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Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals

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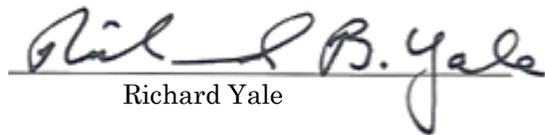
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LISTENING PRAYER FOR TALKATIVE EVANGELICALS

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

KEITH J. FOISY
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ABSTRACT

Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals

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The goal of this study is to introduce evangelicals at Evergreen Covenant Church to contemplative listening prayer practices. Through the setting of a three-day retreat, seven seminars, and two sessions of spiritual direction, participants were introduced to these disciplines. The three-day Sabbath retreat included four seminars presenting the concepts of Sabbath, *Shema* (hearing God), solitude, and silence. Solitude and silence were practiced throughout the majority of the retreat. The following weekly seminars introduced seven listening prayer practices, including *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading), the Examen Prayer, imaginative prayer, and others. Participants were also invited to experience two spiritual direction sessions to both introduce them to spiritual direction and to reflect on their experience of the listening prayer practices.

All of the participants had little or no personal experience with contemplative prayer practices. Because this program was intended to introduce evangelicals to contemplative prayer practices, it was designed using evangelical concepts such as deepening a personal relationship with God and provided an extensive biblical basis throughout. Participants not only learned about the prayer practices but were invited to experience and debrief both within the seminar sessions themselves and independently between sessions.

This study has determined that evangelicals at Evergreen Covenant Church both embraced the biblical nature and necessity of listening prayer practices as relates to personal spiritual development and a deepening sense of intimacy with God. One major hindrance to the study concerned the time commitment required by participants. None of the participants were able to completely fulfill the objective of attending the retreat, all seven seminars, and two sessions of spiritual direction. Considerations will need to be made as to condensing the program experience to a more manageable time frame and commitment to accommodate for the challenges of personal scheduling demands.

Content Reader: Richard Yale, DMin

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I am indebted to Evergreen Covenant Church not only for calling me, fresh out of seminary, to be their pastor, but also for investing in me in such a way as to equip me to be a competent, a compassionate, and an increasingly contemplative person. I am thankful to my family, who share me with the congregation, for teaching me to balance my personal life and ministry in a way that brings health to the congregation, our family, and myself. I am thankful to the many within the Evergreen congregation who have joined me on the contemplative journey, spending time learning prayer practices and attending retreats together. I especially think of the inquisitive group who were participants in this project.

I also want to acknowledge my teachers and spiritual direction cohort at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. Their direction and community helped me to find my home in the contemplative life. My desire was fanned into flame by the teachers and cohort of the Fuller Doctor of Ministry Spiritual Direction program, out of which this project and paper ultimately emerged. Finally, I want to thank my editors, Angela Amstutz and James Love, without whom this paper would not have made the final submission. All of these are my teachers, friends, and siblings in the spirit. Without each of these voices, I could not hear the voice of God.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening prayer, also known as contemplative prayer, is the name I am using to describe prayer practices that stress being attentive to the inner stirrings of the spirit as well as having a conscious awareness of the presence of God. In this paper, the emphasis on the listening aspects of contemplative prayer stands in contrast to the more familiar prayer practices taught and practiced within evangelicalism. Evangelicalism stresses the written and spoken word, which often transfers to an emphasis on verbal prayer as well, predominantly in the forms of petitionary and intercessory prayer. These prayers tend to focus on divine intervention in external situations or circumstances. Listening, or contemplative, prayer tends to focus on the work God is doing internally in one's own life and is, therefore, more personal, seeking both personal transformation and deepening intimacy with God.

Listening prayer often includes verbal prayer, but it is more conversationally focused, seeking God's response as received through inner stirrings. This type of prayer is highly reflective and is more of an intentional dialogue than a monologue. Some forms of listening prayer forgo speaking altogether. Listening prayer is the normal biblical pattern of relationship between God and receptive human beings, as presented throughout Scripture.

Human beings were created to be in relationship with God and endowed with the ability to communicate with him. Throughout the Bible, from the first chapters of Genesis in the Hebrew Scripture to the book of Revelation, humans heard directly and personally from God. Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden with God in the cool

of the day. Eve told the serpent that God had given her and Adam specific instructions concerning the trees of the garden. Both Adam and Eve are said to have even heard God walking in the midst of the garden (Gn 3:8–10). They are in conversation with God both before and after the Fall.

Today, specifically within the context of the evangelical tradition, there is a tendency to emphasize knowing about God through the revelation of Scripture while underemphasizing hearing God’s voice in any personal way.¹ Evangelicalism and its larger umbrella of Protestantism tend to focus on the written and spoken word while glossing over God’s voice in the life of the individual believer. This emphasis on the written and spoken word is evident in the central placement of the pulpit in most Protestant churches.

My experience as a convert to evangelicalism was a call to be *in the Word*. Devotions are traditionally an essential part of evangelical spiritual formation and generally consist of reading the Bible and spending time in prayer. Prayer primarily consists of the individual speaking to God. This tendency toward loquaciousness appears in common prayer helps as prayer acronyms. ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) is a common prayer acronym which leads a person in four types of prayer. The individual is often instructed to say prayers of adoration by verbalizing praise and

¹ The evangelical tradition has traditionally expressed the need for a personal relationship with God, yet most of the prayer practices taught within evangelicalism prioritize speaking to God with very little emphasis on hearing God speak back. A genuine relationship implies two-way communication. Dallas Willard writes “Sometimes today it seems that our personal relationship with God is treated as no more than a mere arrangement or understanding that Jesus and his Father have about us. Our personal relationship then only means that each believer has his or her own unique account in heaven, which allows them to draw on the merits of Christ to pay their sin bills.” Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 26.

honor for who God is. In confession one verbally confesses their sins to God.

Thanksgiving is where the person declares the various things for which they are thankful to God. Supplication is the act of asking God to intervene to meet one's needs and the needs of others. There are other acronyms such as PRAY (praise, repentance, asking for others, and asking for yourself), JOY (Jesus first, others next, and you last), and PRAISE (praise, repentance, ask, intercede, speak the word, enjoy God's presence). What these types of acronyms tend to have in common is an emphasis on the individual creating speech and a lack of emphasis on hearing God in a discerning manner.

Recent years have brought a renewed interest in the practice of listening prayer and spiritual discernment to both mainline and evangelical congregations. Protestants and evangelicals are reintroducing age-old spiritual disciplines such as spiritual direction and contemplative prayer. These spiritual practices emphasize listening to and encountering God in addition to learning and knowing about God through reading Scripture. In the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination, this has primarily begun at a leadership level. National and regional offices are introducing pastors to practices such as spiritual direction and inviting participation in listening disciplines such as Lectio Divina, imaginative prayer, centering prayer, and various other listening prayer practices. Retreat leaders are being sent out to select congregations to lead the Covenant members in discovering and practicing new disciplines for prayer that go beyond speech, and toward cultivating an attentive ear and spirit.

Listening prayer practices are essential for deepening intimacy with God and personal discernment, especially when one considers the theological implications of the Reformation as it relates to the *priesthood of all believers*. If priests are intermediaries

between God and humanity, then it is vital that believers live in a conversational and discerning relationship with God. Since each person's call and relationship with God will be unique, it is essential that a person of faith have a sense of God's presence and direction in her life. Scripture reveals this as a standard characteristic of those called by God, who follow his guidance for life and ministry.

While petitionary prayer tends to focus on God changing one's circumstances, listening prayer emphasizes God transforming one's life from the inside out. Wilhelm Hermann describes the necessity of personal transformation and its connection with prayer. He states, "We hold a man to be really a Christian when we believe we have ample evidence that God has revealed himself to him in Jesus Christ, and that now the man's inner life is taking on a new character through his communion with the God who is thus manifest."² Dallas Willard says, "Spiritual formation into Christlikeness—true change of character—comes from living in relationship to God."³ Personal relationships are a matter of mutuality, which includes both being heard and listening.

Thankfully, Christian tradition offers a rich resource of listening prayer practices. (See Table 1.) This paper and project will focus on the life and practices of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers; later monastic practices, especially Ignatian spirituality and practices from an assortment of traditions, including Orthodox Christianity; and more modern evangelical voices such as Willard. Willard writes, "Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational

² Wilhelm Hermann, in Willard, *Hearing God*, 29.

³ Willard, *Hearing God*, 29.

relationship with God, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other respects.”⁴

Table 1. Goals of listening prayer

Listening prayer practices	Outcomes
Sabbath, Solitude and Silence	Finding time and creating an environment favorable for the practice of listening prayer
Contemplation	Developing a more constant and intimate sense of God’s presence
Examen Prayer	Becoming more aware of God’s activity and presence in daily life
Colloquy (conversational prayer)	Cultivating a conversational relationship with God by adding listening to speaking
Ignatian imaginative prayer	Entering imaginatively into the Gospel narrative to encounter Christ in a personal way
Lectio Divina (sacred reading)	Hearing God’s word by listening to Scripture
Dreams	Hearing God as it relates to subconscious issues that impact waking life

The revival of listening prayer practices is relatively new in Protestant circles, especially within more conservative evangelical spheres. For instance, I was recently speaking at a Youth With A Mission (YWAM) campus in Richmond, Virginia, to a group of about seventy missionaries.⁵ I asked how many of them were familiar with the practice

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ This presentation took place at YWAM Richmond on April 23, 2018. YWAM, an acronym for Youth With A Mission, is an evangelical parachurch ministry focused on equipping youth for missionary activity throughout the world.

of spiritual direction and not one person knew what the term meant. After I explained it, some suggested that their mentor and discipleship relationships might be equivalent, although spiritual disciplines such as listening prayer practices were not typical of such relationships. Also, these mentoring and discipleship relationships focused more on teaching doctrine, theology, and practice than on personal and spiritual discernment. Practices such as contemplation, centering prayer, Lectio Divina, imaginative prayer, or even solitude and silence, were not taught or practiced with intentionality. While the knowledge of these historical disciplines will likely differ from denomination to denomination, the reintroduction has begun and will likely continue to expand. The project described in this paper is part of the continuing attempt to introduce evangelicals to listening prayer practices in an intentional way.

The ministry application of this project sits within a particular evangelical congregation, Evergreen Covenant Church. Evergreen is a rural church, established over one hundred years ago in Michigan. It has a unique local history and flavor, having been founded by Swedish immigrants in a farming community and evolving to a retirement and resort community. The congregation continues to be made up of these groups, presenting both opportunity and challenge.

This local church is overwhelmingly fellowship and Word-centered, coming together primarily for these two functions. The fellowship of the congregation fosters deep relationships. The emphasis on strong Bible teaching both cultivates and reinforces the community as a center of belief in the truths and doctrines of the Bible. The prayer that happens within the life of the congregation tends to be verbal, focusing on petitionary and intercessory functions. There is little evidence for the practice of listening

and reflective prayer practices existing in the life of the congregation. While the congregation would consider prayer central to the life of the community, they see prayer's primary purpose as petitioning God to change outward circumstances rather than inward realities. Prayer time, within the congregation and as reflected upon prayer chain lists, focuses on health, financial, and relational needs rather than spiritual formation and deepening intimacy with God.

I have pastored Evergreen for twelve years and desire to lead the congregation into spiritual disciplines and practices that are beneficial in spiritually transforming their lives. Listening prayer practices are essential for personal reflection, deepening intimacy with God, and Christlike transformation. This ministry project will introduce evangelicals at Evergreen to listening prayer practices to develop intimacy with God and a deepening identification of his presence and voice in their daily lives.

Part One of this paper will provide an overview of the community and ministry context in which this project will be carried out. Evergreen Chapel, now Evergreen Covenant Church, first began to emerge as a faith community in the late 1800s within the context of a rural, farming community with a broad base of Swedish immigrants. The strong ties these farmers and blue-collar workers had among themselves is central to the independent nature of this congregationally led, community-based church. The congregation's historical bond is evident in shared belief as well as local fellowship and service. The introduction of a course in personal spirituality and growth through listening prayer practices is something new in the life of this congregation.

The second section, Theological Reflection, begins with a literature review, sampling key works that speak to both the theology and practice of listening prayer. The

literature review goes beyond specific listening prayer practices to include disciplines, such as the essential principles found in Sabbath, that will provide a framework to make listening prayer possible. Sabbath, silence, and solitude are essential for preparing the environment in which listening prayer takes place. For this reason, the listening prayer seminars will begin with a Sabbath retreat, which focuses on these three key elements. Select works by Walter Brueggemann and Henri Nouwen on this topic will inform this area. Works by Willard, Adele Calhoun, and James Martin will speak more specifically to the practice of listening prayer, including specific disciplines.

Beyond the literature review, this section will develop a biblical witness and theology for listening prayer, using biblical examples to exemplify the personal nature of this relationship with God as common in Scripture. The Evangelical Covenant Church, of which Evergreen is an affiliate, affirms this biblical theology. Key points relating to the tradition and development of listening prayer within the Covenant, as well as witnesses arising from outside traditions such as desert monasticism and Ignatian spirituality, will be discussed. The concept of the priesthood of all believers, deriving from Reformation theology, will establish a contemporary basis for the practice of listening prayer. This section will conclude by presenting the need for adding the practice of listening prayer as both a compliment and balance to the proclamation of the spoken word, which tends to dominate Protestant theology and practice, especially within the life of Evergreen.

Part Three, Ministry Practice, presents an overview of the implementation of the listening prayer program. This overview will include the target group, setting, and experiences that will make up the program. There will be three essential experiences,

which will include the Sabbath retreat, listening prayer seminars, and two sessions of spiritual direction interspersed throughout the program.

This project paper will end with an outline and overview of the implementation process by which this program will move forward. A final evaluation offers a critique of the overall impact of the listening prayer experience.

PART ONE

COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1
COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

Carr Settlement: 1800s

So much of what characterizes a congregation rests on its historical context and development. Carr Settlement became the home of Evergreen Chapel in the late 1800s.¹ It is located on the west side of rural Michigan, surrounded by the Manistee National Forest. Local historians say the Carr brothers, who founded Carr Settlement, were granted the land by the United States government as part of the terms of their military service during the Civil War. The Carrs are no longer in the area, but their name and memory remain. The local fire department is known as Carr Township Fire Department. The community center across from it, Carr Hall, has played host to the annual Fireman's Ball and Mother-Daughter Banquet for untold years. While the main road through the settlement has changed names, it is still referred to as "Carr Road" by the locals, many of whom have historical roots within the congregation.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the history of Carr Settlement, Baldwin, Branch and Evergreen Covenant Church comes from a culmination of personal conversations with congregants of Evergreen, citizens around the Baldwin/Branch area and Geraldine Moore, "A History of Evergreen Covenant Church," Evergreen Covenant Church, accessed August 26, 2018, <http://evergreencovenant.org/history/>.

While the Carrs were the first settlers in the area, lumbering companies owned the majority of the surrounding land. Some early inhabitants were the lumberjacks who worked for these companies, clearing much of the local forest and shipping the wood via the railroad. In time, the lumber companies sold the land to their workers, who cleared their fields of stumps and began transforming the acreage into a farming community.

The Swedish Settlement

The territory adjacent to Carr Settlement came to be known as the “Swedish Settlement” due to a large influx of Swedish immigrants who moved into the region and took up farming. These families founded Evergreen Covenant Church. Their decedents—who bear surnames such as Anderson, Carlson, Johnson, Larson, and Peterson—are still connected to the congregation in various degrees. Even those who married outside of Swedish heritage proudly lay claim to their family names and earlier ancestors.²

Parishioners say that a number of these local farmers, who were all good friends and family members, decided early on that it was important to begin gathering for Christian worship. In the early days of the settlement, they gathered sporadically in one another’s homes. Lay leaders would typically lead the meetings with Bible readings and the sharing of personal testimonies. In the summertime, they would meet on the lawn on the Carlson’s property, which was on the corner of Carr and Evergreen roads. Services would often start late in the summer and harvest months so that farmers could tend to their fields and cattle earlier in the day.

² Again, this history is derived from personal interviews with congregations and Moore, “A History of Evergreen Covenant Church.”

The Carlson family offered to donate the property on the corner of Carr and Evergreen roads, so long as it was always used for worship gatherings and a signed deed was put in place to make sure it could never be sold. The deal was accepted. The Ladies Aid raised money to buy a vacant home from a nearby town. In the winter of 1920, a team of horses with a makeshift sleigh moved the home some miles to its new location on the corner. Mrs. Albert Peterson³ reflects on moving day in the following way:

A special day was set and the neighbors with their teams and sleighs, and also their wives, set out for Marlboro early one winter morning to work all day like beavers—tearing down the building and hauling it home. At noon hot coffee was made at one of the Marlboro homes, and a generous dinner served by the ladies. We do not have records concerning the men who helped that day, but everyone consulted agrees that it was a glorious bee.⁴

The congregation continued to come together after morning chores on Sunday, whenever a gathering was called. Anna Sellon and Tressia Kuncaitis, known as the Johnson sisters, recall when preachers would come through on bicycle routes or with their horse and buggy, picking up kids along the way.

The chapel consisted of farmers and blue-collar workers who worked and played together. Many in the community married others from within this social context and built families of their own. They celebrated baptisms, weddings, and countless fellowship gatherings together. When funds were needed, they found creative ways to raise money. They experienced the highs and lows of life, from welcoming newborns into the church family to saying goodbye at funeral services, within the sanctuary they built with their

³ As this information comes from sources that are more personal than academic, I am honoring the original text, and working through the limitations of Mrs. Peterson's first name not being recorded.

⁴ Moore, "A History of Evergreen Covenant Church."

own hands. Not many had college degrees, and a number never graduated from high school.⁵ Still, they worked hard and made a life for themselves in Carr Settlement.

In the early 1980s, the congregation waned. Part-time ministers, who would often travel seventy or more miles, led the congregation on the weekends. Membership diminished due to the decline of active farms and few job opportunities in the area. Many families moved away to find work. Decedents of those first- and second-generation immigrants sometimes began attending church elsewhere or not at all. The whole town seemed to change, transforming into more of a resort and retirement community made up of people who bought second homes on the surrounding lakes or hunting cabins they would enjoy seasonally. For Evergreen to have a future, it had to adapt as well.

The Lake Community

A Ministry to “Trunk Slammers”

Evergreen’s part-time pastors did not live in the area and most traveled from larger cities to serve Evergreen on the weekends. They typically ministered to the congregation for one to three years and moved to other opportunities. Sometimes they were all but pushed out by congregation members, as was the case with one minister who

⁵ This hardworking, limited-education demographic is reflected within the larger denomination as well. Zenos Hawkinson notes that many early Covenant congregations functioned without a pastor. A sermon would be written up in the Covenant magazine called the *Pietisten* (The Pietiest), which was used by local Swedish gatherings. Hawkinson writes, “The Sermon came in the magazine; it did not have to come with the preacher. The preachers of the renewal movement were few and far between, largely itinerants.... The paragraphs were short and they were all numbered, so that usual method in the cell of reading around the circle could be followed simply and efficiently. Each person had a number to read, all the way around. And those who could not read very well were still able to participate, because they knew which number to point to and follow with their peasant, callused fingers.” Zenos E. Hawkinson, *Anatomy of the Pilgrim Experience: Reflections on Being a Covenanter* (Chicago: Covenant Publishing, 2000), 23.

was said to talk more about philosophy than Bible doctrine. This minister was told by the chairperson of the time that “he could go and not come back.” Sound Bible teaching was central to the congregation’s gatherings.⁶

In the early 1990s, the congregation was small, but it increasingly attracted some of the people who had second homes on nearby lakes. These people were referred to as “trunk slammers,” because every weekend they would come to their cottage on the lake and by Sunday afternoon would pack their belongings in the trunks of their cars, slam them shut, and leave for their primary residences. These trunk slammers or “weekenders” enjoyed the church services, where they could sing old-time hymns and hear the word of God. The little country chapel was white, had a steeple, and reminded many of the days of old. The weekenders contributed to the financial needs of the congregation, helping Evergreen to meet the salary needs of its pastors and maintain the present property. In the wintertime, the congregation often had only ten to twenty attendees on Sunday mornings but come summer those numbers would double or even triple.

