the aim of spiritual formation is not easily articulated. However, the works of Robert Mulholland have been beneficial in presenting a coherent picture for personal spiritual transformation. *Invitation to a Journey* (Mulholland 1993) and *The Deeper Journey* (Mulholland 2016) bring to light an image for spiritual formation which is grounded in biblical text and real-world reflection. Mulholland presents an understanding of spiritual flourishing that is simultaneously inspiring and accessible. Mulholland argues that through the work of God's love, individuals can truly achieve union with Christ which is in line with their original design. Much of how I understand the aim and function of spiritual formation comes from Mulholland's works. Additionally, Mulholland's text on the role of Scripture in spiritual formation, *Shaped by the Word* (2000), presents a compelling argument. As a New Testament scholar, Mulholland identifies the unique power within the Word of God to shape the hearts of believers. "This living, productive Word- the very essence of God- encounters us at the core of our being and discerns the deepest structure of our being and doing" (Mulholland 2000, 39). His thoughts in this text helped me to consider *Lectio Divina* for this research as I desire to help others experience spiritual formation.

Integrating my understanding of spiritual formation with my ministry situation on a residential college campus led me to the work of James K.A. Smith. Smith's work initially appealed to me due to his attention to spiritual formation on a Christian college campus. However, I quickly found his thesis connecting habits with formation to be entirely captivating. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Smith 2009) and *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit* (Smith 2016) made important connections in my mind regarding liturgical practices and spiritual formation. Smith's presentation on the limitations of intellectual ascent helped me to make sense of my personal spiritual journey as well as the work I do with students.

As mentioned earlier, my current ministry context at Houghton College is situated within The Wesleyan Church. As a result, it is important for my work to take into consideration the significant theological and historical underpinnings of this tradition. To explore these concepts most succinctly, I spent time in the original source material of John Wesley's standard sermons. John *Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons* (Wesley, 1967). This anthology is the backbone of Wesley's theology and presents an image of spiritual formation rooted in sanctification powered by God's grace. The most pertinent text for this project is Wesley's second Standard Sermon, "The Almost Christian." As explained in Chapter 3, Wesley presents an image of spiritual formation which requires transformation of the heart.

Finally, as my research focused on the practice of *Lectio Divina* amongst a largely protestant population, I have engaged with two texts to help me navigate this particular practice. First, Evan B. Howard's article, *Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition* (Howard 2012), provides a thorough reflection on the connections between the Protestant evangelical church and a historically Catholic practice. Second, with so many different methods and schema for the particular practice, it was important for my research to land on one resource. Jim Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard's text, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (Howard, Wilhoit 2012), presents *Lectio* in a format which is faithful to the historical practice while being entirely available for today's Protestant Christians.

### **Project, Methodology, and Methods**

The following section will outline in detail the structure of the project and the research methodology and methods utilized.

#### Field

This research took place at Houghton College in Houghton, New York. The project ran for 6 weeks during the fall semester of 2019. All participants were currently enrolled students in the residential college. The active research ran from October 21 to December 4, 2019.

The participants started as a group of 15 current, residential, students ranging in age from 18-25. Participation was open to the entire student body, but I

included the first 15 students who agreed to participate after reading the information letter and signing the consent form. The 15 participants provided some diversity:

- 13 different areas of study
- 6 different states and 1 international country
- 9 different denominations or Christian traditions
- 12 women and 3 men (this imbalance is representative of other projects I have experienced. Female students more regularly show an interest in spiritual life programming. Additionally, the female population on campus is 3:2)
- 1 student of color (this is an underrepresentation of the minorities on campus. Currently, 81% of the student body identifies as white)
- The age range spread across the campus' population: 4 Freshman, 3 Sophomores, 2 Juniors, 5 Seniors, and 1 recent graduate who is pursuing another degree.

All participants were volunteers who responded either to an announcement in chapel or an all campus email introducing the research.

### Scope

This project explored the impact of spiritual formation on students at Houghton who engage with *Lectio Divina*. The project helped me to determine how *Lectio* should be added in a more formal way to the current approaches to spiritual formation on Houghton's campus.

This project did not explore the health of other spiritual practices on campus. Ultimately, the sample size involved was too small to make conclusions regarding larger campus programming. Additionally, the project did not take into account demographic factors beyond what was previously listed. I did not collect data on academic standing, socio-economic status, co-curricular participation, or mental health.

### Methodology

This project made use of some of the principles from Action Research (described in further detail below) to explore the potential impact on spiritual formation through the practice of *Lectio Divina* with students living in a residential Christian college community. As the primary researcher, I provided instructions and training for all participants and made myself available for support along the way.

The first set of data was collected via pre- and post-interviews which helped to chart the overall experience for participants (Appendix 1 and 2). In addition to the interviews, I collected journals. Each participant was asked to record personal reflections on their experience with *Lectio* during each session (Appendix 3). The final piece of data collection came in the form of a log which recorded how often students participated in the practice and the time spent at each attempt. These logs served as a quantitative data set, allowing me to calculate the amount of time engaged with the practice during the research (Appendix 3).

## Methods

Following the chapel announcement and the all-campus email, I responded to each interested student. I sent potential participants the information letter and consent form via email. Once they agreed to be in the research, participants attended an informational meeting where I offered training in the practice of *Lectio Divina* and gave the opportunity to ask questions about the instructions for the research. I held four different info sessions in order to best accommodate schedules.

After the info sessions, I scheduled initial interviews with each of the 15 participants prior to starting the practice of *Lectio*. The interviews lasted 15-25 minutes and provided a baseline set of information. The initial interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. The questions were designed for participants to comment on the following areas:

1. Current habits related to Bible reading
2. Sense of God's love
3. Sense of spiritual impact related to current Bible reading
4. Sense of connection with personal spiritual formation and the larger campus community. As a Christian college we speak often about the impact of the larger community. This question was to help me explore if private spiritual practices connect to the larger community in the mind of students

## 5. Sense of personal spiritual health and current relationship with God

The questions comprising the interview were open-ended in nature but with appropriate guidelines to keep the content focused on the participant's time in college. As Tim Sensing explains, "The open-ended questions will be used most often in DMin projects. Sometimes these questions can be narrow in focus requiring only one or two sentences or even just one word" (Sensing 2011, 113). The interview format was "semi-structured," allowing consistency across participants with some flexibility to ensure appropriate information was collected (Sensing 2011, 107). This particular structure was chosen to allow for points of clarification if questions or answers are not completely understood by either party.

Once the initial interviews were complete, participants were asked to practice personal *Lectio* two- three times a week for 4 weeks. I provided participants with a list of the Bible verses being used for the college's morning prayer and afternoon communion services. They were not required to work from this schedule, but the list was designed to give them a resource to help select Bible passages for *Lectio*. Throughout these 4 weeks of practice they kept a journal to record the experience and a log recording how much time was spent in the practice. Participants received a model for journal keeping as an example (Appendix 3). This model was designed to maximize the useful data in the journals while minimizing any sort of specific guidance which might impact the results. The decision to collect journals was to help understand aspects of change

during the process and to illuminate any distinctions between the two interviews. These journals served as “artifacts” providing personal interpretations of the events taking place in participant’s lives during the research (Sensing 2011, 135). The log (Appendix 3) provided some quantitative data to better understand how much time each participant spent practicing *Lectio*.

Following the completion of the project, students met with me for a second interview which allowed participants to reflect on their experiences with spiritual formation throughout their time practicing *Lectio*. The second interview focused on the same topic areas as the first interview and used the same structure. However, this interview asked students to indicate any possible impact the experience with *Lectio* had on their lives. The specific questions can be found in Appendix 2.

