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Word to Silence: Facilitating Contemplative Silence among Mandarin Speakers in the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary

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WORD TO SILENCE: FACILITATING CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE AMONG MANDARIN SPEAKERS IN THE MALAYSIA BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Written by

MATTHEW KIN HENG LEONG

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

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WORD TO SILENCE: FACILITATING CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE AMONG MANDARIN SPEAKERS IN THE MALAYSIA BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MATTHEW KIN HENG LEONG
FEBRUARY 2019
ABSTRACT

Word to Silence: Facilitating Contemplative Silence among Mandarin Speakers at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary
Matthew Kin Heng Leong
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2019

The goal of this study is to explore how contemplative silence can be used to facilitate spiritual growth among Mandarin speakers at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. It is argued that these inward practices of spiritual disciplines are reproducible, and can lead to spiritual growth on personal and communal levels when introduced in a context sensitive and creative manner. The thesis is tested on student groups that have at least thirty-two hours of spiritual formation class time.

The ministry context is initially examined and includes the Baptist tradition and the worldview of Mandarin speakers. The importance of community in the believer’s journey to be more like Jesus is revealed in a theological reflection on the nature of God as Trinity. A biblical mandate from an examination of Scripture and the life of Christ establishes the use of silence in Christian formation. Similarly, the insights of both ancient and modern-day practitioners contribute to the project design.

To test this hypothesis, silence is introduced using disciplines such as Lectio Divina, solitude, contemplation in nature, spiritual autobiography, and spiritual journaling. To fulfill the goal of the project, students are supervised in spiritual direction sessions while surveys and personal interviews are carried out to gain feedback. On completion of the project, an analysis is done to ascertain impact of contemplative practices on students.

This study concludes practice of contemplative silence as individuals and as a group does bring about an increase in spiritual growth among Mandarin-speaking students. Moreover, these practices are reproducible and applicable in the student’s context. However, due to unpredictable size and heterogeneous profile of each group, these results require additional study before a definite conclusion can be made. While further research is needed, this project can still benefit Mandarin speakers in a seminary or a small group setting.

Content Reader: Cindy Lee, PhD

Words: 297
To the two women who modeled contemplation in my life: Ah Ma and Mama; and to Lan, my companion in the journey
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To the President of MBTS, Dr. John Ong and the Dean of Academics, Dr. Sunny Tan, for encouraging me to finish the project.
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Above all, my utmost gratitude to the God of Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Only in Him “I live and move and have my being” (Ac 17:28).
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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges faced by the Mandarin-speaking students at Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (MBTS) in Christian formation is their perception that strenuous effort is required to practice the spiritual disciplines that lead to life transformation. For some, the process of maturity is by God’s grace and not by works and hence these students are inclined to put in less effort in practicing the spiritual disciplines. Rowan Williams, however, has this to say about the Christian life: “We have to be strenuous yet relaxed.”\(^1\) Williams acknowledges to hold together “the tightly strung pitch of effort” and “the slackness of relaxation” that comes from trusting God is necessary and “far from easy.”\(^2\)

The purpose of this thesis is to introduce spiritual formation practices to second-year Mandarin-speaking seminary students at MBTS so they can experience spiritual growth through disciplines of contemplative silence, while holding in helpful tension both effort and living under the grace of God. In this seminary, I teach full-time and part-time students, and have also been assigned as a spiritual mentor to second-year students. I closely oversee the students’ spiritual growth for the whole academic year, and this is my fourth year in the role. In this ministry project, the nature, process, means, and appropriateness of contemplative prayer are examined by conducting lectures, guided practices, and personal spiritual direction for these Mandarin-speaking students. The main purpose of the project is to facilitate spiritual growth in individuals and communities.


\(^2\) Ibid.
Thomas Kelly is one of the most influential spiritual guides in the last century. Kelly persuades believers to engage “internal practices and habits of the mind” as an avenue “of conducting our inward life so that we are perpetually bowed in worship, while we are also very busy in the world of daily affairs.” He says, “This practice is the heart of the religion. It is the secret, I am persuaded, of the inner life of the Master of Galilee. He expected this secret to be freshly discovered in everyone who would be His follower.” Kelly rightly identifies a strong interior life of worship as a key to authentic spiritual maturity even while participating fully in the activities of this world.

However, the seminary often does not intentionally provide the ministry of facilitating spiritual growth at the deeper level. Spiritual growth of the students is assumed to automatically happen when they enter and study Christian related topics. This pursuit of head knowledge, academic grades, and the lack of spiritual formation practices have contributed to a rather fractured understanding of Christian spirituality, one that is not dynamic and life transforming.

Moreover, in the MBTS academic curriculum, spiritual formation is placed under a compulsory but non-credited category. As a result, some students do not take spiritual formation as seriously as they should. Millennial students also tend to be more absorbed with social media and other distractions. They struggle with attentiveness in class, time management, and priorities. As a result, a significant number of graduates leave their pastoral roles or drop out of ministry because they are not able to cope with ministry

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4 Ibid.
demands and stresses. Attrition of ministers due to burnout and moral failings is a sad reality and the seminary has a responsibility to provide an environment to nourish and shape the inner life of future pastors and leaders, and not just focus on programs and academics.

One of the ways to prevent this attrition is for students to grow deeper in their journey of faith, especially through the practice of silence found in specific Christian disciplines such as silence and solitude, *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading), and contemplating nature. Learning these disciplines enables students to nourish their own inner lives since these disciplines are means by which one meets God personally, as demonstrated in the lives of saints in history. Practicing these disciplines also reveals the commitment of students to seek first the kingdom of God in their lives.

The model used by many seminaries and for most spiritual formation programs is still from a Western perspective. Therefore, curriculum for the students is designed for an Asian context, in particular a Malaysian one. This design takes into consideration the colonial legacy of the country and religious pluralism of its multicultural and multiethnic society that has Islam as the dominant religion. The factors shaping and influencing individual and group setting are also considered to ensure no bias towards a particular culture or group.

In the strategy to introduce these spiritual practices, appropriate resources for teaching are selected, and some contextualized practices for students are incorporated into the design. In this project, focus is on the role and impact of the community on spiritual growth of these second-year Mandarin-speaking students. According to Alex Tang, existing trends in contemporary Christian spiritual formation focus primarily on the
individual and the “perfecting of the self” rather than on communities.\textsuperscript{5} This is understandable because these resources on Christian formation are predominantly from the West.

Tang examines Christian spiritual formation paradigms in the English-speaking groups with a more Western individualistic orientation to life. However, Western spiritual formation resources are increasingly being translated and introduced to non-English speakers as well. There is little work done to take into account the impact of such cultural differences on purpose and practice. Therefore, in the proposed spiritual formation strategy for the Asian and non-English speakers, the project introduces teaching and practices not only to facilitate spiritual growth as an individual, but also in the context of a prayerful and loving community.

There are some significant terms or working definitions used in this study.\textsuperscript{6} These definitions are refined for ministry context as the study proceeds. For example, a spiritual discipline is a planned, regular activity of the body and mind designed to form the spirit. Through disciplines for the spiritual life, along with God’s grace, the apprentice develops Christlikeness and an increasing participation in God’s kingdom and the divine order. Nation also writes, “A spiritual discipline is a mental and physical act and a habit that expresses our love for God and fosters a greater display of His glory in our lives and a

\textsuperscript{5} Alex Tang, \textit{Till We Are Fully Formed: Christian Spiritual Formation Paradigms in the English-Speaking Presbyterian Churches in Malaysia} (Malaysia: Malaysia Bible Seminary, 2014), 1.

\textsuperscript{6} Elane O’Rourke and Dallas Willard, \textit{A Dallas Willard Dictionary}, 2nd ed. (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 243-256.
The process of spiritual formation in Christ is an intentional one to shape a person’s inner being to be like the inner being of Christ that is God-connected, self-denying, joyful, and easily obedient. While spiritual formation is always dependent upon the leadership of the Spirit and the provision of God’s grace, it is founded on intentional human efforts. Contemplation is traditionally defined as a specific disposition of attentive and responsive receptivity that causes self-consciousness, and therefore experience, to recede or is the consequence of that process. According to Merton, contemplation is “that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder . . . It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source.”

One of the assumptions in this project is the learning experience is best structured in a small group, within the existing structure of the seminary. Another assumption is specific Christian disciplines practiced over a significant period of time increases the possibility of a positive spiritual growth experience for the participants. The final assumption is students who have benefited and grown spiritually are willing to equip others, and also be given opportunities to do so. In view of these assumptions, these research questions need to be addressed: What is a suitable approach to contemplative silence for Mandarin-speaking students at MBTS that is biblically and theologically

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sound? What approaches are sensitive to the distinctive culture of these students? Are these approaches reproducible in the lives and ministries of the students?