Retirement, Resort, and Renovation

Out of necessity, the weekenders took a more active role in the church, attending congregational meetings and bringing new ideas with them. Many local members got tired of hearing the statement, “What they did in my church back home was....” They grumbled, “what goes on in a city church is not necessarily right for a country church.” Some of the local members resented the input and participation of the weekenders. Locals

⁶ At this point, information shifts more to personal interviews as Moore’s work was written in 1953. This oral history is all that remains as no written history has been undertaken since.

protested by either refusing to serve alongside them or by leaving the congregation altogether. Even so, Evergreen's ministry and invitation to weekenders began to grow, and as it did, so did both the attendance and finances of the church.

Worship in the Woods

New life was coming to Evergreen some one hundred years after the chapel was first founded. While some local members still attended, Evergreen was becoming a retirement and resort community. Many of these newer members had little memory of Evergreen's past and less of a sense of historical ownership. What they did desire, however, was to see Evergreen flourish and become a place where they could worship God and develop friendships. They eagerly sought out the counsel of the denomination for the development of the congregation. With the help of the denominational council, the congregation discerned they had the necessary annual income to hire the church's first full-time pastor to lead them through the next stage of development.

I relocated to Carr Settlement and began pastoring Evergreen Covenant Church in 2006. At that time, the congregational ministries were limited to the Sunday morning service, a midweek Bible study that was attended by about five people, and the humble support of a missionary and ministry in Kenya. Evergreen's activities were primarily limited to a Sunday morning service with a fellowship hour following. The community was almost entirely made up of retirees and baby boomers who had homes on the lake. A few longtime Carr Settlement residents were still active in the life of the church. The congregation considered itself a "Bible church." When calling a new minister, strong preaching of the word of God was their uppermost concern.

The challenge at Evergreen is to move from being a Sunday morning event church to a congregation that is vibrant in both spiritual formation and active mission. This work is underway, and growth in these areas has been progressively realized over the last ten years. Local missions are being implemented successfully, and spiritual growth paths initiated and carried out. Some of these initiatives include prayer retreats, spiritual direction sessions, experiential seminars, and intentional formation teaching through discussion groups and Sunday sermons. The goal is to support the congregation's growth in intimacy and conversational relationship with God while introducing others to the same life-transforming encounter with Jesus. Since many in the congregation are either retirees or weekenders seeking retreat, Evergreen is in an ideal position to offer opportunities to engage in spiritually formative practices, both onsite and at nearby retreat centers.

Church Context

Core Values, Vision, and Mission

Evergreen Covenant Church established functioning boards and committees soon after I became the pastor. In 2008, with the assistance of the denomination, Evergreen underwent a period of intentional revitalization and began reforming its communal identity. Special congregational meetings were held to both explain and explore the core values of the church, especially the difference between what congregants believed those values should be and what evidence demonstrated those values actually were. Together they created and established their core values, vision, and mission.

The vision Evergreen adopted is foundational to the broader vision given to the whole Church by Christ himself, and it is shared with Christians everywhere. It is established as follows: “We are united by Christ in a holy covenant of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey the great commandments and the great commission: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to go into all the world and make disciples.”⁷

The congregation understood the mandate given by Christ to his disciples as a collective mandate for all who share the Christian faith. The ultimate vision is to grow in love toward God and others while inviting others into the faith and fellowship of the believing community, reproducing this vision in others and answering the call to make disciples. Evergreen’s vision statement speaks to *what* they are about, leading to the question of *how* they will actively pursue their vision. The answer is summed up in their mission statement, which reads, “The mission of Evergreen Covenant Church is to equip loving, giving, growing Christians to reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ—evangelizing the lost, ministering to those in need, and seeking justice for the oppressed.”⁸

The mission statement is established in the active tense. Evergreen is determined to equip spiritually formed and forming members to reach out to others with the good news of Jesus Christ. They do this through evangelizing, caring for those in need, and seeking justice for the vulnerable. The congregation is continually finding new ways to

⁷ Evergreen Covenant Church, “About Evergreen Covenant Church.”

⁸ Ibid.

be active in areas that fit with their passion, their individual giftings, and the needs of the communities in which they are active. In this way, the congregation shares a common purpose and works alongside one another to carry out these goals. Some examples of the ministries Evergreen has been involved with will be given below in the section entitled “Mission and Ministry.”

Leadership Profile

The local body is congregationally led by both the congregational assembly and the leadership of the elected executive board. On the organizational flow chart, the executive board oversees both the pastor and all other boards and committees of the church. The executive board is made up of officers and the representative chairpersons of each lesser board, including the diaconate, trustees, and mission boards. Together they are tasked and empowered to carry out what the congregation as a whole has determined, which must be in line with the core values, vision, and mission of the church.

Mission and Ministry

The range of current ministry extends from caring for those within the congregation to an increase in active local and world mission and outreach. Because Evergreen Covenant Church has become home to a resort and retirement community, many of the members are fifty-five and over. With aging comes an increase in health concerns. These concerns are reflected within the congregational prayer time, which is overwhelmed by requests for intercession in the area of health problems, surgeries, and recovery. Pastoral visitation, prayer chains, and prayer list updates are a predominate

ministry of the church. Because medical issues are a significant concern in so many individual lives, they have become a priority for the congregation as a whole.

The mission's board leads the congregation in both local and world outreach. The board's focus is on reaching individuals outside of the congregation, demonstrating the love of God in both word and deed. They also meet medical, food, clothing, and shelter needs for outsiders of the church community. Their objective is to build relationships through which they can introduce people to the Gospel and the believing community. Board members do this on both an individual and collective scale. Personally, impact occurs as congregation members connect with the church to meet the specific needs of those they know outside of the congregation. Collectively, the congregation hosts a monthly fresh food distribution, serving up to 150 local families. Their impact has evolved from passing out evangelism tracts along with the food to going car-to-car to engage those they are serving, making conversation, and collecting prayer requests. This ministry has continued for about eight years, extending invitations while also establishing and growing relationships.

Evergreen is intentionally meeting people within their comfort zones. The congregation is developing natural opportunities for invitation and inclusion of others in the fellowship of believers where they can hear the word of God, find belonging in the community, and begin the process of discipleship. One of the invitations the congregation extends is to a monthly pasta dinner hosted by the church. The dinners were strategically scheduled for Wednesday evenings so that fliers and invitations could be handed out to the community during the Tuesday food distribution. Many of those served at the monthly distribution are now coming to the pasta dinner. The dinner gets people to

connect with the congregation and church facility in a nonintimidating way. Bible study follows the pasta dinner, and an invitation is extended for anyone to join. Very few have taken up that invitation, although a good number have come to Sunday morning service.

Beyond local mission, Evergreen is growing in its world mission impact.

Supported missionaries must be personally connected to someone in the congregation and involved in relational evangelism through which the Gospel can ultimately be shared.

Sponsorship provides a sense of supporting congregation members as well as increasing commitment and support of those missionaries who are part of their families. In this way, Evergreen balances the overall local feel of the congregation, while making an impact worldwide.

The Written and Spoken Word

Evergreen Covenant Church still sees its primary purpose as being a place where people come to hear the word of God and join in the fellowship of believers. The central ministry of Evergreen, now as it was in the past, is Bible teaching through Sunday school, Bible studies, small groups, and sermons. As mission and ministry increase, the members are more conscious of their shared belief, especially as it is proclaimed within the Sunday morning worship gathering.

When Evergreen determined to call its first full-time pastor, the pastoral search committee focused on finding someone who would engagingly preach the word of God. Preaching was important because Sunday morning worship attendance was increasing, and this was the principal function and ministry of the church at the time. The plan

seemed to work. Many were encouraged by the growing number of people coming to worship services, drawn by what they described as dynamic Bible teaching.

Multiple times I was encouraged to, “Just keeping preaching the word like you do. That’s what you’re here for and why people come.” Though fellowship gatherings were bringing people together more regularly, Sunday morning continued to be the main event. Bible study and small groups were functioning, but with minimal participation compared to the growing number of members and attendees. As a pastor, while glad for the congregation’s excitement about the Sunday morning Bible lessons, I sensed something of the depths of spirituality and discipleship were missing.

The Missing Link: Listening Prayer

Though attendance and outward vibrancy grew within the congregation, something essential was lacking. During this time, the Evangelical Covenant Church introduced its ministers to spiritual direction. Within spiritual direction, there is an emphasis on hearing God often through various listening prayer practices. The Covenant not only offered spiritual direction sessions for its ministers but also began to send out retreat leaders to congregations to host prayer retreats. Within these contexts, I began to learn about these keys for spiritual growth and transformation. I discovered them to be a valuable discipleship tools for walking with someone in a deepening relationship with God.

Having been introduced to spiritual direction and listening prayer practices, and seeing their benefit for spiritual transformation, I determined to bring these practices to the local congregation. I began by training as a spiritual director and spending more time

in the practices myself. Once I was trained, I launched a couple of retreats, began offering spiritual direction, and led some midweek sessions introducing spiritual practices. While Sunday service has gained in popularity, and fellowship events are going strong, there has been minimal interest and engagement by congregation members in either spiritual direction or practices. However, among the small groups who have experienced them, commitment is growing.

In the past, the congregation has been invited to participate in prayer retreats and special gatherings designed to introduce new prayer practices; however, a formal explanation and established initiative were never presented. With the listening prayer seminars, both the congregational need, and the intentional initiative to meet that need, will be laid out before the congregation with the support of elected leadership. The objective will be to introduce the congregation to spirituality and development through listening prayer practices and offer a path to both initiate and equip members.

Overview of the Target Group

This project and paper attempt to create a program for introducing congregation members to listening prayer practices that develop intimacy with God and a deepening identification of his presence and voice in their daily lives. An overview of the initiative was presented before the congregation at a scheduled business meeting where most active members were present. An open call went out before the congregation, both within this meeting and within the Sunday morning service, for participants and volunteers. Most of those who responded, either to the open invite or personal request, were those who have had some contact with the spiritual discipline exercises and retreats offered in the past.

All of those participating would consider themselves new to practices such as spiritual direction, silence, solitude, Examen Prayer, Lectio Divina, and imaginative prayer. A few of the eight participants have no experience with any of these practices.

Of the eight participants involved in the pilot program, two are male, and six are female. All are Caucasian, reflecting the demographics of the congregation, which is 99 percent Caucasian. All are middle- to upper-class in socioeconomic status. Ages range from thirty-five to eighty years old. (See Table 2.)

All participants have a Protestant background and grew up in church. Denominational backgrounds differ, with traditions stemming from United Methodist, Congregational, Christian Reformed, nondenominational, Lutheran, and Evangelical Covenant. The prayer and devotional practices of the group tend predominantly toward Bible reading and intercessory or petitionary prayer.⁹

Table 2. Pilot project members

Gender	Age	Occupation	Years at Evergreen
Female 1	43	Licensed counselor	11
Female 2	35	Registered nurse	Less than 1 year
Female 3	53	Administrator	3
Female 4	80	Retired nurse/missionary	16
Female 5	60	Administrator	12
Female 6	62	Retired teacher	20
Male 1	77	Retired mechanical engineer	10
Male 2	54	Operations manager	3

⁹ This information is based on a survey taken by participants.

Obstacles and Limitations

One of the significant obstacles and limitations of the “Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” program is its lack of availability to the weekenders, for whom this would be a vigorous time commitment. The program entails a three-day retreat, followed by seven weekly seminars and two intermittent sessions of spiritual direction. For weekend and seasonal residents, part-time residency status is a hindrance to committing to attend all seven weekly seminars. Fluctuating schedules and obligations to houseguests make consistent attendance difficult. This course can be adjusted in the future to offer single retreats and seminars, though it is hypothesized that the program will have its greatest impact when all three aspects are undertaken in conjunction with one another.

The second potential obstacle is based on the established personality of the congregation. Historically the congregation comes together for biblical teaching, song, and fellowship. Based on the last eleven years at Evergreen Covenant Church, the congregation is comfortable with doctrine and belief as well as joining together for fellowship and projects. Engagements specifically addressing spirituality and practice are not well attended. This lack of attendance may be due to the personal nature of such topics.

The goal of listening prayer is not to receive answers, but to foster a deepening sense of intimacy with God that leads to spiritual transformation. By necessity, the measurement of outcomes will be somewhat subjective, stemming from the participants’

assessment and through feedback offered to the director during spiritual direction and group discussion sessions. The primary measure will be the question “have you grown in intimacy with God and a deepening sense of discerning his presence and activity within your life?”

The effectiveness of listening prayer will be measured by the participants’ desire and willingness to continue actively using listening prayer practices as well as their commitment to spiritual direction. Pursuit of these activities is not required or assumed as a part of the program. Instead, the disciplines are presented and engaged in so far as they inspire the participant toward further action and practice. Ideally, the listening prayer seminars will become an annual opportunity offered to the congregation, nurturing growth in intimacy with God through listening prayer practices.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

For many evangelicals, an introduction to listening prayer will require a dynamic shift in their understanding of what constitutes prayer. In listening prayer, the primary goal is to become present to God and aware of God being present. Since evangelicalism tends to be word- and knowledge-based, it is essential that an introduction to listening practices begin with establishing a biblical basis and theory for listening prayer. Therefore, in this chapter, key writings will be presented that will lay a foundation for the Sabbath retreat and the following weekly seminars.

The Sabbath retreat will explore the themes of Sabbath, solitude, and silence. The retreat will emphasize creating an environment that is conducive to practicing listening prayer and becoming aware of the presence of God. The weekly seminars will introduce participants to various listening prayer practices. The following references will be used to examine the idea of creating a sacred listening space. The reading will also be used to explore the goals and outcomes of listening prayer: growth in intimacy with God and spiritual discernment for personal and spiritual transformation toward Christlikeness.

The literature review will give an overview of the five main books that will be used to inform the theology and practice of listening prayer. For each resource listed,

there will be a thesis, a summary of the main argument of the book, an overview of its contribution to the project, and a presentation of its main limitations in light of the ministry challenge. Other resources will be used as well, but they will not be detailed in this overview.

***Hearing God by Dallas Willard*¹**

In his book *Hearing God*, Willard proposes that humanity has been restored to intimate relationship with the life of the Trinity through the reconciling work of Christ. Like Christ, individuals can enter into communication with God, being heard by God and hearing his voice. What Jesus has done is nothing less than restore a conversational relationship with God—even as it was in the beginning, when Adam and Eve conversed with God in the garden.² Though sin distorted communication, the righteousness and work of Christ invites people to reenter the *divine dance*. It is in this relationship with God that spiritual formation into Christlikeness takes place.³

In the first century, the Sadducees argued that God no longer spoke to people directly. They believed God finished speaking after he communicated his divine will to Moses, and it was captured in the Torah; however, later Scripture reveals God as communicating directly with those who walk in relationship with him. He spoke both to and through the Prophets, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom through Jesus, and

¹ Willard, *Hearing God*.

² *Ibid.*, 193.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

spoke in a variety of ways to the disciples and other Christian believers throughout the New Testament.

Much like the Sadducees, some today believe God stopped communicating personally after the Old and New Testament canons were completed.⁴ This is not what the Bible teaches. Willard argues that Scripture reveals a pattern that is to be replicated in the lives of believers who walk in relationship with God. In fact, each believer's relationship with God can and should be a conversational relationship, where he not only speaks to God but has an impression of his presence and thoughts toward him as well.

Willard emphasizes that the individual's primary goal in hearing God's voice is not just to obtain direction for personal decisions, but, above all, to seek to grow "in a loving relationship with him."⁵ Developing a listening posture in relation to God cultivates a deep and reciprocal recognition of God's abiding presence.⁶ With a deepened awareness of God's attentiveness of humanity, people grow in both intimacy and understanding of God.⁷ Willard concludes, "In this life with God, his presence banishes our aloneness and makes real the meaning and full purpose of human existence."⁸

Since Willard comes from a solid evangelical tradition, his teaching in *Hearing God* will provide a strong foundation within seminars introducing "Listening Prayer for

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

Talkative Evangelicals.” Willard establishes a biblical basis for hearing and experiencing God outside of the pages of Scripture and within daily life. This concept will be a crucial shift for some evangelicals who have intentionally or unwittingly embraced the idea that God can only be heard through Scripture and not personally.

Through Scripture, Willard proves that God speaks to those with whom he is in relationship in a variety of ways.⁹ Willard argues that this should not be the experience of a select few individuals but a pattern for all of those who are living life with God. In contrast, he goes on to say that encounters with signs, visions, wonders, and other such experiences are typically reserved for those who do not hear God through the most mature means. Willard illuminates how Jesus did not rely on such mediums but, instead, had a conversational relationship with God.¹⁰ Scriptural stories, such as when Samuel heard God calling to him (1 Sm 3) or Elijah heard God’s voice in the stillness (1 Kg 19:12), teach that God speaks—not in an overpowering way, but—in a perceivable way to those who learn to listen. Moreover, Jesus affirms that his sheep will indeed hear his voice (Jn 10:27).

Willard’s *Hearing God* is a limited resource for specific listening prayer practices because it does not lay out specific disciplines for listening prayer. While the book invites and even guides readers in some listening prayer practices at the end of each chapter, this is not its emphasis. This resource’s focal role in the program is to establish a biblical basis as well as offer a rubric for discerning God’s voice from one’s own. Willard affirms

⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰ Ibid., 145.

the prayer practices introduced to evangelicals through the seminars, but those practice will be developed through other sources.

***Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Brueggemann¹¹**

Sabbath is an act of resistance against the endless demands of a society driven by production and consumption. This act of resistance is revealed against the backdrop of God releasing Israel from Egyptian bondage, where Pharaoh demanded their enslavement to continuous production.¹² Pharaoh's relentless pursuit of manufacturing brought nothing but anxiety upon the Israelites as they became burdened under the harsh rule of their taskmaster.¹³ In the fourth commandment, God offers Israel the gift of entering his restfulness. Sabbath offers an alternative in which his people are no longer defined by materialism but by their relationship with God.¹⁴

While world leaders come and go, one thing remains consistent: the relentless demands of production and consumption continue to rule societies around the globe. An individual's worth is measured by the monetary value of what she produces and her capacity to consume. This manner of assessment is so pervasive that a human being can be referred to as being "worth" their net value. A Google Search inquiry, "What is President Trump's worth," resulted in a large banner declaring "Donald Trump/Net

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

¹² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

worth: 3.1 Billion USD 2017.” In Pharaoh’s world, people are worth the sum of their assets and their potential to produce and procure more.

