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ABSTRACT

**STRATEGY TO DEVELOP A CULTURE OF BIBLICAL
SPIRITUALITY AMONG SOUTH NEW SOUTH
WALES CONFERENCE PASTORS**

by

Kendell Cobbin

Adviser: Allan Walshe

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Project Document

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: STRATEGY TO DEVELOP A CULTURE OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY
AMONG SOUTH NEW SOUTH WALES CONFERENCE PASTORS

Name of researcher: Kendell Cobbin

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Allan Walshe, DMin

Date completed: July\ 2014

Problem

The majority of the pastors in the South New South Wales Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church work in isolated rural settings. In the past, there has been minimal connection between these pastors, with little sharing of plans, ideas, deeper concerns, or spiritual accountability. This has been compounded by their demanding roles and responsibilities. Such realities have the potential to deplete the spiritual health of individuals.

Method

This project developed, implemented, and evaluated a strategy over a 12 month period that fostered an enhanced intentional journey with God among 18 South New

South Wales Conference pastors. The main focus was to nurture relationship-focused small groups where trust was developed and spiritual disciplines were encouraged. At the end of the period a questionnaire provided the key source of evaluation data.

Results

There was an 89% response rate of pastors responding to the questionnaire. Between 75-80% of the participants were positively impacted by the process undertaken in this project. Some 25% of ministers have developed a similar pattern to the cluster group within their own local churches.

Conclusion

Results indicated significant gains to the culture of ministry in the South New South Wales Conference. The intentional sharing of personal narratives helped to develop trust and community, and served to reduce the sense of isolation among the pastors. Through the process defined for the cluster groups, pastors' personal spirituality was enhanced.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

STRATEGY TO DEVELOP A CULTURE OF BIBLICAL
SPIRITUALITY AMONG SOUTH NEW SOUTH
WALES CONFERENCE PASTORS

A Project Document
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Kendell Cobbin

July 2014

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION OF PROJECT

Introduction

Character transformation is beyond mere human achievement, yet is core to the journey of any follower of Jesus. Submission to the Holy Spirit's influence for the molding of character is integral to the faith journey and the underlying intent of this project. Discipleship and biblical spirituality are the tools for connecting to the Holy Spirit, whose resourcing enables the subtle changes into godlikeness. This is no menial endeavor, necessitating an intentionality of focus. However, it provides a potential influence of eternal value.

This project has been undertaken in fulfillment of a Doctor of Ministry program at Andrews University in the area of Biblical Spirituality and Discipleship with the practical aspects of the research undertaken in the South New South Wales Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The privilege of research in this area of study has become more and more pronounced as the project has progressed. This researcher is indebted in his own journey to the group process that has been stimulated by the focus of this Andrews University, Doctor of Ministry cohort. The richness of relational connection has been a foretaste for ongoing potential relational development.

Background to Project

Personal History

In relaying one's personal journey, it is difficult to distinguish between personal life and ministry, for both are interwoven into the fabric of life itself. God is not just interested in one's spiritual life; He is interested in one's life and desires an all-of-life connecting. I have become aware of this insight in later life.

I have experienced two beginnings in ministry. My father was a pastor and my first beginning, on reflection, was based on obligation to my parents' wishes, and their assumption that I would follow in my father's footsteps. This first endeavor in ministry that lasted four years occurred in the midst of the Australian theological battle over righteousness by faith in the early 1980s. It was a somewhat unhealthy era of mistrust by church administrators of ministers and ministers of administrators. While attempting to navigate this theological confusion and uncertainty of tenure, my marriage began to flounder, as my spouse became disillusioned with the church and began to resent being a partner in ministry. As this situation further deteriorated, withdrawal from ministry became the inevitable outcome.

Marriage and ministry failure challenged me to my core and stimulated a significant desire for personal, relational, and spiritual growth. This brought new life-experience and highlighted for me as a single person the great value of a small group environment in which I experienced both a nurturing community and an avenue for change, with spiritual accountability as a desired outcome.

Remarriage provided an experience of intimacy and attachment, together with a secure home environment. During this time, I founded and operated my own successful

company. I maintained my interest in serving God by volunteering in various local church roles of lay ministry. All of these factors provided an environment in which I was able to, for the first time, engage in an experiential journey with God. Journaling in the early morning provided an insightful awareness of how the lack of a program of devotional habits had contributed to my earlier demise in ministry.

A new calling from God to ministry came, born out of response to this relational journey with God rather than any sense of parental obligation. My positive response to this calling had the full support of my spouse.

Further contrasts to my earlier ministry emerged during my second experience. I gained an awareness of being intentional in my journey with God through the practice of devotional habits. These included conversational prayer, thanksgiving, and praise, reflecting on scripture aided by the calligraphy of Botts (1997), solitude and silence, scripture memorization, and fasting.

I have now come to see these two contrasting experiences in ministry, not as a negative, but rather as a unique opportunity for understanding the resources needed for an effective ministry to pastors. This has been due to being able to compare and contrast failure and success within the context of ministry. It has also led to an understanding of the following components that have been the catalyst for my ongoing and fulfilling, second experience of ministry.

Ensuring that physical isolation of ministry is compensated by appropriate measures of community that include some form of small group support. Further provision of support is enabled through utilizing the resourcing of a spiritual companion. Both these support structures also strengthen spiritual accountability.

Another strength to ministry is provided for by the intentional pursuit of devotional habits. Such devotional practices that were included in my second experience of ministry have not only strengthened my own journey with God but also resourced my ministry to others.

Had the above factors been operating within my first experience of ministry, the situation may well have been retrievable. An understanding of these factors and their significance for my life has been the catalyst for this project.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of the ministers in the South New South Wales Conference work in isolation from each other with large distances separating them over a widespread rural landscape. This lends to a paucity of community among them, with minimal cross-pollination of plans and ideas, or of deeper concerns and heartaches, or any level of spiritual accountability. The resulting relational isolation in ministry may also contribute to loneliness and burnout or to independence in ministry perspectives.

Statement of the Task

The task of this project has been to develop, implement, and evaluate a strategy that fosters a closer personal journey with God among South New South Wales Conference pastors within the Australian Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, through nurturing relationship-focused small groups and encouraging spiritual disciplines suitable to pastors' temperaments/personalities.

Justification for the Project

The South New South Wales Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces a number of significant challenges to ongoing growth and development. It is situated within a largely secular society that has an inherent consumer, postmodern mindset. Latent effects of a modernistic rational worldview have influenced the church in a largely informational theology with minimal focus on an experiential relationship with God. Acceptance of doctrinal tenets, through baptism as the indicator, is seen as the key prerequisite to membership.

A vocal group exists within the church that advocates a traditional, cognitive mindset with an accompanying narrow theological perspective, and deficit relational focus. This group consumes a disproportionate amount of pastors' time and energy, and contributes to little fruitage of loving relationships or growth within their community of faith. The relational focus of this project has the potential to help refashion this mode of ministry and provide keys to nurturing a community where relational ministry and an experiential faith can be embraced.

This project sees pastors of local congregations as key to potential development along a relational pathway within their faith community. Pastors will be encouraged in growing a deeper connection with God, through disciplines suited to their personhood, and will be provided support and held accountable to that journey through the nurture of a trustworthy group of fellow pastors.

Expectations From This Project

It is anticipated that this project will enhance my ability to serve and nurture the ministers within my portfolio of care by enabling the pastors to foster collegiality within

their clusters and developing an environment for the ministers where they feel more unified in a community of caring fellow ministers. Additionally, this project will potentially enable ministers to develop ways of connecting with God in a manner more synchronized with their own temperament and persona, and potentially provide a deeper awareness and appreciation of others' distinctive needs for faith formation. It also may potentially help reduce the sense of isolation and discouragement that is sometimes associated with a geographically dispersed ministerial workforce. Finally, it is anticipated that this project may provide a potential model for other conferences in nurture and support of their pastors.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

This research has chosen to focus on ministers' cluster groups rather than a broader context of ministry within local churches. Such an approach not only fits within my own purview of ministry (as Ministerial Association Secretary), but will also provide a more transparent context that can potentially enhance the minister's own personal journey.

I excluded the most isolated posting of ministry due to cost prohibitions of transport that have inhibited meeting on a regular basis with a cluster, for one minister. Also excluded from research were the office departmental personnel and officers. While not disregarding the potential value of group-process for this group, such personnel form a different setting to that which has been designed for this project.

Only ministers in local churches were included in the clusters. Other local church leaders (e.g., elders) were not included in the testing groups. In some ministry localities,

these leaders have become part of subsequent groups with the individual minister being the facilitator.

Due to financial limitations of travel costs, I prescribed the regional settings for the groupings of ministers, thus limiting choice of previous bonding that may have been present for these individuals.

Limitations

This project has utilized a methodology of evaluation that has been largely dependent on the reflection of participants as to their perceptions from their involvement in the process outlined by the project.

It has utilized the sample comprised of the ministers in the South New South Wales Conference with a total number of participants being 18. As such a designated sample, it lacks the objectivity of a random sample from a large population (or numbers of ministers from a larger conference).

The context of sample is of a first world, Western culture with a largely secular, individualistic worldview. The ministry setting sampled, whilst largely involving rural isolated communities, also includes larger communities with shared ministry locations. Thus the research has not taken place outside of other influences on community and accountability processes of peer support that may well have contributed to the outcomes of this project.

Definitions of Terms

Aretègenic: In relation to the devotional habits, this is the *virtue-shaping* function of the habits in transformation of the life of a disciple (Charry, 1997, p. 19). In reality this is a description of what takes place as disciples become available to the Holy Spirit's transforming work in life through the indirection (defined below) of practicing devotional habits.

Biblical Spirituality: This project replaces *spiritual formation* with this term in an endeavor to avoid potential confusion that spiritual formation might entail anything other than a biblical frame of reference. It entails the process of transformation of life for a willing disciple of Jesus. Further definition is provided under the term *spiritual formation*.

Devotional Habits: These are practices that assist a disciple in building a relationship with God. These can be sub-categorized in two groups: habits of disengagement, and habits of engagement. Habits of disengagement involve an intentional unplugging from daily routines in order to engage and connect with God. These include (but are not limited to) meditation, solitude and silence, Sabbath resting. Habits of engagement are more active in their focus and include (and are again not limited to) praising God in worship, reading Scripture devotionally, Scripture memorization, Sabbath communing and worshipping, and conversing with God through prayer.

Disciple/Discipling (verb): This involves an intentionality of action in being a follower of Jesus through daily inviting Jesus to be Lord of one's life (Luke 9:23).

Discipling takes place indirectly by means of the Holy Spirit as one pursues the devotional habits in daily life. By beholding one becomes changed.

Facilitator of Ministers' Cluster: A senior minister within the regional setting who is best equipped to facilitate the group process. Such a person organizes the time and location of meeting with the rest of the group members. The facilitator liaises with the treasurer of the group with respect to payment of meals or other activities (as organized by the group).

Indirection: In reference to devotional habits, is a process whereby transformation takes place not by a direct focus on the transformation desired, but by a practice of devotional habits focused on nurturing an intimate relationship with God, whereby the Holy Spirit is enabled to do the work of transformation in one's life. It is aptly described by Foster and Helmers:

Indirection affirms that spiritual formation does not occur by direct human effort, but through a relational process whereby we receive from God the power or ability to do what we cannot do by our own effort. We do not produce the outcome. That is God's business. (Foster & Helmers, 2008, p. 155)

Intentionality: In reference to devotional habits, this describes both a willingness to, and a maintenance of, pursuing ways for nurturing a journey with God by a follower.

Ministers' Cluster: These are a small group of ministers within a regional setting who meet together once a month (where practicable) for two to three hours for reflective practice, encouragement, identifying with and supporting each other's needs, as well as challenging personal spiritual development. Eating together is also encouraged as part of the shared process.

Reflective Bible Reading: This entails a shift from a cognitive approach focused on the technical information of the text, to a relational approach where one is attentive to

how God is revealed in the passage and what is His invitation to oneself. An attentive attitude is invited by such an approach in order to gain a relational understanding of God. An alternate terminology to this approach that is utilized in this project is a *conversation with the Word* (Peterson, 2009, p. 46).

Sapience/Sapiential Theology: This has links to wisdom, but theologically is the combining of an intellectual and a practical understanding of God. “Sapience includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known” (Charry, 1997, p. 4).

South New South Wales Conference: This is a local conference within the Australian Union Conference. The State of New South Wales is composed of three such conferences. The above conference is the smallest numerically (with some 2,600 members), whilst in geography it covers over two thirds of the State.

Spiritual Disciplines: As defined by Willard (1988), “Spiritual disciplines, ‘exercises unto godliness’ are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his [God’s] life and power without harm to ourselves or others” (p. 156). These are largely referred to in this project as *devotional habits* and in no way does this project allude to or support any form of eastern mystical emptying of one’s mind as part of this process.

Spiritual Formation: This is a term that has been widely misconstrued in its broader interpretation as being linked to eastern mysticism or ancient mystical practices. The Moody Institute has provided a succinct definition in the following:

An academic synonym for spiritual growth toward godly maturity, or the process of Christian discipleship and sanctification (Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 3:1-2;

2 Peter 1: 5-8). The focus of spiritual formation is on a life yielded to the Holy Spirit, open to conviction, based upon a regenerated life in Christ and anchored in the Word of God. Spiritual formation at Moody is not to be confused with, or associated with, mystic or New Age practices. Rather, spiritual formation is rooted in the spiritual disciplines practiced by believers of all times, including Christ Himself, such as prayer, fasting, reading God's Word, and fellowship. (Moody Bible Institute, 2007, p. 7)

This project applies *spiritual formation* in a similar context as the word *sanctification*. However to avoid confusion to any errant association of this biblical focus to that of eastern mysticism or mystical and emotional subjectivism of past centuries, this term has generally been replaced by the term biblical spirituality in this project.

Worldview: A filter or lens by which one interprets one's world and culture. More precisely "the 'fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives'". Worldviews are what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living" (Hiebert, 2008. p. 35).

Description of the Project Process

A priority focus in this project was the nurture of my own personal journey with God. I was assisted by having both a mentor and a support group, who provided accountability to this focus, as well as support in the completion of the overall project.

The theological research that follows focuses on Jesus' discipling in biblical spirituality along with Pauline passages that focus on the discipline of growing in Christ-likeness.

The literature review focuses on biblical spirituality, specifically in its impact on evangelical Christianity over the last 10 years, with particular reference to how relational small groups enhance spirituality for the individual.

The nurturing and an accounting of the spiritual journey of the pastors in the South New South Wales Conference has been encouraged through three areas of influence.

First, personal accountability for ministers' spiritual journey has been aided by encouraging pastors to have a sacred companion/spiritual mentor for a 12-month period.

Second, a deepened sharing at minister clusters was nurtured to aid their groups becoming more relationship focused. These clusters met over a 12-month period. Proactive measures were taken to encourage a sharing of the immediacy of personal journeys as well as personal faith-talk. This process moved away from a task-focused training context, to a focus on sharing personal life-story. Feedback was collected in this process from individual reporting along with my observations and assessment. Additionally, in the group process there was an intentional focus on the development of devotional habits. Sharing of, along with a commitment to this journey was encouraged within the group. The ministers were invited to journal during this process and provide a report of their journey at the conclusion of the 12 months by answering a questionnaire. An evaluation was made of the process and the personal outcomes for the project participants through their responses, as well as my observations and notes of assessment taken during intermittent visits to each of the clusters.

Third, provision was made to focus on a deeper awareness of biblical spirituality at ministers' meetings, together with supplying the ministers' personal library with books and resources that focused on a parallel agenda.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF PERSONAL
BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

Biblical spirituality (spiritual formation) and discipleship are terms common to a large conversation group within evangelical literature of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This conversation has the potential to provide significant insight for nurturing authentic faith communities. Biblical foundations are necessary to add value to this area of interest, not only for theological accuracy but also for practical guidelines of behavior. A disciple, after all, is one who follows in the footsteps of their master. It is hoped that in the following theological analysis, there is provided some understanding to the dimensions of biblical discipleship. Further, that such understanding might contribute to enriching faith communities.

Of the large resource pool within the biblical and theological arena, this study has chosen to focus on three areas, which I believe to be crucial within the journey of the disciple. These include: (a) a focus on a Trinitarian theological perspective of God, (b) a focus on Jesus as a model of discipleship and spiritual practices, and (c) a Pauline exploration of the Christian journey of faith, with particular reference to Spirit-filled living (as observed in Gal 5:13-26; Eph 4:1-6; 5:15-21; Phil 3:1-4:9; Col 2:6-10; 3:1-17).

These three focus areas will be seen to buttress biblical spirituality within the New Testament.

A Theology of Biblical Spirituality

Trinitarian Theology of God as Foundational to Biblical Spirituality

Foundational to a theology of biblical spirituality is an appreciation of the significance of God as an intimate Trinity. This Trinitarian concept of God provides the framework for relationship and community into which disciples are invited. Charry (1997) highlights such a connecting: “Doctrine is pastoral. Theology and spirituality belong together, and the purpose of what seems to be practically irrelevant formulas, such as God is One and Three is to promote love of God and nourish a godly life” (p. xiii). While this paper does not argue a theology of a Trinitarian God, it does accept its fundamental reality. The Bible appears to follow this same approach in not providing an extended apologetic of God’s make-up (providing room for the mystery of God to prevail), although there are numerous allusions to this reality of the Trinity. The following samples such an understanding of the Trinitarian God.

Biblical Support of God as Trinity

In Jesus’ Gospel commissioning he commands, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19, NLT). No explanation is provided as to how these three Persons of the Godhead are relationally integrated. There is, however, a resemblance of this in Jesus’ baptism where both the Father and Holy Spirit were present, as attested by all four Gospels (Matt 3:16, 17; Mark 1:10, 11; Luke 3:21, 22; John 1:29-34).

The following texts both describe an intimate connection between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and convey a seeming interchangeability of Persons. John 14:26 states, “But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.” While Titus 3:4-6 resonates:

But—‘When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Each of the above scriptural passages illustrates the biblical acceptance of this Triune God.

God’s Intimate Community

The most outstanding attribute of God is love: not that *God is loving* but that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), necessitates there being three Beings in order for this love to be truly unconditional and more than merely reciprocal. It is not altogether surprising to see the word *perichoresis* coined as a descriptor of the intimacy of the relationship within the three-in-one God: an intimacy of community that we are invited to join through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. *Perichoresis* conveys the idea of a tight circle of a folk dance, where there is both joy and love shared. (I was first introduced to this concept in an address by Larry Crabb but the concept has been developed by a number of voices echoing this symbolism.) In 1 John 4:9-16, God’s love is described within this setting of intimate community and this gift is forwarded on to humans in an incarnate manner: both through Jesus ministry on man’s behalf and through His indwelling of human beings by

the Holy Spirit, as is stated, “And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us” (1 John 4:13).