The central ministry issue is the spiritual formation program of Mandarin speakers at MBTS has lacked a more holistic approach to Christian spiritual growth. Although the Baptist tradition which is centered on the word has contributed a strong biblical and theological foundation in students, these students still lack experiences in contemplative disciplines that can build up their inner lives. The spiritual growth in Mandarin-speaking students at MBTS is also impacted by the inability of the students to behold God in a postmodern and fragmented world. The formative approaches in contemplative silence are currently inadequate and un-contextualized for holistic spiritual growth in these Mandarin-speaking students.

The seminary student’s spiritual life should involve the intentional development of his or her inner being into the likeness of Christ. This transformation does not come naturally but requires the student to be diligent in basic spiritual disciplines such as prayer and the reading of the Word. However, this inner transformative process is made increasingly difficult by many distractions found in postmodern, twenty-first century life. Distractions include addictive social media usage and escalating consumerism and materialism, as evidenced in the booming advertisement industry. As a consequence, people, especially the young, are becoming accustomed to a fast paced, fragmented, and material view of life. Seminary students are not immune, and many find it a Herculean task now to spend regular time with God and to behold Him. This has led to a weakening of the students’ prayer lives and relationship with God.
The process of inner transformation toward Christlikeness should not only be intentional but also holistic. A holistic development can only come from a holistic approach that recognizes the believer exists as one within a greater community. There is no one-size-fits-all spiritual formation process, thus a need exists to evaluate the appropriateness of current spiritual formation practices that influence the spiritual growth of each student. From past experience, spiritual formation practiced by the seminary is generally oriented toward the individual and lacked community interaction. As a result, there is a lack of accountability and mutual encouragement that comes from the sharing of life's successes and challenges.

The Chinese school education philosophy is based on rote learning and is results-oriented. Failure is usually not acceptable, discipline is punitive, and it is not appropriate for students to question those in authority. As a result, many of the spiritual formation and discipleship programs unconsciously have these values assimilated in them. There is consequently less life change, especially in the hidden inner life. Therefore, an appropriate pedagogy that is transformative rather than program-oriented is needed to enable spiritual growth of students as a community of faith.

The contextualization of contemplative practices in the community should be done with creativity and sensitivity to the Asian setting. In doing so, students are able to experience the presence of God in a way that seems natural to them and not just as head knowledge. As such, they can better sense the grace of God in their daily experiences. This work attends to the constant struggle between legalism and grace, as well as distraction and stillness in the prayer life. With many of the students coming from a
Buddhist or Confucian background, bridges of commonality need to be built to allow them to cross over and lay claim to the wisdom inherent in Christian spirituality.

It is time to develop a unique MBTS spiritual formation model for the Mandarin-speaking students. This project offers an approach that facilitates their spiritual growth intentionally, yet naturally. This is possible when the Asian value of communal rather than individualistic spirituality is taken into consideration.

The methodology for this project is based on qualitative research. This approach is chosen because unlike quantitative research that tends to be rigid, qualitative research can give better insights into the complex reality that accompanies the spiritual growth of seminary students. In this qualitative research, the methodology involves collection of data after each session of silence in different settings. The Mandarin-speaking students give feedback on their feelings in the presence of God at that point in time. In addition, in-depth interviews and personal spiritual direction sessions are carried out with each student. During the research, feedback is sought from faculty members and seminary students for their views on spiritual formation and spirituality in a community setting. At the end of their program, students do a survey and submit it to the facilitator.

There are a few limitations to this study. For instance, the project is located to a seminary setting and in particular, the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary. The scope of the spiritual formation approach is limited to an Asian context that includes Mandarin-speaking Chinese. This study is approached qualitatively rather than quantitatively because of the nature of the subject—spirituality. The intentional use of surveys and face-to-face interviews is not primarily for the purpose of gaining data, though important, but more for building relationships with students. As such, this project
also offers opportunities for interactions that can foster and impact the lives of students, especially in the area of spiritual growth.

The greatest obstacle to this project is the lack of background information on contemplative silence. There are only a few studies conducted on spiritual formation in Malaysian seminaries, with almost none on contemplative silence. This study on facilitating spiritual growth using contemplative silence in a seminary setting may be the first attempt among Mandarin speakers in Malaysia.
CHAPTER 1
MINISTRY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

This chapter is an overview of Christianity in Malaysia and the Malaysian Church context, and also to trace the history of the Baptist congregations in Malaysia. As Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious country, it is important to understand how Christianity came to Malaysia, and how it is perceived by society at large. This understanding has implications for the development of a contextualized spiritual formation program for believers in this country, and even for those in the regional countries that share a similar cultural heritage.

The Malaysian Baptist churches have their roots in the modern Baptist movement of the seventeenth century, and the movement's beliefs have guided the congregations in their spiritual formation process as a community of saints. These beliefs have also provided insights for the nurture of the seminary students at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. The spiritual formation of the students is highlighted in this chapter by describing the current formation program of students in MBTS. Contextualization issues in spiritual formation development are presented along with issues that stem from the increased enrolment of students from other denominations and countries.
Church and Christianity in Malaysia

Malaysia is a country located in Southeast Asia. It consists of Peninsular or West Malaysia and East Malaysia, which is a part of Borneo Island. Because of geographical distances, the establishment of Christianity for both West and East Malaysia has a different trajectory. For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on the Christian history of Peninsula Malaysia, because it includes Penang Island where the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary is situated (see Appendices A and B).

As early as first century BC, the Malay Peninsula was already part of the maritime and trade route between Southeast Asia, China, India, and beyond. As a result, the major influences on culture in terms of language, literature, and social norms were from Hindu and Buddhist elements found in India. There were also Nestorian traders from Persia who plied the route around the seventh century, and these left a number of Christian settlements in the Malayan Peninsula.\(^1\) However, in the thirteenth century, the Indian and Arab traders brought Islam to the region, and by the fifteenth century, the Malacca Sultanate converted from Hinduism and established Islam as the religion for the Malays. The Malays are a majority people group in Malaysia today.

It can be said that Christianity came to Malaysia with either the ships and the guns, or the goods. There were three waves of colonialism in the Peninsular: the Portuguese in the 1500s, the Dutch in the 1600s, and the British in the 1700s and 1800s.\(^2\) Roxborogh, a noted historian on Christianity in Malaysia, writes, “In terms of Christian

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impact on the Malay Peninsular the Portuguese had neither the vision nor the moral and spiritual energy to contemplate evangelism. Inevitably, Christianity was perceived as the religion of invading foreigners whose presence was unwelcome. “3 Until today, Christianity is still seen as a foreign faith by Malaysians.

The conquering Dutch also did not influence the locals in terms of religion. They were more preoccupied with trade and profit, and Dutch private companies were not supportive of missionary activities. The Dutch set up the Lutheran Reformed Church in Malacca on the west coast of the peninsula, but persecuted the Catholics.4 Many Catholics fled to places such as Penang. The Dutch formed advantageous alliances with the local Malay rulers in exchange for non-interference in religious matters pertaining to Islam. Agreements such as these served to drive the wedge further between the adherents of Islam and other faiths.

The third wave of colonization was by the British as their influence in the Malay Peninsula grew with the establishments of Straits Settlement ports in Penang (1786), Singapore (1819), and Malacca (1824).5 The priority of the colonial government was centered on the tin and rubber industries. However, the Straits Settlement ports were also missionary hubs where Christian outreach and activities spread out to other parts of the peninsula. Unfortunately, due to the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor in 1874 to bring the

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Peninsula states under the control of the British, restrictions were placed on Christian evangelism of the Malays.

The coming of the British to Penang in the late 18th century was a pivotal turn in its history, both culturally and economically. Penang became the first British trading post in the Far East in 1786, and was known as the Prince of Wales Island. Its capital, George Town, was named after the reigning King George III. One of the main trades in Penang was that of spices, with the planting of nutmeg and cloves on the island.6 Other traded commodities included betel nuts, rattan, opium, tin, salt, tobacco, and oil.7

Penang functioned as an entrepôt that attracted merchants and traders from all over the region. A census taken in 1788 mentioned a population that included Malays, Chinese, Jawi-Pekans (mixed race Muslim Indians with native Malay spouses), Portuguese-Eurasians, and Europeans—the smallest number but "wealthiest elite" during those times.8 Other ethnic groups included the Armenians, Jews, Burmese, Thais, Bugis, Ambonese, Javanese, Acehnese, Rawanese, Minangkabaus, and other peoples of the archipelago; groups from North India such as the Gujaratis, Bengalis, and Parsis; South Chinese groups such as the Cantonese, Hokkiens, Hakkas, Teochews, and Hainanese

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8 Ibid., 154.
were also present. The Ceylonese, Sikhs, Japanese, and Filipinos were later additions to Georgetown.  