Brueggemann describes Sabbath as a way to maintain “a distinct faith identity in the midst of a culture that is inhospitable to all distinct identities in its impatient reduction of all human life to the requirements of the market.”¹⁵ YHWH presents an alternative form of government, under his own rule, which offers Sabbath restfulness as opposed to Pharaoh’s anxious restlessness. Brueggemann continues, “In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.”¹⁶

Sabbath serves as the foundation of all listening prayer practices. It is the act—or inaction—by which one sets aside time to be attentive to God’s presence. Sabbath is an act of resistance against the manufactured demands that keep believers from being attentive to God. It is the act of pushing aside all distractions in order to both acknowledge and experience one’s existence within and sustained by God alone. It is the call to remember, as the author of Acts declares, “For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28).¹⁷ It is the womb in which one discovers her being and identity in God rather than the

¹⁵ Ibid., x.

¹⁶ Ibid., xiii – xiv.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references will be from the New International Version.

system.¹⁸ Sabbath is the alternative to the yoke of slavery or the Law, which Jesus described when he beckoned his followers to “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”¹⁹

Sabbath does not have to hold to a particular day, a set amount of time, or a particular place as in the former legal system. In listening prayer, Sabbath is the act of attending to God throughout one’s hours, days, weeks, months, and years. It is the act of setting aside one’s doing and focusing on *being* in existence within God. Sabbath can happen within specific moments of a day or over the course of multiple days. The key is found in the intentional act of finding time to be attentive to God’s presence. In *Sabbath as Resistance*, Brueggemann offers a strong argument and invitation to find one’s identity in God rather than the market-driven system of the world. He shows how God invites people to enter into his rest, to stop striving, and to embrace God’s alternative governance, which in turn embraces Sabbath. As people allow this practice to permeate their days, they allow God’s presence and voice to enter into their lives.

Brueggemann’s book is limited as a resource for the topic of listening prayer as it does not lay out a specific invitation to enter Sabbath prayerfully. *Sabbath as Resistance* is a call to make time for God, but it does not give direction on how to use that time to deepen relationship with God; however, it does set the necessary context in which listening prayer can develop. Without setting aside time in which to be attentive to God,

¹⁸ I am using the term *womb* to refer to a place of formation. Sabbath is a time set aside to encounter God and undergo transformation. It stands in contrast to ordinary time and cultural influence and shaping. In this way, Sabbath might be described as a womb, whether within or outside of time is difficult to determine.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

there is no opportunity for hearing God. Therefore, the listening prayer seminars will begin with the foundation of Sabbath as a form of resistance and as an invitation to set aside regular time for God. This sacred time will specifically be used to cultivate listening prayer practices that will assist in both spiritual discernment and deepening intimacy with the divine, setting the stage for spiritual transformation.

***The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen²⁰**

In *The Way of the Heart*, Nouwen asks, “What is required of a man or a woman who is called to enter fully into the turmoil and agony of the times and speak a word of hope?”²¹ Using the early desert dwellers’ example and wisdom sayings, Nouwen presents the practices of solitude, silence, and prayer as a necessity for personal and spiritual transformation. Nouwen claims that, once transformed, one is able to reenter a chaotic world in a transformative way.

While most would not abandon the world to dwell in the wilderness, all people can create a space of solitude, silence, and prayer within their lives to cultivate intimacy with God. Nouwen writes, “My first task is to explore what it means for us to flee from the world. This raises the question of solitude. My second task is to define *silence* as an essential element of a spirituality of ministry. Finally, I want to challenge you with the

²⁰ Henri J.M. Nouwen. *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1981).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

vocation to pray always.”²² Nouwen cites *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* as the source of these practices.

Arsenius prayed again: “Lord, lead me in the way of salvation” and again he heard a voice saying, “Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness.” The words flee, be silent, and pray summarize the spirituality of the desert. They indicated the three ways of preventing the world from shaping us in its image and thus the three ways to life in the Spirit.²³

Nouwen devotes a chapter to each of these three disciplines: Solitude, Silence, and Prayer. He describes solitude as the “furnace of transformation,” where one’s false, compulsive self is transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ:²⁴ “Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self.”²⁵

Jesus entered this furnace when he was led out into the wilderness. After beginning his ministry, he reentered solitude regularly, slipping away to solitary places to spend time with the Father in prayer. Building upon a famous saying of Abba Moses, Nouwen expounds, “The task is to persevere in my solitude, to stay in my cell until all my seductive visitors get tired of pounding on my door and leave me alone.”²⁶ The primary task of solitude is to meet with the Lord and with him alone. Solitude helps the believer shed the distractions that keep him from knowing himself and growing in

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid., 4-5.

²⁴ Ibid., 10, 15.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

intimacy with God. It is within this sacred space, this furnace, that transformation most readily takes place.

Nouwen writes, “Silence completes and intensifies solitude.”²⁷ The spiritual practice of silence is not emptiness and absence, but fullness and presence.²⁸ This awareness is essential because people often think words are more significant than silence.²⁹ However, it is in silence that one is better able to hear God, others, and oneself. Since hearing is so important to these three relationships, Nouwen says the challenge of the parish is “not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they can no longer hear the voice of God who speaks in silence.”³⁰

Within solitude and silence is the intention to *pray always*. Nouwen says, “This is the real purpose of the desert life.”³¹ He goes on, “The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced.”³² Nouwen distinguishes between the prayer of the mind and the prayer of the heart. The prayer of the mind concentrates on prayer as primarily an intellectual process, involving speaking to God or thinking about God. The goal of this

²⁷ Ibid., 36.

²⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁹ Ibid., 51.

³⁰ Ibid., 56.

³¹ Ibid., 64.

³² Ibid.

type of prayer is typically to understand, and understanding is often motivated by a desire to control.³³

In contrast, the prayer of the heart has to do with seeking the presence of God and being present to God. The prayer of the heart deeply links with contemplative prayer. Nouwen writes, “The prayer of the heart is a prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. By its very nature, such prayer transforms our whole being into Christ precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as to the truth of God.”³⁴

The Way of the Heart links the wisdom and discipline of the early desert dwellers with the purpose and practice of solitude, silence, and contemplative prayer that is essential for the transformative growth of all Christians. Many evangelicals are unfamiliar with desert wisdom or the traditions of monasticism. Nouwen helps reveal these concepts and connects them to a personal need for believers to grow in intimacy with God, undergo transformation, and reengage the world. Nouwen’s text will be essential to developing the Sabbath retreat, which introduces desert monasticism, explains the practices of solitude and silence, and sets the stage for the contemplative prayer disciplines described as *The Way of the Heart*.

The Way of the Heart is limited in relation to the listening prayer seminars because, while it describes contemplative prayer, it does not give specific examples. Most of the listening prayer practices presented in the seminars will come from Ignatian

³³ Ibid., 69-70.

³⁴ Ibid., 76.

Spirituality, as described in James Martin's *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*. During the Sabbath retreat, insights gained from *The Way of the Heart* will be used to set a precedent for the practice of solitude and silence being essential to creating the sacred space in which one meets with God.

***The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* by James Martin³⁵**

In *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, James Martin lays out a comprehensive, layman's guide to Jesuit spirituality. It is a contemporary introduction to Ignatius's fifteenth-century practices and avenues for spiritual awareness. God is ever present and always speaking, but he never demands one's attention. Instead, his followers are invited to pay attention to God's activity in their daily lives and to live their lives in such a way as both honors and attunes to his movements.

St. Ignatius learned his spirituality through his personal experience of God in everyday life. Ignatius's learning was acquired by paying attention to his desires, by noticing which desires led to God and which led to vanity, and by learning from the experiences of his life while reflecting in daily prayer. Ignatius's practices have been implemented in the daily lives of the Jesuits, who are members of the Society of Jesus, the religious order that Ignatius founded. Martin, who is a Jesuit, makes these practices accessible to the average layperson, providing descriptions and practical guidance in his book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*.

³⁵ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

Martin explains everything from the practice of simplicity to the various prayer practices that are a regular part of the Jesuit tradition. Each of the prayer practices has a particular purpose—understanding God’s character, becoming more self-aware, or recognizing and the work God is doing in one’s life—that is meant to help the individual draw nearer to God. The Examen Prayer teaches the believer to look at the flow and details of her daily life and discover where they both encountered and missed God’s invitation. In another prayer practice, Martin invites people to enter into the scenes of the Gospels themselves, encountering Jesus through imagination and paying attention to both the call and resistance experienced in those scenes. In yet another practice, Martin encourages cultivating a conversational relationship with God, speaking openly to God as one speaks with a friend and listening to what God’s response might be. While most individuals will not hear an audible voice, they can imagine God’s response based on what is known of God through Scripture and personal experience.

Martin’s book will serve as a basis for a number of the listening prayer practices for this project. Prayer practices will include solitude and silence, the Examen Prayer, colloquy, imaginative prayer, Lectio Divina, and contemplative prayer. Practices will be introduced through a series of seminars. Seminars will give an overview of the practice, offer an opportunity to engage the discipline, make space for group reflection, and then be practiced between sessions. All of the listening prayer practices will serve as the basis for reflection in the spiritual direction sessions, which the participant will undergo at two different times throughout the experience.

Considering that these seminars will be targeting evangelicals, one of the perceived limitations of Martin’s listening practices might be that they are not all

unambiguously found within or explicitly supported by Scripture. As Ignatius revealed in his discernment practices and the daily examen, he leaned heavily upon personal experience in hearing the voice of God. Lectio Divina, commonly referred to as lectio, pays less attention to the contextual meaning of the text and more attention to personal revelation. Imaginative prayer invites the reader to enter into the scenes of the Gospels but encourages one to go beyond what is written and allow the imagination to both project and then analyze what the mind augments. For evangelicals who focus on the written word of God as unalterable revelation, these improvisations will stretch their usual boundaries.

***Spiritual Disciplines Handbook by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun*³⁶**

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and has over forty years of ministry experience. She currently serves at Highrock Church in Arlington, Massachusetts, where she is a spiritual director and retreat leader.

Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* began as a way to introduce church staff to disciplines meant to promote inward renewal with God. In the course of teaching and practicing the disciplines within the life of the church, practices were added and eventually developed into a handbook, which contained numerous prayer disciplines. Each was introduced with a description of the practice, its purpose, and a guide.

Toward the opening of the book, Calhoun lists various disciplines alongside potential personal desires. For instance, if one desires to grow in both noticing God's

³⁶ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

activity and one's God-given desires throughout an average day, the Examen Prayer is suggested. If a person wants "to develop a continual openness and awareness of Christ's presence living in me," then the "Practice of the Presence" is recommended.³⁷ If one finds they are consistently distracted and they desire to grow in attentiveness and being present to the Lord, the practice of silence is advised.

Each of the many disciplines has its own section within the book. Each section is titled with the name of the prayer practice and opens with an explanation of the practice, including the history of the discipline. For instance, Calhoun presents the discipline of "Devotional Reading," which is also known as *Lectio Divina* or *lectio*. She notes that this practice was especially popular for the first fifteen hundred years of the church. For much of Christian history, copies of the Bible were not readily available to most lay people, who were, for the most part, illiterate and dependent upon others to read to them. During this time, listening to the word of God read aloud and taking a memorable word or phrase with one into the week was a helpful devotional practice. Calhoun describes devotional reading as different from studying the Bible, as being more intimate and allowing one to hear God's word in a more personal way "for this particular moment in time."³⁸

Next, Calhoun describes *lectio* with its parts and purposes. In nearly all of the practices, she includes an overview sheet and a template, which is comprised of five sections: Desire, Definition, Scripture, This Practice Includes, and God-Given Fruit. "Desire" names the desire each practice speaks to and fulfills. "Definition" briefly

³⁷ Ibid., 12.

³⁸ Ibid., 168.

defines the practice along with its purpose. “Scripture” provides the scriptural precedent and examples for this particular discipline. “This Practice Includes” lays out the various parts of the practice itself. “God-Given Fruit” names the transformative effect of the discipline.

Calhoun’s handbook will serve as a helpful template for the listening prayer seminars. Many of the seminars’ practices are described in her book, which will be used as a content guide in developing the participant worksheets. Each week a new listening prayer practice will be presented according to the format found in the *Spiritual Disciplines* book. An overview of the history of the practice, along with its purpose, will be given. This overview will help participants in understanding the usefulness of practices with which they may otherwise be unfamiliar. Biblical precedent will be established, and specific scriptures will be presented to support the precedent. In addition to the presentation, practice, and reflection, a handout of each practice will be available. The handout will follow closely to the format presented in the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, providing participants with a quick reference guide to each week’s spiritual practice.

There are strengths and weaknesses in the brevity of the overview for each of the disciplines Calhoun chose to include in her handbook. The strength is found in the easy accessibility to each prayer practice, which includes worksheets that are typically one page long. The weakness is that each of these disciplines could be expounded upon at length for greater understanding and conviction. Since the listening prayer seminars are meant to be more experiential than theological, these limitations will by necessity be found in the seminars.

CHAPTER 3

A THEOLOGY FOR LISTENING PRAYER

The Bible is the story of God’s relationship with humanity: past, present, and future. Beyond being a record of history, Scripture is about spirituality. Within the pages and stories of these books that make up the Bible, are examples of what it looks like to both encounter God and miss God. For this paper, the objective will be to seek ways to encounter God—hearing his voice, discerning his guidance, sensing his presence—and grow in intimacy with the Creator.

The theological review will look at examples within Scripture where human beings encounter and communicate with God. The concept of the Shema, which is the call to hear God, is central to Jewish tradition, the Bible, and Christianity. Hearing God is meant to be an everyday part of human experience. The practices that will be introduced in the listening prayer seminars will be connected explicitly to cultivating a listening ear to better hear God. The Sabbath, solitude, and silence are three practices among several spiritual disciplines that will be used within the retreat context to prepare the environment for listening to God.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is firmly embedded in the Reformation and evangelical traditions. As such, an emphasis has historically been placed on the written

and spoken word. In recent years the Covenant began reclaiming listening prayer practices. These include the practice of spiritual direction and other listening prayer disciplines such as the colloquy, Lectio Divina, the Examen Prayer, imaginative prayer, discernment, contemplative prayer, and even listening to one's dreams.

While these listening practices have been known under various names, their presence can be seen throughout biblical history, and they have been developed in many traditions, including those of the ancient desert dwellers and later Ignatian Spirituality. Followers of the evangelical tradition have tended to distance themselves from hearing God in these more personal ways. When it comes to discerning God's will for both the world and one's personal life, evangelicals have focused on the written and spoken word. However, many within evangelicalism are reclaiming some of these ancient disciplines and practices. They see value in cultivating a listening relationship with God—one that never contradicts but is always complementary to the teachings and revelation of the Bible.

Listening to God in Scripture

While the Bible contains true history, it is not primarily a historical account. The Bible is a book about spirituality, describing the relationship between God and humanity. Disciples do not come to the Bible merely to read it but also to allow it to read them. Willard encourages entering the biblical narrative, saying, "First, however, it is worth reminding ourselves to read the biblical accounts as if what is described is happening to

us.”¹ In this light, when believers read about Adam and Eve hiding from God, they consider the ways they also hide from God. They ask the question, “Why do I want to hide from God?” They also hear God’s voice calling them to come back out into the open and meet with him. They think of the ways God clothes them and covers their insecurities. They find themselves in the story. They find God; they find themselves.

It is in and through Scripture that individuals discover a connection with God. Humanity is uniquely described as being created in the *image of God*. David Benner writes, “The teaching that humans have their origins in God’s being goes right back to the creation story where we encounter the powerful metaphorical imagery of God’s breath vitalizing the dust of the earth and leaving us unalterably connected to our origin. Nothing exists that does not have its origins in God.”² This connection is better described as relationship.

Throughout Scripture, human beings have a conversational relationship with God. They hear God and are heard by God. Their objective is to help others hear God as well. Those in the Bible who hear God are not meant to be anomalies. They instead reveal the inherent human potential for an intimate relationship with the Creator. God may speak in similar or different ways, but Scripture reveals that God desires his people to hear his voice. The Church ought to be a place where people come and learn to hear the voice of God for themselves. That voice begins in Scripture and never contradicts it, but it does become ever more personal.

¹ Willard, *Hearing God*, 119.

² David Benner, *Presence and Encounter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 63.

Witness from Hebrew Scripture

Within Scripture itself, the revelation of God begins with one of the most popular and powerful calls, *שמעו ישראל* “Hear O’ Israel.” The Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4, is first and foremost a call to listen to God. It is in listening to God, rather than speaking, that God’s revelation is given and received. The Israelites heard God’s voice and came to the revelation that “God is One.” There were not many gods, as was taught by competing human voices, but One Creator God, who was calling the Hebrew people into intimate relationship with himself.

In many other places in the Bible, God’s voice must be discerned through the noise of daily human chaos. Abraham heard God’s voice beyond the clamor of the city of Ur and was called to leave behind his country and his kinfolk to follow the voice of God. Through Abraham, God would establish a people, but those people would once again get lost in the human cacophony in the land of Egypt.

While Moses tended his flock, he heard the voice of God. God commissioned Moses to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery, into the Promised Land; that is, into relationship with God. Moses was concerned about going before the people because, some five hundred years after Abraham, they did not remember the One Creator God. Therefore, Moses inquired, “Who shall I say sent me?” (Ex 3:13). The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before their descendants finally discerned the voice of God and began to know him.

While in the wilderness, the Israelites learned to make a place for God within themselves through the practice of Sabbath (Ex 16:23). For them, Sabbath was a way to carve out a niche for hearing God within the expanse of time. It is within *שַׁבָּת* (Shabbat)

that one שמע (Shema). In the same way, those who find themselves within the chaos of daily life must create space for listening.

Listening does not come naturally; it must be taught and cultivated. Samuel is an excellent example of one who went from not hearing God to being able to discern the voice of God for himself and God's people. Samuel heard God calling him but did not recognize that call as God's voice. It was Eli, an older priest, who mentored him, teaching him how to be attentive and obedient to God's prompting (1 Sm 3).

Scripture teaches the lesson of listening for God's voice, not in the noise or extraordinary events, but in the quiet spaces between. After Elijah experienced a great victory against the prophets of Baal, he found himself at a loss. Although God had clearly shown himself as living and active, Israel's leadership set themselves against both God and his prophet. Elijah fled from Jezebel when she threatened his life. While Elijah was in the desert wilderness looking for answers, he heard God's voice:

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs 19:11–13).

Once again, the theme of making space within one's life for God is depicted in the desert wilderness. Once again, it can be seen that God is not heard in the noise and the chaos, but in the stillness and quiet. The Hebrew phrase is קול דממה דקה, which could be

translated as the sound of *a small but vibrant silence*.³ The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates it as “a sound of sheer silence.”

Israel never cultivated an ear for either listening or responding to God’s voice, and so God sent his Word to dwell among humanity. The opening passages of the Gospel of John depict Jesus’s arrival into the world as the entrance of light into the midst of great darkness. The darkness represents a world alienated from God. So, the first-century prophet proclaimed, “I am a voice shouting in the wilderness. Clear the way for the LORD's coming!” (Jn 1:23, NLT). Once again, the theme is that people might *hear*.

Jesus and Christian Scripture

Jesus precedes his Messianic ministry with a sojourn in the wilderness, where he learns to discern between two voices, rejecting the false voice and embracing the voice of the Father. Jesus’s followers, too, hear the voice of God. At Jesus’s baptism, all witnessed and heard a voice from heaven declare, “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

Without listening, none can expect to hear or know God. This truth becomes an essential part of Jesus’s teaching. On multiple occasions when Jesus spoke, he ended with the invitation “For those who have ears to hear, let them hear” (Mt 11:15; 13:9, Mk 4:9, 23). Deep and prayerful listening is essential to hearing God’s voice and being in relationship with him.

³ Baumgartner L. Koehler et al, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, ND: Brill Academic, 2000), Logos: הַשְׁמָעָה .