The data collected was primarily qualitative. The logs and interviews provided some opportunities for calculations, i.e., the time spent in the practice, the number of students who experienced positive change, or the number of students who plan to continue in the practice. However, the primary information collected observed impact through a narrative lens. The initial interview, journal, log, and final interview work in concert to tell the story of spiritual impact from each participant. No coding took place until all documents were collected and interviews were completed. For the initial read through, I examined the three primary documents for each participant as a unit and took notes to extract

appropriate information. Following this first read, I began coding the entire participant group as a whole.

The coding process began with several readings of the collected materials. Throughout these readings, large themes began to emerge. At this point I made use of the coding software NVivo to help me keep track of various statements and quotes. Once large categories emerged, I used NVivo to re-organize every quote which may fit into one of the large categories. Eventually, I was able to identify two primary themes of struggle and opportunity. Following these large category assignments, I began to work my way through the various quotes to delineate smaller sub-themes. This process went through multiple cycles as I reviewed the data and gained a clearer sense of the various themes which emerged. The details of the themes and sub-themes will be shared explicitly in the findings.

### Phases and Timetable

**Table 1: Phases and Timetable**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
Development Phase	May 2019	Held discussions with colleagues and classmates to narrow down scope of research
	June 2019	Met with campus staff members who needed to give permission and support for this project
	June 2019	Updated campus lectionary for coming academic year
	August 2019	Finalized interview scripts and model for journals

	August 2019	Finalized teaching session on <i>Lectio</i> and necessary resources
	August 2019	Finalized plan for recruiting participants
Ethical Approval Phase	August 29, 2019	Submitted Tyndale REB application
	October 3, 2019	Tyndale REB approval received
	October 3, 2019	Submitted Houghton IRB
	October 8, 2019	IRB approval received
Implementation Phase	October 21, 2019	Invited participants and distributed information letters and consent forms
	October 22-23, 2019	Held informational meetings
	October 24-25, 2019	Held initial interviews
	October 27- November 23, 2019	Participants practiced <i>Lectio</i>
	December 2-6, 2019	Held second interviews and collected all journals and logs
Data Analysis Phase	December 8-10, 2019	Organized data and began initial review
	December 10, 2019- January 10, 2020	Reviewed data and coded results
	January 11, 2020- March 2020	Interpreted data and compiled into report.

**Summary of Active Participant Timeline:**

Week 1: participants handed in consent, attended introductory meeting, and met for initial interview. An entire week was set aside for these tasks so all interviews could be conducted in the midst of student’s full schedules.

Weeks 2-5: participants actively engaged with *Lectio* and recorded the experience in their journals. The current literature on creating habits indicates a median time of 66 days with an upper range of 254 (Lally, Phillippa, et al. 2010, 1002). My

setting did not allow for that length of study with the complexities of the college calendar. Additionally, the total time of six weeks was the maximum I could fit into the semester without significant interruptions for breaks and exams.

Week 6: participants handed in their journals and completed a final interview.

### Ethics in Ministry Based Research

Conducting this research in my current ministry setting requires special attention to appropriate ethical protocol. My role at the college as a minister and teacher creates an additional level of power differential beyond that which already exists as a result of the age gap between myself and students. Additionally, my research included collecting information from personal reflections related to one's spiritual life. While it was impossible for me to completely remove the potential impact of the power structures, I did my best to minimize the imbalance. With all this in mind, I used the following guidelines to help ensure the research was safe and ethical.

- Throughout the development phase of the research, I was in regular consultation with my direct supervisor, the Dean of the Chapel, who serves as the senior administrator for the campus' spiritual life department. His feedback gave me an immediate sounding board from someone who has a strong sense of our current ministry setting.
- In addition to receiving Tyndale's Research Ethics Board approval, I received approval from Houghton College's Institutional Review Board

before conducting the research. Tyndale's approval was received on October 3, 2019. Houghton's approval was received on October 8, 2019.

- I did not connect participation in this research with any of the courses I was teaching in the concurrent semester. I made no mention of the research to my students in class and I used only the approved means of communication (Appendix 6) to solicit involvement. I did end up with one participant from one of my courses. In order to minimize the power imbalance, I never spoke of class during the research sessions and I never spoke of the research in class.
- Students were given the opportunity to step out of the research at any time. If students failed to attend an informational meeting they did not receive a follow up email to minimize any sense of pressure.
- I have maintained anonymity for all participants by removing names and personal demographics from any information. All participants' names have been changed to a number.
- I maintained security by keeping all record on my private drive on a secure server or in a locked filing cabinet in my personal office.
- Participation was open to all residential students currently enrolled in classes. While open participation means my sample was not exactly representative of the larger campus body, there was no discrimination related to race, gender, socio-economic class, nationality, or academic

standing. This helped prevent participants from underrepresented people groups from being excluded.

- I was open and transparent about the research, my hopes, and long-range goals to all participants. However, I allowed the research to lead to its own conclusions, making it clear to all participants I have no particular expectations for the data collected.

### **Findings, Interpretations, and Outcomes**

Having explored the methodology for the research, I now will present some of the findings, interpretations, and outcomes. Findings will focus on the details of what was uncovered through the coding process. Interpretations will introduce my reflections and understanding of the findings. Finally, outcomes will connect the research findings and my interpretations with the ultimate impact of what has been discovered.

#### Findings

For sake of clarity, the findings are best organized by the following five categories:

- Initial interest communicated by potential participants
- Initial interviews with participants
- Participants' journals kept during the four weeks of *Lectio*
- Second interviews with participants
- Participants' logs recording *Lectio* practice habits during the four weeks

### **Initial Interest Communicated by Participants**

As I developed this project I was hoping to find 8 students willing to participate. However, I had some concern about the possibility of gathering a group of more than 5 students. In my experience, students rarely have time to take on extra work and my research was unfolding at a demanding time of the semester. Point in case, in order for some of our graduating psychology students to conduct their capstone research, some courses make participation in research a graded assignment in the syllabus. My research offered no academic benefit to participants. Additionally, my timeline limited my communication to one announcement and one email taking place just hours apart on the same day with immediate responses needed. Both the announcement and email were factual and brief (Appendix 6). This format was void of my normal winsome communication style. The simplicity of the recruitment tools was developed intentionally to help minimize any sort of coercion with the recruitment process. Based on personal experience, this was less than an ideal structure for soliciting involvement, but it was necessary for my research.

Within hours of these initial communications I was contacted by 43 students. Based on campus population at the time of the research, this number accounts for more than 5% of the student body. Many of the students indicated a desire to grow spiritually and were happy to participate in research aimed at helping them achieve that goal. Of the 43 students, I had a prior relationship with

only 21. More than half of the students expressing interest were individuals completely unknown to me.

Once the information letter, consent form, and explanation of the timeline were sent out, the group dropped to 21 participants. Of the students who explained their reasoning for not participating, no one cited issues with the research or the consent. Each reply indicated an issue with their schedule and inability to take on additional responsibility.

I brought in to the research the first 15 students to sign the consent form. The project was designed to have a max of 15 participants simply due to the workload I could manage as the researcher. Of the 15 participants I had a prior relationship with just 7 students. Beyond, the 15 who participated in the full research, I trained 6 additional students in the practice of *Lectio* and they participated in an abridged version of the project which will be used for my own personal ministry benefit. These six additional participants were not interviewed in-person and were not required to keep a journal or a log. Rather, at the conclusion of the research I sent out the questions from the second interview via email. Responses from this questionnaire provided some further insights into *Lectio*'s fit in my place of ministry.