In 1800, Sir George Leith the Governor of Penang wrote, “There is not probably in any part of the world so small a space in which so many different people are assembled or so great a variety of languages spoken.”

Despite this melting pot of diversity, common life was still in a way segregated, both by race and status, as different groups lived in their own zones based on ethnic and cultural affinities. However, there were instances where fusion of cultures gave rise to sub-groups such as the Peranakans, a people group having both Chinese and Malay traditions.

In the late eighteenth century, Christianity arrived and was established in Penang by three main Christian groups: the Catholics, the Anglicans, and the London Missionary Society (LMS). According to Roxborogh, the Anglicans were less eager than the Catholics to spread their denomination because ministry was catered for only the expatriates as part of the East India Company chaplaincy. Michael Northcott attributed this lack of growth in the Anglican church to its lack of indigeneity stemming from “racial overtones” right until Malaysia's independence in 1957. As such, Christianity continues today to be seen as the white man's religion.

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, the revival of mission interests in the American churches resulted in an influx of Protestant mission activity in Southeast Asia. These events also “coincided with the era of industrialization and scientific progress in Europe” which led to developments in education and healthcare that the British introduced to the country.\(^\text{13}\) The missionaries that came to this region at this time were the Scottish Presbyterians (1851), the Open Brethren (1860), the Swiss Lutheran Basel church (1882), and the American Methodist (1885).\(^\text{14}\)

In the twentieth century, other denominations and mission groups also set up their outreaches in Malaysia. These included the Evangelical Lutherans (1907), Adventists (1911), and the Mar Thoma Church (1926) from India.\(^\text{15}\) North American churches such as the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptists also increased their presence in this region, and in 1938, the Salvation Army also established their first headquarters here.\(^\text{16}\)

The Church in Malaysia became more indigenous when the government imposed a ten-year limit for all foreign missionaries after the country's independence from the British in 1963. Local people who became Christians in schools, rose to assume leadership roles in the Malaysian Church. The formation of the National Evangelical

\(^{13}\) Robbie B. H. Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 8.


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 264.

Christian Fellowship (NECF) in 1983 and the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) in 1986 united believers across denominational, organizational, and linguistic lines.¹⁷

There was church growth in the 1970s due to the Charismatic Renewal in the mainline denominations and the emancipating of laity, especially the women. There was also a proliferation of specialized ministries such as those focusing on youth and uniform groups, the disabled, and the drug addicts. These ministries have contributed significantly to Malaysian society to share the gospel in action. As the church established and grew, mission work was not just incoming to the country, but also outgoing as local churches began to send local mission workers to different parts of the country, as well as overseas.

Until today, the impact of the church growth movement from America is also significant. Local churches in some denominations, especially the English-speaking and/or Pentecostal ones, aspire to copy the mega-church structure and ideology of the West. These churches tend to be more program-oriented and are largely influenced by resources from the Christian West. There is very little in the way of developing local and contextualized resources for discipleship and Christian formation. As such, the bulk of the materials used is imported and is more biased towards the tradition of evangelicalism and activism.

The historical contributions of foreign missionaries in Malaysia were most significant in areas of church planting and social ministries to the marginalized, as well as in the fields of education, medical services, and translation work. However, after two

hundred years since the introduction of Christianity in the country, the percentage of Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) remains relatively low at 9.2 percent compared with other faiths such as Islam (61.3 percent) and Buddhism (19.8 percent). Other religions found in the country include Hinduism (6.3 percent), Confucianism, Taoism, other Chinese traditional religions (1.3 percent), and others or unknown religions (2.2 percent).

It is useful to compare the composition of the ethnic groups in Malaysia along with the religious profile above. The ethnic groups include Malays (63.1 percent), Chinese (24.6 percent), indigenous or tribals (4.3 percent), Indians (7.3 percent), and others such as the Eurasians (0.7 percent). In Malaysia, the Malay identity is bound up with Islam, and it is against the law to proselytize to this people group. The result of this embargo is reflected in the ethnic and religious profiles where Malays remain Muslim, while Christians are made up of Chinese, tribals, Indians, and Eurasians. In Penang, only 5.1 percent of its population is Christian, and these numbers are made up of ethnic groups such as Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. Even though 42.9 percent of the Penang population is Chinese, most follow Buddhism (35.6 percent), and Chinese folk religions (4.6 percent).

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.
The historical background of the Malaysian Church shows a robust Western heritage that still influences the identity and expression of the local church today. There is still little contextualization of teaching and discipleship resources, except for the translation of English resources into local languages. One consequence of this lack of contextualization is church leaders and ministers have not been trained to critically evaluate the appropriateness of these resources for their congregations.

The Malaysian church profile is culturally very diversified. However, it is still divided along ethnic lines to cater for groups such as English, Chinese, or Indian speakers. Churches may have a bilingual service or have many separate services in different languages. The members from Chinese-speaking churches can be from a Fukien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew, or Foochow background. Even though these dialect groups come under the broad definition of Chinese, each of these groups has its own unique language, customs, and traditions.

In Malaysia, a plethora of spiritualties and worldviews can be found in its diverse cultures. Spirituality and spiritual matters are core aspects of an Asian worldview. First-generation Christians, meaning those who come from a non-Christian background, need to experience not just a change of allegiance to Christ but also a transformation of worldview from a non-biblical to a biblical one. Unfortunately, what constitutes a biblical approach to life is often muddled with a Western-biased way of practicing the faith, which is not wrong, but inadequate to address issues that arise in a non-Western context. Therefore, the formation process of Christians who come from another religious background is decidedly more complex, and needs to be carefully and thoughtfully contextualized to lessen the risk of a spiritual colonization by the West.
Baptist History and Contributions in Malaysia

As this thesis focuses on a local Baptist seminary, more details on Baptist history in Malaysia, specifically in Penang, is provided. This includes some features of its ecclesiology that have shaped Christian formation in the seminary. The first known Baptists in Malaysia were those who came from Swatow, China in 1905. In 1938, some of them formed the first Baptist church in Malaya, called the Oversea-Chinese Baptist Church (Swatow) in Alor Star, a town situated near the north of the peninsula. Baptists from China also went to other parts of the land.

Although it was Asians who began the Baptist work in Malaysia, missionaries from the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention also partnered to help new churches establish and grow. Some Baptist ladies from China made a request to the United States for help to establish a Baptist church in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Miss Jessie Green from the Southern Baptist Convention who had worked among the Cantonese in China was the first to arrive in 1951. Many others followed her and settled in various parts of Malaysia. They preached the gospel, bought lands, erected buildings, and built many churches all over Malaysia. Some missionaries also came from Hong Kong to work hand-in-hand with the missionaries from the United States. The missionaries played a vital role in advancing the Baptist work in Malaysia, and eventually handed over the task to locals.

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21 Wei-Tjang, Hwang, "The Baptist Church in West Malaysia," in Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborogh, eds., Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia.: Pelanduk Publications, 1992), 244-246.

The coming of the missionaries gave a strong impetus for growth among the Baptists. From the beginning, Malaysian Baptists worked together to form the Malaya Baptist Convention in 1953, and to organize various regional associations. Most of the ministries of the convention are carried out through its four boards: education, seminary, mission, and service. By the end of 2006, there were over 160 Baptist churches and chapels with over 19,000 members from all the major cities of Malaysia to the interior regions of East Malaysia.23

In Penang, the Penang Baptist Church was the first to be established in 1953. Sunday services were at first held at the home of Mrs. Oh Hock Teck until the church purchased a bungalow at 35, Anson Road.24 This bungalow was not just used as a church and residence of Rev. Green and Martha Strother, missionaries from the Southern Baptist Convention, but also used as a theological seminary. In 1954, an English-speaking youth fellowship was established at the Penang Baptist Church, a Chinese-speaking assembly.25 However, a separate English worship service was set up when the English-speaking congregation grew. Georgetown Baptist Church, the tenth Baptist church in Malaysia eventually began in 1956 to accommodate English speakers. It initially used the rented premises of Penang Baptist Church, but a gift from the Lottie Moon Fund and the local


congregation enabled the purchase of another site at Larut Road. This site is where Georgetown Baptist Church, one of the largest churches in Penang, is currently located.