Jesus not only taught prayerful listening but practiced it as well. After his sojourn in the wilderness, he often took time to go to solitary places and pray. Marcus Borg says that Jesus's form of prayer went beyond the verbal petitions that evangelicals are so accustomed to: "The reason we know Jesus practiced contemplative prayer is because the Gospels refer several times to his praying for a few hours at a time or going to a solitary place and praying all night long. Unless we imagine that his prayer list had become enormously long, it's impossible to imagine that he was doing verbal prayer all that time."⁴

Jesus sets a strong precedent and expectation for humanity to hear the voice of God. Willard explains:

Some of Jesus's deepest teachings are about hearing. He taught in parables so that those who did not really want to hear the truth could avoid it. He realized that not everyone has ears for the straightforward purpose of hearing but that some use their ears to sift out only what they want to hear, leaving the rest aside. One of his most repeated sayings was, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." But he also urged his hearers to make a great effort to hear, assuring them that what they received would be proportional to their desire and effort (Mk 4:23–24).⁵

Not everyone heard and responded to Jesus's voice, but there was an expectation that those who truly gave themselves to God would hear and respond. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (Jn 10:27). While Jesus invites today's follower to hear his voice as his disciples did, the relationship goes beyond that of servant and master. Trevor Hudson notes, "And we see in John 15:15 that

⁴ Marcus Borg and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Days of Awe and Wonder: How to be a Christian in the 21st Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 181.

⁵ Willard, *Hearing God*, 91.

Jesus changes the identity of the twelve disciples from servants to friends.”⁶ This friendship was not limited to the twelve disciples or Jesus’s earthly ministry. After the resurrection, Jesus reveals his expectation that his followers will continue to hear God’s voice through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, saying, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (Jn 16:12–13).

In the book of Acts, there are numerous examples of Christians who hear God’s voice convict, encourage, direct, and teach them. At Pentecost, when people began to hear God’s spirit speaking through the crowd in a way each could understand, Peter said:

Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:14–18).

God’s personal communication through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is prophesied. Willard shows how Paul taught that this communication was an expected part of the church, saying:

If we look at the advice on how the meetings of the church were supposed to proceed as given in 1 Corinthians 14, we see that they assumed that numerous people in the congregation were going to have some kind of communication from

⁶ Trevor Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God’s Friendship* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), 14.

God which they would be sharing with the others in the group: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26).⁷

According to Scripture, Christians are meant to hear God’s voice not only through Scripture but in a personal and intimate way. Richard Foster writes, “Just as Mary recognizes Jesus when he spoke her name, so we can expect to recognize the voice of God speaking personally to us in the inner sanctuary of our waiting hearts.”⁸ Christ has brought about the restoration of the image of God in humanity, and a major part of that is the capacity for being in a conversational relationship with God. Benner insightfully describes this, saying, “What makes us truly human is our capacity for presence and encounter.”⁹ Growing in ability to discern God’s voice is a central part of being in intimate relationship with him and fulfilling Jesus’s mandate, “That they may know you, the One True God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3).

N. T. Wright talks about the issue of Scripture and authority at length, stressing that authority is found in God and is now delegated to Christ.¹⁰ Jesus is the living Word, which means that the authority of the word goes beyond the written text and exists in the person of Christ. Wright states, “When John declares that ‘in the beginning was the word,’ he does not reach a climax with ‘and the word was written down’ but ‘and the

⁷ Willard, *Hearing God*, 70.

⁸ Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Helmers, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*. (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 59.

⁹ Benner, *Presence and Encounter*, 63.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 22.

word became flesh.’’¹¹ Jesus, the living Word, affirms that Scripture testifies about him (Jn 5:39). Therefore, Scripture points to Christ.

Scripture also points out that God speaks to people in many ways, including through creation itself and especially through the teachings and example of Jesus.¹² At the same time, in pointing to Scripture to establish his authority, Christ also establishes the authority of Scripture.¹³ Scripture is an overarching guide of God’s plan for redeeming humanity and a reliable narrative to which we must measure and submit our own experience.

Our personal experience is not authoritatively equivalent to Scripture, but subject to it. In listening prayer, we expect to hear from God and be taught and led by him. By the Spirit at work within us and through listening prayer practices, God informs, transforms, and directs us. These experiences must be informed by and subject to the witness of the written and living Word. We must not, as some have done with tradition, elevate what we discern in listening prayer practices to the level of Scripture or the teachings and example of Christ.

Listening prayer practices and hearing from God on a personal level, outside the context of Scripture, is shown to be a routine experience within Scripture itself. Christ himself is a model of this type of relationship between God and humanity. Benner writes, “By becoming fully human, Jesus leads us to the fulfillment of our humanity. By being

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid, 31.

¹³ Ibid, 41.

fully God, he leads us to God.”¹⁴ Jesus, as the second Adam, is restoring us to right relationship with God, which includes divine encounter and communication.

Protestant Evangelicalism and the Priesthood of All Believers

The Evangelical Covenant Church denomination, with which Evergreen Covenant Church is affiliated, describes themselves as a *Reformation* church.¹⁵ A significant part of this affirmation entails embracing the Protestant doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” Martin Luther propagated this concept in his commentary on the epistle of St. Peter.¹⁶ Luther states, “And just as you are not called a Christian because you have much gold or wealth, but because you are built upon this stone and believe on Christ, so you are not called a priest because you wear a tonsure or long robe, but for this reason, that you come into God's presence.”¹⁷

Luther accepted the idea that some are called by the congregation to be church officers, but these were not considered priests on the basis of their elected office. Their priesthood was based on their identification with Christ, as would be the same for all believers; therefore, all who identify with Christ in faith are technically priests before God. All believers are priests because Christ’s work has gained them access to God’s presence, with no need for any mediator but Christ himself.

¹⁴ David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 88.

¹⁵ Evangelical Covenant Church, “Covenant Affirmations” accessed October 18, 2018, https://covchurch.org/resources/wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2015/03/covenant_affirmations_booklet.pdf.

¹⁶ Martin Luther and E. H Gillett, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude: Preached and Explained* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1859), Kindle: Chapter 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

When it comes to listening prayer, the affirmation of the priesthood of all believers is relevant in that all believers have immediate and personal access to the presence of God. For the biblical precedent of hearing God in a personal manner, we turn to Christ and his priestly role as revealed in the Gospel of John. In Jesus's high priestly prayer, found in John 17, he establishes the expectation that his followers would know the Father in an intimate way, not merely through text, but even as Christ knows him. Jesus prays, "For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.³ Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:2–3).

In this prayer, Jesus defines eternal life not as living forever, which it may entail, but as knowing God and Jesus Christ. This recalls such relationships as Abraham and Moses had with God, speaking to him as one does his friend (Exodus 33:11). God spoke to Moses, Abraham, and the prophets so they might *hear* him and know his heart and will. Jesus now invites us into this type of relationship, modeling it for us through both his life and in this very account found in John 17, where He speaks to God as one speaks to a friend or even a Father. In this way, Jesus invites us into the presence of God, a role once reserved for the High Priest. Now Christ has revealed the Father to us, saying "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." He has also made known the will of God, saying, "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world" (Jn 17:6).

Jesus can confidently assert "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." Jesus knew what the Father desired of him because, as the

Gospels consistently show, Jesus seeks the Father in times of prayer, often going off to a solitary place.¹⁸

In Capernaum, before selecting his disciples, Jesus goes out early in the morning to pray.¹⁹ Though all the crowds are looking for him, he discerns that the Father is sending him on to other towns.²⁰ Jesus is able to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of the people. Toward the end of his ministry, he seeks God's will in the garden of Gethsemane. Though Jesus desires to be free of the burden of death by crucifixion, he is able to recognize the difference between his own will and the Father's will.

In John 17, Jesus prays that we might be woven in an intimate relationship—individually and as a community, or priesthood, of believers—with him and the Father, who are one. The invitation is to enter into relationship not just with a text but with the reality of God. We are not invited to enter into relationship with God through the priesthood of a human moderator. Our access is secured for us by the High Priest, Jesus himself, that we might come boldly before God's throne, which is to say, before his presence.

Jesus declares that we will be able to discern God's will for ourselves through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Just before this high priestly prayer, Jesus assured the

¹⁸ Mt 14:13; Mk 3:13; Lk 5:16

¹⁹ Lk 6:12

²⁰ Mk 1:37

disciples that the Spirit would lead them into all truth.²¹ Jesus described the Spirit's role saying, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). In this sense, each believer receives the spirit of Christ and enters a communal relationship with God. Our mediator is Christ, and, in Christ, we are found in God. Though we can learn from others, we do not need another human mediator. We can sit at the feet of God through Christ.

In listening prayer, one seeks to move beyond knowing *about* God to knowing God, from belief to experience. This insight is key for evangelicals who embrace the concept of having a personal relationship with God. Personal relationship is not defined by what people know about God; it is about an intimate relationship with God.

The priesthood of all believers is a concept Evergreen has embraced in practice from the beginning of their development as a congregation. Evergreen is committed to being independent and community led, placing a strong emphasis on lay-led ministry. As Luther described, the pastor is seen as one appointed by the congregation for the special task of preaching the word of God and administering the sacraments, but not as uniquely set apart as a priest.

Rather than being directed by the denomination, the congregation holds that they can hear God for themselves and do not need a mediator to reveal God's will for their assembly. Congregants also believe that they can hear God individually through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Based on the belief that individuals stand as priests before

²¹ Jn 16:13

God and enter into the divine presence, listening prayer practices intentionally assist the individual in this holy discernment and relationship. These practices are not at odds with the denomination, which also affirms the priesthood of all believers, insisting that laity receive status as well as responsibility within the church, being responsible together for the life of the congregation.²²

Individual believers have the incredible privilege of entering into a personal relationship with God and entering into his presence, and as priests, they extend that invitation to others as well. Part of the outreach of the believer is to make disciples. Making disciples chiefly entails ministering to others so that they might enter into a personal relationship and the divine presence for themselves. Listening prayer practices can be a vital part of the discipleship process, but it is necessary for the believer to have this experience for themselves before they can communicate it to others. As Rohr discerned, only “transformed people transform people.”²³

The Evangelical Covenant Church

One of the core slogans of the Evangelical Covenant Church is “Where is it written?”²⁴ This foundational question points to the Covenant’s first Affirmation “We

²² James Hawkinson, ed., *Glad Hearts: The Joys of Believing and Challenges of Belonging* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 39.

²³ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation: Daily Meditations for Men* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 375.

²⁴ James Bruckner, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom and Paul Koptak, eds., *Living Faith: Reflections on Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2010), 23.

affirm the centrality of the word of God.”²⁵ While there is great theological diversity within the Covenant, all theological positions are held to the standard of biblical precedent. There is room for both Calvinist and Arminian theology so long as adherents base their conclusions on biblical evidence.

The priesthood of all believers is affirmed by the Covenant, as is the evangelical assertion that each person must have a personal relationship with God through Christ. Community with other believers is also vital to one’s personal life with God. A second popular Covenant saying asks, “How goes your walk with God?”²⁶ This Covenant is a central theme of both spiritual direction and reflective listening prayer practices.

These affirmations, backed by scriptural witness, are the reason the Covenant has developed a school for training in spiritual direction. In addition, the Covenant has implemented a plan for introducing direction and listening prayer practices into its affiliated congregations. The C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction, launched in 2005, is a part of North Park Theological Seminary and offers training and graduate-level certificates in spiritual direction.²⁷

The Covenant launched an initiative to introduce its pastors, myself included, to spiritual direction through their seminary training programs. They also began encouraging laypersons to experience spiritual direction at Covenant-sponsored events,

²⁵ Donald C. Frisk and Evangelical Covenant Church of America, Committee on Covenant Doctrine, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1981). There are six Covenant Affirmations, of which this is the first in order of priority and predominance.

²⁶ Bruckner, *Living Faith*, 97.

²⁷ Stan Friedman, “North Park Theological Seminary Celebrates the C. John Weborg Center,” *The Covenant Quarterly* (February/May 2012): 3.

including conferences and retreats. The latest initiative expansion offers spiritual direction to interested Covenant members, free of charge, by connecting them with Covenant spiritual directors, either in their area or through video conference technology.²⁸ Each conference within the Covenant has its own spiritual director's cohort, which operates under the umbrella of the Spiritual Direction Association within the Covenant. In addition to the introduction and development of spiritual direction ministry within the Covenant, the department of spiritual formation also provides and financially supports sending directors and retreat guides to Covenant congregations to lead contemplative retreats and introduce listening prayer practices.

The "Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals" program is an outgrowth of the ministry of the Covenant in this related area. As a pastor of a local Covenant congregation, I have the opportunity to offer spiritual direction, retreats, and now an extensive program by which to introduce laypersons to listening prayer concepts and practices. All of this is part of the biblical imperative that emerges from Jesus's prayer to the Father, "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (Jn 17:3). Listening prayer, though being introduced to many within the Covenant for the first time, is not something new; it is rooted in historical Christian practice.

²⁸ I currently offer spiritual direction to local pastors and Covenant employees once a month at one of the Covenant Bible camps nearby. In addition to this I offer spiritual direction to parishioners within my congregation.

Ancient Desert Monasticism and the Practice of Solitude and Silence

Scripture provides a strong basis for creating space to be with God and cultivating a listening ear to discern his voice. So, it should be of little surprise that when the church itself seemed to become preoccupied with the affairs of the world, many left the unholy city and made for the desert, birthing monasticism. In desert monasticism, the practice of Sabbath was taken more seriously, incorporated into daily practice through solitude, silence, and listening prayer.

Like Sabbath, solitude and silence are a way of making space to encounter God. Solitude and silence are essential to listening prayer even as listening prayer is essential to a genuine, mutual relationship with God. Roberta Bondi, who writes about the purpose of prayer among the monastics, says, “In taking up the practice of prayer, however, we must always bear in mind that first and last, prayer is a pursuit of the God who has promised us God’s own self, not just for the time of prayer but always.”²⁹ For the monastics, the daily practice of solitude and silence made continual space to experience a personal relationship with God.

The theme of a personal relationship with God is deeply rooted in evangelical theology, though less attested to within evangelical practice. Brueggemann describes the practice of Sabbath within the American Protestant faith as being more like a series of *Thou Shalt Nots* than a saying of *Yes* to a deeper relationship with God. He recalls his

²⁹ Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 53.

childhood family practice of Sabbath as being a day when you could not play cards, not see movies, and not go shopping.³⁰ Sabbath is much more than that.

Abraham Joshua Heschel describes Sabbath as being more than making space for God. He uses Rabbi Shimeon's analogy to describe Sabbath as a way of converting time into eternity.³¹ Heschel describes Sabbath as the way to establish union between the finite and infinite: "The Sabbath, thus, is more than an armistice, more than an interlude; it is a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above. All that is divine in the world is brought into union with God. This union is Sabbath, and the true happiness of the universe."³²

In this way, solitude and silence created a constant practice of Sabbath for desert monastics, who also saw these practices as bridging the gap between the temporal and eternal. One of their main objectives for living life in the presence of God was to reclaim the image of God within themselves. Bondi describes this work, saying, "An essential element in the work of Christ is the healing of the wounded image of God."³³ Healing the divine relationship and the internal image also results in healing human relations. Brother Dorotheus describes the relationship between loving God and loving others with a description of something like a wagon wheel. If one imagines herself and others as living

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, ix – x.

³¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 41.

³² *Ibid.*, 31-32.

³³ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 38.

on the outside of the wheel and moving toward God along the spokes of the wheel toward the center, which is where God resides, then as she moves toward God she also moves toward others.³⁴ In this way, solitude and silence do not create isolation but deepened relationships.

Listening Practices and Ignatian Spirituality

Monastic tradition can be credited with developing and carrying on the tradition of listening prayer practices in the context of solitude and silence. Over a thousand years after the start of Christian monasticism, Ignatius of Loyola founded his own order called the Society of Jesus. The following practices include a number of disciplines that were developed by Ignatius, but which are not limited to Ignatian tradition.

A biblical and theological precedent will be established in this section for the listening prayer practices used in this introductory program. More extensive descriptions of and directions for each discipline were developed in the lecture notes and prayer practice worksheets for the retreat and seminars.³⁵ While there are admonitions to pray and narratives in which people are praying, the Bible gives little explicit instruction concerning the practice of individual prayer. The most definitive teaching on how to pray came from Jesus. When the disciples expressly asked how they should pray, Jesus offered them a prayer. This prayer can be recited, although it is debated whether Jesus intended

³⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁵ The Lectio Divina worksheet is included in Appendix C and serves as an example, but the seminar lecture notes and additional worksheets were not included due to space restrictions.

for the prayer to be echoed in its exact form, aloud or otherwise, or meant for the prayer to serve as a guide.

While the Bible offers little instruction in prayer, others have made suggestions for filling that void. Believers throughout Christian history have discovered prayer practices that they have found helpful for cultivating their relationship with God. These practices have provided discernment and insight in their spiritual life, which is, of course, a significant part of their daily life and decisions. For the most part, the prayer practices listed below were cultivated within the monastic tradition. One additional practice, paying attention to one's dreams, has more contemporary origins, although it is not absent from early Christian thought.

The Colloquy

Through Christ, humanity has been restored to intimate relationship with the life of the Trinity. Like Christ, individuals can enter into communication with God, being heard by God and hearing his voice. What Jesus did is nothing less than restore a conversational relationship with God reminiscent to the way it was in the beginning, when Adam and Eve conversed with God in the garden. Though sin distorted communication, the righteousness and work of Christ invites humanity to reenter the divine dance. In this relationship with God, spiritual formation into Christlikeness takes place.

As discussed in the overview of Willard's book, *Hearing God*, the Sadducees believed that after God communicated his divine will to Moses, God no longer spoke to people directly, but later Scripture reveals that God communicates directly with those

who walk in relationship with him. Through biblical illustrations, believers learn that God speaks in a perceivable way to those who learn to listen. Jesus affirms that his sheep will indeed hear his voice (Jn 10:27).

The Colloquy, or conversational prayer, is a practice Ignatius adds to a number of the prayer practices he prescribes in *The Exercises*.³⁶ Colloquy often comes after the believer has completed either the examen or imaginative prayer. The believer is encouraged to enter into a colloquy, or conversation, with God concerning what she has discovered in her reflective practice. Conversational prayer is a dialogue rather than a monologue. In this dialogue, one *encounters* the other.³⁷ William Barry asserts, “Moreover, we cannot get to know another if we monopolize the conversation. It is clear that if we want to know another person we must spend time with him or her and ask him or her for some self-revelation.”³⁸

The colloquy involves speaking to God but leaves room for God to speak in return. This concept was not new to Ignatius but was advocated long ago by other Christians, such as Cyprian of Carthage, who said, “See that you observe either constant prayer or reading. Speak now with God; let God now speak with you.”³⁹

³⁶ The Ignatian Exercises refer to a program Ignatius developed to introduce people to contemplative prayer practices for the purpose of deepening their intimacy with God and hearing God’s voice in a practical and discerning way.

³⁷ Benner, *Presence and Encounter*, 87.

³⁸ William A. Barry, *God and You: Prayer as a Personal Relationship* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 27.

³⁹ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 2009), Kindle: Chapter 2.

Colloquy is the practice of leaving time in the conversation for God to respond, that one might hear his voice, questions, thoughts, and direction. Hudson writes, “Additionally, like in any good friendship, we need to listen to God. This part of our conversation with God usually takes much longer to develop.”⁴⁰ Participants are invited to always enter into conversation with God about what arises within their reflective prayer practices, and the colloquy will play a role in all of the following disciplines.