God’s intimacy of community shared
with followers

The apostle Paul refers to followers of Jesus linking with God in love as “God’s mysterious plan” (Col 2:2), and he provides some unveiling of this in his prior comment: “And this is the secret: Christ lives in you” (Col 1:27). Add to this his comment, “For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body” (Col 2:9), and there is provided some insight into this shared intimacy of community both within the Godhead and also with God and disciples. Paul elucidates this *mysterious plan* in Eph 1 where he describes the decision of all of God prior to creation, formulating a plan whereby followers can be enriched with God’s love, adoption, grace, kindness, wisdom, and understanding (Eph 1:3-10) because of their being “united with Christ” (Eph 1:3, 11). Paul continues this theme in Eph 2:4-10 where he assures followers of the security of eternal life because of this incarnational unity. Worthy of note is how Paul portrays the gift of the Holy Spirit endowed to followers as a symbol: “The [Holy] Spirit is God’s guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people” (Eph 1:14).

There is such a symbiotic synergy in the shared love and identity of the Godhead, that there can be an interchangeability of Persons, or union, without jealousy or concern, as in John 10:30, where Jesus attests, “The Father and I are one.” This is also illustrated by Eph 1:23, “And the church is his [Christ’s or Father’s as both are previously mentioned] body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere

with himself [through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit].” A further case-in-point where all three Persons are mentioned by Paul in the context of providing a unity of community for both Jews and Gentiles is, “Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us” (Eph 2:18).

The salient point in the discussion of a Trinitarian theology is the belief that core to any discipleship and biblical spirituality is an invitation to join a community, or more precisely, the best community of all: the *all-of-God* community. White (1889) accepts this participation in highlighting the outcome of this communion with the divine: “If we are indeed partakers of the divine nature, His praise will be continually in our hearts and upon our lips” (p. 95). Harder (2013) asserts that a focus on the “fellowship of the Three” (p. 23) builds community and self-forgetfulness. He further emphasizes the God of community even more than the unified God, for it is this love shared by all of God in community that is contagious. Harder cites Lutheran theologian Jensen who describes “the roominess of God. If God is three, there is space between the persons – room for us” (p. 36). The intimacy of shared community with the divine provides the follower not only with God’s perspective but also the sourcing and resourcing for godly living by the gifting of the Holy Spirit: also described by Stevens and Green (2003):

This is the gospel. God draws us into relationship with himself within the circle of God’s own loving communion. The God who is ‘us’ is not solitary, is not abstractly ‘one’ but a unified communion of personal relationships. And this God gives us access to God’s own personal life. What could be better than this? (p. xv)

Community an antidote to legalism

More will be stated in relation to the Holy Spirit and His influence in the discipling process in a discussion of the Pauline passages, as the terms *biblical*

spirituality and *spiritual formation* are both terms that embrace the Spirit. The Holy Spirit's indwelling provides the antidote to the ready legalistic bent of the disciple, but rather, contrasts an obedience through humility of submission to God's leading.

Jesus as a Model in His Discipleship and Devotional Habits

Jesus' Dependence on the Father and the Holy Spirit

Jesus offers the quintessential example of relational connection. Although He, in His ministry provided profound discipling of His followers, of relevance to this exploration of a theology of biblical spirituality is an exploration of how He Himself was disciplined through His association with His Father. Jesus' ministry is characterized by a profound dependence on God's presence in life. It could also be argued that this intimacy of connection with His Father, in turn, is reflected in how He disciplined others. In considering this, it is crucial to recognize that key to Jesus' being disciplined by the Father was His Spirit-dependence. He was completely devoid of any arrogance of self-endeavor for righteousness that one might be tempted to emulate. The spiritual disciplines Jesus practiced emerged from, and reinforced, his utter dependence on God. While a pursuit of disciplines is not unrelated to the gospel in that they operate optimally within its framework, the gospel of Jesus substitutionary death and resurrection alone is salvific (Eph 2:4-10). The value of disciplines in discipleship lies in their providing an experiencing of God in life in contradistinction to a mere transactional approach of knowledge of the gospel. Jesus' practice of devotional habits evidences a life that goes way beyond superficial knowledge to a rich experience of the Father in life and ministry.

The Disciplines Jesus Practiced

Jesus devotional habits prior to public ministry

Jesus' childhood. There are indications to show that both Jesus' parents were God-fearing in recognizing God's presence in their lives and attentive to such presence in life with a concomitant obedience to His instructions. Both were willing to follow the angel's instructions regarding Mary's pregnancy with Jesus irrespective of social mores and the stigma of such action (Luke 1:30-38; Matt 1:18-25). Both experienced God's blessing, through Simeon (Luke 2:33, 34), in their lives that was associated with their dedication to Him. They were obedient to both God's voice (Matt 2:13) as well as in covenantal commitments (Luke 2:39, 41).

A simple text covers Jesus physical and spiritual growth up until the age of 12, "There [in Nazareth] the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him" (Luke 2:40). A subsequent passage conveys an almost parallel description for His ongoing development till he began His public ministry, "Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52).

While the first sentence of Luke 2:40 presents a precise appraisal of physical development, the second sentence "Jesus was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him," conveys an emotional/spiritual development and is also descriptive of a relational connectedness with His Father. Other references to *wisdom* in the Bible suggest a synergy between having wisdom and being close to God that includes both an understanding of God and God's ways (Jas 3:13, 17; Prov 1:23; 2:1-8; 3:5-8; Jer 9:23, 24). Jesus' interaction with the religious teachers was the result of this wisdom that He had gained from this connecting with God the Father, where He demonstrated the

discipline of listening as well as that of asking appropriate, incisive questions. Luke provides an indication of the amazement of those who heard Jesus in this interchange and the depth of His wisdom, “All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47).

Jesus teen to adult years. Irrespective of this previously mentioned wealth of wisdom and perhaps precisely because of such wisdom, Jesus humbly returns to His earthly home where these disciplines for knowing God and His will in life were further embraced and practiced, as is stated, “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people” (Luke 2:52). He patiently waits for His Father’s leading before entering public ministry. Jesus’ relational development with his growing “in favor with God and all the people” (Luke 2:52b) is indicative of His having gained mastery in relational skills that would prove to be highly effective in His later leadership (McNeal, 2000, p. 56). Added to this, was Jesus’ insight of experience in practical life that was far superior to the theoretical legalistic perspective of life prevalent among His antagonists, coupling with a “sensitizing . . . to the life concerns of people” (McNeal, 2000, p. 55). Such insights and disciplines formed a wellspring of practical, relational ministry.

Poignant, additional insight of Jesus’ development during his teen years is provided by White (1903, p. 11; 1952, p. 443) in describing how Jesus memorized the Psalms and would sing a Psalm when provoked in the workplace. She notes that, in doing this, His would-be-antagonists would join him in song. White (1898/1940, p. 73) further elaborates how Jesus, by following this pattern, was able to help his associates recognize the presence of God in the workplace. Neither of these practices would be seen as out of character for Jesus when one considers His attitudes and actions in His ensuing public

ministry. Paul admonishes followers of Jesus to pursue these same practices:

Let the message about Christ in all its richness fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts and whatever you do or say do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. (Col 3:17)

In Eph 5:20 Paul adds that we should enable the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives in order for joyful psalm singing to emanate from hearts overflowing.

Jesus devotional habits during
His ministry

Jesus' devotional habit of solitary time with the Father. There are numerous occasions recorded of Jesus going out alone to be with the Father in prayer and communion. Luke's gospel cites the greater portion of these (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28; 11:1; 22:41) some of which are further highlighted in what follows. An instance recorded of Jesus' early ministry by Mark, occurs pre-dawn, following a busy time of healing and ministering to the crowds the previous day, "Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray" (Mark 1:35). Why does Jesus pray in isolation when the crowds are looking for Him? Miller (2009, pp. 44-46) provides three clues: (a) His identity is so wrapped up in the Father that He can't operate independently (John 5:19; 5:30; 8:28; 12:49); (b), his "one-person focus," whereby his ministry attention is focused on the individual (just as his praying is focused on the Father); and (c) his limited humanity, whereby he needs to be away from others in order to attend to His Father. These three assertions open a window into Jesus' life and ministry that is worthy of further focus. Miller provides an insight into the value of the solitary prayer time that Jesus experienced with the Father: "Any relationship, if it is going to grow, needs private space, time together without an agenda. . . . You don't create intimacy; you

make room for it” (Miller, 2009, p. 47). Miller further clarifies what impinges on this intimacy: “Efficiency, multitasking, and busyness all kill intimacy. In short, you can’t get to know God on the fly” (p. 47), something it would seem that Jesus was fully aware.

For some context on the significance of this solitary time, it is worthy of note that Jesus, with only three and a half short years to cover a ministry of universal significance, takes time out from this crucial and finite ministry to spend with His Father. Clearly, in His mind, this time with His Father was considered to be as integral, indeed imperative to His monumental ministry. This is demonstrated in Gethsemane prior to His crucifixion where He again converses with the Father for His resourcing (Luke 22:39-46). Not only does Jesus pray for strength for what lies before Him, but twice He admonishes His disciples, “Pray that you will not give in to temptation” (Luke 22:40, 46).

A further occasion where Jesus seeks solitary connection with the Father, is recorded by Mark following the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:46, 47). On this occasion, Jesus’ devotional time with the Father occurs at night, indicating that it is not just the early morning hours that is an appropriate time for Him to spend with the Father. What both references have in common is that on each occasion Jesus had been involved in busy ministry prior to each time-out. In connecting with the Father, Jesus was enabled a refocusing of ministry that shifted His direction: on the first occasion, He shifts towns for ministry; on the second, He desists from performing miracles because of people’s shallow reasoning in following after Him (John 6:26-32). He turns away many of the crowd because of this decision, and then shares some challenging statements that are hard for some to accept. One might say that time with the Father is a two-way communication where listening accompanies speech and reflection is integral to both these situations.

The Gospel of Luke also informs readers of Jesus praying at a number of critical junctures in His life: at His baptism where the Holy Spirit's appearance and the Father's affirmation of His Sonship takes place "as He was praying" (Luke 3:21-24); He prays all night on the mountain before choosing His disciples (Luke 6:12-13); on the Mount of Transfiguration at a time when He predicts His death and where He receives His Father's blessing (Luke 9:29-36); and at Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives just prior to His betrayal (Luke 22:39-46). On this latter occasion, Luke adds a word to his commentary that evidences the habitual nature of Jesus praying, "Then accompanied by His disciples, Jesus . . . went *as usual* [emphasis added] to the Mount of Olives . . . and knelt down and prayed" (vv. 39, 41). Prayer on the Mount of Olives is a devotional habit that Jesus practices and while it might be assumed this to be a pattern in life, Luke's wording adds weight to its reality. The intimacy of the conversation Jesus shares with the Father during this prayer displays a relationship that is far more than casual in its essence. Jesus expresses His heartfelt desire for release from the anguish He is facing while submitting to the will of His Father (v. 42).

Jesus' prayer for His followers. An extended version of the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane is shared in John 17 and it is here that the intimacy of Father and Son is further unveiled (John 17:25). Jesus reflects on their shared glory before the world was created (John 17:5) and requests that followers may inherit the same unity as He shares with the Father (John 17:11; 20, 21). The otherworldliness of His followers is spoken of and Jesus invites the Father's protection over such because of their vilification by the world (John 17:14-16). Even more than protection, Jesus invites the Father to "Make them holy" (John 17:17, 19) so that Their (Father and Son's) love may be in them in

order that God's glory might be displayed to the world by the unity of Their shared love (John 17:22, 23). These thoughts must have had a profound impact on the disciples, for they are amplified and reiterated throughout the apostolic writings, some of which will be highlighted in what follows.

Other devotional habits of Jesus

Fasting. Jesus fasts 40 days in the wilderness when He is tempted by the Devil (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus is able to resist Satan's temptation because of a complete reliance on His Father. He rebuffs Satan's words with quotations from memorized Scripture: a further devotional habit from His early life. The results of this fast are: physical hunger (Luke 4:2); overcoming of Satan's temptations; and being "filled with the Holy Spirit's power" (Luke 4:14).

Jesus makes allusions to a fast during the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). The disciples are concerned for His wellbeing and insistent that He eat something, to which He replies "I have a kind of food you know nothing about . . . my nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work" (John 4:32, 34). There is further mention of the recommendation of fasting by Jesus following the previously mentioned Mount of Transfiguration where some disciples have unsuccessfully attempted a miracle. To their enquiry as to why the miracle had not taken place, Jesus replies "This kind can only come out by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29, NKJV).

For the majority of His ministry, Jesus and His disciples are characterized by their non-fasting and a contrast is drawn between Jesus disciples to those of John the Baptist (Luke 6:33, 34). Jesus' ministry commences with a wedding feast and He performs a

miracle that ensures the continuation of the feasting (John 2:1-11). The sully of Jesus' reputation is possibly exacerbated by the party that Matthew the tax collector invites Him to, placing Him in the company of "many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners" (Matt 9:10, NLT). This no doubt rankles the scribes and Pharisees as on another occasion they say of Jesus: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). It is at this time that Jesus responds with the three parables of Luke 15, climaxing with the feasting of the father over the return of His lost son. In each of these scenarios, a devotional habit of celebration and fellowshiping through eating together is noted: a powerful pattern that the early Christian church continued. This discussion in no way denies Jesus' practice of, and relegating significance to, the discipline of fasting for growing followers of Jesus. What it does illustrate is the Eccl 3 principle of a time for every purpose and hence the value of *both* disciplines of fasting and celebration.

Sabbath resting. The rest embedded within the Sabbath is another devotional habit of Jesus as attested, "When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath"(Luke 4:16). Jesus' approach to Sabbath-keeping has a vastly different purpose to that of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus describes that contrast with "the Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). He functions within a different realm, as evidenced by their disdain of the miracles He performs on the Sabbath. Jesus' invitation of "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you . . . and you will find rest for you souls" (Matt 11:28, 29). Such a focus could well be aligned to His outlook on the purpose of Sabbath in one's life.

Jesus' understanding of Scripture transcends information. Jesus' reading, understanding, and application of Scripture as revelatory of His personhood and the very character of God are a source of much amazement to His listeners. It also causes much consternation to those opposed to His ministry. Jesus challenges this latter group to have open hearts to His personhood as the fulfillment of Scripture with, "You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life" (John 5:38, 39). On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27), Jesus shares from Scripture (including the Psalms) an understanding that conveys His embodiment of the application of Scripture.

Jesus knows His origin and destiny and clearly enunciates, "For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will" (John 6:38). This is to the consternation and bewilderment of most of His listeners. He has also obtained a deep understanding of the practical application that He himself is providing in His ministry in referring to Himself as the "bread of life" (vv. 35, 48, 51) and that eternal life and resurrection is His to gift others (vv. 40, 47). Clearly, Jesus has an experiential approach to Scripture, but also an application of Scripture to life, beyond that to which any human could ever give.

Jesus' Didactic Instructions on Devotional Habits

Sermon on the Mount

The *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus shares with His listeners is profoundly practical in its teaching and shares much about what it is to chase after God. Miller conveys the perspective that Jesus' focus in this sermon is on aligning to His Father's will. "Jesus

introduces us to what it means to be a child of our heavenly Father” (Miller, 2009, p. 158). By removing the options for human power and glory we are opened to the availability of God in all of life, “May your will be done” (Matt 6:10).

Jesus provides a stark contrast here to the Pharisaic form of piety that “understood purity to depend on separation from that which defiles” (Charry, 1997, p. 66). His sermon paints a piety that is expressed in a relational, heart purity. “In comparison with the precision with which Pharisaic precepts monitor minute details of daily life, the Sermon gives focused yet general guidelines for conduct and virtues” (p. 66). In this sermon Jesus calls for a seemingly impossible visioning of a righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20). In his analysis of the *dikaiosune* that Jesus invites, Willard accords that “it is a call beyond any act-focused approach to righteousness and to a character-focused view” (Willard, 1998, as cited in Preston, 2010). Jesus is here addressing the answer to life’s challenge of that which really matters being what happens on the *inside*. “This ‘within’ is the arena of spiritual formation and, later, transformation” (Willard, 2002, p. 16). Such a shift can become a reality as one nurtures a relationship with the One who is the embodiment of all such righteousness.

Integrity of Jesus’ instructions and practice

If there were the slightest deviation of character and practice in Jesus’ ministry, there would have been reason for his antagonists to judge Him prior to Calvary. However Jesus goes to Calvary with His integrity intact, for even the Roman officer and soldiers at His crucifixion state, “This man truly was the Son of God!” (Matt 27:54). This is further evidenced by the New Testament apostles basing purpose in life and hope of future life

on Jesus (further outlined below) and in attesting to His exemplary character in that he “understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God” (Heb 4:15, 16a).

Apostolic Witness of Paul to Discipleship and Biblical Spirituality

The writings of the Apostle Paul offer much insight in the area of biblical discipleship. Guidance in walking the path as a disciple constitutes much of what his letters shared with the fledgling church in Asia Minor. Of the many passages that could be referred to, five will be considered, as it is felt they inform the discussion on the theology of personal biblical spirituality.

Let it be clearly stated at the outset that a focus on a holy life and obedience to God’s commands in no way depreciates the impact or import of the Gospel or of God’s activity on one’s behalf. To the contrary, such a focus enhances the impact of salvation, for not only does it provide the recipient of the Gospel with the grace of sins forgiven and the gift of salvation in justification (Eph 2:4-9), but further provides the continuous ongoing work of Christ: “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (v. 10). This is only achievable through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the follower’s life, whereby growth and development of the fruit of the Spirit are enabled. This spiritual formation is the result of a dependence and cooperation with the Holy Spirit, and as such are truly *the fruit of the Spirit*.

Spirit-filled Living (Gal 5:16-26)

Paul clearly states here that it is not by any personal endeavor that one becomes

righteous and pursues a righteous pathway for their life (Gal 5:1, 4). Rather, it is God's grace that provides freedom from legalism and a Spirit-empowering life-of-faith. In this Spirit-led life, Paul is mindful that Christians will be seeking community and attitudes that enhance such community building (Gal 5:13, 14).

Paul's definition of life *in the Spirit* compared with life *in the flesh* (i.e., following one's sinful nature) is similarly contrasted in the ensuing passages studied. Together these passages profile a starkly different outcome to the pursuit of each. In Gal 5:17 it examples such a contrast, with Gal 5:19-21 elaborating on the details of the attributes derived from following the sinful nature, while Gal 5:22, 23 describes attributes of life that is open to the Holy Spirit's leading, commonly referred to as the *fruit of the Spirit*.

The ongoing process of life in the Spirit

Little is stated in this passage as to how one is enabled to pursue the Spirit-led life rather than the former way of life, although there is mention that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there" (Gal 5:24). These words are reminiscent of what Paul stated earlier in Gal 2:20 and also in Rom 6:6 and of particular interest is the preposition used in the word *crucified with* which has the same reference of intimacy as is discussed below in an analysis of Col 3. While this *crucifying-of-self* might be seen as referring to a singular act at conversion of accepting Christ's death in place of one's own, closer examination would reveal that there is an ongoing discipline of self-denial and openness to the Spirit's empowering. Paul refers to a daily death (1 Cor 15:31) and Jesus' invitation to any would-be follower is to "take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23, NKJV). Idleman, in recognizing the challenge of this daily decision, provides an insightful analogy for an

alternate concept: “But to see following Jesus as a one-time decision is like saying after your wedding, ‘Now that I’m married, it’s back to life as usual.’ There is more to being a husband or wife than a wedding ceremony” (Idleman, 2011, pp. 168, 69). This aptly describes the ongoing process of commitment to Christ in the Christian walk.