Two of the 15 students dropped out of the research within the first week following the initial interviews. Both participants named issues with an ability to make time for the practice of *Lectio* along with keeping a journal. Because I have almost no data from these participants, their interview transcripts and journals are

not included in the findings or in any calculations. As a result, all findings from this point on will refer only to 13 participants. Again, the issue was directly related to available time and not the practice itself. In fact, both participants indicated a desire to interact with *Lectio* following the information session's training.

### **Initial Interview with Participants**

Prior to the four week practice of *Lectio*, I conducted interviews with each of the 13 participants. This interview was designed to gather a baseline for the participants' interaction with the Bible and sense of personal spiritual health. The questions for these interviews can be found in Appendix 1. These initial interviews uncover places of challenge alongside incredible opportunities for growth. Table 2 outlines the coding categories for the initial interviews. The language for the categories and sub-categories in the coding process are not necessarily taken from exact quotes. I produced these titles using my own words to capture the overarching theme found in a number of interviews.

All 13 participants communicated at least one sense of struggle when considering their experience with Scripture. Some participants made more than one comment which could be coded as a challenge. This explains why the numbers in Table 2 add up to more than 13.

**Table 2: Coding for Initial Interviews**

Coding for Initial Interviews		
Category	Sub-Category	Reference Count
Challenge	The Bible is Boring	1
	Lack of Impact on Personal Life	6
	Only Read for Information	7
	Not Enough Time	8
	Struggling with Faith	4
Opportunity	Sincerely Seeking Growth	8
	Enjoy Reading Scripture for Classes	5
	Desire to Read Scripture More	11
	Finding Balance in Life	3
	Supported by Healthy Community	16

More than half of the participants noted a lack of time as a specific issue. This particular struggle is communicated well by Participant 1 who stated, “I guess I often feel like I don’t have enough time. So I don’t dig into it as much as I want to. And sometimes I am so tired I don’t get anything out of it.” The lack of free-time reported by participants is not given a clear explanation in any data. While academic responsibilities can impact a student’s schedule, participants identified a separate challenge related to academics and reading the Bible. Seven participants admitted a struggle with reading the Bible either only for class or

with an informational focus. Participant 4 states, “If I try to get deeper I feel like I am proof-texting by trying to find direct application to problems in my life.”

Finally, the third most reported struggle had to do with a lack of connection between the Bible and participants’ everyday experiences. A number of participants described a sort of disconnect between the Bible and their life.

Participant 5 highlights these comments when they shared, “I know when I read the Bible it is like I do my devotions, I go to bed, and I don’t remember a thing... Or I simply put it to the side and go about my day. It doesn’t seem to affect me.”

Alongside these honest struggles, I discovered encouraging opportunities for growth. The majority of the participants communicated a desire to deepen their relationship with God and to expand their ability to connect with God through the Bible. All 13 participants communicated either a desire to grow in their relationship with God or a hope to improve their regular interaction with Scripture. When asked to provide an image depicting their current spiritual life, the primary images conveyed opportunity for formation. Some images used were a baby, a book, a garden, and a blank piece of paper. There is reason to note desirability bias here, as the participants in my study self-selected as being interested in research focused on spiritual formation.

Additionally, the challenge of reading the Bible exclusively for academic purposes did not negate the potential positive impact of studying the Bible. Five of the participants indicated a new found appreciation for Scripture as a direct result of their required coursework in biblical studies. Participant 2 states, “I have

been reading a lot of Old Testament for my Bible class this semester... Through classes, I have been able to take a bigger context of the Bible and understand the historical context better.”

Finally, when students were asked to provide descriptive words for God and for the ways they believe God sees them, primarily positive words arose. Love, beloved, child, and daughter were the only repeated words used. “Love” or “beloved” was used by 7 participants and “child” or “daughter” was used by 6 participants. The fact that the words were mostly positive may, again, be a result of desirability bias. However, the specific words used by participants had a level of consistency.

These themes stood out clearly as the remainder of the words used to answer these two interview questions varied widely. For example, one participant described God as “author” and another used the phrase “not concerned with my lists.” However, the concept of love and an intimate familial relationship reoccurred consistently

### **Participants’ journals kept during the four weeks of *Lectio***

All participants were asked to keep a journal during the four weeks they practiced *Lectio*. The model for journaling (Appendix 3) provided some recommendations on how to keep a journal but with no specific requirements related to the length of journal entries.

In addition to the two participants who stepped out of the study, there was one more participant who was able to practice *Lectio* for the four weeks but did not keep a journal. This participant cited busyness as the primary factor.

The data from the journals is directly connected to participants' experience with *Lectio*. As I was coding the journals, "challenges" and "growth" surfaced with regularity. Under each main category there were several reoccurring themes.

Table 3 outlines the coding and themes from the journals

**Table 3: Coding for Journals**

Coding for Journals		
Category	Sub-Category	Reference Count
Challenge	Adjusting to the Practice	19
	Life Struggles	8
	Too Busy	6
	Too Tired	4
	Struggling with God	8
Growth	Connected with Chapel	5
	God's Love	6
	God's Personal Presence	13
	Real Life Connections	25
	<i>Lectio</i> as Good Practice	9
	Bible Reading	7

	Slowing Down and Listening	3
	Trust in God	4

### Challenges:

Similar to the initial interviews, there was a consistent concern with busyness and exhaustion. However, while a number of journals alluded to particular times of being too tired, busy, or distracted by life situations, these issues did not prevent participation. In fact, there were some occasions where the issue was resolved through time in *Lectio*. Participant 15 recorded,

[I] was feeling very drained and exhausted going into this time of Scripture reading. Sat on my bed and closed my eyes. Took some deep breaths. Primary feeling was fatigue at the beginning. By the end I was feeling more alert and cozy.

Along the same lines, there were occasions where life struggles were identified but did not prevent participation in *Lectio*. In some cases, these struggles were part of the work being done through meditation on Scripture. Participant 14 writes,

My initial reaction was that it was difficult to read the passage out loud because I wasn't feeling very joyful and the tone of the Psalm was very joyful. As I read it a second and third time, though, I was able to be more sincere, especially during *oratio*. I've been going through a pretty dark time in life and it was difficult to read aloud such a joyful passage of worship.

The personal struggle was mentioned as part of the *Lectio* but not named as inhibiting participation in the practice.

Adjusting to the practice was the most prominent challenge represented in the journals. Again, this did not thwart participation as the logs will show engagement with the practice that at least met or exceeded expectations. At the info sessions no participants raised any issue with the practice from a theological or philosophical standpoint. It is common for Protestant Christians to have some suspicion related to *Lectio* as a practice (Howard 56, 2012). Based on the journals I received, participants indicated initial discomfort with a new practice. Participant 3 represents this sentiment well stating, “I found myself asking myself if I had spent enough time lingering on the words, which I think is a result of doing something different from what I am used to.”

Growth:

Journal comments indicating positive growth were more prevalent than those naming challenges. As participants engaged with *Lectio*, the most prominent place of growth occurred when real life situations were integrated with God’s word. Five different participants cited chapel sermons as points of reference where God was illuminating a particular point. Participant 13 highlights this type of connection, “I also thought it was interesting because I chose this passage randomly, and it ended up including some of the same ideas that Dean Jordan talked about in chapel today: serve God in kindness.” Additionally, there were 25 references to integrating personal life situations and needs with the experience of *Lectio*. Participant 13 writes, “I feel God really spoke to me about some issues I’ve been having in my life that I have to reorient my thinking about.”