Lectio Divina

The Bible does not describe how it should be read. The practice of Lectio Divina evolved as a way of reading the Bible devotionally. Lectio was especially helpful when written texts and literacy were limited. A passage was read aloud, emphasizing a word or phrase, so that people might take that word or phrase with them into their day or week. There they could meditate upon it devotionally, allowing God to continue speaking through it to them. This is why lectio is deemed “Devotional Reading.”

The principle of lectio is biblical, focusing on God’s word as living and dynamic. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” While reading a passage of Scripture, a word or phrase arises above the rest of passage. This word or phrase is likely to be different for each of the listeners as it will speak, overtly or subconsciously, to some circumstance or question in their lives.

⁴⁰ Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness*, 58.

Listeners may not immediately see the significance of their texts, but as they spend time with them, the connection becomes clearer. Hebrews 4:12 declares, the word of God “Penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit,” and “it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Lectio seeks this personal encounter with God because, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16–17). In lectio, a word or phrase may speak to the listener’s situation and invite her into conscious dialogue, or prayer, with God.

Lectio Divina means *sacred reading*. It is a devotional way of reading the Bible. Scripture is not primarily a history book, giving facts about past events; it is a spiritual writing that is intended to read the reader. In other words, Scripture reveals something of the self to the reader, with the aim of aligning her more closely with the will and way of God. As the Timothy passage suggests, lectio is not about *knowing* answers or *correcting* others; rather it is a way to allow God to read and reorient believers. Christians are taught, rebuked, corrected, trained, and equipped for every good work. Lectio is personalized, speaking to each in his current circumstances and situation.

The Examen of Conscience

Socrates is noted for saying, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The Examen Prayer is the practice of prayerfully reviewing one’s day, paying attention to experiences of desolation and consolation. Ignatius taught that deep learning could occur when going over experiences and the thoughts and feelings connected to them. He understood that God is always at work in one’s life and there is much to be gained by

noticing that activity. God is present and active in the major events, but he is just as present and active in the ordinary events that make up the majority of life. People tend to overlook the ordinary and, in so doing, miss much of what God desires to reveal about himself, transformation, and one's inner workings. To getting the most out of daily experiences, believers must *notice*.

Ignatius, through his experience, developed a guide to prayer practice that helps believers become more perceptive of God's activity in their lives. This practice, called the "examination of conscience," is an examining of one's day for signs of God's presence. Jesuits consider this examination, or examen, the most important of all prayer practices. Examen prayer can take as little as five minutes or last as long as one has time with God. Typically done once a day before going to bed, the examen involves five basic steps, which are sometimes described differently. A step-by-step guide to one version of examen was provided to participants in the seminar.

Willard points to a critical insight, found in Paul's teaching, that underlines the importance of the kind of self-reflection the examen offers:

In a passage of great importance to our exploration here, the apostle Paul makes a comparison between humans and God regarding self-knowledge: "For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). Paul then points out that we have received the Spirit of God and concludes that we can therefore search out and know the very mind of God by means of his Spirit.⁴¹

The Examen Prayer works with the process of one's daily life and experiences over time. Examen is one of the ways the follower of Christ can *work out their salvation*

⁴¹ Willard, *Hearing God*, 131.

and become *co-laborers with God*. John O'Donohue writes, "We should not force ourselves to change by hammering our lives into any predetermined shape. We do not need to operate according to the idea of a predetermined program or plan for our lives. Rather, we need to practice a new art of attention to the inner rhythm of our days and lives. This attention brings a new awareness of our own human and divine presence."⁴² Examen focuses attention on the inner rhythm of daily life, developing greater self-awareness in believers, through which God is able to direct them toward Christlikeness.

Imaginative Prayer

Imaginative prayer invites believers to know Jesus more intimately, experiencing and even interacting with him, by entering into the Gospel narrative through imagination. Entering into the narrative develops a deeper understanding of a Gospel event's mysterious meaning.⁴³ This prayer focuses on the Gospels, but it also takes its inspiration from Jesus, who regularly used stories to help his listeners enter into an imaginative exercise, which led to real life understanding and transformation.

Jesus tells stories that invites the listener to enter the scene and discover themselves as one or more of the characters. Jesus told such a story when invited to Simon the Pharisee's home for a meal (Lk 7:40–43). Knowing of Simon's judgmental attitude toward a woman in the room who was "a sinner," Jesus shares a parable about two men—both of whom owed debts, one much larger a debt than the other—who had

⁴² John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1998), 57.

⁴³ Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 151.

their debts forgiven. Jesus asks Simon, which of the men will love the forgiving master more? Simon gives the correct answer—and likely realizes that he is one of the characters in this story. That realization invites both awareness and an opportunity for change.

Jesus regularly uses imaginative stories to help listeners enter into new perspectives and realizations. Imaginative prayer shares this purpose, encouraging believers to develop a more personal relationship with Christ. As believers enter the Gospel narratives in an imaginative and personal way, they are no longer just reading about Jesus but encountering him in person.

Discernment of Spirits

Spiritual discernment helps the believer attend to the consolations and desolations that give clarity to the convictions God has placed in his heart. Clarity moves the believer in the direction in which he finds peace before God. The believer seeks discernment in making choices that better lead to God's deepening his life in the person.⁴⁴ A number of spiritual discernment practices and principles were offered in the seminar and included in the participant worksheet on spiritual discernment.

Through discernment of spirits, a person attends to their spirit and the Holy Spirit by paying attention to inward stirrings, or convictions, which Ignatius calls consolations and desolations. Consolations are those things that draw one closer to God and thereby bring life. Desolations are those things that move one away from God and ultimately steal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 330.

life. Attendance to these consolations and desolations offers spiritual direction for the person tending to them.

Jesus affirmed that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit was to give counsel, “Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). Jesus believes that his followers will understand and receive direction from the Spirit: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (Jn 14:26–27).

A sense of peace, which Ignatius calls consolation, accompanies the Spirit’s confirmations. Paul affirms this saying, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16). This points toward an inner witness brought about by the activity of the Spirit. Paul speaks of this inner confirmation in yet another place, writing, “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 9:1).

Following the admonition to “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn 4:1), Ignatian practices of spiritual discernment help believers attend to the inner stirrings associated with the Spirit. Since false consolations and positive aspects of feelings of desolation exist, Ignatius provides guidelines that help the believer discern between that which strengthens and that which weakens life with God. The goal of spiritual discernment is not material prosperity or personal safety; it is a deepening intimacy with God through fulfilling his intent for one’s life.

Contemplative Prayer

Be Still and Know that I Am God

—Psalm 46:10

A journalist once asked Thomas Merton what he considered to be the leading spiritual disease of his time. Merton's answer surprised his interviewer. Of all the maladies Merton might have suggested—faithlessness, isolation, immorality, apathy—he answered instead with one word: efficiency. Merton continued, “From the monastery to the Pentagon, the plant has to run... and there is little time or energy left over after that to do anything else.” Merton is pointing out that, when it comes to God and religion, the problem is not so much badness as it is busyness.⁴⁵ People's lives are filled with distraction.

So many distractions compete for attention at once that people have come to value a new skill: multitasking. One can hardly give full attention to anything, much less God. Ronald Rolheiser writes, “We are living the unexamined life, and its price is a practical atheism. Fortunately, it can be overcome by contemplative awareness. God will be seen in ordinary experience when ordinary experience is fully open to him.”⁴⁶ Hence, the practice of contemplative prayer, also known as “the practice of the presence of God.” Merton describes contemplation:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and

⁴⁵ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 39-40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.⁴⁷

Jesus was known to stay up all night praying. Borg comments on this, saying, “Such lengthy hours of prayer accompanied by solitude do not imply verbal prayer, but contemplation or meditation, the stilling of the mind and directing of the heart toward God.... Jesus practiced one of the classic disciplines for becoming present to the world of Spirit.”⁴⁸ The book of Acts reminds readers that they live, move, and have their being in God (Acts 17:28). Other scriptures encourage being still and silent and knowing that God is God. In *sheer silence*, Elijah became aware of the presence and voice of God. Today’s disciples can still increase awareness of God’s presence by practicing silence and stillness in contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer is the practice of being still before God in a deepened awareness of him. Benner writes:

Contemplative stillness is the place of deep transformational encounter with our own self and with the Spirit. This is the hearth in which the alchemy of transformation makes us more than we are. Without regular times of such stillness, we will remain caught up in our psychospiritual self-improvement projects and our growth will have little transformational potential.... Contemplative stillness is essential because it allows us to step back from the ordinary background noise of consciousness at our respective level of self-development and organization. It allows us to notice our preoccupations and identifications and set them aside in an act of surrender. The goal is not to eliminate anything but to release everything. For only then do we discover that we are not defined by what we hold, but by whom we are held.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 1.

⁴⁸ Borg, *Days of Awe and Wonder*, 59.

⁴⁹ David Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 164.

In contemplative prayer the believer sets herself before God, releasing all thoughts, words, and images, and cultivating the awareness of being in God's presence. In this awareness, she also discovers that God is ever present to her. Whenever she notices her mind beginning to wander, she draws her attention back to God. Because it often takes several minutes to develop an enduring awareness of God's presence, contemplative prayer typically continues for a period of twenty minutes or more. Some choose a word to contemplate as a way to recall themselves to an awareness of God's presence when their attention drifts. Once they have returned to a conscious awareness of God's presence, they put the word aside until it is needed again. Nouwen comments on this wordless prayer practice saying:

The crisis of our prayer life is that our mind may be filled with ideas of God while our heart remains far from him. Real prayer comes from the heart.⁵⁰ The prayer of the heart is a prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. By its very nature such prayer transforms our whole being into Christ precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as to the truth of God.⁵¹

Continuing with this theme, Benner comments, "In presence, we allow ourselves to be absorbed by that to which we seek to be present. Rather than 'getting' it, we allow it to 'get us.'"⁵² So often believers seek a sense of control through knowing and understanding; contemplative prayer seeks to absorb the believer into the presence of God. "The purest form of prayer," as contemplative prayer is sometimes called, is not about analyzing God, but allowing God to claim one's entire self.

⁵⁰ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵² Benner, *Presence and Encounter*, 41.

“The present is the point at which time touches eternity.”⁵³ Contemplative prayer practice ushers the believer into the present and presence of God where time touches eternity, and the believer discovers the reality of the proclamation, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Contemplative prayer yields a deepened sense of intimacy with God and a growing sense of the presence of God, both in times of prayer and throughout the day. With this deepened sense of *being in God* comes a greater capacity for trusting God, which goes beyond words and petitions.

Dreamwork

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

—Acts 2:17

Dreamwork has ancient roots, but it will be considered from a contemporary understanding of the role of dreams as a source of internal and personal revelation. Rather than seeking glimpses of the future or secret knowledge, dreams will be presented as a way to reveal the believer’s heart, mind, and spirit. The North African theologian Tertullian wrote *The Anima* and spoke intelligently about the importance of dreams, but it was not until the time of Freud and Jung that dreamwork was considered more fully.⁵⁴ Tertullian wrote, “Is it not known to all the people that the dream is the most usual way

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 75.

⁵⁴ Morton Kelsey, *Dreams: A Way to Listen to God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 73.

that God reveals himself to man?”⁵⁵ While the answer to this question is debatable, it does seem that nothing, including dreams, exists in nature without a function.⁵⁶

Evangelicalism is a child of the Enlightenment and, while not fully embracing enlightenment conclusions, is influenced by its rationalistic and empirical ideals. One scholar writes, “We want creeds, not religious experiences, and dogma, not inspiration. Above all, we refuse to accept the nonrational unconscious, because it threatens the tyranny of rationality that has gripped us today.”⁵⁷ Most evangelicals do not analyze their dreams or enter into dialogue with God about them; however, dreams are biblically established as one way that God speaks, and there is no indication within Hebrew Scripture or the New Testament that God intends to stop this practice. Willard asserts, “God addresses us in various ways: in dreams, visions and voices: through the Bible and extraordinary events; and so forth.”⁵⁸ More recent psychological discoveries point to the dream’s purpose as a means of self-revelation. While self-revelations are not divine, Christians can still bring these revelations into conversation with God and use them to assist in holistic transformation.

Throughout Scripture, God uses dreams to speak to people for the means of both revelation and direction. Job 33:14–18 illustrates that God often speaks in visions while

⁵⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁶ John A. Sanford, *Dreams: God’s Forgotten Language* (New York: Harper One, 1989), 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 95. Another example of this critique might be found in evangelical fascination with apologetics which focus on rationalization and evidence to counter scientific objections to the existence of God and miracles. Highly popular books such as Josh McDowell’s *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ* are examples of this.

⁵⁸ Willard, *Hearing God*, 115.

people sleep, though they may not perceive it.⁵⁹ The purpose, it says, is multifaceted. Some dreams serve as warnings, while others keep one from wrongdoing and pride. This passage in Job says that paying attention to dreams is ultimately about preserving one's soul. This is confirmed in Daniel 2 and Matthew 27, where dreams give both warning and direction; although, as in Matthew, this advice is not always followed.

In Daniel 2:4, Nebuchadnezzar has a warning dream, which Daniel explains to him, saying, "So that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind." This passage gives the understanding that dreams can play an essential role in decision making. In Matthew 27, Pilate's wife warns him, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." Pilate ultimately disregards the insights of the dream and continues on his destructive path.

The discernment that dreams can bring is not limited to biblical times or persons, but as Scripture declares, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). In more recent times, the psychological role dreams play in everyday life has been discovered. This discovery is to be expected since Scripture also says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings" (Prov 25:2). It is important to remember that a dream, while not always obvious, seeks to reveal rather than conceal.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See scriptural reference for Job 33:14-18 in the chart above.

⁶⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 214-215.

Gillian Holloway writes concerning the role of dreams connecting the conscious with the unconscious, saying, “All of us are multifaceted beings with layers of feelings, memories, and potential. During our busy days, it’s often all we can do to stay on top of our scheduled tasks and maintain rapport with others. It falls to the unconscious processes to do the deeper work of making sense of things, deciphering our deep feelings, and offering insights in the form of our dreams.”⁶¹ Deciphering these feeling and insights is integral to the work needed for personal growth and formation. Holloway continues, “When we are open we find that the depths of ourselves are revealed to us. God presents us with ourselves, and then, as we work with Him to understand and grow, He draws us closer to Himself. Dreams and the understanding of them seem to be one way in which God pours out His love upon us and helps us become what we are capable of becoming.”⁶² For Christians, dreams are about undergoing an inner work, which leads toward self-awareness, with the aim of moving toward holistic integration of the self, which is uniquely made in the image of God.⁶³

Conclusion

The Bible does not give step-by-step directions on how to pray; yet, it is filled with prayers and examples of praying men and women. God speaks in different ways to different people at different times. The listening prayer disciplines chosen for the retreat

⁶¹ Gillian Holloway, *The Complete Dream Book: Discover what your Dreams Reveal about you and your Life* (Naperville: Sourebooks, 2006), 13.

⁶² Kelsey, *Dreams*, 99.

⁶³ Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active imagination for Personal Growth* (New York: Harper One, 1986), 13.

and seminars have developed over a long period. When introducing evangelicals to listening prayer practices, it is necessary to establish a biblical and theological basis that supports each practice.

PART THREE
MINISTRY PRACTICE

CHAPTER 4

LISTENING PRAYER OUTCOMES

Key Theological Conclusions and their Implications for Ministry

Evangelicals are known for emphasizing a need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What is often assumed, but unsaid, is that many other Christian denominations do not emphasize having a personal relationship with God. Just what evangelicals mean by a personal relationship is not clear, though it includes the idea that people need to confess their sins and believe in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on their behalf. In this way, salvation is personal and not impersonal. Salvation is not brought about by the act of someone being baptized when an infant or by some other impersonal means. It may be more appropriate to say evangelicals hold that each person must have a personal belief in the salvific work of Christ, rather than have *a personal relationship*. By definition, relationship goes beyond personal belief; it is interpersonal. With this in mind, it is difficult to pinpoint how evangelicalism might be more relational than other Christian denominations.

This project presupposes that evangelicalism does not have a distinct means of cultivating a relationship between a person and God. Evangelical Bible reading tends to

be more informational than transformational. Evangelical prayer tends to be more of a monologue than a dialogue. In prayers of petition, intercession, acclamation, and thanksgiving, the one praying is doing all of the speaking. Personal relationships are interactive by nature and, therefore, should be transformative and reciprocal.

“Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” is an initiative to introduce evangelicals to listening prayer practices. The goal of these practices is to grow in intimacy with God, discern God’s voice and activity in daily life, and gain an increased sense of God’s presence. The biblical witness and foundation for hearing God must be established from the beginning. Since evangelicals tend to be reason-based, it will also be important to establish the logical foundation for encountering God both personally and experientially.

For this reason, the listening prayer seminars will begin with a three-day retreat, laying a basis for Sabbath, solitude, and silence. Within this context, a case will be laid out for the biblical expectation that humans are designed to *hear* God. The key concept behind this is the Hebrew word *Shema*, with its basis in Deuteronomy 6:4. An extended amount of time will also be spent exploring Sabbath, solitude, and silence, laying the impetus for making time for God through practices that may otherwise seem unproductive to those who are more action-oriented. All four practices are essential for transitioning evangelicals from monologue to dialogue.

The desired outcome of the listening prayer seminars is that evangelicals who are exposed to the listening prayer practices will cultivate a more personal relationship with God. This relationship will be one where they have a deepening sense of God’s abiding presence and voice in their lives, supported and inspired by their expanded biblical

theology and the regular practice of listening prayer disciplines. By setting aside time for Sabbath, solitude, and silence, the evangelical will significantly move from knowing *about* God to *knowing God* in a more intimate and personal manner.

Target Group

The pilot program will target members and regular attendees of Evergreen Covenant Church. The initial group will be made up of five to eight individuals from various economic and vocational backgrounds. All of the participants will be over the age of thirty. They will all share an evangelical upbringing, although from different specific denominations within evangelicalism. Members of the target group will have had limited exposure to intentional and directive listening prayer practices.

Various forms of resistance to the listening prayer practices are anticipated. These will likely include failure to attend portions of the program or not practicing the disciplines between sessions. Some will likely have difficulty in transitioning from head to heart; that is, moving from knowledge and facts about God, or even the practices, to experiencing God within and through the practices. For example, one might get distracted by wanting to understand the nuances of a text during the *lectio* rather than focusing on the significance of a word or phrase that stands out to the individual. Although maintaining a healthy balance between informational knowledge and experiential knowledge will be emphasized, redirection back to the heart of the practice will be an indispensable part of helping the evangelicals' transition.

Key Components to Listening Prayer

The “Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” initiative consists of three components: Sabbath retreat, listening prayer seminars, spiritual direction. The participants will begin the program with the Sabbath retreat, which will be held at a contemplative retreat center over three days, beginning at 3:00 in the afternoon on a Friday and conclude at 1:00 in the afternoon on the following Sunday. Though many of the participants will have attended other retreats, the typical evangelical conference schedule is filled with interaction. Most of the participants will be unfamiliar with a retreat intentionally designed to create space for contemplation. With this in mind, the Sabbath retreat will include four seminars and a closing ceremony. Meals will be eaten together in silence. The hours between the seminars will be dedicated to solitude, silence, reflection, and prayer.