There is further indication given by Paul in this passage about the ongoing process of spiritual development. He invites: “Let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives” (Gal 5:25, NLT). This is hardly achievable in a momentary, metamorphic change but rather necessarily entails an ongoing growth of awareness and openness to the Spirit’s leading in life.

The impact of community in spiritual growth

One could almost be tempted to see this journey of growing in tune with the Spirit as being an individualistic endeavor independent of community, however context reveals a vastly different perspective. First, the fruit of the Spirit are relational by nature and cannot be demonstrated devoid of community. Second, in Gal 5:26, “Let’s stop being arrogant, provoking one another and envying one another” refers to ways in which Spirit-filled followers act in order to maintain healthy community. The ensuing verses in Gal 6 also call for a responsibility in building such a community. Third, the contrast of the *we* language of the Holy Spirit community-led life stands in bold relief to the *I* language of pursuing the polar opposite of the sinful nature. Together, these indicators provide a strong rationale for the focus and nurture of community under the leading of the Holy Spirit in all of life through a daily dying to self and living with Christ as Lord of life.

Kingdom Living (Phil 3:1–4:9)

This passage offers additional validation to a theological foundation of biblical discipleship. Paul provides another insightful contribution to this conversation, in proposing the value of spiritual training, not because of its inherent worth, but rather because of the value of the *life* outcome that it is focused upon. “There are no awards for calisthenics, but indirectly they are the foundation of the game. The disciplines of the Spirit are the same” (Hull, 2010, p. 286).

Paul goes to some length to demonstrate that one’s own efforts lack intrinsic, salvific value. He outlines his own journey to illustrate the futility of chasing self-righteousness. Not that Paul is saying that effort is unwarranted, as it is a means of getting to know Christ, who is the end goal of any disciplined approach to seeking after Him (Phil 3:10). While not enunciated as such, what Paul is outlining is a process of *indirection* whereby the disciplines practiced, are the means of connecting one to the goal of knowing Christ and having life revolve around His presence.

Hence, it is for the outcome of spiritual maturity that Paul commends fellow Christians to follow his example (both in Phil 3:17 and 4:9). He is not putting himself on a pedestal, rather, he is here desiring that together, such maturity can result. By pursuing such disciplines, one is enabled to keep in focus one’s true citizenship and avoid the pitfalls of destructive behavior (Phil 3:19, 20).

Living as citizens of the kingdom provides a heavenly reality to life in the present, where joy is the operative expression and worry is alleviated through a recognition of God’s ongoing care (Phil 4:4-6). As one becomes intentionally focused on Christ and disciplines practiced to assist that focus, Paul gives the following assurance: “Then you

will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7).

Fullness of Life in Christ (Col 2:6-10)

In this short passage, Paul paints the need for an ongoing relationship with Jesus in order for growth to occur: "And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him" (Col 2:6). The acceptance of Jesus as Lord is seen as the beginning of a journey and not its conclusion. Sweet (2012) voices a concern that today's Christianity has a tendency to focus on the essence of Christianity being "a moment of decision rather than a momentum for life" (p. 71). He invites a shift in focus for discipleship to become "the art of pilgriming, the artistry of following Jesus . . . an artform that takes a lifetime to dry" (p. 71). A follower of Jesus includes Him in all of life, as Paul indicates: "Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him" (Col 2:7a). A parallel passage in Eph 3:14-19 adds that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers the follower who seeks this connectedness and enables the roots to "grow down into God's love and keep you strong" (3:17). Just as a tree gains its nutrition through its roots being in connection with water and nutrients within the soil, so too the follower of Jesus maintains an ongoing (daily) connection with Jesus. It is not momentary, but an ongoing process: "Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught and you will overflow with thankfulness" (Col 2:7b). This is the outcome of this ongoing connection: strength of faith, and an attitude of gratitude. The thankfulness is in recognition that it is not through one's personal inner resoluteness that this strength of character is attained. Rather, it is through Christ, whose union with the follower, enables the gratitude and resilience to develop.

Of additional interest is the pathway of faith development that is outlined in this passage. One is initially invited to *belonging*, followed by *believing*, followed by *behaving* (Rice, 2002). The concept of belonging is suggested in the relational attachment of connection with Christ; while believing is noted in, “your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught” (Col 2:7a); and behaving is the outcome of “you will overflow with thankfulness” (Col 2:7b). Sweet (2012) outlines a parallel connection in Jesus’ statement “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and recognizes the following progression: “first belonging (way), then believing (truth), then behaving (life)” (p. 47). A reversal of this order seems to be the pattern within many churches, and it is worthy of note to see this more biblical process: a process that is spoken of at length by Rice (2002). Peterson (2007) adds further insight: “The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life” (p. 4). Paul appears clearly aligned with such a progression through his words in this passage.

Unity of God-Community (Eph 4:1-6)

Paul’s admonition for action in these verses is prefaced by a recognition of belonging, through God’s calling. Paul’s (previously mentioned) prayer in Eph 3:14-21 contextualizes this passage, with his comment about the availability of resourcing in Spirit-empowered resilience and the confirmation of secure attachment with the Trinitarian community; secure in the knowledge of the source of one’s true worth. This type of knowledge is only achievable through reflection and heart-targeted application of passages of Scripture like the one stated above, allowing the Spirit to establish its growth.

By so doing the false selves of ambition, performance and people-pleasing are avoided (Meyer, 2008, p. 225).

Through recognition of one's true worth, and in tune with the Holy Spirit's guiding and empowering, a follower of Jesus is invited on a journey of community-building, engaging in habits that manifest various attributes core to this process: humility, gentleness, patience, making allowance for each other's faults, loving, peacemakers (Eph 4:2, 3). Such attributes are reminiscent of the fruit of the Spirit previously mentioned, and Paul recognizes their Spirit-dependence in his request: "Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit" (Eph 4:3a).

Paul invites a unity of community in a number of statements relating to oneness (seven in all). Shared, intimate community is portrayed as the essence of who God is and how His followers are to perceive themselves. In Eph 2 Paul symbolizes a building (temple) with blocks all joined together (Jew and Gentile alike) with Christ as the cornerstone as representing this community. This provides additional evidence for the concept that a *solitary* Christian is an oxymoron.

Out of such a community, there is provided a rich soil for development and maturation for followers of Christ, enabling such to have an established, resolute faith that does not stumble when confronted by alternate worldviews (Eph 4:13, 14).

Living in the Spirit (Eph 5:15-20)

In this passage, Paul advocates Holy Spirit-dependence for attaining spiritual health. His invitation to live wisely (Eph 5:15) is elaborated later in the passage with drinking in the Spirit and may allude to Jesus' parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), with the oil of the wise being representative of the Holy Spirit.

In Eph 5:16, 17 Paul advises care of thought and time. These are best pursued by the follower of Jesus through having a reflective practice where God's leading is sought and there is a recognition of the presence of God in life in the here and now. Willard (1988) is a strong proponent of the *here and now* of the Kingdom of God with disciples "steadily learning from him [Jesus] how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence" (p. xv). Paul's invitation for followers of Jesus to pursue a communal musical responsiveness conveys a picture of Kingdom reality in a joy-filled, Spirit-led, unified life (Eph 5:19, 20).

Eph 5:18 contrasts the ideas of being drunk with wine with being filled with the Spirit. "Only the latter provides true joy without a hangover, but both have an influence on a person: Those who must be in control will know neither influence" (Patterson, 2005, p. 38).

The verb *to be filled* is expressed as a command in relation to the Holy Spirit, but is conveyed in the present passive imperative. Coe (2009) provides the following insight regarding this reality:

the person is not primarily commanded to do something, but to allow something to be done or happen to the person. In this case, the verb could be translated as a command to be acted upon or influenced by another person ("be continuously acted upon or filled by the Holy Spirit"). . . . Opening to the presence of the Spirit is to color all our life, obedience and efforts in being transformed. (p. 30)

Transformation of heart as experienced and expounded by Paul can only be realized under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Character Development in the Christian Life (Col 3:1-17)

The invitation shared in this passage offers an indirection that shifts attention

from worldly concerns and perhaps even self- absorbed development, to attending to God in life and seeing the reality of our heavenly inheritance.

White (1889) encourages a personal focus pertinent to this passage:

If we would permit our minds to dwell more upon Christ and the heavenly world, we should find a powerful stimulus and support in fighting the battle of the Lord. Pride and love of the world will lose their power as we contemplate the better land so soon to be our home. Beside the loveliness of Christ, all earthly attractions will seem of little worth. (p. 91)

This suggests a recognition in whose kingdom the Christian belongs, and in so doing, allows behavioral changes (as previously discussed, through the Spirit's empowering) to accordingly develop, that align with where one belongs.

Col 3:1 has the Greek word *συνεγείρω* and conveys the idea, *raise up together with*, the prefix *συν-* signifying a tight union or partnership that is much closer than other prepositions that could be used in its place (*μετα, παρα*) (Crosswire, Strong's Numbers 4862, 3326, 3844). Paul appears to be depicting a tight bond of community that Christ has with his follower to the extent that it is as though the follower, by association, has gone through the process of death and resurrection to new life that Christ Himself went through. Eph 2:4 provides a parallel expression by utilizing the same word *συνεγείρω* relating this community to the richness of God's mercy and love towards us. However, Eph 2:6 enhances an appreciation of this community with another compound word with the same prefix *συνκαθίζω* indicating that followers of Jesus are *seated together with Him* in heavenly places because they are so tightly *united with Christ*.

Paul encapsulates his intent in this Colossians passage with the words: "Let the message about Christ in all its richness, fill your lives" (3:16). Therein lies the essence.

All other discussion in regard to biblical spirituality and discipleship fits within this cohesive construct.

Conclusion to Biblical Theology

The apostle Paul admonished the Philippians to adopt the same mindset as Jesus (Phil 2:5), and while Paul clarified this as being an attitude of humility, it could equally include the methodology and patterns of behavior that Jesus adopted in order to maintain such humility and consequential related patterns of living. Wilkins (1992) adds: “Paul sees the whole Christian life as a recapitulation of the existence of Jesus and hence as an exercise of . . . discipleship” (p. 306). This imitation of Jesus is more directly addressed by Paul: “Imitate God, therefore; in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ” (Eph 5:1, 2a). The devotional habits that Jesus adopted in nurturing His relationship with His Father provide exemplary import for His followers. Getting to know Jesus experientially necessitates practicing the habits Jesus Himself practiced, in order to develop a close relationship with Him. Such habits include: solitary time in God’s presence; taking time out from work and ministry for perspective; reflective reading of Scripture where there is an attentiveness to God speaking; memorization of Scripture; fasting; recognition and attention to God’s ongoing leading in life; prayer with an attentiveness to maintain connection with Father; delighting in the Sabbath and extending its potential for good. While not exhaustive, these are some of the habits that Jesus demonstrated. Followers of Jesus would be well served in adopting these self-same habits.

In the Apostolic writings, Paul by no means limits Christianity to a theoretical, transactional approach to the gospel. Instead, he is inclusive of a practical, relational

understanding and application whereby followers of Jesus are invited into a community of faith where nurture and support are the natural code of conduct. Paul calls fellow Christians to Holy Spirit-dependence in order for the Spirit's fruit to become evident in life, not for salvation, but for witness and influence; *because* of salvation. Hence, Paul is able to promote himself as an example, not due to his perfection, but due to his pattern of discipling and being disciplined. Herein lies the nucleus of one's calling, to allow oneself to be drawn into the *perichoresis* of the intimate community of God.

Theological Perceptions and Practices for Potential Refocus in Ministry

It is anticipated that a heightened focus on biblical spirituality and discipleship will stimulate change in each of the following significant areas of Christian practice:

1. A shift from independence (and isolationist) to dependence (community of relationship) we are being invited as friends into the community of Trinitarian life.
2. A shift from a solely theoretical, intellectual approach to God of a "mere mental assent to correct doctrine" (Willard, 1988, p. 23), to an experience of God. This is the wisdom of sapiential understanding (Charry, 1997, p. 4) and connects with the affective domain, "We must not lose sight of the fact that knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual and volitional one, and could not indeed be a deep relationship between persons were it not so" (Packer, cited in Issler, 2001, p. 22).
3. Closely associated with the above but warranting separate mention is a shift from ministering out of a sense of obligation to that of ministering out of the overflow of the heart (Luke 6:45).
4. From eschatological hope to current reality of kingdom life (heaven is not our

goal, it is our destination. Our goal is in aligning ourselves to the will of God and *life-with-God*).

5. From Holy Spirit negligence to Holy Spirit inclusiveness that is enhanced through an experiential, relational journey with God.

6. From legalism of religious practice to flourishing of life with God (not performing devotional habits for personal piety but rather for aligning with God's will).

7. From evangelism based on doctrinal conversation, to influence, based on changed life. In an article by the Barna Research Group on the current influence of Christianity on culture in America, it states:

The most influential aspect of Christianity in America is how believers do – or do not – implement their faith in public and private . . . it is people's observations of the integration of a believer's faith into how he/she responds to life's opportunities and challenges that most substantially shape people's impressions of and interest in Christianity. (BarnaGroup, 2010, p. 11)

Patterson (2001) provides an accord to this observation: "People are God's method, not techniques and programs and people become usable to God as they swell in His glorious presence" (p. 39).

It is optimistically anticipated that a focus on biblical spirituality as was practiced by Jesus, combined with an embracing of Spirit-filled living as commended by Paul, has potential to resolve the above concerns. In their wake a faith community could develop that is charismatically irresistible in its appeal to others.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE CONTRIBUTING TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY AS A RELATIONAL JOURNEY

Introduction

Determining elemental aspects of nurturing Christian faith adds clarity to what is core to a fulfilling ministry. It is to these aspects that attention is now focused. This review of literature surveys some patterns of recent thought leaders with regard to biblical spirituality, and identifies the need of a relational focus in personal spiritual nurture and likewise in ministry. For an understanding of the challenges of current ministry, some historical background is necessary, as is also an appreciation of the influence of worldview. A theology of the *presence* of God in all of life captures a highlight in the current landscape, and offers a basis for the need to shift from an informational to a relational spiritual focus, through an indirect methodology of devotional habits. An exploration of these habits through the answering of key questions will also be explored: What are these habits? Do they pose a risk of legalism in their being applied? How core are they to the Christian journey? Is there any virtue-shaping quality to their practice? What training is needed? How does the theological concept of the Trinity relate to the habits? Answers to these key questions are offered in this literature review. The final section of this chapter will provide an analysis of the interconnectedness of deepening relationships for spirituality through deepening

connections, spiritual companions, and a worshipping community, with a particular focus on small groups.

Overall Purpose of the Christian Faith

Asking a question of ultimate purpose invites an understanding of underlying motivation or, as Smith (2009) suggests, offers narratives that we live by (pp. 24, 25). Not surprisingly, authors focused on spiritual formation and discipleship resonate with this thinking. Tozer's response to ultimate purpose is "surrender to Christ; get to know God personally; grow to become like Him" (Wiersbe, 2000, p. 7). Charry (1997) speaks of Christian excellence as an outcome but states, "A central theological task is to assist people to come to God" (p. 5). Lovelace (1979) in an extensive study of revival movements says this of the essence of the Christian faith: "True spirituality is not a superhuman religiosity; it is simply true humanity released from bondage to sin and renewed by the Holy Spirit" (pp. 19, 20). Bonhoeffer (1995) addresses a key issue in defining "costly grace" as a call to discipleship; a new way of life; while "cheap grace" is the abstraction, allowing one to remain unchanged (pp. 57, 58). Willard (1997), while stating a similar perspective to Bonhoeffer's call for discipleship, offers contrasting imagery, and articulates "costly faithlessness" (p. 301) as the lack of need (or desire) for discipleship, while a theoretical theology of justification is all that is called for. Willard's (1988) contention is that "we *can* . . . become like Christ by *practicing* the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father" (p. ix).

Definition of Terms

There is much spoken of in the current literature arena on spirituality, and its conversation is encompassed across numerous denominations and religions. This in part speaks of both the need and dearth of answers provided by modernity. At the outset of this review, it is helpful to clarify that, as Willard (2006, p. 69) notes, everyone is spiritually formed but it just depends by whom. Benner (2002) defines spirituality as “a person’s awareness of and response to the Divine. . . . Christian Spirituality involves *working out our existence* within the context of the Christian faith and community. . . . Spirituality is not Christian if it is not centered in the Spirit” (p. 15). There is a close link here to the Holy Spirit and Spirituality. Hull follows along a similar vein to Benner although he designates Christ as the key member of the Godhead (Andrews, 2010, p. 115).

Standish (2005) saw a great lack in what he called a “functional style of church” (p. 7) and studied about spirituality to find a solution to stave off stagnation of ministry. He provides some effective contrasts in definition:

As opposed to theology, which is the study of God and life from a rational, analytical, and semi-scientific perspective . . . the study of spirituality is the study of the lived relationship between God and us, as well as the study of the practices and perspectives that lead to a deepening of the relationship with God. (p. 6)

He likens the first to eating dry crackers while the second as the much-needed water. While not all would agree with the definition of theology being narrowed to a modernistic perspective and see more of a unity between both perspectives within a theological framework, Standish does provide an avenue for further discussion of the impact of rationalism. The wealth of what Standish discovered relates to “how to

encounter and experience God” (Standish, 2005, p. 6). This thought is more widely discussed under the devotional habits.

Some terms of reference within this paper have already been noted as being interchangeable, namely: devotional habits and spiritual disciplines; biblical spirituality and spiritual formation. These are termed thus to avoid potential misperceptions that their alternates may engender. Willard (2006, p. 53) provides an illustration of this, with the term *discipleship*, which he maintains has been stripped of its biblical intent by its varied perceptions on the right and left of the theological pendulum.

Relationship Between Biblical Spirituality and Discipleship

A level of distinction between biblical spirituality and discipleship becomes apparent in Hull’s quote from Willard, “Discipleship is the decision to follow Jesus, to be His apprentice. This is about positioning, making oneself available. Spiritual formation is the direct action of the Holy Spirit upon the inner person” (Andrews, 2010, p. 116). Willard adds: “Spiritual formation is the training process that occurs for those who are disciples of Jesus. . . . As a disciple of Jesus, I am living with Him, learning to live in the kingdom of God as He lived in the kingdom of God. Spiritual formation is taking the explicit statements of Jesus and learning how to live this way” (Andrews, 2010, p. 56). In a foreword penned by Willard of the contribution of Wilhoit to an understanding of the true significance of spiritual formation, Willard affirms the necessity of refocusing ministry with the centrality of spiritual transformation for disciples (Wilhoit, 2008, p. 11).