To understand the spiritual formation of members in Baptist congregations, one needs to understand Baptist ecclesiology as it is within congregational life that Baptists experience the reality of their beliefs. The Baptist beliefs that influence their faith formation include the Bible as the infallible word of God, autonomy of the local church, the believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper, the priesthood of all believers, and the separation of church and state. For the seminary, the most influential distinctive would be the Bible as the infallible word of God, therefore the Baptists are non-creedal people. Baptists believe the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and guides the person reading it to Jesus Christ.

**Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary (MBTS)**

The Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary is located in Batu Ferringhi on Penang Island that has approximately 730,000 people. The seminary is going to be seventy years old in the year 2024. It was established on 11 January 1954 at 35, Anson Road, Penang. It had three teachers, four students and Dr. Greene W. Strother, a Southern Baptist missionary, as the first president. In 1976, Dr. Wayne Siao’s appointment as the sixth president made him the first national to hold the post. In May of 1997, Dr. John Ong, a Penangite, was elected the eighth president and is responsible for the seminary’s current emphasis on cross-cultural missions.

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Every year, a program called the School of Transcultural Missions is carried out in June until August. Besides mission and pastoral programs, the seminary also offers specialized courses in Child Studies. MBTS is the only seminary in Malaysia that offers missiology at doctoral level, as well as youth ministry and holistic child development at masters level. All these courses have attracted foreigners and students from other parts of Malaysia. These students are either residential full-time or non-residential part-time students. Languages that are used in the seminary include English, Mandarin, Malay, and Korean.

The vision of MBTS is to equip men and women to fulfill the task commanded in Ephesians 4:11-13, “Preparing God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up and become mature,” and in Matthew 28:18-20, “to make disciples of all nations.” Strategic partnerships with other theological bodies and churches provide resources that support this vision. Therefore, the seminary is committed to provide quality theological training to church leaders who have a strong sense of calling and commitment to serve God.

There are three formative philosophies foundational for students in this seminary. These include being a called person, a person in community, and a person in ministry and witness. The call to ministry distinguishes between those who are enrolled to study in the seminary and regular members of the local church. Over the years, a sense of one’s calling is observed by the faculty to be the most important factor that determines whether students can succeed in their studies. Faculty members have to give input on applications.

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28 Ibid.
made by potential students before they are accepted. From testimonies and references submitted by students, the faculty discerns whether they are born-again and in the process of growing spiritually. Students who have a strong sense of calling are generally ones who will be effective in ministry and a blessing to local churches.

A Baptist congregation is a spiritual community or family in which members are concerned for each other. Although Baptists affirm the priesthood of individuals, they oppose individualism as they believe the New Testament teaches that believers are the body of Christ. Likewise, student life in the seminary is also one centered in community. Therefore, communal living, and the caring and praying for one another, all play an important role in shaping the spiritual formation of each student. Residential students stay in dormitories and are assigned communal tasks such as cleaning and kitchen duties. Students are also expected to attend dawn-prayer meetings and chapel services on Tuesdays. There is a student council that organizes activities and events for the seminary. The ability to live in community and build healthy relationships is an important facet of Christian formation for students.

Ministry and witness are two fundamentals in the Baptist faith held in balance. The seminary has adopted this approach to equip its students. Besides academic studies and communal living, students also have their weekend ministry in various Penang churches. Depending on the hosting church, these internships give them hands-on training in ministries such as Sunday School, youth, pastoral, and preaching. Students are also expected to share their faith and witness for the gospel whenever there are opportunities.
Besides preparing students to do active ministries, one of the objectives for training in the seminary is “to nurture in students a deep spiritual life which will enable them to exemplify Christian character and deal with the challenges of ministry through God's power.”

Prior to 2008, materials used for spiritual formation mostly came from the Southern Baptist Church, with the curriculum focusing on development of the 3Hs: Head, Heart, and Hands. In 2008, visiting faculty member Glen G. Scorgie introduced his book *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality* to the seminary. The dean of academics, Dr. Sunny Tan, decided to implement principles found within the book by incorporating the three dimensions suggested by Scorgie with the three years of undergraduate studies. These dimensions are the Relational Dynamic: Christ with us, the Transformational Dynamic: Christ in us, and the Vocational Dynamic: Christ through us.

The implementation of these dimensions for first-year students includes an understanding of the self. These first-year students are placed under the care of Ms. Koh Tan Peng who is a trained and licensed counselor. She guides students to discover their personality types using Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The overall goal for first-year students is to know themselves with the guidance of a teacher.

When the students enter the second year, they are expected to learn and cultivate different spiritual disciplines that enhance their relationship with God. This is the role I have been assigned to facilitate. During the third or final year, faculty members will

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develop the readiness of students to face challenges arising from pastoral issues in ministry.

At present, these spiritual formation courses are compulsory but still not credited, and the seminary emphasizes more on academia and active ministries. As a result, students struggle to keep up with their devotional lives and neglect them in the midst of busyness. This is not very helpful for long-term ministry because there is a greater risk of burnout and attrition as future ministers.

**A Brief Context of the Mandarin-speaking Students at MBTS**

There are three groups of Mandarin-speaking students that I teach as a faculty member of MBTS. The first group consists of ten second-year students that are overseen in non-credited spiritual formation classes at the seminary. The second group consists of thirty-two students who have signed up for a two-credit elective course on Christian Spirituality. These are both full and part-time students. The third group is from a certificate level weekend course for laypeople held at a local church. This four-year program is organized by MBTS to equip leaders from local churches. The emphasis of this course is discipleship and spiritual formation. There are around thirty regular participants for this course. Students from these three groups go through at least thirty-two hours of spiritual formation class time.

A detailed demographic profile of students is given in another chapter. Overall, courses are taught in Mandarin to students who come from Penang and other parts of the country. Some students also come from Asian nations such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Brunei, and Korea. These students have a wide range of
occupations such as church leaders or pastors, children and youth ministers, missionaries, retirees, businesspeople, and homemakers.

Even though the seminary is set up by the Baptist denomination, believers from different church traditions such as Pentecostal, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Brethren assembly also enroll in classes. There is an eclectic mix of students because MBTS is the only accredited evangelical seminary in the northern region of Malaysia. As enrolment of Baptist students has decreased in recent years, influx of students has been mostly from other church backgrounds. The interactions between members of different Christian traditions in the seminary are reflective of the diverse church setting in Penang. There are generally healthy partnerships between the evangelical churches. It is not unusual to have workshops and conferences offered across denominational lines.

The commonalities among these Mandarin-speaking students are some basic Asian values and culture even though the students are from different countries. The common values include the importance of community and a non-linear perspective on life. However, most students have been trained in a Western-biased way that is more analytical, individualistic, and compartmentalized. This perspective actually conflicts with the Eastern culture of harmony and integration. Although a Western approach is helpful for building up rational thinking, a more holistic approach is therefore more appropriate for effecting life change for the Asian.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the use of silence in contemplative practices from both Western and non-Western perspectives. This is helpful to understand any similarities and difference between these two perspectives. Insights gained can contribute to a project design that is more holistic for the ministry context. The following are the five resources that contribute to this project.

_Journey of Silence by Peter Chang_

This book written in Mandarin consists of thirty-one short chapters with many practical exercises to guide the reader into a personal journey of silence. The contents of each chapter center on the theme of silence, yet the final chapter is titled Silence Not.¹ This book also describes the “holistic, healthy, and fruitful” interior journey of the author.²

This resource is a blessing for Chinese churches because it is written from an Asian perspective. It has its own distinctive style, and this small and practical book yields profound truth about silence. Although an introvert himself, the writer recognizes that it

¹ Peter Chang, _Journey of Silence_ (Taiwan: Campus Evangelical Fellowship Press, 2000), 157.
² Ibid., 8.
is not easy to master the art of silence. He writes in order to enter into silence, each individual needs to begin with a small step and have the willingness to pay the price.³ For him, the only difference between the silence of Christianity and other faiths is believers have the grace of God and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide them through the process. Silence is practiced not in the believer's own strength but with faith and trust toward God.⁴ The ultimate goal of silence is not the silence itself, but it is to create the space for us to commune with God and listen to his voice.⁵

Despite being a scholar, Chang writes plainly and goes straight to the point with simple and poetic prose to express his thoughts on silence. He slowly guides readers to experience the beauty of silence. For instance, he demonstrates how to begin the practice of silence in short durations, and then to gradually extend these periods into lengthier ones.⁶ Chang also suggests how to practice praying as a group in silence that believers find is one of the best exercises for intercession.⁷ Besides these recommendations, the writer invites readers to contemplate nature, and follow him to do so even in the midst of a busy life in Hong Kong. He gives suggestions on how to walk in silence around the park and during a hike, and in doing this, he writes that one can be continually abide with

³ Ibid., 33.
⁴ Ibid., 61.
⁵ Ibid., 103.
⁶ Ibid., 33.
⁷ Ibid., 65.
God.\textsuperscript{8} Chang also encourages the practice of silence in a small group, with accountability partners assigned for each member.\textsuperscript{9}

Unlike many other Chinese writers who had received theological education from the West, in particular from America, Chang remains sensitive to the culture of the Chinese. In one of his chapters, Chang uses Chinese calligraphy to illustrate how the individual can express the complexity of his inner feelings.\textsuperscript{10} He observes a person in the context of silence is able to attend to his emotions or reduce stress with each gentle brush stroke.\textsuperscript{11} This is a brilliant observation and suggestion that can be applied in future.