Sabbath Retreat

The first day will begin with the arrival of participants, who will be welcomed, acquainted with the schedule, and invited to spend time in solitude and silence until joining together to eat dinner, also in silence. This introduction is intentionally jarring, allowing the participant to immediately face the dilemma of not having a busy itinerary, as might be expected within a typical conference retreat. At 7:00 in the evening, the first seminar will introduce the concept of Sabbath, focusing on the intent for setting aside time for God within the context of one’s life.

Sabbath will be presented as a form of spiritual resistance to the consumer market and production demands of society.¹ Israel incorporated Sabbath rest into the Hebrew calendar in direct contrast to Pharaoh’s unrelenting system, which reduced human purpose to commodity and redefined neighbors as “slaves, threats, rivals, and competitors.”² Heschel sees Sabbath as a division between ordinary and sacred time.³ This seminar will help participants recognize the necessity of setting apart sacred time within their lives to engage with God in a personal way.

In accordance with the rhythm and practice of the retreat center, the second day will begin with breakfast, followed by twenty minutes of centering prayer. At 9:00 in the morning, the group will gather for the Shema seminar. Participants will consider Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear O’ Israel,” and learn about Shema, the most essential prayer in Judaism. The lecture will draw attention to how practicing Jews carve out sacred space within their day to turn their attention to God and prayer. Particular emphasis will be paid to revealing the biblical pattern of humanity hearing from God personally.

The Old Testament contains many examples—including Adam, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, and Hagar—of God speaking personally to humanity. While some circles of evangelicalism believe the biblical canon is closed and that God now speaks only through the written word, this assumption will be called into question. Examples from the New Testament and other relevant teachings of Scripture will demonstrate that the Bible

¹ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 106.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

³ Heschel, *Sabbath*, 15.

never says that God has stopped speaking personally to individuals. The significant point for evangelicals is that, since the Bible is primarily a book revealing the relationship between God and humanity rather than a historical document, the patterns seen within the Bible are instructive for one's life with God.

Care will be taken to note the difference between absolute divine revelation and personal revelation. Absolute divine revelation is binding upon all humanity, while personal revelation must submit itself to the authority of Scripture and is liable to human fallibility. Participants will be reminded that the customary ways of hearing God today—intuition, impression, Scripture, memory, image—are more subtle than audible voices or visions. Various ways God might speak will be discussed further within the context of the listening prayer seminars.

Participants will be provided with a reflection worksheet as an option for engaging between sessions; otherwise, that time is to be used solely to attend God and experience solitude and silence in the context of the retreat center and grounds. The reflective worksheets provided are to assist the participant with some direction on how to spend the time and offer questions for reflection. After that time of solitude, silence, and reflection, the third session will take place at 1:00 in the afternoon. This session will introduce the purpose of biblical solitude, using examples from Scripture and building upon the themes of Sabbath as sacred space and of expectation for hearing God within this space.

Evangelicals tend to gather. They gather for worship, prayer, teaching, small group, fellowship, and mission. Those who have a discipline of keeping a devotional time, which usually consists of Bible reading and spoken prayer, do set some time apart

to be alone with God. This time is usually filled with words, whether from reading Scripture or in telling God one's concerns or thanksgivings. Little space is made to hear God or make space for God's engagement. Solitude is more than time alone; it is time alone *with God*.⁴ Solitude is practiced not so that God may be attentive, but so that one might become attentive to God. Nouwen calls solitude the "furnace of transformation." It is not merely time alone or time away; it is a time and place for spiritual growth.

Biblical examples will be presented to reveal a pattern of people meeting God in solitude and undergoing transformative encounters. Special attention will be given to the start, inspiration, and practice of desert monasticism with its strong emphasis on solitude and silence, linking this concept back to the idea of Sabbath as resistance and solitude as the setting. Abba Moses is noted for telling a seeker, "Go into your cell and it will teach you everything you need to know."⁵ The monk's cell is synonymous with solitude.

O'Donohue describes solitude as an avenue that reveals a sacred openness in the soul. By default, people tend to try and fill this openness with external things, such as possessions, the work they do, and the beliefs they hold. Solitude strips all of these fillers away, revealing the void, which can only be satisfied by finding one's identity in God.⁶ In solitude, one finds God and one's self. However, as John Calvin says, it is uncertain

⁴ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 14.

⁵ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 139.

⁶ O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 101.

which one precedes the other since both are so intertwined.⁷ The Shema session will conclude with the revelation that solitude actually brings one back into the community, in a transformed and transforming way.

Extended time for solitude and silence will be set aside between the third and fourth seminar. No reflective worksheet will be provided for this space. The time between the third and fourth seminars will intentionally include less help for directing one's thoughts and invite the individual into the possibility of uncomfortable, unfilled space.

The fourth seminar will begin at 7:00 in the evening and focus on the purpose of silence, as it relates to Sabbath, Shema, and solitude. The participant will be guided to the understanding that solitude is more than being alone, and silence is more than the absence of external noise. Meister Eckhart said that there is nothing in the world that resembles God so much as silence: "Silence is a great friend of the soul; it unveils the riches of solitude."⁸ Mother Teresa spoke of the various kinds of noise that keep one from being attentive to God. Not only is there the noise that enters one's ears, but also the noise of eyes, mouths, and minds.⁹

This seminar reflects on the passage in which Elijah runs from Jezebel and encounters God in "a gentle whisper" (NIV). The NRSV translates this more literally as "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12). While evangelicals generally fill prayer time

⁷ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, trans.. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 37.

⁸ O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 111.

⁹ Mother Teresa, *The Joy in Living* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 228.

with words, this seminar will focus on the importance of silence in leaving space to hear God's voice personally. For this message to be received, it will be important to reframe what prayer is for the evangelical mind. Rohr reframes prayer saying, "Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance. It's a way of living in the Presence, living in awareness of the Presence, and even enjoying the Presence. The full contemplative is not just aware of the Presence, but trusts, allows, and delights in it."¹⁰

This transition moves from prayer as *words* spoken to God toward prayer as life in the reality of God's presence. This shift is essential as Evangelical prayer often focuses on asking God to change something or giving thanks for who God is or what he has done. Evangelical prayer is more action oriented. Redefining prayer as growing in the awareness and experience of God's presence moves prayer from *doing* toward *being*. Silence is the space in which one experiences *being*.

At the close of the silence seminar, a worksheet will be made available. This worksheet does not invite reflection, but instead calls attention to a poem and scriptures about meeting God in silence. Once again, participants will be released into the silence of the night with no objective other than to be aware of God's presence.

Sunday will be the final day of the Sabbath retreat. Rather than the expected practice of attending church in the morning, nothing will be planned. This intentionally awkward break in the usual pattern of worship reinforces the reframing of solitude and

¹⁰ Richard Rohr, *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to your Deeper Self* (New York: Crossroad Publishers., 2015), 12.

silence as a way the believer meets with God. A continental breakfast will be available at the retreatant's leisure. No prayer or activity will be scheduled until late morning.

At 11:30 in the morning, all will join together to celebrate a *Havdalah* service. *Havdalah* is a Jewish ceremony marking the division between sacred and regular time at the close of Sabbath. Participants will be invited to share some way each encountered God within the space of Sabbath, silence, and solitude. As is traditional within the Jewish *Havdalah* practice, this time will be followed by a meal, where talking will be permitted and, perhaps, celebrated.

The Sabbath retreat will present the biblical and theological rationale for listening prayer. The retreat sessions will provide biblical precedence for the expectation that God's people will hear God's voice in many ways. The retreat is intended to inspire participants to make space—space shaped by the practices of solitude and silence with the intent to Shema, or hear God—in their lives for God. Hearing God is about growing in intimacy with God and a deepening sense of his abiding presence. While hearing God within this sacred space is not about asking questions or finding specific answers, the practice will deepen the believers' knowledge of themselves and God in a way that it will bring direction to their lives.

Listening Prayer Seminars

The Sabbath retreat will be immediately followed by seven weekly seminars, lasting approximately one and a half hours each, which will introduce a new listening prayer practice each Wednesday evening. A schedule detailing the name of each practice and week it will be introduced will be provided at the first mid-week session. The prayer

practices will be introduced in an intentional order, which takes into consideration a more natural transition from typical evangelical prayer practices to the more contemplative ones.

Each seminar will include an overview of the practice being introduced—including its basic form, history, biblical precedent, and its intended benefit—followed by a time for questions and answers. Participants will then spend fifteen to twenty minutes of the seminar engaging the practice, either individually or as a group, as is most appropriate. Once the practice has been experienced, the group will regather to share their experiences with the practice.

All sharing will be voluntary, and participants will be encouraged to relay both the benefits and the difficulties they encountered with the practice. Each session will conclude with distribution of a worksheet, which will provide an overview of the discipline along with a practice guide to be used between sessions. Participants are encouraged to engage the practice as often as their circumstances allow throughout the week. Each will be invited to share the experiences of the previous week's listening prayer practice at the start of the new mid-week seminar.

Participants will engage seven different listening prayer practices. This variety of listening prayer practices is offered so individuals can discover the ones which draw them and choose a few to make a part of their regular practice. They are not expected to adopt all of the practices into their regular prayer habit.

Colloquy

The first listening prayer practice to be introduced will be the colloquy, sometimes referred to as conversational prayer, which derives from the Ignatian exercises. Retreatants are invited to converse with God in prayer, either about something they have experienced or a topic that is of concern to them. While Evangelicals tend to be comfortable talking to God, the colloquy is unique in that it leaves space within the prayer time to listen to or imagine God's response.

God's response may come in many forms within colloquy. The participant may experience an impression, intuition, thought, recollection of a Scripture passage, question, or memory—and the possibilities are not limited to these. The participant is reminded that he knows much more about God than he realizes. A lifetime of Bible teaching, Scripture reading, and experiences has given the believer an idea of who God is.

During colloquy, the participant is invited to begin a conversation with God about something that is on his heart. The participant shares as he might with a friend, leaving space for God to respond. Based on what is known of God—through the teaching of Scripture, the example of Christ, or his personal experience—the one praying imagines how God might respond.

In conversational prayer, the one praying does not look for a specific answer to a specific question but seeks a deepening realization of God's interest in the details of his life and thoughts. The colloquy might result in an affirmation, encouragement, inspiration, challenge, new perspective, or simply a deepening sense of God's abiding

presence. This dialogical approach to prayer adds an interpersonal dynamic to one's relationship with God that is missing in the usual monologue.

The colloquy seminar spends significant time exploring the ways Christians can discern between what is and what is *not* the voice of God. Participants will be introduced to several cautions, including a strong caution to be vigilant against false images of God, which might skew a proper conception of God's response. Participants will also be reminded of the priority of agreement with Scripture during colloquy, as well as during all other practices. Finally, the biblical basis and benefit of a trusted council will be presented. Establishing these cautions and encouragements early will support all seven of the prayer practices, as participants must have the tools to discern whether they are growing in humility and love toward God and others.

Lectio Divina

The second seminar, *Lectio Divina*, will continue the transition between more familiar evangelical practices and less familiar listening prayer practices. *Lectio Divina*, or *lectio*, is a Scripture-focused prayer practice that will help evangelicals move from reading the Bible for information toward reading the Bible devotionally, with sensitivity to what God is saying in the present circumstance.¹¹ I like to describe *lectio* as the practice of allowing Scripture to read the reader or, in other words, inviting scripture to draw attention to a matter in the reader's life that can be brought before God.

¹¹ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 81.

The lectio seminar will briefly review the historical development of the practice and also provide a biblical precedent for God's word as living and active. The review will begin with the practice's foundation in Christian exegesis under Origen of Alexandria; will continue with St. Benedict's development and coining of the practice as *Lectio Divina*, and lectio's application to the Benedictine rule of life; and will end with a survey of the more popular forms of lectio used today. While evangelicals do not equate tradition with scriptural authority, they do appreciate tradition for historical precedent and practice.

A biblical precedent for God's word as living and active will support the historical precedent for the lectio practice; also, having Bible open and in hand will lend a familiar feel to the introduction of this listening practice. Hebrews 4 presents the word of God as judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart—a very personal application that aligns readily with lectio. In 2 Timothy 3, Scripture is described as useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness. There is no better place to begin this forming and shaping than by practicing lectio for one's own life rather than focusing externally upon the lives of others.

With this historical context and biblically-founded precedent, participants will move forward as a group into the lectio devotional practice. Lectio begins with asking for God's help, that we may be attentive to what God would have us notice during the prayer practice. After a moment of silence, the reading of the selected passage begins according to the four steps of *Lectio Divina*: *lectio*, or reading; *meditatio*, or meditation; *oratio*, or prayer; *contemplatio*, or action. Each step represents a new reading of the text.

Lectio listens to the passage for a word or phrase that stands out to the reader. *Meditatio* contemplates the passage and whether God has something particular to reveal to the reader through the chosen text. *Oratio* invites the reader to speak to God, pouring out any feelings, questions, or reactions about the text. *Contemplatio* requires the reader to create a plan of action based on the prayer. This completes the four steps of the *Lectio Divina*: read, meditate, pray, act or contemplate.

Each step of the *lectio* will be explained and engaged. Once the *lectio* is completed there will be a time and option to share the word or phrase that stood out to each person. Participants will be invited to tell how that word or phrase might speak to their life—perhaps as an invitation, awareness, new perspective, comfort, encouragement, or rebuke. Participants will then be given seven *lectio* worksheets, each having a short passage and a guide for each of the discipline's steps. Individuals are free to either begin a new *lectio* daily or to remain with the same reading for many days, inviting God to continue revealing greater depths of meaning.

Examen Prayer

The Examen Prayer follows *lectio* as naturally as *lectio* follows colloquy. *Lectio* builds upon the colloquy in that the third step, *oratio*, invites conversation with God. Like the examen, *lectio* helps one to become more attentive to what might be below the surface, in the subconscious or semiconscious. When a word or phrase stands out to her from Scripture, what it points to may often surprise her, though it is relevant to her life and personal situation. Often it is something that has been on the periphery of her consciousness. The *lectio* helps her to notice and become prayerfully attentive to the

issue. In the same way, the examen reviews both the outward and inward activity of one's day or a specific period, helping her to become prayerfully aware of what is going on within her in the context of her daily encounters and experiences.

The examen is a step away from complete dependence upon the Bible for revelation. It is more personal than learning from the lives of others as found in the stories of Scripture. As cited in Chapter 3, the apostle Paul asked, "For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). Willard expands on this for the purpose of examen-like reflection, writing, "Paul then points out that we have received the Spirit of God and concludes that we can therefore search out and know the very mind of God by means of his Spirit."¹²

In the Examen Prayer, individuals begin with silence and intentionally become aware of the love with which God looks upon them as they begin the examen. Then, they review a specific period, most commonly the last twenty-four hours. The first step is the practice of cultivating *gratitude*: noting the gifts that God's love has given that day and giving thanks to God for them. The second step is the *petition*: asking God for an insight and a strength that will make this examen a work of grace, fruitful beyond human capacity alone. The third step is the *review*: reviewing the day, looking for the stirrings of heart and thoughts that God has given that day, as well as looking for those that have not been of God, reviewing the choices in response to both and throughout the day in general. This step helps individuals to become aware of where God is at work in their lives, what

¹² Willard, *Hearing God*, 131.

he is revealing, and what he is calling them to. The fourth and final step is *forgiveness*: asking for the healing touch of the forgiving God who, with love and respect, removes the heart's burdens. This step is not about feeling sorry for actions or failures to act, but knowing God's grace, which invites believers to continue moving forward in a life of spiritual transformation.

The Examen of Conscience rests on the belief that God is presently and persistently active in all the moments of life. Reflecting on the experiences of the day, while paying attention to the inner stirrings of consolation and desolation, individuals carry those movements into conversation with God. Within the context of this conversation with God individuals gain greater awareness, healing, and invitation to personal transformation toward Christlikeness. Timothy Gallagher writes, "The examen is not the self-evaluation of a heart in isolation but rather a colloquy, a conversation, a dialogue between two hearts."¹³ O'Donohue supports the intent of the examen, saying, "Though the human body is born complete in one moment, the birth of the human heart is an ongoing process. It is being birthed in every experience of your life. Everything that happens to you has the potential to deepen you."¹⁴ The Examen Prayer helps individuals pay attention to what *happens* to and in them, nurturing awareness and growth.

¹³ Timothy A. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 92.

¹⁴ O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 6.

Imaginative Prayer

Imaginative prayer is a dynamic way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions as one imaginatively enters into a Gospel scene.¹⁵ This practice begins with Scripture reading, which is comfortable for evangelicals, but then leads the participants into less familiar territory. The participants are each invited to choose a narrative of Scripture, actively imagine the chosen scene and, at some point, place themselves within it. Depending on individual inclination, participants may adopt the role of a central figure, an onlooker, or themselves within the story.

Individuals are called to pay attention to all that they might experience with their five senses, noting sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes. They are free to allow new details into the story, ask questions and interact, and notice what other story figures are doing, saying, or feeling. They are especially encouraged to interact with Jesus within the story. They can do this by imagining movements, asking Jesus questions, drawing nearer or further away, and responding to the actions of others within the story.

After imaginatively entering the narrative, participants will spend time reflecting on what stood out most. They will focus their attention on the stirrings that occurred within themselves at various points during the imaginative practice, asking themselves what they noticed or were drawn to most. They will consider insights, emotions, desires, memories, and feelings that arose within the imaginative practice. They will then bring this awareness, these thoughts and experiences, to God in conversation. Revelations and

¹⁵ Kevin O'Brien, "Ignatian Contemplation: Imaginative Prayer," accessed October 2, 2018, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/ignatian-contemplation-imaginative-prayer> accessed.

insights concerning the character and nature of Jesus and the individual are likely to surface and invite deeper intimacy, honesty, healing, and spiritual transformation through this prayer practice.

Spiritual Discernment

In Ignatian Spiritual Discernment, evangelicals are introduced to the value of paying attention to inner movements and stirrings, which Ignatius calls consolations and desolations. Concentrating on these movements helps connect the head with the heart. Rather than depending entirely on rationalizations, individuals who seek spiritual discernment focus on the spirit's inner movements and bring those movements into prayerful conversation with God. In doing so, individuals often discover contradictions between their rationalizations and their inner stirrings. This connection leads to greater self-discovery and helps them better discern the will of God for their lives.

The spiritual discernment seminar will introduce participants to Ignatian principles of discernment. Rather than making choices based on material advantage, participants will be called to discern which choices might draw them closer to God and which might lead them further from him. Spiritual discernment focuses on growing in self-knowledge and intimacy with God by prayerfully bringing inner stirrings to God for conversation and reflection. The insights gained foster transformative possibility and action. Participants are again encouraged to actively use worksheets as a guide in real discernment and decision-making processes throughout the week.

Contemplation

The monastic practice of contemplation as wordless, imageless prayer is almost entirely foreign to, and tends to be the most challenging for, evangelicals. Because contemplative prayer is not action- or goal- oriented, practitioners often feel as though they are not doing or accomplishing anything; however, contemplation is arguably the purest form of prayer, as its goal is seeking God alone. Contemplation is the practice of being completely silent before God and becoming conscious of being in God's presence. In this practice, it bears repeating, one experiences the reality that "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The seminar will give an overview of both the practice and purpose of contemplative prayer, acknowledging its difficulty. Contemplation is perhaps the simplest discipline to explain and the most challenging to practice. The individual finds a quiet, comfortable place to pray and sits in a position that can be maintained for about twenty minutes. As with other practices, the individual asks for God's help in both being completely present to him and deeply aware of his presence. Then the individual begins by breathing regularly, concentrating on the breath as it goes in and out, and bringing awareness to the spaces between the inhalations and exhalations.