Beyond making connections with personal life situations, there were 13 references indicating growth in an awareness of God's presence. Participant 7 captures this experience well, writing:

What was nice was that, after I prayed and quieted myself and read, I could sort-of 'feel' You in the silence. Not in the previous, stronger ways that I've felt You, but I sensed Your presence all the same. Like, I had to just pause for a while after reading through the passage the first time. I had to soak You up.

The "You" in this text refers to God and God's presence felt during a session of *Lectio*.

While adjusting to the practice of *Lectio* was the most prominent challenge, participants identified an appreciation for *Lectio* as the third most mentioned place of growth. Participant 15 wrote, "Was looking forward to this time of *Lectio Divina*. Was excited about what God might have to say to me." Similarly, Participant 2 recorded, "*Lectio* was a super nice way to kick off my day, and makes me want to do it more than twice a week."

Some of the additional areas of growth discovered in the journals are also highlighted in the content from the second interviews. The findings for these topics will be unpacked next.

### **Second interviews with participants:**

After practicing *Lectio*, participants met with me for a second interview. These interviews took place about one and a half weeks after the completion of *Lectio*. This time gap was due to the semester calendar and Thanksgiving break. The questions for the second interview were designed specifically to compare

answers with the first (Appendix 2). Similar to the journals, the interviews revealed places of challenge as well as growth. See table 4

**Table 4: Coding categories for second Interview with Participants**

Coding for Second Interviews		
Category	Sub-Category	Reference Count
Challenge	Adjusting to the Practice	1
	Too Busy	2
Growth	Connected with Community and Chapel	6
	God's Love	3
	God's Personal Presence	5
	Real Life Connections	2
	<i>Lectio</i> as Good Practice	13
	Bible Reading	15
	Slowing Down and Listening	7

As illustrated in Table 4, the number and frequency of challenges saw a reduction from the first set of interviews. The bulk of data collected in the second set of interviews was positive. Two of the most notable places of growth were

related to Bible reading and the practice of *Lectio*. In the first set of interviews, struggles with Bible reading was cited by all 13 participants. In the second set of interviews, the most frequently coded comments represented positive experiences with reading Scripture. Participant 14 noted,

Even taking part in that was encouraging me to read the Bible more regularly... I felt like it was a healthier way of reading the Bible. Active listening rather than just reading and not expecting to get anything out of it.

Similarly participant 4 commented, “Through *Lectio*, I was able to open the Bible and feel good about it. It feels casual and comfortable in a good way.”

The other primary data to report from the second set of interviews relates to the actual practice of *Lectio*. As noted in the journals, the most prevalent challenge reported was learning the practice. However, at the time of the second interview 8 of the participants spoke positively of *Lectio* as a practice. Participant 15 stated,

I think it is a good practice. *Lectio* is a good foundation and structure for reading Scripture. It can be helpful. Even if you don’t feel like you are getting something out of it *Lectio* provides the structure which can help make it familiar. I think it is a valuable tool.

Participant 9 said, “This study helped me understand that it is an accessible practice and I am more comfortable doing it on my own.”

Finally, when asked about continuing to participate in the practice of *Lectio* all of the participants responded affirmatively. While the level of frequency was diverse, there was clarity in the decision to continue the practice beyond the study. It is possible some of these responses were impacted because participants

wanted to seek my approval. In the future, I will need to develop a tool for follow up some time after this type of project. In addition to their own desire to continue in the practice, all 13 participants recommended *Lectio* be extended to the wider community at Houghton. Participant 7 explains,

Yes! I think it is really beneficial. We have done it a few times in chapel and a lot of my friends say it is really helpful. It is so important that people slow down and pay attention to what God is saying sometimes.

Outside of my research, we had three chapel sessions where the Scripture reader for the day did a modified version of corporate *Lectio*. After a time of silence, they read the Scripture three times slowly and then followed with silence.

In the second set of interviews the number of comments in some categories of growth saw a reduction. There is no indication there was backwards growth when looking at the data across each participant's interviews. For example, comments specifically naming real life connections showed up less. Yet, there is no indication of students experiencing less real life connections after spending time in *Lectio*. There is no specific mention of backwards movement. Rather, the interviewees brought up this topic with less frequency. This may be a result of the tools I developed for the project.

## **Logs**

As students participated in the study each kept simple logs in order to record the number of times they practiced *Lectio* and the length of time spent in a *Lectio* session. The sample log can be found in the Appendix 3. At the info session, participants were asked to try and practice *Lectio* 2-3 times a week

spending 10-15 minutes in each session. This would calculate to an average of 10 sessions of *Lectio* and 12.5 minutes per session. Table 5 illustrates average log data from all participants against the intended expectation.

**Table 5: Lectio Log Data**

<i>Lectio</i> Log Data		
Number of Sessions in <i>Lectio</i> Recommended	10 Sessions over 4 Weeks	.73 sessions below average over the total 4 weeks.
Average Number of Sessions Recorded	9.27 Sessions over 4 Weeks	
Time Spent in Each Session Recommended	12.5 Minutes per session	4.35 minutes per session above expected.
Average Time Spent in Each Session	16.85 minutes per session	

Participants on average came close to the expected number of sessions. However, when I look at individual participants, the number fluctuates from 5 sessions to 21 sessions. The time spent in each session far exceeds the expectation set forth at the beginning of the study. The lowest average time spent by any individual participant was 13 minutes. Participant 7 had the highest average time spent in the practice with 21.67 minutes. Interestingly enough, Participant 7 had one of the lowest numbers of sessions recorded at 6. Participant 7 had some of the longest journal entries with personal reflections about struggle. There is no direct mention of a decision to limit the frequency of *Lectio*, but all data indicates a sincere and personally deep level of engagement with the practice.

## Interpretations

After reflecting on the findings, I turn now to interpretations of the data.

To best organize my interpretations, I am focusing on four topics:

- Engagement with the Bible: The students in my ministry seem to desire engagement with Scripture.
- Growth in a New Practice: Students in my setting seem capable of connecting with a new spiritual practice within a relatively short time span.
- Personal Spiritual Struggle and Growth: There are encouraging signs of the potential for spiritual growth in my ministry setting.
- Community as a Place of Growth: Students are well aware of how an individual spiritual practice is woven into their relationships with the larger community.

### Engagement with the Bible:

The level of interest received from the initial invitation to participate in this research indicates a level of desire in my community for deeper engagement with Scripture or spiritual practices in general. The interest level is not enough data to draw a final conclusion, but it seems spiritual practices in general or specifically engaging with Scripture is of interest to students in my place of ministry. Admittedly, I cannot speak for the entire campus from this one data point. However, the interest level points to an area where further exploration may

be warranted. This data point seems to indicate either a desire that is not being met or an overall desire for growth existing in some of the student population. This observation merits further exploration, but in this instance students responded with a noticeably high level of interest when presented with a new opportunity for spiritual formation.

At the onset of the research it became clear most participants did not read the Bible with their desired level of consistency. There was a slight sense of guilt associated with these comments, coupled with the excuses my experience with students would predict: too busy, feeling disconnected with the Bible, and not confident in what to expect when reading the Bible. The comments in the initial interviews, indicating a struggle with reading the Bible informationally, pointed towards my assumption that most contemporary college students have been trained to approach the Bible with an analytical mind. This approach demands readers find meaning and application in every bit of text. While there is some benefit to be found in study of Scripture, an intellectual-only attitude towards Scripture is limited, as highlighted in my model. Ultimately, the majority of participants were frustrated with their current ability to engage with Scripture.