In addition, Chang also engages with Scripture in his understanding and practice of silence. He selects portions of Scripture to demonstrate practical ways of practicing silence. For instance, he highlights the temptation of Jesus, the story of Martha and Mary, and the journey of Paul.\textsuperscript{12} He also points out incidences in the Bible where practice of solitude and silence are present, though not obvious.\textsuperscript{13} For example, Paul must have used his travelling time to contemplate his faith in silence, especially for those journeys covered by walking alone. The writer's own engagement with Scripture and prayer done in silence also gives encouragement for readers to emulate his example.

One of the weaknesses of this book is the lack of background study or historical record of how silence was practiced in desert spirituality. This may confuse some readers

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 76-77.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 131-133.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 61, 143, 147-148.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 61.
that the contemplative practices he advocates in the book are no different from those of another religion like Buddhism. In addition, Chang attempts at the last chapter to introduce the psychological concept of electroencephalographic (EEG) briefly.\(^\text{14}\) This is unhelpful because many readers are not able to understand the technical nature of what he is trying to say, even though he tries to link it to the practice of silence. This information seems out of place, and out of sync with the rest of the book. However, the book is still valuable for its insights and doable activities to introduce the art of silence and contemplation.

There are a few compelling reasons why this book will contribute to the ministry project. Firstly, Chang’s clarity in explaining makes readers see that the practice of contemplation is not as mysterious as many may think. This helps students from an evangelical background go beyond doctrine and be more open to build up their inner lives using the practice of contemplation. The ability to contemplate aligns to the lifestyle of Jesus on earth, where every moment was turned into a sacred one.

Secondly, this book is helpful to Mandarin-speaking students because it is written by a Chinese scholar and is not a translated work. This is significant because he writes from a Chinese worldview and this resonates with Chinese readers. Besides this, Chang has taken a long period of time to incubate his thoughts and digest whatever training he had received from the West before writing this book on silence and solitude. As a result, his writing reflects an authentic journey into silence and impacts readers because it is not just a conduit for information but a call to life change.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 151.
Thirdly, this book is instrumental in helping evangelical students who have little or no prior involvement in the practice of silence, experience breakthrough in their own contemplative disciplines. For the past three years, this book has been introduced to more than a hundred students, especially those in the second-year classes at MBTS. Students go through the entire book in the first semester. They appreciate Chang's work because they can easily reproduce whatever he suggests in their lives and enhance their spiritual walk with God. Some students get inspired and quickly apply what they learned to their small group meetings in their home churches. This book is an excellent primer for evangelicals to experience the beauty of silence as a contemplative discipline. By the end of the ministry project, the students should be able to come up with their own ideas on how to go beyond what Chang the author has suggested.

*Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality* by J. Brent Bill

J. Brent Bill is not only a writer, he is also a photographer, popular speaker, retreat leader, and a Quaker minister. This book is recognized as a contemporary classic on contemplative silence, presented from the perspective of the Quaker tradition. In the book, the writer draws readers to experience life transformation through knowing how to hear the voice of God more clearly and intimately in sacred silence. As such, he is able to capture the true language of silence.

In the introduction to Quaker spirituality, the writer touches on the history of the practice of silence in other religious and cultural traditions, such as the Chinese
philosophy called the *Tao Te Ching*. However, he follows all these through with a discussion of the distinctiveness of Quaker silence. He also invites the reader to participate and reflect on silence while learning about it. The writer does this by incorporating stories from his own experience and using “quietude queries” periodically, the latter being the Quaker practice of asking spiritual questions within the silence.

The reader will discover in Quaker tradition that the practice of silence goes beyond what is understood as soul care. Bill highlights historical and biblical foundations of keeping the silence, and demonstrates how this practice can be carried out as an individual or a community. He also approaches the practice of silence from a theological angle and writes about its uniqueness in the Quaker tradition. It was intriguing to learn that Quakers do not use any traditional church rituals for their worship. They do not even use bread and wine during communion.

In the book, Bill writes Quaker tradition began as a quest for an authentic inner spiritual life. During mid-seventeenth century England when there was religious unrest, a group of people grew increasingly disappointed with the religious practices of their day. These practices were ritualistic and formal, and did not nurture the interior life. As such, this group who called themselves the Seekers left the traditional church and began a movement on their own. The belief that true religion is rooted in the inward life guided

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16 Ibid., 121-124.

17 Ibid., 1-8.

18 Ibid., 16.
their practices. As such, the use of silence was incorporated into their practices as a means of cultivating their inner spiritual journey.

George Fox eventually became the leader of the Seekers. He discovered in his own life that when a Christ follower entered into a holy silence, he would be able to experience the “immediacy of Christ's presence”19 This was the impetus for the practice of silence in Quaker tradition as they sought to grow in intimacy with God. In fact, holy silence became the focal point in Quaker worship where the real presence of Christ was mediated. Bill writes this is similar to how the Roman Catholics view the Eucharist during Mass. In Catholic theology, the elements of bread and wine during the Eucharist become the body and blood of Christ, mediating Christ's presence to the worshipper.

One weakness of this book is the difficulty in translating the work. This is because many examples are from a Western context with illustrations about American culture and geography. The language used in this book is also poetic, which makes it more challenging to translate.

There are no known Quakers in Penang, and not many of their resources are circulated here. The exception is Richard Foster's work called The Celebration of Discipline, which has been translated into Mandarin. This book has been instrumental in introducing spiritual disciplines among Chinese communities. However, many of the students are still unfamiliar with the practice of silence. This book by Bill deals more in-depth on the practice. Therefore, it is helpful to introduce students to his insights on using the spiritual discipline of silence to experience Christ's presence.

19 Ibid., 18.
Moreover, the Baptist tradition emphasizes the word of God as Baptists see the Bible as infallible and the main guide in spiritual matters. The seminary is word-based and students are taught more doctrinal subjects. They are trained to see the word, more than to listen to the word, which is best done in silence. Even for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Baptists here tend to be so word-oriented that the occasion is often reduced to a ritual just for forgiveness of sins. As such, this meaningful ritual has gradually lost the sacramental beauty and significant impact of God with us, both in individuals and as a community. Therefore, many believers fail to fully experience the presence of Christ during the Lord's Supper.

This ministry project attempts to broaden Baptist and also evangelical spirituality by incorporating contemplative practices in the daily lives of students. In Bill's chapter on silence practices, he gives practical exercises that are very useful for the contemporary practice of silence. What he suggests can be widely applied, regardless of culture, albeit with some contextualization. These suggestions can be used by the students and are helpful for their own contemplative practice.

*Renewing the Christian Mind: Essays, Interviews, and Talks edited by Gary Black*

Gary Black does excellent work on compiling Dallas Willard’s collection of readings, interviews, talks, and articles, many of which were previously unpublished. As Willard's works draw upon his own proficiencies in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and theology, they provide fresh insights to the understanding of the human person and Christian spirituality.

20 Ibid., 113-120.
One diagram in particular demonstrates Willard's brilliant understanding of spiritual growth and the inner human condition. This diagram is helpful in the area of spiritual formation and is called The Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth and Willard uses it to give an acute understanding on the whole process of spiritual transformation, which is the goal of discipleship.\(^{21}\) Though Willard’s strong conviction is believers are saved in the name of Jesus Christ the moment they are born again, he maintains the most important matter in life is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to grow to be more like Him. Therefore, Willard defines spiritual formation as the “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self—our “spiritual” or invisible aspects of human life—in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”\(^{22}\)

Believers are “to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29). The Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth represents three factors that work together to transform believers to be more like Jesus.\(^{23}\) According to Willard, believers grow spiritually when their minds are renewed to become the mind of Christ.\(^{24}\) Therefore, he situates “Mind of Christ” at the center of the triangle depicting the transformative process. The first of three factors is found at the tip of the triangle and written as “the action of the Holy Spirit.” This shows the Spirit's pivotal role in the whole process. The Holy Spirit works through the “ordinary events and trials of life” (which he located at the left side angle) as well as the believer's “planned discipline to put on a new heart” (located at the right side angle)


\(^{22}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 475.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
to bring about spiritual growth. In Willard’s opinion “A discipline is something within our power that enables us to do what we cannot accomplish by just trying,” and he writes, “We must have a plan for activities that lead to growth.” Therefore this unique diagram shows readers they can put on the character of Christ when they intentionally engage in activities that help them grow spiritually.