The challenge of contemplation arises in maintaining inner stillness. The individual is instructed to release thoughts, words, and images during the practice. When distractions arise, the individual simply takes note of them and, sometimes using a focus word, continues returning to an awareness of God's presence for a period of twenty minutes or more. At the end of the practice, the individual thanks God for the gift of being in him.

The potential benefits of contemplative prayer will be considered, including increasing awareness of, and deepening intimacy with, God. Practicing contemplative prayer can instill a deepened sense of peace and can release anxiety and stress. Release happens when identity is found in God rather than in financial worth, secular accomplishments, or the subjective opinions of others. Contemplative prayer practice nurtures an increasing awareness of the temporality of earthly days and the eternity of God through the gift of life in Christ.

The seminar will allocate twenty minutes for the group practice of contemplative prayer to allow enough time for a person to overcome the initial difficulty anticipated when setting thoughts and images aside. Within the context of the twenty minutes, participants are expected to experience moments, rather than long periods, of awareness of God's presence. Participants will then be invited to share their experiences of the practice and encouraged to engage this practice at least twice more before the next meeting.

Dreamwork

In the final seminar, participants will be introduced to the biblical and practical concept of dreamwork as a way to deepen personal awareness and holistic transformation. The seminar will begin by laying both a biblical and rational case for dreamwork, emphasizing that the most common function of dreams is to bring the unconscious toward consciousness to resolve issues. Dreamwork, as practiced within the program, will be informed by a contemporary psychological understanding of dream analysis.

The lecture supports dreamwork with biblical examples but eschews the more extraordinary uses, such as prediction and divination, of revelatory dreams in Scripture. While the early Christian theologian Tertullian spoke of the usefulness of dreams for discerning God's voice, dreamwork is not among the more common historical Christian disciplines of the church. Notable psychologists, such as Freud and Jung, have developed dreamwork as a useful method of recognizing subconscious desires, hopes, and fears. This understanding fits comfortably within the listening prayer tradition and incorporates readily into Christian prayer practices. God's use of dreams as a form of communication throughout Scripture establishes a biblical precedent for such dreamwork.

Dreamwork emphasizes the basic principles found within many of the prayer practices already introduced in the listening prayer seminars, including the practice of focusing on the stirrings of one's inner life. These same stirrings are what bring a word or phrase to the forefront in lectio. They are the stirrings one notices when paying attention to the experience of desolation and consolations in the practice of discernment.

Dreamwork is very similar to the practice of imaginative prayer, except that dreams arise from the subconscious and are less likely to be consciously manipulated. The challenge remains to understand the dream images and symbols without bias, either conscious or subconscious.

This seminar will present dreamwork as a path to learning more about one's own inner conflicts, concerns, needs, and hopes by discerning the relevance of dreams as they relate to everyday life. Practical guidelines will be set forth based on contemporary psychological principles, in which dreams are analyzed according to the theory that they predominantly focus on the dreamer's current circumstances and her often-unconscious

thoughts and feelings about those circumstances. These insights and awareness's will then be brought before God in prayerful reflection for further discernment, direction, and transformation.

Dreamwork challenges the common evangelical assumption that God only speaks through the Bible. While few evangelicals consistently hold to this theory in practice, for many it is a default assumption; however, Scripture demonstrates otherwise. A passage that points to a fulfilled prophecy in Joel, which has been referenced at length earlier in this paper, states that God says, “your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17). In this passage, rather than dreams ceasing as a way of God communicating with humanity, it is anticipated that this form of communication will increase.

The Bible itself does not say that God only speaks through Scripture; although, this program emphasizes that Scripture is the only authoritative voice of God for collective humanity and that whatever God genuinely reveals in one's personal life will not contradict Scripture. While Scripture always takes precedent in matters of theology and practice, as one learns more about herself, she grows closer to God through listening prayer practices and discovers more of the personal will of God for her own life. In this way, the dreamwork prayer practice assists the dreamer in living more authentically and fully in waking life.

Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction, as it will be used as a part of the listening prayer experience, is defined as the meeting between a trained spiritual director and directee with the intent of

paying attention to the directee's inner stirrings and relationship with God. The director and participant will meet once after the first or second session of the listening prayer seminars and once again upon the conclusion of the seminars. Benner writes:

Carl Jung argued—correctly, I think—that it is impossible to become conscious without a relationship with another person. He expands on this: “The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a You. Wholeness is a combination of I and You, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity.”¹⁶

The direction sessions, which are usually an hour in duration, focus on the directee's relationship with God and their prayer experience.¹⁷ The director takes interest in the directee's experience of God rather than just personal theories or speculations.¹⁸ The director is trained to listen prayerfully, raise questions, call attention to themes, and direct the directee to make God a part of the process of their discernment, with all of its personal implications.

Participants will be encouraged to bring insights, experiences, and questions related to their practice of the listening prayer disciplines. Sessions will be used to work directly with the material presented throughout the listening prayer seminars and the outcomes that participants experienced throughout the introductory program. The director will then be able to encourage the directees to attend to what is arising within themselves and their relationship with God through the prayer practices. At times, the direction conversation may deviate from explicitly addressing material connected to the prayer

¹⁶ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 173.

¹⁷ Barry, *God and You*, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

practices and discernments that arise from them. The director will help the directee bring even unrelated topics into a prayer-centered and discerning process within the directee's relationship with God. Direction sessions will serve as an additional method of evaluation for the effectiveness of the listening prayer program in the lives of individual directees.

Conclusion

The "Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals" experience consists of three main parts: Sabbath retreat, listening prayer seminars, spiritual direction. The retreat and seminars focus on laying a biblical and rational foundation for the listening prayer practices. In addition to this, they provide an overview of the practices along with a guided experience, which is then followed by an open discussion of the participants' experience of the practices. Participants are encouraged to engage each new practice multiple times between seminars.

At the beginning of each new seminar, time will be allotted for open discussion of personal experiences with the latest prayer practice. The program director will provide questions to assist in discussion and evaluation. Participants are encouraged to engage with a spiritual director twice throughout the program. Participants can meet with either the program director or a director of their choice.

When meeting with a spiritual director outside of the program, participants are asked to submit an overview of their sessions. Overviews will be limited to the benefits and challenges of the prayer practices, and whatever additional details participants are comfortable sharing. Overviews will assist the program director when evaluating the

usefulness of the program and considering possible changes that may benefit the overall program experience.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS AND EVALUATION

Implementation

This chapter will give an overview of the implementation and process that was undertaken in launching the pilot “Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” spiritual formation program. Consideration was given to both presentation and recruitment of initial participants. The timeline took into consideration the necessary advanced notice that might be needed for participants to secure space in their calendar for the retreat. The resources were varied, including everything from the setting of the retreat and seminars to projection equipment and handouts. There were multiple surveys and questionnaires used for evaluation, and a summary of the relevant findings will be offered.

Presentation and Recruitment

An overview and invitation to the listening prayer program was initially offered in the context of a congregational gathering. “Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” was presented as an opportunity for “talkative evangelicals” to be introduced to various listening prayer practices in the context of a three-day retreat, followed by a series of seven seminars. The Sabbath retreat would focus on making space for God in the context

of one's daily life while providing a tangible experience of the same. The seminars would introduce a new listening prayer practice each Wednesday evening.

The phrase "talkative evangelicals" was explained as being used both for humor and to call attention to the theological focus of evangelicals on both the written and spoken word. The written word is connected to the Protestant tradition of *sola scriptura*, to which evangelicals hold firmly. The spoken word refers to the evangelical emphasis on biblically-based preaching, represented by the pulpit, which is so often the centerpiece of the sanctuary platform.

The evangelical emphasis on the spoken and written word of God is intimately connected with the central evangelical devotional practices: reading the Bible and spoken prayer. These two devotional and prayer practices are indispensable, but they are not the only beneficial practices for developing intimacy with God. The listening prayer program seeks to introduce evangelicals to additional practices that will nurture a deepening identification of God's presence and voice in their daily lives.

In collaboration with the initial presentation and invitation, a sign-up sheet was placed in the fellowship hall for those interested in participating. The program was open to anyone who wished to participate; however, the invitation stressed that, excepting unforeseen circumstances, those who participated would be committing to attending both the retreat and all seven seminars. Seven participants signed up without encouragement. One participant was personally invited to the event because I deemed it would be beneficial to her. Eight was the ideal number for the program due to the nature of the group work and the number of accommodations available at the selected retreat center.

Timeline

The invitation to the listening prayer seminars was extended three months prior to the retreat to allow participants time for scheduling Sabbath retreat attendance, which spanned three days. The retreat introduced the practices of solitude and silence and laid a foundation for Sabbath as “setting aside time in our lives for God.”¹ The listening prayer seminars began the following Wednesday evening.

The seminars repeated for seven consecutive Wednesdays, introducing a total of seven prayer practices.² Each seminar lasted approximately ninety minutes and included time for presenting the discipline, encountering the practice, and regrouping for personal sharing of the experience. Handouts were provided as both an overview and a guide. Participants were instructed to practice that week’s listening prayer discipline as often as possible—ideally once per day but at a minimum of twice throughout the week—between sessions.

Each participant committed to two sessions of spiritual direction in addition to the retreat and seminars. The sessions were to be held after the first two weeks of seminars and again within two weeks of completing the entire experience. The spiritual direction sessions could be taken with another spiritual director or with the presenter. Participants were encouraged to bring discussion topics related to the prayer practices to their sessions. Those seeing a director outside of the program were asked to bring a brief

¹ A retreat schedule can be found in Appendix A. The retreat lecture notes were not included in the appendix due to space limitations.

² A schedule of seminars can be found Appendix B. The individual seminar lecture notes were not included in the appendix due to space limitations.

report, according to their level of comfort, of what was discussed during their spiritual direction sessions. These reports were used to assess what was beneficial or unhelpful about the prayer practices.

Resources

In this section, resources will be divided into the three sections already determined by the program: Sabbath retreat, listening prayer seminars, spiritual direction. The center secured for the Sabbath retreat was chosen for its ability to provide the space and atmosphere for the complete retreat experience. The distance to the chosen center was far enough away to provide a sense of separation from everyday life yet close enough to avoid hindering participation. Single rooms encouraged genuine solitude and all meals were provided on site, where they could be enjoyed in silence. A gathering and presentation room was rented at the center for the presentations held during the retreat. In addition to these amenities, the grounds contained many walking paths, prayer labyrinths, prayer chapels, and other sacred spaces conducive to spending time alone with God.

The retreat included four presentations and a final Shabbat ceremony. Apart from meal times, these were the only gathering experiences, and the remainder of the retreat was spent in solitude and silence. Each seminar required a presentation room, prepared lecture notes and PowerPoint slides, computer, projector, and screen. A portable printer was also helpful as, at the end of each seminar, relevant articles and guides were provided for further learning and clarification. Most seminars also included guides for related activities that could be undertaken between sessions, including ways to use the prayer labyrinth, parables, nature walks, and reflective questions to consider in prayer.

The final gathering on Sunday morning was a *Havdalah* service, which is a Jewish ceremony celebrating the conclusion of Sabbath. The supplies needed for this were a special plate, candle, cup, wine, and handout for responsive readings. This celebration was followed by a meal, which was eaten together, and conversation was allowed at the dinner table for the first time.

The Sabbath retreat ended on Sunday afternoon and the listening prayer seminars began the next Wednesday evening. The seminars were held at Evergreen Covenant Church in the fellowship area and required only the presenter's notes, PowerPoint presentations to compliment, and prayer practice worksheets, which were handed out to each participant. Each of the seminars focused on one new prayer practice and provided space to practice together as a group. The worksheets were supplied as an overview of the practice and a guide for engaging the discipline independently throughout the week.

In addition to the retreat and seminars, participants agreed to attend two spiritual direction sessions. The first session would be scheduled after the retreat and toward the beginning of the seminar series. The second session would be scheduled within two weeks of concluding the program. Participants could choose to complete direction sessions with the presenter or with another spiritual director; however, all sessions were expected to focus on the participants' experiences with the various practices and associations emerging within them in their engagement of the disciplines. Reflection guides were provided to support participants in considering what topics they might want to address in direction. When completing sessions with someone other than the presenter, participants were asked to submit a brief report with an overview of what emerged in

spiritual direction. Participants were encouraged to report only what they felt was relevant and were comfortable sharing.

Assessment

The Listening Prayer Program for Talkative Evangelicals underwent a threefold assessment: engagement, helpfulness, and deepening awareness of God. The participants reported on their engagement and understanding of the practices, which included their success in creating space in solitude and silence in the midst of their lives to make room for listening prayer. The listening prayer practices were assessed for helpfulness in becoming more self-aware, noticing the various thoughts and movements going on within the participants themselves, and bringing those issues before God in conversational prayer. Together, the participants and presenter examined whether there was a deepening sense of intimacy and transparency within one's relationship with God.

Assessment is subjective relative to the nature of what is being weighed. In measuring the outcomes of the program, listening prayer participants used reflective surveys to self-assess and report whether or not they were growing in the evaluated areas. These surveys were handed out at intervals throughout the program. The surveys were open to discussion and feedback in both the group setting and private spiritual direction sessions.

Participants completed three reflective surveys in total. Before the beginning of the program, a reflective survey gathered information about the participants' demographic data, current prayer practices, and level of familiarity with listening prayer disciplines. After the Sabbath retreat, a reflective survey assessed the participants'

critique of the retreat, including what they found helpful or unhelpful and any related comments. A final survey given at the conclusion of the seminars inquired about the participants' experience with each of the practices.³

Additional opportunities for reporting were given at the beginning of each new listening prayer seminar session. The first fifteen to twenty minutes of each session reflected on the latest completed practice and invited participants to share their experience of the previous week's discipline. Questions differed from week to week and included an evaluation of their comfort and difficulty in engaging the practice. Participants could also share insights, inner stirrings, calls to action, or other practice-related outcomes.

Spiritual direction sessions served as an additional means of assessing the participants' sense of emerging commitment, effectiveness, and relationship with God through engagement of the listening prayer practices. During these sessions, participants self-reported their experiences while the presenter took notes, which were also used in assessing the prayer practices' benefit to the participant. Benefit was determined by rating the participants' growing self-awareness, deepening intimacy, increasing transparency with God, and sense of continuing spiritual healing and transformation.

According to the initial survey, all of the participants had participated in multiple congregations that fall squarely into the evangelical tradition. Participants' reasons for participating in the listening prayer program extended from deepening their relationship

³ Participant surveys were used to inform the evaluation of this paper but are not included in the appendix due to space restrictions.

with God to wanting to learn more about listening prayer practices. Many of the participants were familiar with the concept of listening prayer but none had direct experience in practice. Replies regarding current prayer practices ranged. One participant said, “I actually hardly ever pray. Almost never.” Another replied, “Frequent short prayer throughout each day, for issues, people, situations.” Yet another said, “Mostly talking silently,” but did allude to hearing God while he is hunting in the woods or surrounded by nature. One participant said, “I typically hear God in conversation with other respected people and sometimes in my ‘mess ups’ in relationship to others.” Most feedback leaned toward more talkative forms of prayer and hearing but did not touch upon reflection and a sense of God’s deepening presence. Only one of the participants indicated naturally practicing prayer that was similar to some of the seven practices introduced but did not like to label the prayer experiences.

Feedback from the survey relating to the Sabbath retreat suggests that the retreat was enjoyed and brought deeper understanding concerning the purpose of Sabbath and the biblical precedent for hearing God in a personal way. The retreat required solitude and silence between sessions, including during meals eaten together. While suggestions and relevant prayer practice guides were provided, there were intentionally no specific requirements between seminars other than to spend time with God, which introduced retreatants to a genuine experience of solitude and silence.⁴

⁴ Some reading materials that supplemented the teachings on Sabbath, Shema, Silence, and Solitude were provided as well as some prayer practice handouts that were compatible with solitude and silence such as contemplative walks, how to use a prayer labyrinth, and modeling clay with instructions to mold something that you feel reflects what God is forming within you.

All participants who responded to the Sabbath retreat survey said the retreat resulted in a desire to spend more time in solitude and silence with God. Participants also stated they would have liked more time speaking with other retreatants during the retreat.⁵ Most said they would have liked to have more specific direction as to how to spend their time in solitude and silence between sessions. Some requested a list of practices that they could engage. The intentional lack of scheduled activities was seemingly effective, revealing the difficulty of the practice in light of evangelicals' usual loquacious and task-oriented routines.

In considering feedback concerning the retreat, my intent for the retreat was met. The resistance to an unstructured time of solitude and silence was anticipated. This cultural necessity for accomplishing tasks and outcomes is precisely what Brueggemann addresses in *Sabbath as Resistance*. This subject was emphatically addressed in the Sabbath lecture that opened the retreat⁶; however, as this program seeks to introduce evangelicals to listening prayer practices of which they are not yet accustomed, allowing more time for interaction and specific prayer practices during the retreat will be considered. Since a number of participants were not able to attend all of the listening prayer seminars, it might be helpful to condense the program by introducing some of the prayer practices within the retreat itself.

⁵ Participants engaged in conversation during all four seminars as well as at the conclusion of the second night, but which time they wanted to come out of solitude and silence.

⁶ A number of the participants are familiar with the observance of Sabbath. These are the “trunk slammers” mentioned in the ministry context. They have cottages on the surrounding lakes, which they come to on the weekends to “rest.” Many of them grew up observing a strict form of Sabbath, which excluded both work and play. Yet, this observance may also have been a goal to fulfill a command. Practicing solitude and silence with the aim to simply be present to God was a new experience.

The closing survey asked participants to rate their overall personal experience of the retreat and each of the prayer practices. Using a scale of one through five, with one being the least and five the greatest value, participants rated their preferences. Space was provided for comments concerning each experience. All participants gave the retreat the highest possible ratings for providing an understanding of what Sabbath is, how solitude and silence help establish a conducive environment for listening prayer, and where the biblical precedent is established for both of these. Most said they would have appreciated more time interacting with others and more direction in how to use the times of solitude and silence within the retreat itself. Two of the retreatants appreciated not having specific tasks to carry out, and having the unrestricted time to enjoy the solitude, silence, and presence of God.

Out of the seven prayer practices that were introduced, the Examen Prayer, colloquy, and Lectio Divina were the most valued and likely to be used in the future. Concerning the colloquy, one participant said, "I was irritated that God wasn't speaking to me, yet I realized he was speaking to me in my distractions. When I was distracted about things and talked to him about my frustration about that, He actually directed me toward doing something about those distractions." Another participant had a similar experience, saying that not only did she discern God replying to her, but also sensed God telling her she needed to begin acting on what she was discerning. Another participant said that after being introduced to the lectio, it seemed as if words and phrases just began regularly standing out to her, showing her what to pay attention to and bring into prayer. Numerous participants commented on how the examen helped them to be more thankful

for the gifts God had given them throughout the day and also to discern what brings life and what steals life, revealing how they ought to use their time and gifts.

The practices that were the least appreciated and most difficult were imaginary prayer and contemplation. In addition to the challenge of placing oneself into the biblical narrative, one participant found herself irritated with Jesus, wishing he would be clearer rather than using stories and illustrations. She went on to say that she wanted to use this practice more because she felt it would ultimately be beneficial in developing her image of God. Most said that they found contemplative prayer difficult because it was hard to still their thoughts. One participant said that it made him angry because it felt like nothing was being accomplished, but then he realized that this was probably part of the point. Though most of the participants rated this practice low, they also expressed an appreciation for how it challenged them to stop doing and appreciate simply being with God. Here is how one participant phrased it: “I one hundred percent get agitated with this prayer every single time I try it. I usually fail at spending any of the time just being quiet and spend all of the time being irritated that I am ‘wasting time,’ even though I know that God promised that quiet has potential to produce growth.”