I was fascinated to discover, as participants spent time engaging with Scripture via a practice different from their typical approach to the Bible, they almost uniformly found a new desire for time in Scripture. *Lectio*'s design pushes participants to shift from what Mulholland would say is an informational approach to Scripture to a formational approach (Mulholland 2000, 49-63). My

research seems to support Mulholland's proposal for the importance of formational reading.

...the informational mode is only the 'front porch' of the role of scripture in spiritual formation. It is the point of entry into the text. But once we have crossed the porch, we must enter into that deeper encounter with the Word that is the formational approach, if we are to experience our false self being shaped by the Word toward wholeness in the image of Christ. (Mulholland 2000, 62)

As participants engaged in a more formational style of reading they cultivated a longing for the text and the Word of God. Over time, the Bible became less a place of frustration and more a place of encouragement and impact.

This growth in engaging with Scripture took place with minimal time commitment but seemed to have yielded some noticeable impact. I believe this research indicates a positive impact on engagement with Scripture can happen without any special content outside of Scripture alone. We can experience some level of growth with Scripture without a special Bible study or video curriculum. Based on my ministry experience and the first set of interviews, I was curious if participants would experience increased frustration as the research asked them to spend regularly time with Scripture. However, it seems *Lectio* specifically was able to increase time in the Bible and reduce frustration. It was encouraging to find many participants identified specific ways the text read in a *Lectio* format impacted their life and how they interacted with others. Examples of this will be explored in the section "Community as a Place of Growth."

## Growth in a New Practice

The actual practice of *Lectio* could have been a failure on my campus, based on church demographics alone. All participants came out of Protestant faith traditions. This particular branch of the church traditionally does not incorporate *Lectio* as a regular practice. Additionally, with the number of participants struggling with Bible reading, a practice built solely around meditation on Scripture could have brought about an increased level of frustration.

While it is clear participants had some struggles with the practice early on, these issues seemed to be short lived. In just four weeks every participant had become comfortable enough with *Lectio* that they decided to continue beyond the study. Furthermore, they became confident enough in the potential good in the practice they recommended that we expand *Lectio* to more people on our campus. While I cannot argue that all ancient spiritual practices are good fit with contemporary undergraduate students, I am confident that *Lectio* fits well with some current students in my place of ministry. Because of the rural setting of our campus, we often attract students interested in a slower way of life. It is possible this aspect of our demographic has some impact on *Lectio*'s success here. However, the participant pool did represent students from urban, suburban, and rural home contexts. Additionally, I believe this research points to the importance of pushing through initial struggles with new spiritual practices to experience the potential for growth. In a college culture where interests and fads change quickly,

it is important to consider the need for perseverance when implementing new spiritual practices.

### Personal Spiritual Struggle and Growth

It was intriguing to learn of the various ways my participants were wrestling with their faith, doubt, and God. I believe the participants were students engaged enough in their spiritual life they were willing to enter this study. And yet, this did not prevent them from being in places of struggle. Even those who were not in a place of crisis in their faith recorded in their journals times of wrestling with God. This piece of my data points to an important feature in my model for spiritual formation (see figure 3). The deep places of a person's heart are often hidden to those around us. Using the image of roots to a tree, some struggles are unseen but cannot be ignored.

I am thankful all participants experienced positive growth. When I look comparatively at the two interviews for participants, each was able to articulate a healthy shift in their soul. One of the clearest examples comes from Participant 14. When asked in the opening interview to give an image for their overall spiritual health they said the following:

Maybe like an injury, that is healed but the bandage is still on the side. You just took off the bandage. There is still a little bit of the past and the hurt there, but the wound itself has healed and you are in the process of getting better from the injury.

After completing the four weeks of *Lectio*, participant 14 was asked if the practice had impacted the image they would use to describe their spiritual health. The

comment shows important personal spiritual growth connected specifically to the practice of *Lectio*.

Yup. The bandage is gone. There is still healing because I am an imperfect person. But I feel a lot more loved and known by Christ. I feel God is more present and I have a more active connection with Him [sic]. It has changed the way I see myself. I still acknowledge that I am a broken person but that is not my identity. Doing *Lectio* has changed my identity into a beloved child of God rather than someone who is needing to be healed.

Comments like this throughout my research reinforce much of the literature which indicates emerging adulthood to be both a fragile and hopeful time for spiritual formation (See Kiesling and Setran 2013).

### Community as a Place of Growth

While the specific practice of *Lectio* was completed in private by individuals, it did not prevent participants from making connections with their larger community. It seems even private spiritual practices can serve as important aspects for the community life on our campus. For one, participants were able to identify how their personal spiritual growth through *Lectio* impacted the ways they viewed others and their friendships. This was primarily seen as a positive. However, this awareness could include aspects of struggle. Participant 10 explains:

It has made me sad. I guess especially because of my townhouse. I am in a very different place than those guys. Getting back into the Word- I am pursuing this idea of holding my tongue and being slow to speak because I am reading James. And when I look at my friends I know they are not where I am. It has made me sad to see what people are doing around me. But I have had the courage to speak with some of them one-on-one to address some of this.

While the issues presented by Participant 10 bring about genuine sadness, this occurred as a result of their own positive growth. The frustrations experienced are not a result of the practice of *Lectio* nor an issue with their own spiritual growth. The primary concern, related to their friend group, was a desire to see those around them experience spiritual growth. While it is possible to conclude that this data indicates my research attracted a student who is exceptional within the larger campus context, my personal familiarity with this individual and their living situation prevented me from drawing this conclusion.

For some participants, the practice became important enough they needed to share it with others. Participant 8 experienced enough benefit with the practice that they taught it to their roommate and participated in *Lectio* together.

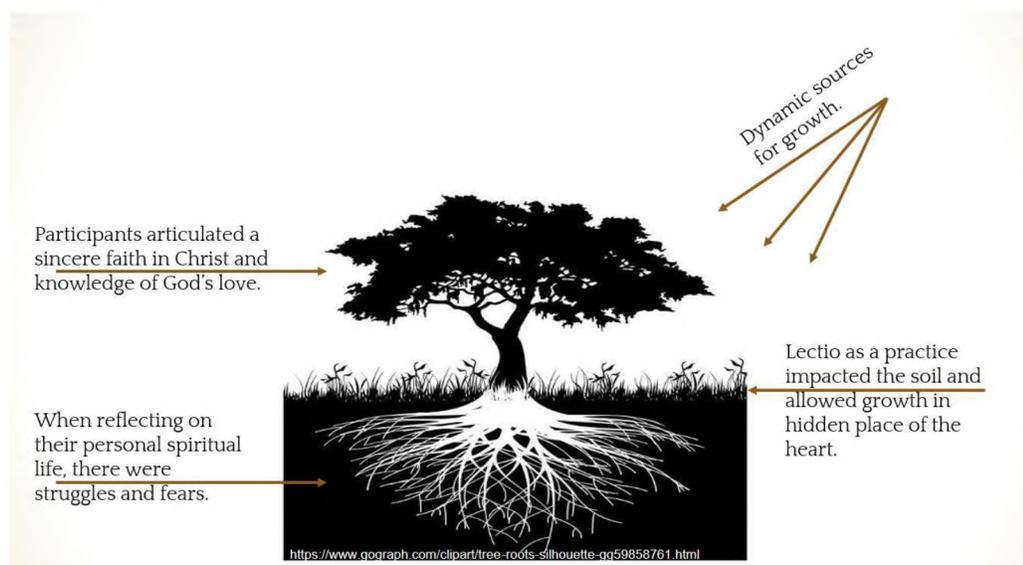
One day I was talking with my roommate and we were having a hard day and I just suggested that we sit and do *Lectio* and we did. We sat together and listened to God through His [sic] word. It was really powerful. We didn't really have a system but it strengthened our friendship and our personal relationship with God. And when we were done we were like wow, we should do this more often.