In the minds of many today there is a distinction between being a Christian and being a disciple, with the latter being seen as the extended version of the *graduate*

Christian. Ogden (2007) is aligned with Bonhoeffer (1995, p. 47), Willard (1988, pp. 258-264), Wilkins (1992, pp. 31, 32) and other spiritual formation writers who challenge this concept, recognizing that there is “no difference between embracing God’s grace as a forgiven sinner and following Jesus as the primary shaping influence over our life” (Ogden, 2007, p. 8).

Spiritual formation is given a vernacular interpretation by Ortberg (2010) in his reference to the *outer you* of a physical body that is affected by what is done to it, and the *inner you* of spirit: “Spiritual formation is the process by which your inner self and character are shaped” (p. 29).

Wilhoit (2008) states unequivocally: “Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period” (p. 15). He provides added insights through his definition: “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (p. 23). Implicit in this definition are five key areas of focus. One is intentionality of purpose (this links with the *training* of disciplines mentioned further), *communal* in focus (this is extended further in a focus on relational community building), non-programmatic (also elaborated further), transformation-focused (the essence of being His disciple), and Holy-Spirit-dependent. This comprehensive definition provides a panoramic picture of this process and is inclusive of the definitions of others, whilst also providing some key, simple ingredients for an extension of understanding and application.

Literature Relating to Biblical Spirituality and Discipleship in a Ministry Context

Historical Background

There is much to be gained from an understanding of the historical forces that have lead to current thought in biblical spirituality. Charry (1997), in pursuing just such research, provides a cautionary insight with regard to worldview when she states: “A community that rejects its past is doomed” (p. viii). White (1915) similarly states: “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history” (p.196). Charry’s warning comes after having researched extensively in historical theology and observing that in pre-modernity, there was no disjointedness between theory and practice.

Sapience is the term Charry introduces as representing this bygone era: “The patristic age emphasized sapience as the foundation of human excellence. . . . Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known” (p. 4). The loss of sapience was directly related to the rationalism that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, in Charry’s words, “undercut the sapiential, aretegenic, and participatory dimensions of doctrinal interpretation . . . the dominant goal became laying out the pattern of Christian doctrines so that Christians would assent to correct propositions” (p. 237).

Lovelace (1979), in his comprehensive study of revivals in Christianity has seen the subsequent historical changes as a series of reactions to what went before, bringing us to a place of a redactive gospel, where sanctification has been displaced (thus showcasing the loss of sapience):

There seemed to be a sanctification gap among Evangelicals, a peculiar conspiracy

somehow to mislay the Protestant tradition of spiritual growth and to concentrate instead on frantic witnessing activity, sermons on John 3:16 and theological arguments over eschatological subtleties . . . the historical development of Protestant Evangelicalism has predisposed it to lose sight of the central importance of sanctification. (Lovelace, 1979, pp. 232, 233)

While different terms are being utilized, Charry and Lovelace are reflecting parallel outcomes of a didactic, rational gospel with little focus on a relational, sapiential construct. This was the emerging emphasis of modernity.

Paulien (2004) in a presidential address outlined the challenges for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in impacting mainstream cultures of first-world countries. These post-modern societies no longer find relevance in the rational mindset of modernism. Of particular interest is that within this challenging arena, Paulien envisages a number of windows within the new thinking paradigm of postmodernism, where a more relational approach to ministry could impact this community-seeking, spiritually open generation. By contrast Moreland (2007) sees little value in the *thin* worldview of postmodernism where cultural relativism lacks any objectivity and calls on a “perspective of the Kingdom of God and the worldview of Jesus” (p. 32) to fill this void. There is value in both these perspectives: Paulien speaks of the potential of a mindset that is different to that of modernism’s rationalism; that is more open to sapience. Moreland on the other hand, sees the need for true commitment in order for discipleship to take root.

Perhaps what is called for within this discussion is an inclusiveness of the best of both worldviews where sapience could be resourced from a solid, rational mindset. The key strength of modernism lies in its rationalistic approach, while that of postmodernism lies in its more subjective, experiential perspective. In order for there to be a healthy combination of what is best within these worldviews, a different worldview altogether is

needed; one that could be termed a *God-view* on how we relate to our world. Such a worldview is further described below.

Worldview and Biblical Spirituality

In their comments, Paulien and Moreland have introduced an inextricable link between worldview and spirituality. Hiebert (2008) provides a comprehensive analysis of worldviews. He recognizes the necessity for Christians to undergo a process of transformation that is inclusive of their worldview (pp. 332, 333). This shift needs to encompass the affective domain and include the fruit of the Spirit (i.e., sapience) along with what he terms “mysterium tremendum” (p. 291) a sense of God’s holy presence. More will be stated on this directly.

Dybdahl (2008) elucidates an idea that Hiebert initializes as the “flaw of the excluded middle” (pp. 102-109) where the rationalism of modernism insists that God’s activity is excluded from that of humans’ and a spirituality of experiencing God in life is undermined, resulting in many Christians being what Dybdahl terms “closet deists” (p. 105): lacking belief in God’s ability to act in everyday life. Moreland (2007) offers a solution, “We Christians must grasp more deeply the worldview struggle in our culture and recapture a view of Christian teaching as a source of knowledge, not mere true belief accepted by blind faith” (pp. 34, 35).

In context, Moreland speaks of the knowledge that involves sapience and as such his statement would find agreement from each of the aforementioned voices.

The significance attached to worldview is highly warranted and one can notice parallels between successive generations’ theology relating to their respective worldviews. Foster (1998) shares a metaphor of streams of spirituality through the

generations with Jesus as the source or “resourcement” (p. xii). Modernism has not been without these voices that have harnessed the source and vision of what is most needed in the Christian faith. To these voices is owed a debt of gratitude for their insight, tenacity and God-directedness.

Impact on Spirituality of Modernism

In light of this historical contextualization, it becomes apparent that modernism has left gaps in Christian spirituality that can only be filled by regaining an intentional, relational journey. Willard (1988) paints a stark picture of this reality:

The highest education, as well as the strictest doctrinal views and religious practice, often leave untouched the heart of darkness from which the demons come to perch upon the lacerated back of humankind. Fine laws of the highest social intent and widespread confession of the new birth of firsthand contact with God still leave an awesome lack . . . in the quality of community and family life. (p. 235)

Identifying with a similar foreboding, Lovelace (1979) sees a “return to the vital core of biblical teaching dealing with Christian experience” (p. 16) as being needed in order to provide reformation and revival. Standish (2005) is similarly aligned while utilizing a different term of reference. He identifies “rational functionalism” with its “restrictive, logic-bound theology” (p. 15) as the offspring of modernism that stunts church health. He identifies the catch-cry of modernism’s approach to be, “If we can just get people to think right theologically, then all of our problems will go away” (p. 15) and contrasts the “blessed church . . . [as where people] encounter and experience God” (p. 27).

B. Epperly and Epperly (2009) in recognizing this gap, provide an experiential (sapiential) aspect to theology with “theological reflection” along with “spiritual practice” (p. 10) as what is needed by pastors in order to maintain a sense of God’s

presence in their life and that of their congregations.

Writing over a century earlier of the lack of assurance of faith in Christ of ministers at the 1888 Minneapolis Conference, White (1980) wrote: “This is the grand and heavenly theme that has in a large degree been left out of the discourses because Christ is not formed within the human mind” (p. 185). She continued, “We need to have a living connection with God ourselves in order to teach Jesus. Then we can give the living personal experience of what Christ is to us by experience and faith” (p. 187).

Issler (2009) terms what is missing within Christianity today as “the willing-doing gap” and further shares that the “greater attention to core belief formation can help us all grow more toward Christlikeness” (p. 179). His concept aligns with Willard (1988), who writes of disconnect between the concept of grace and the actual life of a Christian: “Somehow we’ve gotten the idea that the essence of faith is entirely a mental and inward thing . . . we know there must be some connection between grace and life, but we can’t seem to make it intelligible to ourselves” (p. x). There is confluence here also with Lovelace’s (1979) “sanctification gap” (pp. 229-270).

The *willing-doing gap* is seen by Issler as being exacerbated by three faulty ministry foci: altar calls for conversion without ongoing support for change; an emphasis on knowledge of the Bible without nurturing inner belief of the Word; and a focusing on the external behaviors to the neglect of the inner heart that motivates the actions (p. 195). Coe (2009) speaks of the “sanctification gap” (pp. 4-5) as the gap between where one truly is as a Christian, and the spiritual and character ideal. Coe’s (2009) thesis is that of addressing this gap by way of a “robust Spiritual Theology, which has its *telos* in love and holiness” (p. 7). In amplification of this thesis, he states that what is needed is not

just the theory of the text (however accurate they may be) but “how the truths of the text apply to and actually work in real life” (Coe, 2009, p. 7). He calls this “drawing out the spiritual implications and applications of theology to real life . . . not only the task but also the ultimate goal of all Christian teaching” (p. 7). There is ready agreement from sources intent on spiritual formation to this needed ministry focus.

A Counteractive Theology of Presence

Worthy of reiteration here is the necessity of an ongoing relational knowing-of-God where His reality as well as His presence in all of life is more fully realized. This provides a counteractive measure to Hiebert’s “flaw of the missing middle” previously acknowledged. B. Epperly and Epperly (2009) speak of this in terms of a relationship with God. “Practicing the presence of God in ministry is a lively partnership that must be nurtured and developed like any other intimate relationship” (p. 3). Buechner (1982), whose identifying hallmark was his regard for the appearance of the divine and of listening to the holy in daily life, has noted, “God speaks through the events of our lives . . . life itself can be thought of as an alphabet by which God graciously makes known his presence and purpose and power among us” (p. 4). Buechner calls this alphabet “*The Alphabet of Grace*” (p. 4) and extends this discovering of God’s presence to the broader sweep of history.

What is invited from what has been described above is a refreshingly, renewed focus on a biblical spirituality that enables a follower of Jesus to move beyond mere theological terminology and form, to a practicality of life experience. Such a *God-view* of operation embraces the best of the contributing worldviews of modernism *and* postmodernism: a biblical theological underpinning alongside a practical, relational

experience of God in life. It is to such a blending that attention is now turned.

Overview of Evangelical Literature Relating to Devotional Habits

Towards an Understanding of Devotional Habits

Devotional habits or spiritual disciplines defy succinct definition and prescriptive allocation, as they provide a variety of ways for deepening one's relationship with God: an avenue for recognizing this ongoing Godly presence in life. As such they offer a sound pathway forward in the pursuit of biblical discipleship as it has been discussed.

Devotional habits call for a creativity of approach in accordance to one's personhood. B. Epperly and Epperly (2009) speak of this variety of disciplines and comment that no one size fits all: "effective practices of opening to God's presence will always reflect your personality type, theological perspective, and professional and personal context" (p. 10).

Hull (2006) warns of the risk of making discipleship (and by association the disciplines) programmatic:

I'd caution churches not to become dependent on prepackaged programs. Think of them as booster shots or launching points, because they don't deal with the mystery and subtleties of Christian spiritual formation. That can only occur when spiritual people seek God together and find their own way. Disciples must eventually struggle in prayer to know what God wants them to do next. (pp. 168–169)

There is a pattern of definition emerging here that unveils the subtlety of these habits: their Spirit-dependence (hence the name *spiritual* disciplines), their variety and specificity according to need, as well as their indirection, as is further explicated.

A more detailed definition of devotional habits is provided by Moreland (2007), in unpacking the connection between devotional habits and spiritual formation. He refers to a habit as an "ingrained tendency to act, think, or feel a certain way without needing to

choose to do so.” He then provides a link that “character is the sum total of one’s habits”

(p. 150) and distills how this relates to the spiritual disciplines:

A Christian spiritual discipline is a repeated bodily practice, done over and over again, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and under the direction of Jesus . . . to enable one to get good at certain things in life that one cannot learn by direct effort.
(Moreland, 2007, p. 152)

This relates to what Hull intimated as the disciplines being Holy-Spirit-dependent.

However the benefits of *indirection* in devotional habits warrants further attention.

Moreland (2007) provides an apt illustration of disciplines being like learning to play tennis. Hull (2010) resonates with this exercise illustration in his comment: “There are no awards for calisthenics, but indirectly they are the foundation of the game. The disciplines of the Spirit are the same” (p. 286). Devotional habits ultimately benefit the Spirit-filled life as it is lived. This outcome is not achieved by directly pursuing a godly character, but rather, indirectly, through the practice of these apparently disassociated habits, God’s imprint is revealed through transformation. In a similar way, Willard (1988) speaks of disciplines as an exercise regime for connecting with God in a cooperative arrangement. He adds: “Spiritual disciplines, ‘exercises unto godliness’ are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others” (p. 156). Willard defines disciplines into two groupings: (a) disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice); and (b) disciplines of engagement (study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission) (p. 158). While providing this simple list, Willard is not limiting disciplines merely to such practices.

Inherent in the word *discipline* is an intentionality and tenacity that can easily be misread and misapplied. Wilhoit (2008) warns that while the disciplines can be used to

provide growth with an added refreshing awareness of God's grace, an opposite result can also occur, depending on one's "life maps, [that] may make a train wreck of an intentional spiritual formation. Unless challenged, legalistic souls will turn spiritual formation to a more finely honed legalism" (p. 7). This is a worthy warning for the over-zealous and warrants further elaboration.

Devotional Habits and Legalism

To the voices who claim that disciplines are simply another form of righteousness by works, Willard (1988) counters that true spiritual disciplines can only be taken on through faith and grace and terms it a "fellowship of the burning heart" (p. xii), where there is the passion of wanting to be like Jesus because of our love for Him that is empowered by His Spirit. In his seminal work *Celebration of Discipline* Foster (1989) advocates that inner transformation or "subjective righteousness" can only be achieved through the same way that "objective righteousness" (justification) is achieved: by God's grace and gifting. The effort that is undertaken in the disciplines "allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us" (pp. 6, 7). He leaves no place for righteousness-by-works within the disciplines. "In and of themselves the Disciplines have no virtue, possess no righteousness, contain no rectitude. . . . The Disciplines place us before God; they do not give us Brownie points with God" (p. 12). There is a concurrence of thought in regard to salvation sourcing with both Foster and Willard, both of whom are key thought-leaders in regard to spiritual formation in the evangelical church of recent times.

Willard (1988) identifies the extremes the church went to during the medieval period with asceticism, and likens it to the "disciplinary malpractice" (p. 134) of the

Jews, where God says that He detested their sacrifices and burnt offerings. Willard in no way condones the monastics excesses of disciplines in life, that operated from a motivation that forgiveness or merit could be earned from their self-denial. He points to this rewards-endeavor as a key reason why contemporary Protestantism in general has rejected the disciplines as relevant to the Christian life. Willard (1988) cites Trueblood (1972) in support: “There is not one unique feature that can be predicated of the practical life of the average member of the Protestant church” (p. 147). This reaction of Protestantism, however, is a shortsighted approach that misses out on the richness associated with a less pendulum-like response. Willard (2006) states, “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning” (p. 61). He adds further insight, “There is a place for effort, but it never earns anything and must never take the place of God with us. Our efforts are to make room for Him in our lives” (Willard, 2004, p. 3), a worthy focus for any human endeavor.

What Willard (2009) purports as a prime human desire is that: “People long to be good, to be worthy and not just to be. . . . There is a lingering suspicion that you cannot have had a good life if you failed to be a good person, and that to be a good person is a large part of genuine success, or ‘blessedness’” (pp. 47-48). The kind sentiments often shared of the deceased at funerals bears out this primary desire. In support of Willard’s premise, Preston (2010) postures:

If Willard is right about the quest for spiritual formation being grounded in our desire for goodness, then the truth is that the Christian who desires to open more deeply to Christ, the Cross, and the Spirit will do so precisely because s/he desires to be genuinely good. (p. 228)

The argument being made here is that a desire for morality is not opposed to the gospel but rather complements it, and to argue whether it is legalistic is to be taking a wrong

understanding of its purpose. Willard (2006) also provides a counter measure for avoiding legalism by not focusing merely on action or outward performance, otherwise “you will fall into the deadliest of legalisms and you will kill other souls and die yourself. You will get social conformity” (p. 55). This is a worthy warning and points to the necessity of being Holy-Spirit-dependent in the pursuit of devotional habits.

Hull (2010) reflecting on the value of Willard’s ministry, confronts the issue of those who are resistant to the spiritual disciplines out of legalistic concerns, and considers it the result of operating from a misunderstanding of grace that leads to a passive religion. He challenges: “Since Jesus is our leader and teacher, should we not look to his life and adapt such practices to our lives?” (p. 290). He continues by affirming Willard’s process of “transforming people through the spiritual disciplines from a readiness to do evil to a readiness to do good . . . to become a new kind of person in practice, not just on paper” (p. 290), and calls for pastors to lead the way “by their apprenticeship, not just in elocution” (p. 290). Hull presents quite a challenge, one that is worthy of emulation that encourages a move beyond rhetoric, to ownership and application.

Relationship Between Devotional Habits and the Christian Journey

Christian (1987, as cited in Charry, 1997) makes a distinction between first-order and second-order doctrines. He maintains that second-order thoughts of a Christian community are its governing doctrines while primary-order doctrines teach about God in relation to human life (p. 5). Charry connects this to her sapiential construct: both a knowing of God and loving God. Johnson (2003, p. 301) is supportive of this link between theology and life, and reiterates the need for coherence between theory and

practice, as does Radner (1998, p. 16) who sees the early church theology as focused on being transformed to the image of God. VandenBerg (2009), while supportive of Charry's focus, contends that not all is lost of a practical/sapiential approach in the modern era with the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a theologian who understood the centrality of Christian formation within theology (p. 334). In fairness to Charry, who makes no blanket statement of modernism's being devoid of sapience and quotes Barth, "stressing the morally uplifting consequences of turning to God. . . . As a theologian he believed that God calls us not to be bent over in shame but to stand tall in light of divine grace" (Barth, 1958, as cited in Charry, 1997, p. 29).

Another voice challenging the theoretical tendency of modernism is Tozer (2005):

The modern scientist has lost God amid the wonders of his world; we Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of His Word. We have almost forgotten that God is a Person and, as such, can be cultivated as any person can. (p. 11)

White (1892/1981), writing at the turn of the nineteenth century provides an early voice in this matter, "There is an evidence that is open to all - the most highly educated, and the most illiterate, - the evidence of experience" (p. 111). This echoes Tozer's challenge and offers refreshing potential for the Christian.