In Willard's work, his concept of planned disciplines can be divided into the disciplines of abstinence that consist of solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, and watching; and the disciplines of engagement that include study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.

The following are insights gained from studying this book that will be a major feature in the project. A possible reason for Willard’s use of a triangle instead of other shapes is because a triangle presents a significant link to the Trinity. In the arena of mathematics, the triangle is the symbol, \( \Delta \), for change. Life change from the perspective of Willard means character transformation to inner Christlikeness. For each child of the light, “the individual will become a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus,” or as Willard plainly states it, “We will simply ‘walk the walk.’”

Moreover, in the study of physics, a triangle can also represent forces held in equilibrium with one another. The lines of the triangle are in a sense dynamically

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26 Ibid., 475.
27 Ibid., 34-35.
28 Ibid., 12.
connected with each other at the points. Dallas’s emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit also indicates the “ongoing engagement of individuals with the living Lord who now stands in personal interactive relationship to them.” And in this interaction, “they are to be constantly taught in the Trinitarian community by the members of the Trinity.”

The role of the Trinitarian community is a very important teaching that Willard has brought back into evangelical circles. Christians have long missed this balance between the members of the Trinity in the doctrines and practices within the different denominations. The spiritual formation of individuals and congregations are in a sense out-of-shape. For instance, Catholics may focus very much on the Father, while the Pentecostals with their emphasis on feelings, signs, and wonders center on the role of the Holy Spirit. Evangelicals have also tended to emphasize salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, often at the expense of spiritual transformation. According to Willard, this lop-sided emphasis has given rise to the phenomena of “vampire Christians” in churches today. Therefore, in order to avoid developing anemic Christians, it is vital to rediscover the Trinitarian role in spiritual development.

As the students are facilitated in experiencing God, the importance of the word of God and growing in a prayerful and loving community is highlighted to them. This is crucial to avoid a misunderstanding of the biblical texts. Willard’s emphasis on the importance of scripture memorization is taken into account and the students are trained to experience the presence of God by engaging the Word using Lectio Divina during

29 Dallas Willard, Renewing the Christian Mind: Essays, Interviews, and Talks, 469.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 310.
spiritual formation classes. This is a “planned discipline” as suggested by Willard in order for disciples to “put on a new heart.”\textsuperscript{32}

In the project, solitude and silence are selected to be the main disciplines in connection with the theme on how to experience the presence of God. This is in line with Willard’s insights that provide a “thorough argument for asceticism (self-denial) as an essential but neglected element in the Christian theory of a moral life.”\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, this is a newer practice in many evangelical circles in Penang. Therefore, the practice of solitude and silence is made a crucial feature in this project on contemplative Christian disciplines.

However, in the use of contemplative disciplines there should be awareness that the practices of Buddhism also include silence, meditation, and solitude. Therefore, doing such practices might hold another meaning for some individuals, especially those students who have come from this religious background. Therefore, it is vital that their experiences of contemplation be firmly rooted in the word of God and done with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the Buddhist believes that one needs to earn merit through works in order to gain salvation. Therefore, it is possible that some Asian students may see engagement in the spiritual disciplines as a way of doing works and earning salvation. However, Willard rightly holds the conviction that salvation is life itself, and not about earning merit to please God. The spiritual disciplines are done because believers want to


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 115.
imitate Jesus. Besides, God provides the grace and the power to enable the believer to do what he or she cannot do by direct effort.

In the Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth, Willard places a rectangle in the center of the triangle with the words “Centered in the Mind of Christ,” with scriptural support from Philippians 2:12-15 and Romans 13:14. The goal for the project is for Mandarin-speaking students in MBTS to have the mind of Christ in their pursuit of all learning. Moreover, they will attain this even in the “ordinary events of life,” where they face temptations from the spirit of consumerism and of the flesh, and the temptation to deny Christ during persecution.

As Willard is scripturally orthodox and an expert in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and higher education, his thoughts are relevant to this ministry project in a seminary context. Therefore the holistic approach he advocates for spiritual formation is more acceptable in an evangelical setting. His strong reliance on biblical truth provides a stronger foundation for understanding spiritual formation.

This strong biblical foundation is important because the thinking and works of Watchmen Nee have shaped the understanding of spirituality for many Chinese churches. Nee’s principles have been an area of controversy and debate because of their association with dualism and Gnosticism. Therefore, an understanding of Willard's spirituality is helpful to provide a more biblically sound approach to spiritual formation.

\[34\] Ibid., 475.

\[35\] Ibid.
As Willard's works focus on character and moral transformation, it is also very appropriate for the Asian context. For example, Chinese who have embraced the philosophy of Confucius will find it easier to adopt Willard's morally and scripturally sound perspective on Christian spirituality. The translation of the book into Mandarin may once again pose a challenge. The translator may not be able to capture some of his more complex thoughts due to lack of appropriate terminology, especially in the fields of theology, psychology and philosophy. Hence, some of his insights might be lost in translation.

_The Cloister Walk by Kathleen Norris_

Kathleen Norris is a contemporary monastic who set aside nine months to stay in the St. John Community of Benedictines. In her book, _The Cloister Walk_, it is clearly seen she is influenced and impacted by the Benedictine community, where the psalms are the mainstay of their prayers. As a poet and writer, she immerses herself in the poetic nature of the psalms and also the disciplined life in the community that helped her fully engage in sacred reading of the psalms. During her stay in the community, she discovers she is able to maintain a vibrant and authentic contemplative prayer life.

In Norris' book, she brings alive the sacred reading of the Psalms with a full imagination as a poet, expressed in her clear and lyrical writing. She quotes British Benedictine Sebastian Moore who says, “God behaves in the psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology.”36 Norris also notes, “The Benedictine method of reading psalms, with long silences between them rather than commentary or

explanation, takes full advantages of these paradoxes, offering almost alarming room for interpretation and response.” 37 She also says, “It allows the psalms their full poetic power, their use of imagery and hyperbole, repetition and contradiction, as tools of word-play, as well as the play of human emotions.” 38 This approach portrays the whole intention of the psalmist more completely than an analytical approach. Norris shares this approach of reading has helped her to relax in church, and as a wordsmith, she finds even reciting the psalm a prayer in itself. 39 One of the best insights about reading the psalms for her is this activity can be carried out through the “gift of communal worship,” whereby the violence, pain, and struggle found in the psalms are able to “pull” her “out of private prayer, into community and then into the world,” in what she calls “praying the news.” 40

Besides this, Norris also writes about “beholding” the word of God. She captures the beauty of silence in contemplating God's word in both these phrases: “fall back into silence” and “long silence between them,” with them meaning different psalms. 41 She writes about how she was “being changed by the words of the psalms” as she allowed them to “work on” her, and sometimes to “work” her “over.” 42 When believers

38 Ibid., 93.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 102.
41 Ibid., 93, 98.
42 Ibid., 101.
contemplate and behold the word of God or even God himself in silence, they are able to deepen their spiritual lives.

Living in the community of faith and love, Norris never loses her personhood as a woman called by God into a contemplative life. Even while engaged with lament psalms full of anger and violence, she looks back and ponders upon the suffering of women in the outside world. She writes, “The human experience is one of violence, and the psalms reflect our experience of the world.”43 This is really helpful for the Asian student who lives in a culture where successes and achievements are feted, while failures and wounds are not attended to as much as they should be. Pain and suffering which is prevalent in this region is an issue not adequately addressed and integrated into our understanding of spirituality.

The admirable feature of Norris' life as a modern monastic is her openness and willingness to submit herself to both the Word of God and to the community. As a poet, she has total freedom to embrace the beauty and pain of the Psalms, while her humility and teachable spirit under the guidance of the community of Benedictines strengthens her discipline to experience spiritual growth.