Some students resonated with doing the practice within the community. A number of journal entries connected what God was saying through *Lectio* with chapel sermons or other teachings in their lives. Students were able to find relationships between a word they received in *Lectio* and a particular insight from a chapel sermon. It seems the addition of a spiritual practice marked by listening and reflecting can enrich a variety of spiritual practices in an individual's life.

Ultimately, this research reflects my previous proposals of the exceptional spiritual formation opportunities within the community of a residential college campus, explored more fully in chapter 3.

### Model for Interpretation

As expounded upon in Chapter 3, spiritual growth is often dynamic, individual, and unpredictable. It is never easy to map or categorize how God is working in an individual's life. However, I was pleased to find connections between my model and conclusions drawn from the data. Throughout the research process, I noticed a link between my discoveries and the imagery of a tree used in Chapter 3. Figure 3 reintroduces the model imagery to help depict a visual explanation of what I believe has happened with my research.



**Figure 3: Model of Spiritual Formation as Demonstrated Through Research.**

As I met with students at the beginning of the research, their visible faith was mostly healthy. Participants were able to articulate a desire to grow and a sincere knowledge of God's love for them. All participants had positive descriptions of God and communicated a sense of overall hope. This aspect of their "public" faith is depicted in the diagram as the visible part of the tree.

Along with this healthy visible faith, participants shared struggles with reading Scripture, sensing God, and healing from hurts. For almost all participants there were deep heart issues they were unable to easily resolve on their own. The health of the heart or "hidden" places is depicted by the roots of the tree.

*Lectio* as a practice has the ability to soften soil, the barrier between the visible and invisible aspects of an individual's spiritual life. The word "soften" here does not indicate that healthy soil for a tree is particularly soft. "Soften" is instead used to describe a level of permeability, reflecting the ways God's grace can reach the deep places in one's heart. The rays in the top corner represent the dynamic sources for growth that come from God as explained in Chapter 3. During regular times in *Lectio*, the soil was softened and God's Scripture was able to impact the roots deep in the soul of participants. As a result, many of the other sources of growth also increased in impact. *Lectio* seems to help create the conditions necessary for the work of the Holy Spirit to move into deep and hidden places in each participant's heart, bringing about important growth in the "roots" of their spiritual lives. Healthy roots are essential for an organism's wellbeing. In the same way, I believe growth in the "roots" of a spiritual life can bring about

positive holistic impact. My opinion on how this interplay works has been unpacked more fully in Chapter 3.

### **Outcomes**

As I consider the findings from this research, I am pleased with how the data fits with my overall ministry hopes at Houghton College. Through this study, we discover that when students practice *Lectio Divina* with some regularity, they experience decreased frustration with the Bible and an increased desire to spend time with God. Additionally, they sense God's love and presence in new and more tangible ways. As presented in Chapter 3, the ultimate aim in spiritual formation is unity with Christ. Scripture is a means by which God brings about the transformation needed to live as God has designed. *Lectio* is a way to engage with Scripture which can shape people more into the likeness of Christ. The growth I saw as students interacted with God through *Lectio* can impact their life and the ways they encounter the world around them. In just a few short weeks of practicing *Lectio*, enough healthy growth occurred that participants are able to identify the benefits of the practice and desired to continue to experience the deep growth in their souls through this practice.

The growth through *Lectio* did not occur without struggle. The research serves as a reminder of how spiritual formation is rarely a clean or predictable process. However, it can be a trusted process as God works consistently in people's lives. While I did expect growth to occur as students spent time reflecting on God's Word, I was impressed with the breadth and depth of growth.

I was pleased to discover some level of success with introducing entirely novel spiritual practices. The decision to introduce a “new” practice turned out to be helpful for my research and for the larger ministry impact. Inviting participants to engage with something different seems to have opened up my prospective pool. As stated previously, the research tapped into a number of students formerly unknown to me and provided feedback for my campus ministry from new voices. Additionally, testing out a practice not widely used on our campus and finding positive results allows me and my colleague to consider how we may expand opportunities for spiritual growth with the students we serve.

I am thankful to realize my research reinforced my belief in the importance of healthy spiritual practices within the community of a residential campus. Already as a result of this research I have begun work with my colleague on how we can widen *Lectio* more formally as a practice across campus, including in our work with Faculty and Staff. Additionally, I have a new desire to explore how I might research additional spiritual practices with a focus on enriching the spiritual life of our campus as a whole.

**CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**  
**HOPE FOR A NEW GENERATION IN**  
**PRACTICES OF THE PAST**

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19 NIV)*

In June of 2018 my wife and I purchased our first home. The house's proximity to the campus was a priority as we began our search. While we no longer live in a college residence, our driveway is 10 feet from a campus sidewalk and our main door faces student housing. Our kids have, on more than one occasion, schemed with students to set up a tin-can phone between their bedrooms. This physical closeness to students has been an important aspect of our ministry for years and has allowed the doorbell moments to continue.

As I have spent the last several years studying spiritual formation and reflecting on my ministry context, I have gained a new sense of peace in my ministry with students, even when the unexpected doorbell calls me to action. Through the work reflected in this portfolio, I have gained a profound

appreciation for the ways God's grace connects with lives and communities. As I face moments of immediate need, there is almost never a temptation to provide a quick fix or to conjure up the perfect words of wisdom. Some of this confidence comes from a growing understanding of how God is at work in the lives of students. However, I would primarily credit this recent maturity in my ministry to my own spiritual formation.

The habits and rituals which I wholeheartedly recommend to students have become essential to my own faith. Through the program at Tyndale I have been doing work on my own soil and the roots of my heart have grown deeper and are healthier than at any other time in my life. My increasing confidence in God's love for me is allowing me to love those around me with courage and gentleness.

In Chapter 2, I shared some of the stories which highlight God's work in my life. The framework of the autobiography was intended to illuminate a sense of God's creative and dynamic work in the lives of God's children. Additionally, there were aspects which demonstrate how rituals have played a role in my journey. Finally, I wanted to share some of how God has led me to my current ministry. Reflecting on my own spiritual growth, I am reminded of the incredibly innovative ways God can work in one's life. With the advantage of hindsight, I can see more clearly specific people, events, and even struggles that all played a role in God shaping deep parts of my heart.

In Chapter 3, I took the various reflections from my personal faith journey and allowed them to enrich my understanding of the needs and opportunities in

my current ministry. Observing this, I am moved to ponder how I might be able to partner with God's work in students' lives. My autobiography and model led me to seek out reliable pathways for spiritual formation in the lives of college students. Standing on Wesley, Mulholland, and Smith, I highlighted the importance of habits and rituals in authentic spiritual formation. As expressed in the previous chapters, I believe the opportunities for spiritual formation on a residential college campus are notable.

In Chapter 4, I put some of my assumptions about spiritual formation via rituals to the test. As I walked with students through the experience of regular *Lectio*, I was pleased with the largely positive result. As a direct result of the research project, I have gained more confidence in how a contemporary undergraduate student can experience growth in their relationship with God through healthy spiritual rhythms and rituals. The college campus provides an ideal setting for young adults to experiment with different rituals and to establish practices which may impact the trajectory of their life as an adult.