Willard (1988) contends that devotional habits are the very core of the Christian journey in growing to be like Christ: "We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged . . . in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father" (p. ix). Willard's *piece de resistance* is that: "*Whatever is purely mental cannot transform the self*" (p. 152). He expands on this with an assessment:

One of the greatest deceptions in the practice of the Christian religion is the idea that

all that really matters is our internal feelings, ideas, beliefs, and intentions. It is this mistake about the psychology of the human being that more than anything else divorces salvation from life, leaving us a headful of vital truths about God and a body unable to fend off sin.” (Willard, 1988, p. 152)

What is highlighted by each of these writers is the wealth to be gained from nurturing a deep relationship with God: A relationship that goes way beyond superficial feelings; beyond an intellectual assent; and even beyond a doctrinal belief system. Without such a biblical spirituality, one is left short-changed of *currency*, as McNeal (2000) states: “Spiritual leaders deal in spiritual currency. The value of this currency depends directly on the strength of the leader’s deposits into the relationship bank with the Almighty” (p. xv). While McNeal is not directly referring to devotional habits, the context of his quote is such that it shows a relationship between the intentional focus on disciplines in order to deepen a relationship with an ever-present God. This in turn has an indirect influence on the shaping of a person’s character as will now be explored.

Devotional Habits and Transformation

As previously stated, Charry (1997) refers to the internal formation that takes place as the aretegenic function of the devotional habits. She takes this term from the Greek *αρετη* used in Phil 4:8 that denotes “moral excellence . . . virtue-shaping” (p. 19) and applies this to what true theology is inviting to take place. White (1980) shares insights in common with Charry, as she conveys a similar theme in a soul-challenging letter to her nephew Frank E. Belden:

You have my dear brother in Christ not cultivated spirituality and grown in grace. Self in you must die. Self-importance must be laid in the dust. O remember that God is a present God. . . . You must be renewed, transformed, converted, and your whole life should be ordered and fashioned after the likeness of Christ. (p. 185)

This has a parallel pattern to what has been focused on as being needed for spiritual

formation: God's presence, an intentional process, and a focus on Christ as example for devotional habits.

Benner (2002), a clinical psychologist, adds that spiritual formation, particularly with the added input of spiritual companionship (a form of spiritual mentoring), has much to offer soul-health, and for too long the church has been given access to merely the "spiritual part of persons. I [Benner] feel very concerned about this development and have committed two decades of work to reversing it" (p. 19). He adds, "The care of souls is much too important to be left to clinical professionals" (p. 19). These sentiments are shared by Seamands (1981) in his analysis of the deep-seated problems that are too often glossed over. He sees the solution as being more focused on taking hold of the Holy Spirit for wholeness, "the Holy Spirit becomes our partner and helper, who works along with us in a mutual participating, for our healing" (p. 20).

Devotional Habits and Training

It is through the intentional training of the devotional habits that the most tangible results are evinced, although (as previously indicated), this takes place in an indirect manner, as Willard (1988) implies: "The activities constituting the disciplines have no value in themselves" (p.138). He states it is enjoying the fellowship of God's love that is the essence of the Christian life and the disciplines are there to help our weaknesses to become strengths. He adds:

We can even lay it down as a rule of thumb that if it is *easy* for us to engage in a certain discipline, we probably don't need to practice it. The disciplines we need to practice are precisely the ones we are *not* 'good at' and hence do not enjoy. (p. 138)

However, even accomplished actions need ongoing practice. A concert pianist does not stop practicing once they have achieved excellence in reaching a pinnacle of success.

Similarly, there are devotional habits where one can have excellent communion with God but it would frustrate that communion to stop the habit and start another. This reaction is partly due to a premise that certain personalities are more inclined to certain devotional habits. To enable this fit so as to build a foundational community with God is what is most needed for spiritual formation to occur, as demonstrated by a creative person sensing a closeness to God through works of art. One sees wisdom in the notion of pursuing primary devotional habits that are beneficial across all personalities and secondary habits that are more specific to needs and weaknesses for training purposes. This is the intent of Willard, for he holds primary habits as being of paramount importance (1988, p. ix). Benner (2002) focuses on this perspective to a degree, in discussing the Christian journey with the early stage involving basic disciplines of “prayer, Bible study, church involvement” (p. 28). While he stresses the primary nature of these, he also recognizes there is much more on offer in developing the journey: “Spiritual direction focuses more on later stages of the journey and is usually judged most relevant to those who seek to deepen an already-present practice of prayer” (p. 28). Chan describes two categories of disciplines, one of which he calls the “predictable practices” of “Bible reading . . . prayers of praise and intercession; regular church attendance; and evangelism” (2009, p. 219). The second category he sees as external to the traditional practices that have, in more recent years blossomed into a variety of spiritual practices.

Foster (1989) contrasts the above to a degree, by raising a concern to any prioritizing of disciplines and rather posits a singular, solidarity of function of the disciplines, “The disciplines are like the fruit of the Spirit – they comprise a single reality

... an organic unity, a single path” (p. 12). He recommends a view whereby each discipline is harnessed for their potential without being limited by any prioritization or “exhaustive list,” including the twelve that are highlighted in his book (p. 12).

Hull (2006) speaks of how the disciplines work and how they enable the previously discussed indirect process of transformation in the life:

God uses the desire to grow spiritually within our heart, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the habits developed by spiritual disciplines to form within us the character and qualities of Christ. It's a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in combination with our wills. (p. 197)

Smith (2009) adds further insight to this process of indirect change that is Spirit-dependent and is in apposition to an endeavoring to bring about transformation by willpower, which he refers to as a “false narrative”:

We change not by mustering up willpower but by changing the way we think, which will also involve changing our actions and our social environment. . . . *We do what we can in order to enable us to do what we can't do directly.* We change by the process of indirection. (p. 25, emphasis added)

Peterson (1989) although reflecting on prayer, but inclusive of spirituality, contributes to the idea of interconnection with the Holy Spirit by what he terms as the ‘middle voice’ being the voice of this activity: where both parties are contributing to the outcome, “We are involved in the action and participate in the results but do not control or define it” (p. 104). What is being reiterated by each of these voices is the externality of the transformation that takes place to one’s own endeavors through connecting with God.

Devotional Habits and the Trinity

There is much that is spoken of in connection with an appreciation of the Trinity and their relationship to biblical spirituality with its associated devotional habits. A term often used in reference to the intimacy of the Trinity is *perichoresis* (as has been

previously mentioned); an understanding also exhibited by the early Christian community (Issler, 2001, pp. 41-43; Peterson, 2005, p. 44, as cited in Andrews, 2010, p. 231; Thiessen, 2005, pp. 58-59). Its literal meaning, *to dance around* conveys the interplay of relationship within the Trinity, with the invitation there for us to join this dance of intimate community. Willard (2006) concurs with this dynamic picture in stating: “Union in action with the triune God is Christian spirituality” (p. 52). Charry (1997) terms this life with the triune God as the “salutariness principle” (p. 18), inferring that this closeness with the Triune God creates a gratitude response that is virtue-shaping. Standish (2005) elaborates on the concept of this dynamic relationship with the Trinity and takes it even further to influencing mission and ministry (p. 20).

In stressing the significance of community, McNeal (2000) comments that the medieval mystics focus was on simplicity: “They sought the One. In this, they were not completely on the right track. The search is for Three. [F]or community” (p. 136). While McNeal makes a valid argument for the value of this simplicity, he perhaps misses the *perichoresis* concept that was also perceived amongst the mystics.

The Need for Devotional Habits

The great value of devotional habits in the fostering of biblical discipleship is self-evident. They are able to achieve a process of transformation through an indirection that cannot be otherwise achieved. This is made possible as one allows one’s self to be subdued through the influence of an intimate relationship with the triune God. It is through what Moreland and Craig (2003) call “indirect doxastic voluntarism” (p. 277), which indicates that it is personal influence over time that impacts a process of change. However it needs to be stressed that while there is intentionality on the part of the

individual for focused attention on specific devotional habits, the spiritual formation that takes place is not merely automatic, or directly attributable to the habits that the participant has implemented. Rather, this process is Spirit empowered, as is aptly portrayed by Foster and Helmers (2008):

Indirection affirms that spiritual formation does not occur by direct human effort, but through a relational process whereby we receive from God the power or ability to do what we cannot do by our own effort. We do not produce the outcome. That is God's business. (p. 155)

Literature Linking Relational Small Groups and Biblical Spirituality

The Need for Deepening Relationships Through Community Building

An appreciation of the aforementioned Trinitarian understanding of God and their concomitant calling into relational community with themselves provides the impetus for relationship. This concept has compounded theological weight added from within the context of creation where man was created for company both vertically and horizontally. Smith (2009) provides a synthesis of this ontology in his model of allocating four key components for transformation: (a) adopting the narratives of Jesus, (b) engaging in soul-training exercises, (c) participating in community, and (d) each of these is empowered through the Holy Spirit (p. 24). Each of these components has been seen as significant within this review, and is augmented by a focus on community, in what follows.

Relationship-Building Through Deepening Connections

Spiritual depth is dependent on community for its nurture, as Buechner (1982) expresses: "You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can

prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own” (p. 46). Bonhoeffer (1954) provides a cautionary note regarding the risk of both community and non-community: “Let [the person] who cannot be alone beware of community. Let [the person] who is not in community beware of being alone” (p. 78). Here Bonhoeffer depicts the value of nurturing silence in aloneness and speech in community. Both are crucial for balance in life. He adds that it is in an accountability of confession to each other that deep community takes place:

Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. (p. 112)

Thrall and McNicol (2010), provide an added dimension of the need for humility in nurturing community, with a recognition of dependence on others for spiritual health (p. 70).

Involvement in devotional habits may on the surface appear to be a solitary occupation, with solitude itself being one of the devotional habits. A clarified perspective, however, is provided by Willard (1988), “You cannot privatize the fire of God that burns through the life of a disciple of Jesus” (p. 228). Hull (2010) states a similar view in outlining how pastors pursue the transformational process of the congregation together in community, forming healthy habits “by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with a community” (p. 291). Further commentary in view of this community is warranted below.

Relationship-Building Through Spiritual Mentoring and Companions

While some of the literature relating to spiritual formation supports the notion of

spiritual directors as potential guides for spiritual formation, there is also considerable support given to mentoring and spiritual companionship: such aspects providing ample opportunity for the nurturing of discipleship in a formational framework. This review has chosen to highlight this latter path in order to avoid negative connotations that are perhaps associated with spiritual directors.

Benner (2002) highlights the difficulty of pursuing the spiritual journey on one's own and states that it necessitates other companions for assistance in moving away from self-absorption (p. 96). He makes an insightful statement of this need of others in one's life for growth: "If you are making significant progress on the transformational journey of Christian spirituality, you have one or more friendships that support that journey. If you do not, you are not. It is that simple" (p. 16). While presenting a strong stance, Benner nevertheless challenges the isolationism that is often the path of least resistance in the Christian journey.

A key part of discipleship entails discipling others, and is best achieved through a close disciple-like association, where appropriate patterns of behavior can be shared and monitored. Hull (2006) relates spiritual mentoring as assisting a person in recognizing who they truly are, and in growing to their potential (pp. 214-217).

DePriest (2005) provides an added dimension to mentoring for ministry, as he sees it as a spiritual fathering of the next generation. He gauges that success in ministry "isn't measured by the size of the ministry, but by what you have developed for the next generation" (p. 80). While one might not entirely agree with any physical measure as an indicator of success in ministry, DePriest highlights a valuable focus in ministry support, warranting greater focus than is given here.

Relationship-Building Through a Worshipping Community

Postmodernism, as has been noted, elevates relationship and community, having an open mindset for a worshipping community. Chan (2009) contrasts modernism and earlier evangelicalism as focusing primarily on individual, personal disciplines unrelated to church, whereas today's spirituality has undergone "a major paradigm shift from individual to ecclesial formation" (p. 220). He outlines four such movements in recent years: emerging church that "fosters a spirituality of radical discipleship, communion, and servanthood" (p. 223); Baptist sacramentalism which "emphasizes the church as a hermeneutical community" (p. 225) and a renewed dependence on worship for deepening faith; "federal visionists" of the Presbyterian tradition with a refocus on covenant-working through corporate worship (p. 227); and convergence churches who see themselves as a "communion" of churches (p. 229). The commonality for Chan in these contemporary movements is the communal nature of worship (pp. 229, 230). What Chan highlights is a renewed interest from a variety of Christian communities in the value of communion in community as opposed to the individualism that has been inbred by our modern worldview.

Issler (2001) sees the gift of friends and community as also providing an environment where love for God is nurtured. "Greater intimacy experienced with others increases our capacity to become more intimate with God" (p. 44). He sees the shift from individuality to a growing love for God and others as actions taking place through community: "It is not just a project of individual human effort, but is supported and sustained within grace-filled loving relationships in community, for which I [Issler] am now very grateful as a recovering loner" (2009, p. 197). Issler extends the parameters of

the value of friendship as “a school through which we learn how to offer love of a genuinely Christian and universal kind to all” (Issler, 2001, p. 49). His bold challenge states: “if our friendship with God can only rise to the level of the most intimate relationship we have on this earth, then we must intensify our friendships” (p. 65) warrants further reflection. It would seem from his statement that our relationship with God is limited by the depth of our earthly relationships. However could not the obverse also be true? Perhaps what is of value is the interwoven connectedness between both an intimacy with God and meaningful human relationships. Patterson (2001) certainly would concur with this suggestion of the potential of intimacy with God as impacting one’s effectiveness on the horizontal plane in his words: “people are God’s method, not techniques and programs. And people become usable to God only as they swell in his glorious presence” (p. 29). Jesus’ statement in John 13:35 also affirms this inter-connectedness: “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” His prayer in John 17 adds weight to the unity of connection that is needed in both vertical and horizontal realms.

McNeal (2000), in acknowledging the need for the development of community in nurturing spiritual leaders sees a strong need for “multiple communities” and states that “leaders do not develop in isolation” (p. xv). He unpacks community as existing within a number of categories (multiple communities): family of origin; current family; friends; a learning cluster; and team in ministry. He places much value on friends as being God’s means of sculpting our souls and links emotional health to the number of meaningful friendships a leader has (p. 127). A learning cluster, he sees as providing a source of added learning “through a peer-mentoring process for debriefing life and ministry

experiences” and further adds: “it captures the dynamic of an intentional learning community” (McNeal, 2000, p. 131). A difference in learning through this mode compared with “traditional methods that are linear, didactic, privatized, and parochial,” is that “learning in community is nonlinear, layered and experiential” (p. 132). This *process* approach is highly relevant for today’s generation, where community is yearned for, and cannot be satiated with an institutional, informational model of Christianity.

Relationship-Building Through Small Groups

Relationship-building small groups provide a practical avenue where the type of community hitherto explored can develop. One finds it surprising that not more is said about this area within the framework of discipleship, as this is where there can be application of much that is theorized. Hull (2006) provides a vital comment in this regard: “You can’t make disciples without accountability, and accountability requires structure” (p. 241). Small groups that operate according to an intentional framework provide this structure. Such a paradigm shift has been utilized by Peterson (2009), who, in a desire to move away from a cognitive, informational approach, renamed the Bible study groups operating in his church, “conversation groups” (p. 46), and found it effective in nurturing a more reflective approach to Scripture and a relational outlook in the group. A conversation is invitational of two-way communication that is a much-needed facet of healthy group nurture. I have found this to be a worthwhile shift of terminology for inviting a more relational application of Bible reading in both a group setting and in personal Bible reading.

Scazzero (2006) also recommends the value of participating in relational small

groups as a mechanism for accountability and support (Scazzero, 2006, p. 207), leading to growth in biblical discipleship. This is a notion echoed by Smith (2009; 2010) who finds that the model he has developed for discipleship as beneficial within a group setting. He states: “Spiritual formation happens most profoundly in the context of a group” (2009, p. 27).

Unfortunately, a large part of the Christian community has focused on small groups for a short-term period with a programmatic format and this has left many churches with the opinion that it has been tried and found wanting of substantive spiritual-growth. Hull (2006) sees the real value in a more long-term approach for small groups where deep community, accountability and the disciplines can operate to full potential. He also sees the potential of a variety of small groups, including both open and closed groups: open groups providing an avenue for seekers and numerical evangelistic growth; while closed groups with their intrinsic qualities of heightened trust and accountability enabling spiritual formation to develop (pp. 230-234). With the key focus of this paper being on discipleship and biblical spirituality, there is a natural affinity with closed groups as the framework that would be keenly promoted to best enhance the potential for deep spiritual growth of its participants.

Wilhoit (2008) recognizes the great value of small groups in developing community although he lacks practical insight to its structure (p. 124). He does, however, stress the value of relating as being where “the rubber of formation teaching and longing meets the road of life” (p. 191).

Jones and Jennings (2000) in a quest to enhance spiritual formation being nurtured at Duke Divinity School, made relational small groups part of the curriculum for

students with a particular focus on disciplines. Part of their reasoning for this process was to highlight the communal aspect of discipleship as opposed to the individualistic, consumerist mindset of many. There was a structure and basic framework provided for this weekly group, with opportunity for personal sharing and reflection, with some time devoted to disciplines and reflective reading of the Bible for its personal insight. This has met with considerable success in that students “seem much more open to the weaving together of beliefs and practices, especially as that weaving is shaped by the small groups” (Jones & Jennings, 2000, p. 127). Jones and Jennings analyze this success further, “we are doing a better job of reclaiming in our classes the close relationship between theological reflection and prayer that has too often been sundered in modernity” (p. 128). Therein is a process worthy of replication.

Relationship-Building in Pastoral Ministry

In expanding a concept of “lonerism in pastoral ministry” originally coined by Rediger, Sturtevant (2001) speaks of the risk of burnout unless ministers build a network around themselves. He sees loneliness and isolation as common threads within ministry with “a crisis of intimacy” (p. 581) their offspring. He notes various support systems needed for ministers, including “clergy support groups” (p. 586). The value of these groups is dependent on: a sharing of common interests; an intentionality to process; a commitment to building community; a leadership focused toward extra-dependence; operating with a contextualized set of rituals and norms (pp. 589-593). Sturtevant’s evaluation and practical insights are a helpful resource tool for ministers establishing their own support groups.

Lawson provides a case-study of a long-term small group that had stayed together

for more than 40 years. While members had come and gone during this time, there were still original members providing a stable core. Early in its life they were encouraged to split and start other groups but as one member responded: “Why we did not split? It would be almost like dividing up a family” (Lawson, 2006, p. 198). Some members did start other groups in addition to their own. In answering his question as to the group’s longevity and vitality, Lawson cited a number of strengths, including the strong commitment of the members: “We all wanted to grow, to grow deeper in our faith” (p. 188). As for others joining the group: “Much of the credit for the addition of new women over the years goes to the open climate of the group, when it meets, and the willingness of the women to really listen to one another” (pp. 194-195). As one member stated: “We trust each other, after so long we really trust each other” and again, “Short-term groups just don’t get that level of connection. I don’t see how they could because you don’t have that much history” (p. 197). While 40 years might seem a long time, what this review highlights is the value of building community over time, as well as the rich rewards of intimacy with God and each other along the journey.

Conclusion

History attests to a flow of those who have pursued a Christian journey with an experiential, relational, connection with God. Although modernism has largely stunted this journey with its preoccupation with a rational mindset, a window of opportunity has opened with the emergence of postmodernism with its relationally focused worldview.