Dreamwork had very mixed reviews. Some were very interested in better understanding how their dreams revealed what was being worked on in their hearts and minds. One participant said, “Dreamwork seems to help me to see some of what I am thinking or feeling during the day that I might not want to admit or maybe am not aware of until I consider where my dreams take me.” Others had difficulty remembering their dreams, while one felt dreamwork focused too much on the difficulties and challenges of life and preferred to focus on the more positive aspects.

Conclusion

In the earlier overview of the ministry context, it was noted that Evergreen Covenant Church is located in a retirement and resort community. The majority of those who live in the immediate area are retired. With age comes the challenge of health complications. There was no way to adequately assess whether this program was able to impact this aspect of the participant's mental, emotional, and spiritual life. I anticipate that listening prayer practices will indeed be beneficial to those dealing with health challenges. This benefit would occur over time, as participants pray less about being physically healed and spend more time reflecting on how God is meeting them in and through their challenges. For example, Paul prayed for his ailment to be removed but learned that God was able to bring good out adversity (2 Cor 12:1–10). Paul said explicitly that God responded to him with this revelation. Listening prayer makes room for considering God's response apart from answering prayer in the way requested.

The most significant difficulty encountered in the overall program was related to time commitment. The initial Sabbath retreat anticipated this and emphasized the biblical precedent for setting aside time to spend with God in solitude and silence, using listening prayer practices. Of the original eight participants, six attended the retreat. One of the two participants who missed the retreat departed the program altogether, while the other missed the retreat due to life circumstances but attended a majority of the seminars. All of the six who attended the retreat missed one or more of the seminars. Though the importance of participation and attendance was stressed before the participants committed to the program, daily demands proved to be a hindrance to complete

participation. Those who missed one or more seminars were provided with the prayer practice worksheets as a guide to use individually.⁷

The Sabbath retreat and listening prayer seminars introduced a group of evangelicals to a variety of listening prayer practices. All of the participants indicated they saw the biblical foundation and importance of listening prayer practices. All surveys indicated that the listening practices helped deepen participants' sense of God's presence and voice in their lives. Of course, whether the experience will continue to deepen and prove lasting will depend upon the regular continued use of listening prayer in the participants' lives. While simply reading the Bible or using vocative prayers more might also have a positive result, it seems more likely that listening prayer practices will be of greater benefit to the individual in areas of self-awareness and personal reflection. Deepening awareness of the work God is doing in one's inner life leads to transformation, as well as a clearer sense of God's response and personal direction as it relates to specific issues and circumstances in a person's life.

⁷ While the retreat was limited to committed participants, the Listening Prayer Seminars were open to the public. Since the seminars were scheduled in the place of the usual weekly Bible study, there were typically about fourteen attendees at any given seminar. Attendees who were not committed participants were not interviewed or surveyed. They were however encouraged to participate in discussions related to their experience of the prayer practice which was being used. These comments from attendees were not used in this evaluation process. Only feedback from committed participants are being considered.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The “Listening Prayer for Talkative Evangelicals” initiative at Evergreen Covenant Church confirmed that participants tended toward verbal prayer and did not have much familiarity with more reflective practices that seek God’s response and direction for their daily lives. The listening prayer practices were received as being fundamentally biblical and helpful. Through these practices, participants gained self-awareness, a deepened awareness of God’s presence and growing intimacy, and a clearer sense of God’s voice and direction within their personal lives.

While implementing the program, external demands became an apparent challenge and hindrance, interfering with participants’ availability for all parts of the program. Each participant missed some part of the program, whether it was the retreat or one or more of the seminars or spiritual direction sessions. This confirmed the difficulty of demands as discussed in the Sabbath seminar during the retreat.

One participant, who attended the retreat but missed all of the following seminars, described an unexpected demand by his employer for him to oversee production at distant work plants. This participant expressed thankfulness for the listening prayer practice worksheets and identified with Brueggemann’s depiction of Pharaoh’s culture of

production, consumption, and anxiety. During a direction session, we discussed using listening prayer practices such as the examen, which takes time to reflect on the presence and activity of God even within the context of a busy day.

One of the program areas most in need of address has to do with the retreat. While there was a strong response in favor of the retreat seminars, which laid out a biblical understanding and foundation for Sabbath, Shema, solitude and silence, participants had difficulty existing within the solitude and silence itself. A few prayer practice worksheets were handed out, encouraging and instructing participants on how to use the prayer labyrinth and a parable or nature walk, but many participants said they would have liked assistance beyond this. Most would have liked a more directive approach to using the times of solitude between the seminars and more time to hear the thoughts and experiences of the other participants. While the difficulty of solitude and silence was an intentional part of the experience, there was too much undirected time for those new to the practice of contemplation.

The most significant change I would make to this project is to move the Sabbath retreat to the end of the experience. By placing the retreat at the beginning of the project, I was attempting to draw interest for potential participants as many were most familiar and excited about this experience. I thought the retreat would be a good venue for introducing the concepts of Sabbath and listening prayer within the context of solitude and silence. I aimed at introducing them to the uncomfortableness of solitude and silence, but I feel this proved to be too much for them. The participants expected more guidance and were ill-equipped to appreciate the uncomfortableness of solitude and silence at this

point. Scheduling the seminars before the retreat would provide participants with newfound practices as a means of engaging God within the solitude and silence.

Future attempts at introducing and encouraging the continued practice of listening prayer disciplines will also need to take into consideration the demands and hindrances of participants' daily lives. The prayer practices will need to be integrated into other aspects of congregational life, such as Bible studies and small groups, Sunday sermons and worship services, as well as independent prayer retreats. Opportunities to keep listening prayer practices before the congregation will need to be provided, or the practice risks becoming an event or something that was tried once and then faded out of memory.

While it is unlikely that using listening prayer within the context of a Sunday worship service will become a regular habit, outlines of prayer practices can be provided as inserts in the Sunday bulletin. Suitable practices can be connected with sermons and offered as part of the take away of that week's lesson. Specific listening practice disciplines might also be experienced within the context of a service from time to time, allowing for interaction with the practice as well as feedback within the meeting. For example, a lectio contemplation, practiced in relation to a passage being studied during a Sunday service, might invite congregation members to share the word or phrase that seemed to stand out for them, integrating those thoughts and reflections into the sermon or lesson.

On a larger scale, this program's emphasis on evangelical language and scriptural precedence for introducing congregations to listening prayer practices could be of great benefit to the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination's current attempt at educating churches in contemplative prayer. The denomination's introduction of spiritual direction,

listening prayer practices, and retreat offerings has been rather direct, with little explanation or intentional biblical teaching. Evangelicals might be more receptive to these techniques, which are unfamiliar to them, if they were framed in familiar language. Laying out a clear biblical precedent for such practices would help break down barriers and resistances congregation members might have as their first response to unfamiliar disciplines that seek to experience God in a more personal way.

An additional step toward introducing individual congregations to the listening prayer practices would also include equipping pastors and lay leaders to lead such initiatives within their congregations. As it stands, most of the denomination's attempts at introducing contemplative prayer have relied on the participation of congregation members during larger denominational events. Less frequently, the denomination has sent retreat leaders to congregations. This has always been at the initiative and request of the congregation. It seems the best way to introduce and cultivate listening prayer practices within the congregation would be to equip leaders within the congregation to both initiate and lead the local church in this endeavor, through a variety of means, on a more frequent and consistent basis.

At Evergreen, steps are being taken to make contemplative prayer a more regular part of congregational life. A prayer labyrinth is now available on the church property as well as a quarter-mile prayer path through the woods offering fourteen prayer stations with guided prayer practices. Contemplative retreats are becoming a more regular part of congregational life. A section of the church website now offers a variety of resources connected with the contemplative life. If the church desires to train disciples who are

becoming more like Christ, intentionality in cultivating a prayer life that leads to greater self-awareness and divine discernment will be integral to the process.

APPENDIX A

SABBATH RETREAT SCHEDULE

Sabbath, Solitude & Silence Retreat

Friday:

Arrival any time after 3p

5:30p Dinner

7:00p Session 01: Sabbath

Saturday:

7:30a Breakfast (self-serve)

8:00a Centering Prayer Chapel

9:00a Session 02: Shema

12:00p Group Gathering

12:30p Lunch

1:30p Session 03: Solitude

4:30p Group Gathering

5:30p Dinner

7:00p Session 04: Silence

Sunday:

7:30a Breakfast

8:00a Prayer Gathering Chapel

11:45a Closing Session: Havdalah

12:30p Lunch

APPENDIX B

LISTENING PRAYER SEMINAR SCHEDULE

September 12 th	Colloquy (conversational prayer): The practice of making space for God's response within the context of dialogue
September 19 th	Lectio Divina: Reading Scripture devotionally and discovering a personal Word for my life now.
September 26 th	Examen: Finding God in the midst of our hours and days.
October 3 rd	Imaginative Prayer: Encountering Christ in the Gospels.
October 10 th	Discernment: Finding God's guidance for life decisions.
October 17 th	Contemplation: The practice of the presence of God.
October 24 th	Dreams: Connecting your subconscious with conscious prayer.

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE OF LISTENING PRAYER SEMINAR WORKSHEETS

Listening Prayer Worksheet: Lectio Divina

Desire	To encounter God through Scripture. ¹ Hearing God’s particular word to me at this particular time and place in my life. ²
Definition	Sacred Reading or Devotional Reading
Scripture	<p>2 Timothy 3:16–17 <i>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.</i></p> <p>Hebrews 4:12 <i>For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.</i></p> <p>Joshua 1:8 <i>Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.</i></p> <p>Matthew 4:4 <i>Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”</i></p>
Practice Includes	<p>Read a short passage of Scripture with the intent to hear a word or phrase that sticks out to you. Meditate on that word or phrase to discover what God may be saying to you through it.</p> <p>The Lectio Divina has four parts: Begin with a moment of silence.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>Lectio</i>: Read Read a short passage of Scripture aloud. Pay attention to a word or phrase that seems to stand out to you. Hold that word/phrase without analyzing it.2. <i>Meditatio</i>: Meditate Read the passage aloud again. Listen for an invitation from God through your word/phrase. Reflect upon the significance of the word/phrase for your life now.3. <i>Oratio</i>: Respond

¹ Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything*, 155.

² Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 168.

Read the passage a third time. Enter into colloquy (conversation/dialogue) with God about what this word/phrase brings up for you. Be real. What are the invitations and/or resistances? Talk to God about these and imagine what he might say in return.

4. *Contemplatio*: Contemplate/Act

Read the passage a final time. Be still in the presence of God. Recall the word/phrase. What does God desire for you to take with you into the day/week from this divine reading?

Fruit Encountering God in Scripture and hearing his word for our lives today. Obedience leads to Christlikeness.

Lectio Divina: Sacred Reading

Lectio Divina is the simple practice of reading a short passage of Scripture and noticing a word or phrase that stands out to you. You spend time with the passage, narrowing in on a word or phrase through a four-step process: *Lectio*/Reading, *Meditatio*/Meditating, *Oratio*/Praying & *Contemplatio*/Contemplation.

The goal of practicing lectio is to encounter God through Scripture. Specifically, you will seek to hear God's particular word for you at this particular time and place in your life. Lectio Divina is also known as Devotional Reading. It is devotional rather than informational, because the word that comes to you from it is more directional and formational than study oriented.

Lectio Divina is an ancient Xian practice that can be connected back to Origin of Alexandria (185–234). Origin wrote, "...and when you devote yourself to the divine reading, uprightly and with a faith fixed firmly on God seek the meaning of the divine words which is hidden from most people." Origin understood the Bible to be living & active, believing God spoke through it to the reader in a personal and revealing way. Origin did not create the four movements of lectio, but certainly embraced the personal and devotional nature upon which lectio is founded.

Raymond Studzinski writes, "[Origin] maps a way to move beyond the letter and to garner spiritual meaning while holding to the Rule of Faith—the belief and teaching of the church." That is, Origin captures the spiritual nurturing nature of the text, which is not bound to that of information or history telling. Yet he also holds firmly to the conviction that any word from God that comes through Scripture will not contradict the sacred belief and teaching of church. For evangelicals, we might emphasize that what we hear from God through the Scripture will not contradict the plain meaning of Scripture.

The practice of sacred reading as we have it today continued to develop through the years. It found its most distinctive shape under St. Benedict (ca. 480–ca. 550) within the 'Rule of St. Benedict', written for Benedictine monasteries. St. Benedict coined the term *Lectio Divina* (Sacred Reading) and prescribed for groups of about ten to gather and listen as one person read a passage aloud. The reading was to be slow, so that it could be

savored and digested. This first reading was the *lectio*. The passage was to be read again and even memorized. This second reading was *memor*, meaning *remembering*. This second aspect will be developed further in modern *Lectio* practice. The third part was deemed *Oratio* or *Contemplatio*, which is a heartfelt response to God. This could take the form of both a prayerful response and an action that might flow out as a response to the word one heard God speak to the heart.

“If in fact speaking and teaching are the master’s task; the disciple is to be silent and listen” (Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 6). In this case God is the master who is speaking to them during the *Lectio Divina*, and one needs to listen closely. Within this admonition from chapter 6, we see that Silence plays a key part to the listening of *lectio*.

Over time, the practice of reading and listening became a pattern in monasteries all over the world. The contemporary *lectio* typically has 4 parts: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*.

Biblical Foundation:

The Bible does not describe how it should be read. The practice of *lectio* evolved as way of reading the Bible devotionally. This practice was especially helpful when written texts and literacy were limited. Hearing the passage aloud and focusing in on a word or phrase allowed people to take that word or phrase with them into their day or week. There they could meditate upon it devotionally, allowing God to continue speaking to them through it. This is why *Lectio Divina* is deemed ‘Devotional Reading.’

The principle of *lectio* is Biblical. The practice focuses on God’s word as living and active. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

While reading a passage of Scripture, a word or phrase arises above the rest of passage. This word or phrase is likely to be different for each of the listeners. Each listener is drawn to their word or phrase for a reason. It speaks to some circumstance or question in their life. They may not immediately see the significance of their text, but as they spend time with it, the connection becomes clearer. The subconscious is always dealing and processing our life experiences. The word or phrase that stands out to us likely arises as result of these processes. Hebrews 4:12 declares the word of God ‘penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit...’ and that ‘it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.’ This is very personal in nature. *Lectio* seeks this personal encounter with God.

In another place, it is written, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). In *lectio*, a word or phrase may speak to situation you are experiencing and invite you into conscious dialogue (prayer) with God.

Lectio Divina means *sacred reading*. It is a devotional way of reading the Bible. It is important to remember that Scripture is not primarily a history book giving us facts about past events. Instead, it is a spiritual writing which is intended to read us. That is, it is to reveal something of ourselves to ourselves, with the aim of aligning us more closely with the will and way of God. The lectio is Scripture reading us. As the Timothy passages suggests, the word is able to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us! Its ultimate purpose is to equip us for every good work. Lectio is not about ‘knowing’ answers or ‘correcting others,’ rather it is a way to allow God to read and reorient us. We are taught, rebuked, corrected, trained, and quipped for every good work! What’s more, is that it is personalized, speaking to us in our current circumstances and situation.

Practicing the Lectio:

“As with any prayer, you first ask for God’s help.”

1. *Lectio*/Reading: Select a short passage of Scripture. Read the passage slowly, savoring the words and the scene. What Does the Text Say? What is going on? Is there a word or phrase that stands out among the passage? Stay in silence with that word or phrase for one to two minutes.

2. *Meditatio*/Meditation: Now ask if there is something that God wants to reveal to you through this text. Read the passage slowly a second time. What Is God Saying to Me Through the Text? How might this word or phrase be speaking to some area of my life? Do not assume the meaning but allow God to surprise you. Pay attention to thoughts, feelings and intuition.

3. *Oratio*/Prayer: Read the passage a third time, keeping the word or phrase in mind. What do you want to say to God about the word? Now it’s your turn to speak to God. How does the text make you feel? What questions arise in your mind? What is your reaction? Pour it all out to God. Leave spaces for God’s response (colloquy). Is there an invitation from God in this word or phrase? Do you feel any resistance within yourself? Allow two to three minutes of silence.

4. *Contemplatio*/Action: Read the passage a final time. Then take time to consider what you want to do based on your prayer? It could be anything from a prayer of thankfulness, assistance, or a movement toward action in your daily life. Take your word or phrase with you into the day and be free to continue contemplating and conversing with God concerning it.

Those are the four steps of lectio: read, meditate, pray, act/contemplate.

In conclusion: In evangelicalism we often ‘read the text,’ but in Lectio Divina, we allow the text to read us. We lean into God’s living and active word, not simply to tell us what

happened to someone else a long time ago, but for what it has to say to our lives today. The Bible is not only 'God's word'; it is God's word to us.

How do we know if our devotional reading is from God? It is as simple as asking the question, "Does it shape our spirits in love and humility? Does it lead us more fully into life with God?" Remember, Jesus said, "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." If your devotional reading is drawing you closer to God in love and humility, then it must come from the divine spirit.

APPENDIX D

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Consent Form for Interviews³ Informed Consent

Introduction: My name is Keith Foisy, and I am a student at Fuller Theological Seminary, and creating a ministry that will introduce evangelicals to listening prayer practices. This ministry initiative will be part of a dissertation that will be written and implemented to fulfill requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. My telephone contact information is: (231) 613-4546 or keithfoisy@gmail.com.

My research supervisor is Cindy Lee and her contact information is dmin-fpcoord@fuller.edu or (626) 584-5653. You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to study the practice of listening prayer for congregation members of Evergreen Covenant Church in Branch, MI. I am trying to learn more about introducing evangelical Christians to listening prayer practices in order to develop deepening intimacy with God and to develop an increasing sense of his presence and voice in their daily lives.

Procedure: If you consent, you will be asked several questions that will take place within the context of written surveys, spiritual direction and group discussions that occur throughout the ministry project. I will make an audio recording of the group discussions and take written notes during spiritual direction, which will be available for you to review. Audio recording will not be used during individual spiritual direction. Your real name will not be used or recorded in any writing.

Time required: The interview questions will take place within the context of a retreat, group discussions and spiritual direction. Therefore, the time commitment takes these three aspects of your overall commitment into consideration and will occur within the context of these commitments.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

³ This Permission Request Form was adapted from Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with the assessment of this project. However, it is possible that you might feel distress in the course of the conversation. If this happens, please inform me promptly.

Benefits: While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy sharing your responses to these questions or that you will find the conversation meaningful. This study is intended to benefit the participation group and congregation by enlivening our discourse on the theology and practice of listening prayer.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Your name will be kept confidential in all of the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I will be the only person present for the interview and the only person who listens any recordings. When I write analysis reports, I will use pseudonyms, made-up names, for all participants, unless you specify in writing that you wish to be identified by name. If you wish to choose your own pseudonym for the study, please indicate the first name you would like me to use for you here:

Sharing the results: I plan to construct an ethnography, a written account of what I learn, based on these discussions together with my reading and historical research. This ethnography will be submitted to my research supervisor at the end of the term.

Publication: There is the possibility that I will publish this study or refer to it in published writing in the future. In this event, I will continue to use pseudonyms (as described above) and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

Before you sign:

By signing below, you are agreeing to audio recorded group discussions for this research study and the allowance of personal notes during spiritual direction sessions or formal interview sessions. Be sure that any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Print name: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Print name: _____

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