As I addressed in Chapter 1, the scope of this portfolio is not without limitations. I intentionally drilled down to a specific feature of spiritual formation with students on my own campus. Through my research in Chapter 4, I discovered *Lectio Divina* to be a reliable pathway for the spiritual formation of college students at Houghton. This work has allowed me to take some important aspects of Wesley's vision for sanctification through grace and build upon the possible applications of these truths. This project indicates a deep spiritual need

for healthy engagement with Scripture and provided a pathway for the specific growth desired by participants. My research did not explore additional practices taking place on Houghton's campus. But, I now have a better sense of how we may be able to assess these existing practices in the future.

In addition to some of the limitations named in Chapter 1, I recognize an important shortcoming from my research in Chapter 4. While I am pleased with the ways my research indicated spiritual growth via *Lectio*, originally I had hoped to focus this research on the experience of God's love in the life of participants. This particular focus comes from the overarching goal of campus ministry at Houghton. As I reflect on the data, I am confident participants indicated growth which could infer a connection to God's love. The comparative comments from Participant 14 on page 132 states this most clearly. This participant talked about a wound needing to be healed at the beginning of the project and then identified significant progress as they grew in their experience of God's love. My intent to minimize impact of participants' answers, by excluding questions that specifically named God's love, was in hopes to discover a theme related to God's love within the questions I created. A number of participants did indeed talk about the phenomenon of God's love, however, I learned that without the explicit question there was less specific verbiage surrounding the love of God than I originally hoped. I was simply too precise in my originally stated goal. I do believe with confidence the participants experienced spiritual growth through their engagement with *Lectio*. I am also certain that some participants used the language of God's

love to articulate this growth, allowing me to conclude that this research shows some positive indications in regards to my originally proposed goal. This piece of my research has brought about important learning in to my work as a researcher and I look forward to growing from this experience.

Even with the limitations at hand, this portfolio will have lasting impact on my current ministry. Throughout my work with students, I have held on to a sincere belief of the potential impact of spiritual practices lived out in undergraduate communities. Up until this point, my confidence in this framework for ministry depended on theological reflection and the anecdotal evidence of conversations with students or casual observations. The work represented in this portfolio has shaped my current approach to ministry and will guide my future work and interactions with students.

The positive results observed through this research support the framework for my own ministry as well and may serve to help the work of colleagues at sister institutions. The cultural momentum in campus ministry points towards “relevant” trends and ministry fads. Talking with others in my field of work, there is pressure to structure worship times that mimic the popular evangelical church movements as a way of reaching this emerging culture of young adults. It is not uncommon for the church to parallel the larger culture’s support of the emerging adult ideal of self-absorption. “...American churches often foster a kind of ‘juvenilization’ among members. Seeking to attract young people, church beliefs and practices often emphasize emotionalism, romantic images of the God-human relationship,

and emphasizes on fun and ‘feel good’ faith” (Kiesling, Setran 2013, 235) As a result, many ancient and trusted practices can easily be underestimated and neglected.

In the United States there are approximately 20 million students enrolled in undergraduate programs (<https://nces.ed.gov/>). Speaking with colleagues at various schools, most campuses, including secular institutions, have some version of campus ministry. As a result, there are a lot of people invested in shaping the spiritual life of undergraduate students. The potential for positive spiritual impact for college students who participate in *Lectio Divina*, as discovered in my research, could encourage other campus ministry programs to consider experimenting with *Lectio* or other ancient practices. On a more practical level, I do hope to share this research at one of the academic conferences I attend focusing on Christian Student Development in Higher Education.

Reflecting on the work of this portfolio, I am considering a number of questions which may lead to further exploration either by myself or others who are interested in researching spiritual formation with college students. The most prominent are outlined in Table 6.

**Table 6: Questions for Further Research**

Questions of Spiritual Formation	What happens when healthy rhythms do not seem like enough? What is next for one who participates in regular practices and still feels stuck?
	How might God work through the practices on campus to impact students who do not participate?

Questions of my Campus Community	Should I assess the other spiritual practices on campus?
	I have focused exclusively on students. How can I integrate the spiritual formation of Faculty and Staff?
	As learning continues to take on different modalities, what aspects of this experience can translate? Is there a way we can support online learners in spiritual formation?
	How might I expand participation of <i>Lectio</i> to the wider campus?
	<i>Lectio</i> was selected because of the pseudo-monastic rhythms on our campus. What would it look like to study the whole package of spiritual practices here?
Questions of Expanding Research	Would <i>Lectio</i> work as well at another academic institution with distinct demographics?
	Students in the study communicated struggles with Scripture. What are the most common spiritual struggles on our campus?
	What did I discover that can be easily exported to other schools? What are some constants?
	Are there specific spiritual practices which fit best with emerging adults?
	How can spiritual practices best integrate with all aspects of the undergraduate experience? Including, residence life, academic pursuits, and co-curricular activities.
	Is there a way to collect some longitudinal data? What can we discover about students who participated in regular spiritual practices during college and their spiritual life 5-10 years after graduation?

Some of these questions will be explored in the immediate future. Since conducting this research, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced me and my colleagues to reconsider aspects of our regular campus-wide spiritual programming. Currently, we are planning for a semester in which we will be unable to hold large worship gatherings or communal singing. Faced with this new reality and with my research in-hand, we have decided to replace one of our regular chapel gatherings with a live-streamed time of *Lectio Divina*. It is exciting to consider how, in the coming months, we will be experimenting with offering regular times of *Lectio Divina* to our entire campus community. While it is possible we will continue this practice beyond the COVID-19 restrictions, it is my hope to use some of the research skills gained from this initial project to understand more fully the opportunities for continued engagement with *Lectio*. Additionally, I plan to present some of my findings with peers at other institutions in the months after all schools emerge from the season of pandemic educational structures. Similarly, I am confident the proposals in my model and the findings in my research hold the potential to inform ministries beyond undergraduate institutions. For instance, I believe a local church could support the spiritual formation of parishioners by helping people in the community recognize the power of habit along with introducing trusted spiritual practices. Many of the challenges and opportunities explored in this portfolio exist in the local church. I plan to glean from my work in the coming months as I introduce spiritual practices to a church-based small group I lead.

Finally, as introduced in Chapter 3, the roadmap to spiritual growth regularly provided to young adults is inadequate. There is a disconnection between a desire to grow and the ability to employ reliable practices. As experienced in my own life and regularly observed in my current ministry, there is too great an emphasis on personal willpower and cognitive tenacity. All too often, students believe they must think their way into a healthier relationship with God. As a result, the impact of habits and rituals seem inconsequential and are easily ignored. Students are not ordinarily trained to consider what happens to their spiritual life when they start each waking day with mindless scrolling through social media feeds, nor how simple historical spiritual practices woven into their daily routine may allow them to experience special outpourings of God's grace. As a result, I am thankful for the ways this entire portfolio has supported and shaped my understanding and goals for my current ministry. It is my desire to regularly introduce students to reliable pathways of practice that will allow them to be formed into the image of Christ. I want to help students become aware of the ways God can work in their life. I hope to provide students with resources to experiment with various spiritual practices throughout their time in college. I dream of a network of colleges and universities working together to support the ministry of spiritual formation with students through habits and practices.

I find it fitting to conclude this portfolio by sharing a benediction from the Northumbria Community in the United Kingdom. I was first introduced to this piece early in ministry and have recited it for years as part of family prayer times.