A focus on worldview is significant to this project as it exposes otherwise hidden influences on thinking, attitude, and behavior. An awareness of this is pivotal for engaging an alternate biblical worldview. This review has noted the value of sapience

that moves beyond rationalism to experiencing God in life, from information about God to a relationship with God. An appreciation of sapience is significant as it is the reason behind applying devotional habits to life. It provides the resourcing for recognizing the presence of God in life.

In gaining an understanding to the potential concern of the devotional habits being associated with legalism is helpful for providing an appropriate theology for this project. It was anticipated that by gaining a sound theological framework there would be an enhanced involvement of participants. The intention was not to polarize participants through theological argument, rather, to draw them together into relational community.

This review has endeavored to provide evidence for the value of devotional habits for the indirect way in which they contribute to formation of Godlikeness. What has also been affirmed through listening to voices speaking in the arena of biblical discipleship is for the Christian journey to be framed within relational settings whereby encouragement, accountability, and authenticity are enhanced through a nurturing community of growing intimacy. Small groups were evidenced as providing a vehicle for such relationship building, with closed groups enhancing the nurturing of trust among participants. This project has utilized this invaluable resource in an endeavor to nurture a climate of trust where the above qualities could be evidenced for the purpose of assisting each participant in their faith development.

Of value is a reiteration of what Tozer describes as the essence of the Christian journey: "Surrender to Christ; get to know God personally; grow to become like Him" (Wiersbe, 2000, p. 7). If this project could aid the implementation of such a simple yet grand design, it will have been worth any effort in its application.

CHAPTER 4

AN ACCOUNT OF THE RELATIONAL MINISTRY

JOURNEY OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

This project has been undertaken within the jurisdiction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the South New South Wales Conference, hereafter termed the *SNSW Conference*. A profile of this ministry context follows which highlights the needs of ministry personnel and the potential opportunities provided by this project. A description of the methodology indicates the participatory nature of the project with an expectation of a high degree of involvement of the conference ministry team. The project has been designed around regional group meetings of ministers with a desired outcome of an enhanced sense of community, alongside a deepened personal biblical spirituality. An implementation narrative provides the practical unfolding of this project with a hint of outcomes for further analysis.

Profile of the Ministry Context

The SNSW Conference has its headquarters in Canberra, the national capital of Australia. It serves both the Australian Capital Territory (Canberra and its surrounding district) as well as approximately two-thirds of the state of New South Wales, and covers an area of approximately 650,000 square miles, with large distances between churches.

One of the church communities (Broken Hill) is 12.5 hours driving from the conference headquarters and is difficult to access by public transport. Air travel between the regional centers is expensive, thus prohibiting its general usage, and driving by car is the most feasible form of transport.

Canberra is the largest city in the SNSW Conference with a population of 450,000 with only two other cities within the region exceeding 100,000. The majority of other towns in the territory are rural centers of smaller population densities. Along the eastern coastline there are a number of smaller towns providing an environment attractive to retirees although there is a growth corridor that is developing in closer proximity to Sydney, the NSW state capital. Also on the eastern coastline are pockets of indigenous communities having a Seventh-day Adventist presence. Outside of the regional centers, the communities are comprised of an aging population with a shift of young adults who have completed their schooling to higher population centers where work and education are more easily accessed. Unfortunately, this shifting population has a tendency to not return, leaving communities with an aging population.

The SNSW Conference is part of the Australian Union Conference and is the third smallest conference within this Union, with a roll of 2,577 as at the end of 2010. This number has reduced over the last two years, due in part to having more accurate online records and some churches having ordered their records. There are 31 churches and five companies, with an average attendance of approximately 1,625 (this number is based on attendance record of 31 churches/companies taken in 2009).

Being a smaller conference and servicing a geographically large community adds complexity to ministry. Ministers serve in remote outlying rural districts with some

ministering to three or four churches that are located an hour or more driving distance from each other. This ministry context lends to a sense of isolation and solitariness that could readily have a negative impact. More focus is given to this challenge in subsequent discussion.

In 2011 there were 17 ministers in the SNSW Conference with two graduate interns added in 2012. Conference officers and management committee made this decision relying in faith on the conference tithe maintaining ongoing development. While tithe has maintained positive growth, there have been other factors (negative returns from the conference schools' system) that have militated against this growth and provided some challenge to an ongoing positive budget. Towards the end of 2012, one of the senior pastors in the conference was called to an alternate conference and the decision was made to re-adjust the ministry locations rather than fill the vacancy. There was also one minister who accepted a voluntary redundancy/retirement, enabling a further reduction in staff. There was a significant movement within the conference of ministry personnel in order to accommodate these changes.

The project outlined below was undertaken during the year when there was stability of ministry with the majority of ministers having been in their location for a number of years.

I commenced ministry in the SNSW Conference at the beginning of 2011 in the role of general secretary and some additional departmental portfolios. Having previously been in a Ministerial Association Secretary role and with the cooperation of the president of the conference, the ministers were provided a choice of remaining with the president (who had also been their Ministerial Association Secretary) or accept me to be their

support in ministry. Prior to the decision the ministers were also informed of the potential project they would be invited to participate in, if I was to be chosen to this role. Having left room for the decision to be made, it was reassuring to experience their vote of approval, as well as to recognize their vote of support for this project to begin.

This decision was reached during a time when ministers and conference management committee were meeting together in an endeavor to define current church culture and what was needed for church health. Ironically, by focusing on some of the negative aspects of church life, there developed a unity-of-thought as to what the conference desired to move away from, and the brainstorming was then able to turn to what their leadership desired as a refocused vision. A new SNSW Conference vision statement emerged from this discussion: *To be and grow followers of Jesus*, with one further change taking place after some further weeks of reflection: *To be and grow flourishing followers of Jesus*. It was deemed that one could possibly be negative while still endeavoring to be a follower and it was this type of legalistic, religiosity that the ministry and leadership team wanted to move away from. Hence the descriptor *flourishing* provided a freshness and vitality of appeal that encapsulated the desired outcome.

Fortuitously, this visioning was shaped just at the time when I planned to unfold the practical aspects of this project. The ministers seemed poised for creating a difference in their churches in a focused spiritual sense with discipleship at the core of visioning, the very areas of focus that I wanted to develop in my project. I believe this to be Holy Spirit-led in its timing.

Description of the Project Methodology Employed

To assist in determining the intervention that would be utilized in this project, there was some partial analysis undertaken to identify the context of the culture and ministry in South New South Wales. A paper I had prepared provided a study of such a context, with some focus given to ministry location and numbers of churches within each minister's parish. This provided a level of understanding of the potential for a sense of isolationism experienced by both parishioners and ministers alike and added merit to the potential value of the practical measures taken within this project for enhancing ministry cohesiveness and community. In recent years, the ministers have gathered together for ministers meetings four times a year as an endeavor to build a sense of team and unity of direction in ministry. However, one sensed from observation that this outcome had not been realized, and from the discussion that ensued at the initial leadership meetings, it was obvious that there was much to be realized in local churches also.

Some of the observations that were made at the time of the first ministers/executive members combined meeting, that I attended and noted, included the following:

Negative Factors:

1. A level of cynicism by some to church hierarchical structure.
2. A difficulty by some ministers in handling ideas of spiritual formation, having perhaps some misconceived perceptions of what this entailed.
3. Years of working independently and solitarily by some ministers who were hence calloused to interdependence.
4. A male-dominated demographic (all in fact are male in this study. The

conference has a female pastor who is on parental leave for a period of time). Such a group is naturally less inclined to open up at deeper levels (especially emotionally) to others.

5. The tyranny of distance and time-priority for such meetings.

Positive Factors:

1. A verbalized yearning by some ministers for more interaction with fellow ministers.
2. Ministers expressed a desire to move away from goal-setting with numbers as the key indicator for ministry growth.
3. The previously mentioned brainstorming of a vision statement for the conference provided a means of convergence of ideas and shared sense of core business and mission. While this was somewhat frustrating to some in that it took considerable time in brainstorming, it later provided a sense of fulfillment to most in its outcome and application of vision for future direction.

The process of this project has utilized an approach similar to that of action research. I was drawn to this approach as it is a model where participation and collaboration is invited and where participants are empowered in their own development. O'Leary adds: "Action research works towards situation improvement based in practice, and avoids the problem of needing to work towards change after knowledge is produced" (2005, p. 191). The knowledge gained is that which comes through experience. This well describes what was anticipated from this project: A willingness by ministers to be involved and experiment with their personal devotional life, contribute to the dynamics of a cluster group, and develop a level of accountability within these groups where trust has

been nurtured. These were the ingredients for such a collaborative, participatory project.

An analysis of the responses of all participants to a purpose-designed questionnaire, with additional observation of each group setting by me, formed the major contribution of the results of this project. I initially intended to conduct a Myer-Briggs type personality testing procedure for each participant. However as the intended learning was participant focused, and as this procedure was an aside to the direction of the project, participants were invited to voluntarily take their own test from the resourcing provided by a book that had been given to each minister entitled *The Me I Want to be: Becoming God's Best Version of You*, by John Ortberg. Some accepted the opportunity to proceed with this testing procedure and personally benefitted from their discoveries, however, there was no official reporting of such other than what may have been shared in their cluster group, nor was there any monitoring of this process.

Development of the Intervention

Proposal

In order to activate an appropriate meeting schedule for the groups, it was decided to replace the four meetings of the large group of ministers with regional clusters of ministers who would connect on a more regular basis. The financial resources used for the large gatherings could then be redirected to fund the mileage and the driving to the smaller gatherings, and a small budget was also allocated for a meal together at each gathering.

Desired tasks and outcomes for the organization of the cluster gatherings included:

1. The organization of a large gathering of all ministers to take place once a year

and the small gatherings/clusters meeting once a month.

2. Adding some prescriptive elements to these clusters, including an agenda to be provided for each meeting with reading material shared and reflected upon.
3. Engagement in theological reflection as one of the key areas of focus of ministry and personal life.
4. Encouragement of the development of highly functional small groups through appropriate modeling and mentoring.
5. The instilling of devotional habits as a key focus for spiritual nurture and challenge for each minister.
6. Maintenance of a level of reporting with administration without violating confidentiality.
7. Obtaining of funding source for travel expenses and shared meals for each cluster group.

Initial Presuppositions of the Potential Outcome From the Procedures

A presupposition that I had at the outset of this research was that the added sense of community that would be developed and the added insights gained for spiritual formation, together with the accountability of a small group, would provide a deeper connection with God for the participants. Having had this process modeled, it was also anticipated that there would be potential for ministers to provide a similar process with the leadership teams in their local churches, hence a flow-on effect of active discipling could occur.

Implementation Narrative

Initial Ministers' Retreat

The ministers' retreat where the project's focus was first mapped out for the pastors had the theme of a *Soul-Food Fiesta*. Inherent within this theme was a focus on feeding one's own spiritual journey and the event included experiential exercises in worship intended to spark an ongoing interest in personal reflective reading of Scripture. Journals were provided to participants for both the exercises on the retreat and for their ongoing use. An additional element of this retreat included a representative from the E. G. White Research Centre, Dr. John Skrzypaszek, who presented material on White's own experiential journey with God. This reinforced the value of relationship in the developing Christian journey and proved to be a significant contribution as it provided a spiritual buttress to those who might feel that biblical spirituality was of a new age, mystical origin.

Another aspect of the retreat focused on the vision statement and how it could be implemented in a local church setting. Cobbin's (2010) educational *Transformational Planning Framework* was shared as a potential model for how this can be achieved within a preaching ministry context.

Worships at this retreat included a change of participation in solitary time-out sessions designed for reflection on particular passages of Scripture with attentiveness to the Holy Spirit's impressions of how the passage speaks into one's own life, with a journal recording of such impressions. There was genuine appreciation expressed for these exercises and it was encouraging to see the utilization of journals and ongoing responsiveness to such initiatives.

Cluster Group Meetings

A further practical measure in this project's implementation saw the formation of cluster groups of the pastors into the regional settings at this retreat. Groups chose their own facilitators and treasurers of finance; times of meeting were also planned and these were provided to this researcher as an accountability measure and for observation. Within this first cluster meeting, plans were made by each group as to where clusters would meet, along with any extra curricular activities, as well as luncheon details. Cluster groups were informed of the provision that was set aside by the conference for financing lunches on a per capita basis, as well as reimbursement for mileage in travel to and from cluster meetings (as previously mentioned). Some groups chose to utilize this lunch funding for each meal, while others chose to bring their own lunch and put the funds towards special events, with one group choosing to hire a fishing boat for the last meet of the year as a rich fellowship experience. Freedom was given to any such variations so that the clusters could be free to nurture community between themselves as they saw fit.

For reasons of proximity, time, and finance, the members in each group were limited to their regional contexts. Of the four groups, one of the groups ended up substantially larger (seven members) partly because of the proximity of ministers and partly by their own choice, while two other groups had four each. A final group had three members. One minister was unable to join other groups because of the isolation of his territory and was provided budget to meet with a minister from an adjacent conference that was in closer proximity to their parish (3.5 hours drive), and while the meetings were not quite as regular as for other groups, there was still a sense of camaraderie and connection felt in this exceptional situation.

The date and time of meeting for each cluster was made completely flexible. Each group made the decision on this so that their times could be linked to their schedules. The one request was that groups meet once a month over the nine-month period except where the conference initiated a conference-wide minister's meeting. The larger cluster group of seven was more challenged in their meeting scheduling as there were more to take into consideration, leading to fewer meetings than other groups.

Curriculum for Cluster Meetings

It was clearly outlined at the initial retreat, to the ministers and the facilitators of clusters, that their cluster meetings were first and foremost to be focused on their own life and journey and less focused on their ministry. As stated, I designed a curriculum for each cluster meeting in order to focus the process so this outcome could be sustained. Again, because of the voluntary, participatory learning that was desired, the curriculum was not mandated. Over time some groups chose a different approach in their formatting, but with a similar end in mind of building connection, community, and stimulating each other's faith journeys.

The curriculum offered at the *Cluster Meets* is outlined in Appendix A. These outlines formed a significant part of the overall project in their focus and the intentional deepening of questions as trust built within the group.

Facilitators' Meeting

Following the initial briefing of facilitators, a meeting was held with them again mid-way through the Clusters gatherings in order to provide for feedback and ongoing support with the further development of respective groups. During this time, I highlighted

to the facilitators the essential elements of their group function and demonstrated a group gathering by modeling the following process:

1. Sharing: Something about your journey with God that you appreciate at the moment.

Something that you are finding a challenge in your journey with God

2. Conversation with the Word: *'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.'* Reflect on this passage.

3. Prayer time

Time was also given to the pragmatics of the clusters, identifying:

1. How clusters are going

2. Challenges for groups

3. Joys of process of group

4. Future direction

5. Questions relating to its process

6. Ideas for implementation

7. The relationship of clusters to this researcher's project

Following a discussion in each of these areas, the facilitators had a meal together with added fellowship and sharing. This gathering provided additional understanding for the conference president who was also in attendance.

Second Ministers' Retreat

A second retreat was held towards the latter stage of the Clusters meetings and the conference was privileged to have Dr. Allan Walshe present at this gathering. This helped highlight the value of this process for the ministers. In addition to this, these presentations

added skills for nurturing community in small groups. Experiencing this for themselves and gaining extra insights through the experiential exercises of the retreat provided a strength of resourcing and served to empower the ministers to replicate such groups in their local churches. This has been an outcome that some ministers have already initiated.

Walshe highlighted aspects of nurturing one's journey with God through devotional habits. The exercises and shared experience provided encouragement to ministers and offered a challenge for them to pursue an ongoing connection with God. At this event, journals were again provided and utilized, thus reinforcing the value of this reflective habit.

Observations of Clusters Visits

Toward the end of the established period of meetings, I attended each of the clusters. This was not without design, as it enabled each cluster to develop their own identity independent of any perceived administrative coercion, and also empowered the facilitators to own their groups without interference. During the initial months, after the facilitator's training, calls and emails from me enabled a flow of communication in support of their important role. While the observations made by me in the final stage of formal monitoring form part of the analysis of the next chapter, a summary of observations of each cluster is made here to illustrate the variety of these groups and is indicative of the freedom of governance provided.

Group A's Cluster

Observations were made at the final meeting for the year; hence, it was atypical, but rather focused on a sense of closure. This meeting included spouses who were able to

attend (a majority were in attendance). The group used a passage of Scripture for personal reflection. This was then shared in two's and three's, followed by prayer for each other in the smaller groups. Some inclusive sporting games followed (table tennis and petanque) in which all joined in. Subsequently lunch was shared together in the home of one of the minister's with food prepared by the minister. What was gleaned from attendance of this *meet* was the relational bond that had clearly strengthened between the group members.

Group B's Cluster

This group met at the base of a mountain, with lunches in backpacks in preparation for an arduous four-hour climb and with wet-weather gear in anticipation of the foreboding weather conditions. The climb including theological reflection en route with sharing and prayer at the various rest stops. Lunch was eaten together at the top of the range in company with heavy rainfall. However, a healthy sharing was experienced by the group in spite of the bleak weather.

Group C's Cluster

This group had their final meeting at a regional zoo and in an environment of wildlife had some reflection on current journey along with stresses of life. Lunch was shared together in a restaurant followed by a visit to the local church where prayer was shared in the group for each individual's concerns.

Group D's Cluster

This group met at a coffee shop/restaurant and processed the prepared curriculum together. A meal was shared and prayer for each other's needs preceded departure.

As clearly observed, each group had a life of its own and one could well imagine that very different outcomes might be observed.

Summative Questionnaire to Participants

To provide a level of accountability and enable some means of assessment of the benefits or otherwise of this process, a questionnaire was prepared as per Appendix A.

Obtaining responses to the questionnaire could well have been a challenge. However, by inviting responses by email and then providing a gentle reminder in successive weeks, 100% of the responses were returned. I chose not to do an official interview in order to lessen the potential for forced responses. It was reiterated to the ministers on a number of occasions the desire for complete honesty and to not provide answers that they might think I wanted to hear. In perusing the responses, it would appear that this desired outcome has been largely achieved, with a variety of responses relating to each cluster group. Assurance was also given to the participants that confidentiality would be maintained in that no names would be mentioned in the project, nor would any named responses be forwarded to Administration within the conference. The responses to the questionnaire provided a great deal of interest to me and form a significant contribution to the outcomes of the project discussed in the ensuing chapter.

Conclusion

The implementation of this project has provided an added appreciation of the context of ministry in the South New South Wales Conference and invited a potential for ongoing development of ministry. This potential has been initially framed in the pastor's personal developing, connecting with God, and with fellow associates of pastoral

ministry. It is anticipated that similar potential could be invested by the pastor in their local ministry as an overflow of their own experiential relational journey.

CHAPTER 5

OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

This project has proposed an approach to biblical discipleship that counters two tendencies inherent within the modernistic worldview. One such is an individualism that leans towards an isolationism. The other is a rationalistic perspective that focuses on an informational mode of operation. Both tendencies are disengaged from a relational context and are counterproductive to ministry that is intended to build community.