One spiritual discipline that impacts Norris' experience at the monastery is the Rule of Life. The Benedictines use this discipline to bring order and structure into a daily rhythm, like a spiritual trellis to train believers to be more disciplined and focus on prayer. In the seminary, the students are usually very busy and have a lot of class work and activities to finish. As a result, students tend to neglect their devotional and prayer

43 Kathleen Norris, The Cloister Walk, 97.
life. Some are unable to focus and plan their days meaningfully. The students have been asked to come up with their own Rule of Life, incorporating an hour of prayer each day over a period of time. The feedback is very positive and this practice is beneficial for training them to order their daily lives.

**The Interior Prayer Life by Matthew the Poor**

In this book, a contemporary orthodox father writes on the orthodox prayer life based on the sayings of the desert fathers and the Scriptures. Matthew the Poor introduces some of the features found in orthodox spirituality such as union with God, the unknowability of God, and the Jesus Prayer. Another feature he presents in this book is the use of holy silence, which is relevant for this project.

The book also highlights Matthew the Poor’s reflections on prayer after he spends many years of living as a solitary in his cell. Matthew the Poor’s prayer life is initially formed under the direction of other spiritual fathers, both Eastern and Western. He spends whole nights in prayer, reciting one or two passages from these fathers, and imploring them to enlighten his understanding. Matthew's statement that best demonstrates his principle and practice of prayer is, “Wherever physical hunger turned cruel against me, I found my gratification in prayer. Wherever the biting cold of winter was unkind to me, I found my warmth in prayer. Wherever people were harsh to me (and their harshness was severe indeed), I found my comfort in prayer. In short, prayer became
my food and my drink, my outfit and my armor, whether by night or by day.” \(^{44}\) For Matthew the Poor, his whole life is one immersed and infused with continual prayer.

Matthew the Poor presents many significant insights concerning his life of spiritual intimacy with God. In his life, he meditates and draws upon the insights of hundreds of sayings attributed to the spiritual fathers, both desert and orthodox. Among the 395 sayings about prayer, twenty-three of them are dedicated for holy silence. \(^{45}\)

Matthew the Poor constantly draws his spiritual strength from these sayings of the spiritual fathers. Moreover, he is devoted to the Scriptures and sees his life as the metaphor of the vine and branches given by Jesus. He cultivates a rich interior life of prayer because he is able to fix his eyes upon Jesus. In the chapter on holy silence, Matthew invites readers to enter into their chambers, shut the door, sit down in silence and prayer, and with total and brutal honesty lay bare his soul before a holy God. \(^{46}\)

According to Matthew, “Man’s discovery of his sins is a great blessing, for it is the only way that leads to healing.” \(^{47}\) For Matthew the Poor, this can happen when believers are willing to enter into a silence that is holy and be fully open toward God.

Matthew the Poor also clarifies a few misconceptions about silence and solitude for contemporary Christian culture. For instance, he observes how many believers go for spiritual retreats to avoid other people. According to him, if this is the sole motive of

\(^{44}\) Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 10.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 200-203.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 198.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
practicing solitude and of silence during retreats, believers end up after returning from retreat the same old selves with “Our former ways of chatter, debates, silly arguments, laughter, politics, newspapers, slander and gossip.”

In addition, Matthew the Poor also addresses the tension between solitude and community life. He bases his thoughts on the resurrection event, recorded in John 20:17 and Luke 24:39-43 in which the words of Jesus “Do not hold me” and “Handle me and see” provide a perspective of balance, in the midst of two seemingly opposing postures. For Matthew, the fleeing from people into solitude does not contradict the longing for the praying community if the person truly comprehends the meaning of solitude and silence.

If believers are well equipped during solitude and silence, they will also carry themselves well among the community. This is observed by Matthew who says, “When you become well trained in solitude, you will find precious occasions for practicing the presence of God and unveiling your soul before its Creator so as to repair every defect and every default in it.” He also says, “Whenever you are among people, keep your thoughts, senses, and emotions as pure as possible so that once you return to your solitude, it becomes easy for you to be unleashed into the presence of God without shame.” Believers should allow God to deal with their weaknesses in solitude and silence, so they can live authentic and godly lives even in community.

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48 Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way*, 199.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 200, 203.

51 Ibid., 199.
From the above, the contributions of the spiritual fathers from the eastern Orthodox tradition can be appreciated. They are men of insight and discernment (diakrisis) who love others and suffer alongside with them. Matthew the Poor provides profound truth and insight into spirituality while he applies the wisdom of the ancient desert fathers to a contemporary orthodox context. However, this is not a book for those new to the area of spirituality because Matthew the Poor does not give much background knowledge of the ancient desert fathers. As such, it is challenging for evangelicals unfamiliar with desert spirituality to grasp the wisdom inherent in quotations provided by the author in each chapter. However, this is still a valuable book for facilitators and other practitioners to more fully understand contemplative silence. In future, it may then be appropriate to introduce to students these wisdom sayings of the desert fathers selected by Matthew the Poor for his own journey into the interior life.

Conclusion

This ministry project explores how contemplative silence is used to facilitate spiritual growth among Mandarin-speaking students at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. The use of contemplative disciplines in spiritual formation is a new experience for many of these students. Therefore, approaches to introduce these practices need to be creative and context sensitive so that students are able to benefit from them and grow spiritually. Moreover, these practices must also be achievable and sustainable. This will motivate students to reproduce them in their own spiritual lives and ministry contexts.

Evangelical students in the seminary have a word-based background and are not familiar with contemplative practices. There are misconceptions existing among students
about such practices that must be demystified to dispel any prejudice towards their use. Therefore, facilitators need to be well prepared in their understanding of contemplative disciplines as well as in their praxis. As such, the selection of the five books for review is for such a purpose.

All resources in the literature review provide genuine and inspiring accounts of the way contemplative silence has impacted and transformed the lives of the authors who come from both Western and non-Western contexts. Moreover, the books by Bill, Norris, and Matthew the Poor also present some background on different streams of spirituality—Quaker, monastic, orthodox, and desert—that reflect the common quest toward an authentic inner life. The material by Willard provides in-depth understanding into the principles and process of character and moral transformation.

The resources also contain helpful suggestions for the practice of contemplative disciplines. Chang gives practical advice on how to train believers to embrace silence in their daily lives as well as in a community. Bill also provides some practical exercises that are suitable for students while Norris highlights the usefulness of the monastic Rule of Life to provide a framework for living a disciplined life. All these suggestions, especially the Rule of Life, are incorporated into the project design and are helpful to facilitate spiritual growth among students. The book by Chang is selected as class reading for the Mandarin-speaking students, while books like the one by Matthew the Poor provides deeper insights for facilitators.
CHAPTER THREE
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON SILENCE

The theological reflection in this chapter focuses on three foundational issues with wider implications on contemplative silence for seminary students. The first reflection is on the nature of God, in particular the Trinity, and how this can inform understanding and practice of contemplation. The second reflection is on relevant portions of Scriptures in the Old and New Testaments that concern silence and contemplation, with highlights on the contemplative life of Christ. The third reflection considers contributions of practitioners such as the Desert Fathers to the discipline of contemplative silence. In addition, there is focus on the thoughts of Dallas Willard, a contemporary figure, who has tremendous insights on spiritual formations relevant in this ministry project.

The Nature of God and Contemplative Silence

God, the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit work deeply and mystically to mature a believer to be like Christ. This spiritual growth is a work of God and God uses various disciplines practiced by the believer to bring about this transformation. For this thesis, the focus is on the discipline of contemplative silence which is relatively
unknown, and not commonly practiced by evangelicals. A theological reflection on the Trinitarian nature of God reveals motives and models for contemplation.

The word trinity does not appear in the Bible. The New Testament speaks only of the mutual love relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The word trinity is used in the course of later theological reflection on the nature of God. It comes from the Latin word *trinitas*, which means threeness. The first recorded use of the word in reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes from the pen of Tertullian, a third-century theologian who attempted to clarify the emerging Christian doctrine of God.¹ Today, the doctrine of the Trinity is formalized as the belief that God is one God who exists in perpetuity as three distinct Divine Persons of one essence or nature.

This revelation about God as a trinity gives believers a convincing motive for the Christian practice of contemplative silence. In his book, *Holy Living*, Rowan Williams maintains, “All contemplating of God presupposes God own absorbed and joyful knowing of himself and gazing upon himself in the Trinitarian life.”² The knowledge that the Trinitarian members are in eternal contemplation and behold each other in wonder provides impetus for believers to put aside the self and fully attend to God.

In spite of the example demonstrated by the Trinity, there are many Christians who do not practice the discipline of silence regularly in their busy lives. This does not


mean they are flippant about their Christian walk. In fact, they are often committed and mature believers who are actively (and busily) serving their churches and ministries. For these Christians, the lack of engagement may be attributed to unfamiliarity with this spiritual activity, or to a perception that it is unorthodox. This happens when Christians belong to faith traditions found in non-contemplative streams of Christianity. As such, a paradigm shift from a mind of consciousness to a mind of beholding is often necessary in such believers.