Additionally, this benediction is used on Houghton's campus every morning at our prayer service. I share these words with my colleague, Mike Jordan, each week as we conclude our time hosting Houghton's podcast. The words have been imprinted on my heart and they are important for my ministry because they indicate the desire to see students grow in their faith while, at the same time, recognizing students are simply passing through this community. It is my earnest hope that all students experience aspects of God's life-changing love and grace while they are with us and they go on with God's blessings in hand.

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,  
wherever He may send you.  
May He guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you through the storm.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
at the wonders He has shown you.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix 1 Preliminary Interview Guiding Questions**

1. Since coming to Houghton, how would you describe your current habits related to Bible reading (frequency, reading plan, time spent reading)?
2. Since coming to Houghton, how would you describe what you experience when you read your Bible?
3. What are three words you would use to describe God?
4. What are three words you would use to describe what God thinks of you?
5. How would you describe your sense of connection with your personal spiritual formation and the larger Houghton campus community?
6. Since coming to Houghton, what image would you use to depict your overall sense of personal spiritual health?

## Appendix 2 -Concluding Interview Guiding Questions

1. Now that you have participated in regular *Lectio Divina*, what type of impact has this practice had on your future practices related to Bible reading?
2. Has practicing *Lectio Divina* created a change in your sense of spiritual impact when you read your Bible? How?
3. Do you remember the three words you used to describe God in the initial interview? Would you change any of those words now?
4. Do you remember the three words you used to describe how God thinks of you in the initial interview? Would you change any of those words now?
5. Has practicing *Lectio Divina* impacted your sense of connection with your personal spiritual formation and the larger campus community? How?
6. Has *Lectio Divina* impacted the image you would use to describe your overall spiritual health?
7. Do you plan to continue with the practice of *Lectio Divina* now after this study?
8. Would you recommend that *Lectio* as a practice be expanded to more people in our community?

### Appendix 3- Model for Journaling

As you participate regularly in the practice of *Lectio Divina* I am asking that you keep a journal to record the experience. The following outline is adapted from Coghlan and Brannick (2014, 41). This sample is not meant to be specific instructions or requirements for your journaling. Rather, it is intended to provide some thoughts on what content might be included in a well kept journal.

1. Concrete Experience: Describe a concrete event which has taken place: what happened, what was said, what sticks out, when did this happened. Stick to a single event and consider the details as if it was a brief news story.
2. Reflection: as you consider the event what are your feelings and reactions?
3. Conceptualization: as you consider relevant concepts to the experience what conclusions or generalizations can you formulate?
4. Experimentation: as a result of this experience what action or implications could you apply to your life? This is a move from general concepts to specific actions.

#### Sample Log:

Date	Passage Read	Time Spent

## Appendix 4 Information Letter

Regarding Research Taking Place at Houghton College, Houghton NY by Rev. J.L. Miller, IV on the subject of:

*Lectio Divina as a Reliable Practice for Spiritual Formation With Residential College Students.* (this title is intentionally different from the project title to ensure students are not impacted by the use of the phrase “God’s love”)

Over the past 5 years, The Spiritual Life department at Houghton College has focused on creating intentional rhythms of worship within the life of our community. The current practices of morning prayer, daily communion, and chapel all find their foundation in classic spiritual practices of worshipping communities. *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading) is one spiritual practice which has not been thoroughly explored at Houghton but is regularly practiced in other worshipping communities.

In order to consider ways that *Lectio Divina* could be included in the spiritual formation of the larger community, I will be conducting research inviting a small group to participate in the practice for 4 weeks and provide feedback on the experience.

The findings from this research will help to inform the next steps in expanding the offerings related to spiritual formation practices within our campus community. Additionally, participants may experience personal spiritual growth as they engage with the practice of meditating on Scripture regularly.

This research will be conducted under the supervision of Rev. Dr. J. Michael Jordan, Dean of the Chapel at Houghton College, as well as my Research Project Coordinator/Program Director: Dr. Mark Chapman, and Spiritual Formation Program Director, Dr. David Sherbino in the Doctor of Ministry Department at Tyndale University in Toronto.

This study will conform to all requirements of Canadian ethical guidelines as outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and the *Tyndale Research Ethics Policy Manual*. And will conform to all requirements of the Houghton College Institutional Research Board.

I invite you to participate in this research to help me explore the potential for *Lectio Divina* as a resource for our campus’ spiritual life. Participation will require that you attend one meeting where you will receive training on the practice and the necessary resources. Participants will be asked to complete a 30 minute interview before they begin the research and again when the research is

complete. The interviews will be conducted by myself and will take place in person, on campus. Participants will attempt to practice *Lectio Divina* 2-3 times each week for a total of 4 weeks. During the 4 weeks of the active research, you will be asked to keep a journal which records your overall experience with the practice.

Confidentiality of all information shared will be guaranteed and all data will be stored in my locked office or on a secure drive. Names will be removed from any publications which may share the results of this research. You will be invited to share as much – or as little – as you feel comfortable.

Total anonymity in this research study may not be possible due to the small scale of the group and the relationships within our campus, so please do not agree to participate in this research if you have reason to be 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.

Your active participation in the research project will conclude by Mid-November 2019. The results from this research will be analyzed in January-March of 2020. My final portfolio will be presented to the faculty at Tyndale University late in 2020. You are welcome to access the findings from the research once the data has been organized and synthesized.

If you have any questions regarding the process explained above feel free to contact me, JL Miller at [jlmiller@tyndale.edu](mailto:jlmiller@tyndale.edu) or my direct supervisor, Dean Jordan at [dean@tyndale.edu](mailto:dean@tyndale.edu)

Thank you for considering participation in this study as we work together to enrich the opportunities for spiritual formation on our campus.

Blessings,

J.L. Miller, IV

## Appendix 5- Research Study Consent Form

*Lectio Divina as a Reliable Practice for Spiritual Formation With Residential College Students.*

Name (please print):

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1. I have read the above Letter of Information outlining the purpose and details of this research project and have had an opportunity to ask any relative questions.
2. I understand that I will be participating in a study over the course of six weeks which involves an informational meeting, weekly engagement with a spiritual practice, journal keeping, and two interviews.
3. I understand that J.L. Miller will be collecting the journals and interview responses as part of the study.
4. I understand that there is potential benefit to my personal spiritual health as a result of participating in the regular reading of Scripture in this study. As a result, I recognize that my full participation may be of benefit to myself.
5. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequence. I am not waiving any legal rights by participating in this study.
6. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.
7. I understand that due to the small scale of the study and the relationships across campus that complete anonymity may not be possible, but confidence will always be respected.

8. I am aware that if I have any questions about study participation they may be directed to J.L Miller or Dean Jordan at

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this study through my involvement: YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 6- Scripts**

### Chapel Announcement Script

Good morning and welcome to chapel.

As part of my current degree program, I will be conducting research on campus this fall and need some help. I am exploring the benefits experienced by college students who spend time reading the Bible using a widely trusted ancient practice.

If you are interested in learning a new way to listed to God's word and are willing to participate in the study, talk to me after chapel or email me at

I have more info about the study that I will send to anyone who is interested.

### All Campus Email Script

Hello Houghton Students!

As some of you are aware, I am currently working on a degree in Spiritual formation. As part of my program, I will be conducting research on campus this fall and I need some help.

My research is interested in exploring the benefits experienced by college students who spend time reading the Bible using a widely trusted ancient practice.

If you are interested in learning a new way to listed to God's word and are willing to participate in the study for four weeks, just reply to this email and I will send along the details along.

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