Inherent within Southern African culture is the ethical concept and philosophy of *ubuntu*. Within this concept is a potential antidote to the above tendencies in Western culture. In its proverbial context, *ubuntu* redefines the self, “I am who I am because of who we all are,” thus describing the interconnectedness of humanity that is a counter measure to the individualism of modernity. Given the insights about biblical discipleship hitherto discussed, an addition of the words *in Christ* to this definition provides an added qualifier and disentangles it from a humanistic worldview. This conceptual framework clarifies the desired outcome of the following research analysis.

The action research described below has been an endeavor to blend the best of *ubuntu* within the framework of a first world culture: a culture steeped in individualism and information.

Project Methodology

Involving fewer than 20 potential participants, this project has been better served by a qualitative evaluation approach. As stated, the main evaluation resource of the project involved a simple questionnaire that invited subjective responses by the participants. Morgan (1998), in providing an analysis and approach for focus groups outlines three keys to effective qualitative study: “(1) exploration and discovery, (2) context and depth, and (3) interpretation” (p. 12). While the cluster groups were not focus groups, these foci are relevant to this project. However, the participants themselves have been the key assessors of their own potential development and this is evidenced by responses given in the questionnaire that follows.

A key goal of this project was the spiritual maturing of a pastoral community within a small-group framework. In this project the ministers were invited to come together in regular small group gatherings whereby deepened personal sharing was encouraged through a focused curriculum. Hence, the project involved more of a self-learning taking place through the participants’ reflection on their personal journeys, coupled with their inter-connecting in a community that was potentially developing a sense of intimacy and relational connectedness.

The most appropriate methodology to what has been described above was a participatory, action-based methodology as described in the previous chapter.

By utilizing elements of an action-based methodology there was a predisposed *activity* for an involved investment and such activity revolved around a small group of persons having a common experience together. At the same time, recognition of each other’s uniqueness in life’s journey offered potential for insight and adaptability. In the

journeying together, there was nurtured a trust that exposed oneself to deeper levels of relationship and personal awareness that was personally discernible for the perceptive participant.

Added stimulus provided for the potential development of participants was encouraged at conference-wide ministers' meetings (as noted in the previous chapter). All were together in a large group at these occasions and insight was provided about the overall small-group process, together with training in practical devotional habits. Both these aspects were implicit in creating the desired learning environment for this project.

This research has endeavored to scrutinize the perceptions of the participants by way of a simple questionnaire (Appendix A). While the responses were subjective, it was of interest to note the similarities observed between each of the following:

1. Responses of participants to questionnaire.
2. Reflections of facilitators to group process.
3. Anecdotal conversations with participants.
4. Observations of researcher to group process.
5. Observations of researcher to the impact of clusters for local ministry.

What follows provides an analysis of the above, together with an evaluation of the process and recommendations for improvement for any subsequent research study. In order to preserve the confidentiality and identity of the participants in some instances the responses are more generic, as are also references to the cluster groups. The purpose of this project was not to compare cluster groups but to nurture an environment within such groups where personal spiritual development could be stimulated.

A further qualifier to this process warrants mentioning that the process described

in this research did not occur in isolation of other factors and influencers that also impacted development or regression in the spiritual journeys of participants. This project did not operate in isolation of these complexities. However, within this qualification, there is a desire to note the potential additional impact of the process and evaluation that is herein outlined. It is not merely circumstantial because of its intentional focus. Also, the observations made, occur in relatively close timing to the actions of this process. The tools that have been utilized in this process are part of the previously mentioned concept of indirection and do not in themselves bring about any change in spiritual development. Thus recognition, honor and praise needs to be given to the Holy Spirit who is the Source of any growth that takes place both interpersonally and intra-personally in a God-led environment.

Outcomes and Evaluation

Responses of Participants to Questionnaire

I am indebted to the faithfulness of the 18 participants who showed such commitment in attending and participating in their respective cluster meetings. Such faithfulness was also reflected in the prompt return of written responses to the questionnaires that were requested, with most participants (89%) returning them with minimal additional requests on my part. Furthermore, the few participants whose questionnaires were not returned had extenuating circumstances that precluded any significant influence to the overarching framework of this project. What is described provides an analysis of each of the questions with some responses defined according to the following identification of the respective clusters: A, B, C, or D. Direct quotations are used where respondents own words are utilized.

Questionnaire Analysis

How has your journey with God changed since commencement of the Ministers Cluster Groups?

The intent of this question was to explore any change that had taken place in the participant's journey with God from a broader perspective than the ministers' cluster groups. However, by having the start of the timeframe defined by commencement of the cluster groups, it is naturally linked to the cluster groups' influence. Hence there is some duplication of thoughts expressed in Questions one and two that follows.

The large majority (75%) of the 16 respondents shared that their journey with God had changed through this period. Three from Cluster C and one other participant responded (some 25%) that there had been little that had changed in their journey with God in that time frame. This is not to say that such respondents' journey with God was deleterious; it could well be the case that it was more constant and unaffected by the described process.

Of those who had experienced change in their journey, three expressed how their journey with God had grown deeper with the increased degree of reflective practice and more consistency in devotional life. Four mentioned that their journey had grown more intentional and deliberate with time spent in Scripture that was more focused on hearing what God had to say to them personally. One mentioned that his journey was shifting from a focus on task to an enjoyment of the journey (a substantial shift for one who has a 'task-focused' personality predisposition). One felt a greater appreciation for others' spiritual journeys and God's patient and gentle timing in the growing process.

Have the clusters impacted this process of your journey with God, and if so, in what ways?

In parallel with the previous question there were four (25%) of the responses that stated little to no impact of personal journey with God having been effectuated by the clusters. One respondent saw benefits in the reflecting and debriefing for ministry but not for personal devotional life. Of particular interest, this respondent gained much in this same period in his devotional journey through personal discovery of study resources. Another mentioned that his journey was stimulated at the larger ministers' gathering with fresh ideas for devotional practice.

The remaining respondents perceived a positive impact on their journeys with God from their experience in cluster groups. There were a number who expressed the commonality of shared experiences was helpful in drawing them into community alongside gaining a sense of 'normality' to their journey in that their experiences were similar. "Personal interest was sparked" was the response of one to the "blessing" of sharing. The "non-judgmentalism" was what another found refreshing and supportive for his own journey, with another adding that it gave him a deeper sense of "belonging" to the Conference ministry team.

Significant adjustment of motivation regarding meeting together in a cluster group was shared by one respondent who stated that meeting together each month served to shift his thinking from obligation, to a sense of anticipation. This participant drew the parallel that the devotional habits were similarly, progressively impacting.

While one mentioned that he had already begun a spiritual journey prior to the clusters, he also commented that this had been strengthened through the interaction

process and “joy” had been added through the stimulation of the sharing with others on similar journeys.

Strength gained through a sense of support from what was shared in frankness and honesty was also reflected. This support was noticed in Cluster B in particular, who developed a pattern of ongoing care by praying for each other in between *meets*, as well as through phone calls and phone texts of Bible promises. One participant in Cluster D who had experienced a significant, painful life-change shared of the “rich biblical blessing of fellowship,” with another adding “the shared experience and praying for each other helped see our unity in God’s eyes.”

Describe how your devotional habits have developed or changed since commencing Clusters.

Eleven (69%) of the respondents felt that their devotional habits had positively changed in a variety of ways because of the groups. One mentioned that while the modus operandi of his habits had not changed, the intensity and purposefulness had significantly increased, with another adding consistency as a gained measure. A number referred to the conference-wide ministers gathering with Dr. Allan Walshe and his focus on devotional habits as having had particular impact through a focus on God in praise and enjoying a sense of His presence in life. One referred to “mini time-outs with God during a busy day.” One participant added: “my habits have changed from ‘studying for analyzing’ to ‘reading and listening’.” Another related response was: “listening to God speak through the Psalms has been rich.”

As has been stated of the 16 respondents, four (25%) reflected minimal change with one such being unsure, but sensing a developing openness to sharing. Another, while

still feeling somewhat caught in the ebb and flow of his spiritual life, was challenged and encouraged at the larger ministers' gathering with its focus on devotional habits. As stated, there was a fifth participant who had not experienced any significant change, although this minister maintained an unintentional pattern as a way of experiencing God in all of life. This participant noted other significant benefits in other aspects of the clusters, such as support, relational bonding, and its flow-on effect of openness of community.

A further mention by seven participants (44%) concerned the sense of community that was forged by the clusters. This was seen to develop their devotional life through the prayers that were offered with and for various group members and their specific needs. This strengthened the cycle by adding further bonds of connectedness.

What were the spiritual benefits, if any, that you have gained through this experience?

This question served to extend the previous question, and brought out a similar tenor of response. Thirteen (81%) responded positively. The majority of these positive respondents made mention of the heightened sense of community experienced in this cluster community and an appreciation of God's presence and working among them. One participant made particular mention of the reduction of inter-church concerns through this process, "meeting with fellow ministers on a friendly, non-work focused basis sorted out a lot of inter-church stuff almost automatically—and removed stress from inter-church/minister relations." One felt so impressed by the benefits that this minister stated, "I would like more than anything to help church members gain the same level of intimacy

in their walk with the Lord.” Observation of this extended impact by other participants will be further reflected in what follows.

One response warrants close attention for the depth of insight given. This participant who has been previously noted for his shift in Bible reading from “studying and analyzing” to “reading and listening,” provided a refreshing awareness of God’s presence. It evoked the following response:

I’ve started to see more of God’s attributes, where before, I always saw the gifts from God, what He has done for me. But changing my devotional habits helped me to focus on the Giver rather than the gifts. My prayers are changing more and more to praise-centered prayers rather than requests. . . . Knowing Who God is has been my greatest spiritual benefit and I am looking forward to know Him even deeper.

Please describe those factors in your own personal experience that enhanced your devotional practices.

A variety of factors were mentioned in response to the above question, which evidenced the uniqueness of each participant. A common thread linked to a shift in focus to relational community experienced in clusters and likewise in devotional practices. Utilization of the handout material at some clusters provided a stimulus for this relational focus. One respondent stated:

The guide sheets were invaluable because we didn’t have to stress about what to talk about, and the open-ended relational type of activity/questions made it clear that rather than a list of tasks to be done or questions answered, relationship was what was important . . . its simple concise layout made it clear what the expectation was and this in turn formed the nature of the cluster.

All of the clusters used the handouts some of the time. Two of the clusters focused particularly on the handouts while the other two developed their own format (after utilizing the handouts in the early meetings), while following a similar focus in their sharing times.

A shift in methodology of approach to Scripture also impacted respondents as an enhancing factor. One reflected on a narrative reading of Scripture with self-inclusion (through imaginative play) as having ongoing impact, others (four) noted a *soaking* in or *internalizing* a passage of Scripture (in contrast to a prior broad informational sweep in study), as being enriching. Another commented on the practice of journaling as enhancing his conversation with God.

Please describe those factors in your own personal experience that reduced the effectiveness or value of the practice of devotional habits.

In opposition to the previous question, the responses nevertheless had strong common elements: time pressure, busyness, stress of work/family life, tiredness, spiritual lethargy, other social influences (media, television) were among the sweep of responses. Worthy of note was the negative picture that time spent with God could be perceived as wasted time from ministry. Another highlighted his prior traditional perspective that had truth entailing doctrinal correctness whereas by contrast he had come to see the *Truth* wrapped in the person of Jesus. He added further insight: "I found out that the capital 'T' 'Truth' lies in the personhood of Jesus Christ only. More knowledge, more studying, more analyzing and more truth, without acknowledging Jesus is worthless."

Another minister noted the challenge of his general pattern of Bible reading prior to his participation in this process as involving the following limitations:

Taking too wide and general a passage for reading. Too much to meditate on. Not having a single object to my devotional time, just read and pray. Too general. Not taking time to meditate and listen. This lack of focus led to a wandering mind, often.

This was contrasted by the same participant reflecting on his fresh approach to Scripture reading as "luxuriating in the passage of Scripture."

Our growth is not just an individual experience, we grow in community, how has the ministers' cluster helped or hindered your growth?

There were 14 of the 16 respondents (88%), who found value in coming together in their cluster groups with many commenting on the interaction of groups enhancing a sense of community. One noted that his short time in this conference with these groups had built deeper connection than in the 20 years at his previous context.

There were two participants with negative responses to this question. One was concerned with his workload and saw the time away from work for a cluster meeting as further fuel to such a load, hence heightening his frustration of a non-achievement of duties. For another the travel time countered the benefits of the interaction (this minister noted the lack of attraction to social settings and being comfortable in isolation).

Were there insights gained from the experiences shared by others in your cluster?

While two responded that they had gained little from the experiences of others, the remaining 14 respondents (88%) made positive comments and shared how the conversations enhanced relational connectedness. One mentioned that while he did not perceive the insights in the cluster to be deep, he did have fun, an attribute not to be missed in life's enjoyment. This was also reiterated within the previous questions of the large majority appreciating the sense of commonality in community together: a climate that could be created through shared experiences.

Has there been any lessening of a sense of isolation in ministry from your times together in cluster? In what ways?

Thirteen (81%) of the respondents gave positive responses to the process lessening their sense of isolation, a majority stating their response as "definitely."

Conversely, there were three responses of the participants who felt it had “a little” impact on their sense of isolation.

Of the positive responses, one reflected that it had created a spirit of a shared journey with the joy and camaraderie evidenced where previously little had been known of each other. Another added that the meals together enhanced the fellowship while a further advised of the benefits of having overnight stays in the future to further enhance community. Another reflected that having the rest of the cluster members’ prayer and support “reassures me that I am not alone in ministry.” Such is a fitting outcome.

Reflections of Facilitators to Group Process

Two meetings were held with cluster facilitators. In recognizing that the facilitators were chosen by the groups themselves, with no influence on my part, it was of interest to observe that the selection of these leaders would have been the same had I chosen them myself.

The first meeting held at the beginning of the cluster process was largely instructive and focused on desired methodology and outcomes for the groups. Not all meeting outlines were provided at this meeting as these were created along the journey in advance of each cluster meeting. This enabled currency of questions and the development of the most appropriate material based on the feedback of how groups were advancing in terms of their level of disclosure. While it was difficult to anticipate the uniqueness of each group, some common components for group disclosure were laid out in this prelude. As noted in Chapter 4, a key ingredient lay in ensuring the conversations be less focused on work and ministry and more focused on the ministers themselves. This could provide

the potential sharing of story in self-disclosure that could build bonds of shared experience and trust.

Communication regularly took place following each of the clusters, either by email or in phone conversation with each facilitator, enabling a direct line of communication should challenges emerge. The facilitators appeared comfortable with the way the groups were operating and no additional assistance was deemed necessary.

A second facilitators' gathering organized midway through the cluster groups modeled the desired group process (as was shared in the previous chapter). The conference president was also invited to this gathering for both awareness and input. The sharing that took place was both intimate and honest and reflected on current personal spiritual journeys and was appreciated by facilitators. Individual time was given to each group facilitator and this provided a context for more detailed feedback as well as the opportunity to raise any challenges faced and questions regarding process over a meal together. Very little concern was raised, but rather an appreciation for the developing health of process of each group was common. Highlights were shared of the growing bonds of connection within the majority of the groups. The largest group had a challenge of maintaining their meet schedule with emergencies arising and impeding some scheduled appointments. However the remaining groups had developed a consistent timeframe for clusters. It was interesting to note the special events that were planned for final meetings of the year with significant energy expended in the planning and implementation of these events. It highlighted the value of doing activities together as a group in order to de-stress and openly communicate at a deeper level.

Anecdotal Conversations With Participants

While anecdotal conversations with participants cannot be seen as precise indicators of the success or otherwise of a project, there is some value in observing an alignment of these conversations with the general perceptions gleaned from the overall analysis. Although anecdotal, what follows is no less authentic in its construct (although generalized to avoid individual identification).

Within the Australian and New Zealand context, a minister is available to be *called out* of a local conference to another conference (that is, invited to be employed by another conference) after having ministered for five years in a conference. Such calls are invitational rather than mandatory. However there is a trend of movement towards larger conferences and in particular, conferences in the warm coastal areas have a significant attraction. One of the ministers in the SNSW Conference wanted to relocate upon completing five years of ministry. However, following the development of a new culture of ministry that has ensued since the implementation of clusters, such relocation is no longer desired and furthermore, an internal change of location within the conference has seen the birth of a freshness of inspiration in ministry on the part of this pastor.

Another minister spoke of a fresh passion for ministry that has been refreshing in his mature years. This minister has developed a vision for new church plants within his region of influence. Such a vision was in contrast to his recent years of ministry. One minister shared in a recent ministers' meeting as having found the real core of ministry through what has been described. This minister shared disappointment for many years where ministry had been focused on less significant foci, and expressed a desire to turn

back the clock so that their current discovery of relational and spiritual depth could be realized in those years.

It was shared in another context that some group members began a pattern of contacting each other on a regular basis (weekly), sharing insights, concerns, and praying for each other's needs (both individual and church-related).

As a result of a personal experience with a heightened sense of community, some ministers (25%) have begun focusing on developing similar relationally- driven small group structures within their local churches. This is gratifying to observe.

Two of the church communities have experienced a shift in focus in their Sabbath School program as a result of the vision shared by their minister. There is a developing strong desire within such churches to build strong community through a relationship-building program where sharing of story is intrinsic. While its conception has been recent, there is excitement shared by these small churches for that which is yet to unfold.

Not all ministers are relational by nature. Some having the Myers-Briggs *J* type personality more easily relate to task-focused agendas. One such person shared the challenge of adapting to a reflective approach in his personal spiritual journey. In describing this challenge, the minister stated that although it was difficult to adjust to such a process, he was persisting with it, as he knew it would be beneficial in the long term for a greater sense of balance in ministry. Such intentionality has begun to bear fruitage in ministry. Another minister who had been little impacted by the times together in the cluster group (their cluster perhaps being one that had less of a relational impact) held some resentment in attending. However, subsequently in an ongoing cluster group it

was noted that there were stories shared of his personal journey at a deeper level to what would have been the case previously.

More than one ministers who were relocated at the commencement of the ensuing year went through a period of loss for the relational connection that had been established in their previous cluster group. The ministers have since adjusted to their new clusters and brought additional openness, vulnerability, and relational warmth to the mix of their new cluster groups. One such minister has mirrored the process of relational connecting in his new church leadership team and is developing a level of trust and sense of team with his elders that will no doubt be realized in added health to his multicultural church community.

More could be stated in this regard, however the above illustrates the ongoing influence of the fledgling steps taken by this innovative and willing group of ministers to draw together in community, and in consequence become more focused on Holy Spirit-dependence in building community.

Observations of the Researcher to Group Process

As stated in Chapter 4, I attended each of the groups towards the end of their first year of operation. This was an intentional process as it enabled each of the groups to build a level of trust with each other as a cluster without any undue influence from me. Mention has been made regarding the value of *closed groups* for their provision of an environment where openness and trust can develop. Such group process was modeled in our study cohort by Walshe (2013), and is supported by several others (Hull, 2006, p. 233; Stanley, 2012, p. 143), and, as has been stated, was established for the clusters of ministers. To impose my presence on such a group during its inception would have stilted

this desired outcome. In visiting each of the clusters in their more mature stage of development, I was able to observe process without any dependence of input on my part. Hence a picture of insight was gained as an observer/participant enabling more of a sense as to the culture of each group.

While the clusters showed various degrees of maturity of development, each had progressed beyond my expectation. There was a level of camaraderie and fun-filled familiarity that had not been observed in previous ministers' meetings. Humor at personal expense, as an indicator of closeness, is possibly more related to the Australian context, and this was readily observable.

As has been noted by the responses of the participants to the questionnaire, the camaraderie and sense of fun, did not detract from the spiritual focus and development that ensued, rather, it was enhanced. In personal visitation to each of the cluster groups the sharing time was inclusive of focus on a Bible passage with experiential sharing of its impact for insight. The time of praying together also evidenced a close community of disclosure and shared concern.

I parted from each group with a yearning, on the one hand, to have been part of each group in its ongoing experience, but on the other hand, with a sense of excitement and joy for the significant development of culture that cocooned the environment for what this project has anticipated. These clusters housed the key elements: of sharing of each other's story, in an atmosphere of trust, where accountability was engendered, and an ongoing commitment to a personal spiritual journey was encouraged.

Impact of Clusters for Local Ministry

Additional Contributing Factors to Spiritual Development

It is difficult to isolate and identify the exact contribution of the process described in this project across the conference, as there have been other changes that could well have combined to impact a process of change to a more relational environment. One such contributing change has been the conference's new vision statement. This has helped to contribute to a new relational paradigm (*To be and grow flourishing followers of Jesus*). The message of this Vision has been relentlessly addressed at every event and meeting with the major convention held each year having a focus on different purposes within this vision. It could well be said that both above processes have together worked in combination rather than contradiction to enhance the developing of a potentially more relational, spiritually-focused, community.

Challenges to a Process of Focus on Spiritual Development

No process of change is without its challenges, and there were definite challenges associated with this project, that may have been avoidable.

Differences of personality

Personality types have a predisposition to be *for* or *against* such a process of personal spiritual development. In utilizing a Myers-Briggs framework those more inclined to a 'J-type personality' are more inclined to a practical, physically active approach than what this conversational group process invites. To ameliorate the impact of this, some facilitators provided counter-measures to this potential resistance by having

the group be involved in a physical activity (e.g., hiking up a mountain, playing a physical game together, and other physical activities). Having a meal together in each cluster meeting has provided some disarming to this reserve.

Engendering a theological perspective conducive to biblical spirituality

A theological perspective prejudicial to a focus on biblical spirituality, along with a cynicism towards the possibility of newness or freshness in ministry perspective, presents another challenge to the focus of this project.

It must be stated that this project has not received reaction from any variant theological perspective that might be challenged by a focus on spirituality. However, it would be unwise to not give consideration to alternate theological perspectives being present within such a group (or future groups of ministers). It is anticipated that in providing a level of understanding and appreciation for the biblical context for a focus on an experiential, relational, spiritual growth process, theological concerns can be mollified and perhaps even embraced. It is hoped that Chapter 2 of this project would provide some influence in this regard. There were elements of the theological framework of this project that have been shared at ministers' meetings that may have helped in an acceptance of the biblical spirituality described.

With regard to a cynicism towards anything potentially *new*, there is very little that can be argued other than an invitation to try the process, as an adage states: "the best things in life can't be explained, they must be experienced." The willingness of those involved in this project in being open to what they experienced has been highly commendable and gratifying.

Facilitation process

Facilitators may not have fully caught the stimulus or the potential of this journey or perhaps were unable to translate what was understood in theory to the reality of the group life they were facilitating. Resolution to this challenge has lain in meeting together with facilitators and modeling for them as a group, that which they could anticipate in their own groups. I found this to be particularly helpful to the process, however, in hindsight, it would have been even more helpful, despite geographical challenges, to meet more regularly, perhaps on a quarterly basis, to strengthen this familiarity to group process and hold facilitators accountable to the relational and spiritual focused aspects of this journey.

Development of questionnaire

On reflection, another area that has impacted results in providing clarity, has been the potential limitation of the questions asked in terms of their conveying a true picture of what was experienced by the participants. Hindsight provides insight into other potential questions that could have been asked. Further clarification of the devotional habits of participants prior to the commencement of the project would have been of assistance in establishing the influence for change in the process that played out.

A control sample

The challenge of not having a control sample group not participating in such a group-process and noting whether spiritual development were to take place regardless of group support could be said to have impacted data. However this occurred in part with the one minister whose physical isolation predisposed their exclusion from a ministers'

cluster group. As stated, while some support was gained through an intermittent meeting with a minister from a town in relative proximity but of another conference, conversation with this minister has revealed that while some benefit was gained, it was less than what was experienced elsewhere.

Prevailing culture

A culture of surface-level community with a paucity of trust also provided significant challenge, although the results show that this was overcome to a large degree. Some of the churches in the South New South Wales Conference have of recent years worked through Natural Church Development (NCD) testing procedures and of particular interest in this process, have been the low levels of the quality characteristic *loving relationships*. This characteristic is an indicator of the level of trust and openness of sharing that is exhibited within each faith community. These are the same communities that the ministers of this conference have been leading over the past years and while not implicitly designing such dysfunction, may well have been complicit at a level of codependence in having such communities prevail. Where a community has operated within a singularly, informational framework with little energy directed towards nurturing relationship in a non-judgmental, caring environment, the above mentioned NCD results, while cause for concern, are not surprising. The above results do however provide opportunity for much potential growth, where open to a development of relational connections as has been the experience of the ministry leadership team in this project.

The responses of the 20-30% of participants who experienced little impact to the process that has been worked through in this project could well have been influenced by

some of the above factors. However, a certain level of negativity would be expected in any process of change where honesty of opinion is sought. One could also observe that life has its stages of development and while this has not been a focus of this study, nevertheless is worth consideration.

Conclusion

A study of this nature is limited in its focus and hence provides much potential for further research. It is valuable to reflect upon some areas for exploration for an ongoing benefit to the basics that this project has revealed. What follows is a window into some of these opportunities for ongoing development.

Reflections Inviting Further Research and Strengthening of Process

Value of Self-Administered Personality Analysis for Participants

As was stated at the outset of this project, challenges were encountered with gaining approval for using personality testing. However, research into the connections that exist between personality and spiritual learning styles would be of significant benefit in the biblical discipleship conversation. Such research would be helpful in providing more clarified awareness of an individual's patterns of behavior. It could further provide specific guidance for the development of more specifically tailored group process guidance. Such an initiative would also improve accountability processes so that the desired goal of spiritual growth could be experienced more broadly.

Additional Training for Facilitators

Additional training could operate alongside regular scheduled meetings with

facilitators particularly in the early months of inception. This would help ensure that all facilitators are operating from a similar frame of reference and would further strengthen a process as described in this project. It could also reduce the risk of any significant counter-productive procedures developing within individual clusters. The facilitators' meeting could provide a helpful model for that which is desired for the cluster groups and thus its frequency could be helpful in highlighting such desired outcomes.

A Clear Shared Strategy for Development of Level of Disclosure

A deepening level of disclosure could operate in conjunction with the planned development of each group. The types of questions asked and their development along a continuum of disclosure would be inherent to this process. The level of disclosure could be monitored by each facilitator in their analysis of group process at the aforementioned facilitators' meetings. The sharing of this strategy would also lend itself to greater ownership of process for facilitators, and stimulate the developing culture of each cluster group.

Further Direction for Ongoing Cluster Groups

Much of today's worldview operates within a short-term frame of reference with goals and relationships reflecting the same temporary framework. However, there is much to be gained from an extended view for the desired outcomes of goals. Longer-term relationship building would lend to a more solid base of support for personal spiritual development within a community of trust that is rarely realized in contemporary culture. Long-term 'closed' small groups that have been the focus of this study are one method

that could provide tangible evidence for such a focus. Within the ministry context, the nurture of relationship and spiritual companionship has clearly been seen to be of benefit. These benefits, observed in the reflections of the minister-participants involved in this study offers some sage insight to conference leadership, and points to the advantages of providing a longer tenure of ministers in one location for such relational processes to be enabled. While this is already taking place to a degree within the Australian context, in part due to economic considerations; this study highlights the advantages of these longer-term tenures as a means of developing deeper community.

With the above considerations in mind, it is purposed to encourage an ongoing commitment to the cluster groups as has been described in this project. They have, in fact, taken on a life and dynamic that has become autonomous, with little administrative input, other than ongoing funding of meals and invitation of feedback from facilitators on a quarterly basis. Curriculum suggestions will continue to be provided to cluster groups so that the biblical discipleship focus so intrinsic to this initiative can be sustained. It is anticipated that such a long-term commitment to this direction will provide substance for a longitudinal study into the future of an enduring culture of biblical spirituality displayed and encouraged by the ministry team of the SNSW Conference.

Summation of Project

The combined assessment and evaluation of this project as described above indicates significant gains for the culture of ministry in the South New South Wales Conference. These gains have particularly been experienced through a lessening of a sense of isolation for the ministers in their respective local districts and a growing sense of community within the pastoral cluster groups that has enhanced their level of trust,

with an associated development of transparency in sharing personal spiritual stories. Further, ministers indicated, in the main, a level of development in personal journey that has been beneficial in enhancing their relationship with God. This is gratifying feedback. Based on these responses, the cluster groups have provided a degree of encouragement, support and accountability that has assisted in establishing and practically applying some of the ideals in biblical spirituality that were presented in the Conference-wide ministers meetings.

In the above evaluation, 20-25% of the participants were minimally impacted by the process of this project. Such numbers do not negate the significance of impact for the majority, nor do they invalidate the benefits of the outlined methodology in enhancing the culture for the ministers. Based on the evidence, I believe the principles and processes that promote biblical discipleship are sound, however, people's response to them will always be the variable. Involvement at a heart-level is always a choice, and as such these numbers do provide an indication of the voluntarism and ownership that was invited in this participatory process.

I have been both surprised and excited that such a simple focus of nurturing relationship, spiritual companionship within a ministry team, and challenging personal accountability for a growing personal relationship with God, has influenced so significant a change in the culture of ministry within the SNSW Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To also observe a *flow-on* effect of ministers developing leadership teams within their local churches using a similar model has been a subsequent, unexpected outcome that warrants ongoing support and resourcing. Such is the commitment of this researcher.

The personal impact of this project on my own journey is multi-faceted and goes beyond description. Undertaking this project was a discipline in itself and required an ongoing commitment to making time in my weekly schedule for its development. My interest in biblical spirituality had been sparked and was developing through my own reading and experience well before joining this cohort; however, the cohort stimulated and expanded that interest with ideas through the recommended reading resources and assignments that has been of great value.

The class time that our cohort experienced was potent in its value. I have never experienced group life like we were encouraged through our class activities. There was an environment of trust that developed in our cohort whereby the sharing became increasingly honest and there was a level of care shown to each other's growth that moved beyond competition, to cooperation and concern for each other. Having experienced such an intimacy of community has fed my own desire to recreate such environments in my area of influence in ministry.

My personal devotional time has been ongoing and my commitment to its value has been solidified, attributable in part to the focus of the cohort and this project. My passion for an experience of God in life, and intentionally focusing on God's presence in all of life, while challenged at times by circumstances is still robust. Having a spiritual accountability partner along this journey, I attribute as aiding this process. My experience finds me in agreement with Willard (2006) in the value he places on Bible memorization: "How then, shall we set the Lord always before us? *Bible memorization* is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation" (p. 58). This has been a source of much strength to me along the journey.

I am excited by the outcomes of this project that went beyond my expectations and its potential for the future as we continue to operate cluster groups for ministers along a similar vein in the SNSW Conference. The future will tell the story of this ongoing development.

God is an intimate community of *Three-in-One* where love is their defining character. Their invitation is for followers to join in their intimacy of community and become influencers of their love in all of life. Such potential is possible through building community as has been described, thereby embodying the request of Jesus, “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, ISV).

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

For all research participants in the research being conducted by

Kendell Cobbin 142454

as part of the following DMin project:

ENRICHING THE CULTURE OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY AMONG SOUTH NEW SOUTH WALES CONFERENCE PASTORS

1. How has your journey with God changed since commencement of the Ministers Cluster Groups?
2. Have the Clusters impacted this process of your journey with God and if so in what ways?
3. Describe how your devotional habits have developed or changed since commencing Clusters?
4. What were the spiritual benefits, if any, that you have gained through this experience?
5. Please describe those factors in your own personal experience that enhanced your devotional practices?
6. Please describe those factors in your own personal experience that reduced the effectiveness or value of the practice of devotional habits?
7. Our growth is not just an individual experience, we grow in community, how has the ministers' cluster helped or hindered your growth?
8. Were there insights gained from the experiences shared by others in your Cluster?
9. Has there been any lessening of a sense of isolation in ministry from your times together in cluster? In what ways?

APPENDIX 2
CLUSTER MEET GUIDES

MEET 1

- Share: 'Who/what were the influencers of your ministry direction?'
OR
 - 'What were some early influences in your Christian journey?'
 - Pray with and for each other in appreciation to God for each one's journeys and ongoing guidance (you could have each pray for the person on their right).
 - Establish group commitments and values.
 - Share insights from 'The Me I Want to Be' for those who have read parts of it. (Has anyone done the online test? Any surprises? Did you feel affirmed?)
 - Challenge all to do this exercise before your next get-together...
 - Is there anything you would like the group to hold you accountable for in your ongoing journey with God?
 - What challenges in your ministry/church/family would you like us to pray for - pray again together before lunch.
- NB. It's great to have unhurried time for prayer and to be invitational of conversational-type praying that enables recurring opportunities for all.

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MEET 2

- What plans do you have in mind for the holidays... for rest, relaxation and renewal?
- What sort of things do you think about during your average day?
- Do a top 5 list of your thoughts/concerns (PTO for this list)
- Is there anything you would like to change or remove from this list?
- Do a 1-10 rating of your life focus on the following spectrums:
Task and People Work and Renewal Focus on others and focus on self.
- INTENTIONALITY - How can you be more mindful of God through each day...
(Read Romans 8:5-7 and Romans 12:2)
- Pray on behalf of each other...

If time during cluster discussion time or over lunch, share discoveries from your reading of 'The Me I Want to Be' or other reading...

"God is not opposed to effort, He's opposed to earning." *Ward*

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MEET 3

Something that I appreciated from Big Camp or our Camp setup time was...
A devotional habit* that I am intentionally working on (or wanting to pursue) this year as part of my desire to have a flourishing life with God is...
How can your cluster help you in this spiritual training/discipline?

Prayer Time

Focus on an attribute of God that you appreciate and how this attribute has intersected your life...share this appreciation together with God in prayer.
Invite Holy Spirit's presence to strengthen the person on your right of the cluster in their special devotional habit...

* Devotional Habits are designed by God to receive His grace by being 'present' with God so that He can transform us (the path does not produce the change - it is God that does this) it simply means learning from Jesus how we arrange our lives around activities that enable us to spend attentive time in the presence of God.
eg. Habits of disengagement Habits of engagement
Solitude time with God Bible reading/reflection
Unplugging (removing distractions) Probe
Christian Reflection (Theod Reft) - awareness Prayer as conversation

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MEET 4

Feedback to each other on how personal time with God is going (from previous cluster sharing)

In 3-5 minutes: Share a story from your life about something you care about deeply – your dreams, hopes, fears, relationships, or a life-changing experience. (Talk about what really happened – be able to laugh at yourself in the situation i.e. Be Real)

Follow up from sharing:

- What is something that you would like to grow from the situation you described?
- What would you like to put into action?
- How will you do it?
- What accountability would you like from the others in the group?

Pray for each other in a way that suits the group...

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MEET 5

RELATIONAL CHECK-UP

Below is quick test to evaluate your relational health. Circle what fits for each of the following:

Yes	No	I am content with the state of my relationships right now.
Yes	No	If I got hurt or upset, I can think of at least three friends I could pick up the phone and talk to about it right now.
Yes	No	I have at least one really close friend, a 'soul mate' that I can share anything with (in addition to my spouse).
Yes	No	I have a wonderful formal relationship with a coach, mentor or peer mentor in my life that helps me grow.
Yes	No	I have someone I talk to regularly to hold me accountable for basic personal holiness issues.
Yes	No	My home is a peaceful, healthy, respectful environment. We don't fight, tear each other down or snipe at each other.
Yes	No	I have/had a good relationship with my parents.
Yes	No	I can't think of anywhere I am carrying anger or a grudge inside me toward another person.
Yes	No	I do things with work associates outside of the work situation. We have more than just professional relationships.
Yes	No	In the last two weeks I had a conversation with someone where they opened up and became very transparent with me.
Yes	No	I have a healthy social life, with people I can hang out, relax and recharge with.

There is no right score to this other than your authenticity, but pick out one of the 'No' answers you scored and commit to how you would take a step towards changing it to a 'Yes.' Write it down and share how you would like to be accountable to your cluster group for this step.

Read Luke 6: 45 and discuss its intent... Ministry flows out of being: who you are is what you have to give. 'If you have few friends you can share authentically with, how will you know how to be a true friend to others?' Share the impact of this statement...

Pray together in relation to commitments that emerge from these shared exercises.

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MEET 6

1. How is the 'stilling' process going?

Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God."

- How has this been happening for you of late?
- What do you need in order for this to be an ongoing process?
- What provides you with the best form of 'stillness'?

2. "The most profound human experience is not joy, or peace, or excitement. It is... the holy awe we will face when we enter into the presence of God."

Either share an incident where a Bible character experienced this holy awe, OR a time in your life where you have sensed 'the holy awe' of being in His presence...

3. "... In his presence we will fall flat on our faces, shielding ourselves from his glory and majesty. Our modern worldview engages in an extremely dangerous venture when it seeks on the basis of reason to analyze, define, and, in a sense, master God. We must submit our whole selves to the totality of someone remote, majestic, and mighty, beyond all experience and comprehension, someone who cannot be reduced to logical consistency, but transcends human reasoning. Our only possible attitude is one of submission - the recognition that this reality goes far beyond us in its sovereign majesty." (Hebert, Transforming Worldviews 291)

- Share any insights and impressions from this quote...
- How can each of us move in a different direction to our modern worldview?

4. Encourage one another in prayer.

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MEET 7

1. Share reflections on our recent 'Knowing God Together' Minister's meetings. What have you begun to implement from our time together?

2. What challenges have you encountered in the implementation process? How might these challenges be overcome?

3. Now having been given more time for reflection, have any further insights or 'Aha' moments struck you from what was shared?

4. Pray for each other's specific needs.

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APPENDIX 3
RECOMMENDED READING
FOR MINISTERS

The following is a short list of resources that this researcher has found to be helpful to share with ministers in providing core awareness of biblical spirituality and discipleship:

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- Harder, C. (2013). *Discovering the other: Asset-based approaches to building community together*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute.
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