Christian contemplation can be perceived by many to be an ascetic activity engaged in isolation. However, the Trinitarian nature of God dispels such a notion. According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, God-contemplation is fundamentally an act demonstrated by the Triune God, where there is “genuine diversity as well as true unity, not just a unit but a union, not just unity but community.” Therefore, God-contemplation does not only take place on an individual basis, but also within a community of like-minded believers who may be from diverse backgrounds. When Karl Barth initiated a renewed attention to the Trinitarian Christian tradition, Christian leaders discovered in Barth “a vision of harmonious community in which diversity can be celebrated rather than stamped out.” The community engaging in contemplation should uphold this unity within diversity as demonstrated by the distinct personhoods of the Trinitarian members.

The Trinitarian members also show mutual submission to each other and this models how a community in contemplation should likewise respect and defer to one

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3 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 27.

another. This mutual submission in the Godhead surely resonates with the core Asian values of harmony and togetherness. In Asian social contexts such as the family, relationships are clearly defined and upheld. Everyone has a contributing role and is expected to defer personal rights for the benefit of the group. In this aspect, the mutual submission and coherence of the Trinity are values familiar and more readily accepted by those from an Asian background.

Despite the Trinity being mirrored in human relationships, believers cannot claim to have complete understanding of this divine mystery. Bishop Kallistos notes the concept of Trinity is to be understood as a revelation by God, and not theorized by our own reason because our language and human reasoning are limited, and thus we “cannot fully explain” the Trinity. He also writes, “The Trinity is not a philosophical theory but the living God whom we worship; and so there comes a point in our approach to the Trinity when argumentation and analysis must give place to wordless prayer.” He mentions the liturgy of St. James, “Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and stand with fear and trembling” to also reflect the inadequacies of humanity to fully understand the mystery of the Trinity.

In view of this, contemplative silence can become a gateway for the believer to enter into a deeper experience of the Trinitarian reality of God. Although the practice of silence is often done on an individual basis, there is surely an enhanced value when this

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 31-32.
practice is carried out in the context of community because of the very nature of the Triune God, which is community. This invitation is particularly significant for the evangelical pastor or leaders, or in this case seminary students, because it is a radical departure from the usual self-directed study of the word, into a realm of silence to experience deeper the Triune God as a community.

Therefore, seminary students who have been called by God to serve need to seriously immerse themselves in authentic Trinitarian community living. This is made possible by going beyond a doctrine-driven understanding of the Trinity to cultivate a deeper interior life empowered by the discipline of silence. And when they do so by the grace of God, they will be able to reflect His very nature at all times.

Theological Reflection on Silence in Scripture

The Old and New Testaments are replete with examples of silence as a means of experiencing the presence of God. In Ross’ guide on silence, she gives a comprehensive list of the occurrences of silence in the Bible and some of these salient examples will be highlighted in this section.8 She also analyzes the word behold which she claims is “one of the most frequently occurring words in the ancient languages of the Bible, even though it is for the most part omitted in modern translation.”9 This omission consequently “signals a shift in perception” toward the significance of silence.10 For Ross, the act of silence is when the self-conscious mind becomes the "deep mind" to enable believers to

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9 Ibid., 46.

10 Ibid.
commune with God. In addition, J. Brent Bill has also written in depth regarding specific events relating to silence, and some of these are also included.

The examples focus not just on the occurrence of silence. Rather, these examples highlight the fact silences occur when an important task is given by God or when some significant milestone is attained. This perspective on silence, drawn either directly or indirectly, provides valuable theological insights on the role of silence in the Bible.

The role of silence implicit in the life of Christ, the incarnated Son of God, is also highlighted. This is necessary because evangelicals have traditionally focused on the teachings and works of Christ, rather than on his contemplative or hidden life. This emphasis on his public life has often resulted in the believer’s despair at not being able to live like Jesus did, or apathy towards spirituality. The spirituality embraced by Christ and the inner disciplines of silence and solitude he practiced enabled him to live as a true man. This insight on Christ's spirituality is not commonly underscored in evangelicalism.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, silence is often a portal leading to an encounter with the Divine. According to Ross, the desert, a prominent feature in the Old Testament, is itself a place of profound silence. She also highlights the silence of the holy of holies from which God speaks: “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you of all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel” (Ex 25:22).


12 Ibid., 46, 61.
Ross also writes about the “sheer silence” in which Elijah clearly hears the voice of God (1 Kgs 19:11). This demonstrates to us the importance of profound silence to hear God’s voice distinctly. In Psalm 4:4 the worshipper is directed to “tremble, then, and do not sin, speak to your heart in silence upon your bed.” In Psalm 62:1 and 6, an example of seeking a portal into silence through song is given: “For God alone my soul in silence waits,” while in Psalm 46:11, the familiar “Be still [silent], and know that I am God” is a reminder of the worshipper’s need to be silent. While these references to silence are obvious, the Old Testament is also filled with allusions that are not so direct.

In the book of Genesis, for example, there is an incidence of silence, albeit not so obvious, in the account of Abraham and his three guests. In chapter eighteen, after he and Sarah welcomed the three guests, a particular phrase was used, “. . . and he stood by them under the tree while they ate” (Gn 18:8 [English Standard Version]). Abraham’s action indicated that he was serving the guests with the most attentive posture, and he would sense their needs without a word spoken. The same scenario can also be seen in Psalm 123:2 (ESV) “behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,” with silence being reflected in the word behold.

According to Ross, the familiar story on Isaac’s near sacrificial death in Genesis 22:1-19 records the three times when Abraham says “behold me,” which was once to God, once to Isaac, and once to the “angel of the Lord.” According to Ross, this original meaning is not so evident in the translated phrase of “here I am.” In her opinion, the emphasis on the word “behold” reveals Abraham’s willingness to obey and to listen.

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13 Ibid., 62.
14 Ibid., 53.
attentively to the voice of the Lord. Ross also points out silence can be implicitly interpreted as seen in the story of Jacob’s vision of the ladder (Gn 28:10-32). The vision comes when he is asleep during which his self-consciousness is set aside. She notes three occurrences of the word “behold” that make the story a significant one.

Bill points out the significance of silence in the calling of Samuel to the prophetic role. The story began with Samuel as a little boy, hearing his name being called in the quietness of the night. At the prompting of Eli that it was the Lord’s voice, little Samuel on the third call, “stilled himself to listen—both outwardly, while lying on his bed, and inwardly in his heart.” Bill goes on to say that, “When he became quiet in holy awe, God and Samuel spoke heart to heart,” and

Samuel’s silence, as a young boy, and his attitude of listening showed his love for God. It also shows us that people of all ages—even the young, like Samuel—long for a deep spiritual connection with God. Samuel’s response was simply, “Speak, Yahweh, for your servant is listening.” Samuel believed God would speak. God did not disappoint him.

Silence is also demonstrated in a context of questioning. Bill gives the Old Testament example of Habakkuk standing silently at his watch and waiting for God's answer to his misgivings. Habakkuk had posed his “questions and complaints” to God: “Why are people suffering? Why is there violence in the land? Why won’t you help?” So Habakkuk stands at his post, silent, waiting to hear what God says.” God replies Habakkuk and reminds him that God “is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence

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17 Ibid., 10-11.

18 Ibid.
before him” (Hb 2:20 [ESV]). According to Bill, God through his reply makes known the concept of silence as a way of worshiping.

The Psalms

The Psalms also provide believers with insights on the practice of silence. The experiences of the psalmists demonstrate challenges and realities of the human condition when silence is observed. In the sixth chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, this godly saint presents his principles on keeping silent. With regard to this, Andrew Marr writes,

Curiously, Benedict does not begin his chapter with words floating serenely out of the primordial silence . . . Instead, he thrust us into the struggle we experience to attain and maintain silence. Benedict extols the value of silence by quoting the opening words of Psalm 38 (39): “I will guard my ways so as not to sin with my tongue. I placed a guard at my mouth. I was speechless and humiliated, refraining even from good speech” (RB 6:1). So far, so good. But Benedict and his monastics would know from chanting the Psalter every week the verse that follows: “I was silent and still, I held my peace to no avail, my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused, the fire burned, then I spoke with my tongue (Ps 39:3).

According to Marr, “this is nothing more than a failed attempt at silence” evidenced by the swelling of “interior noise” within the psalmist even though he had initially refrained from speaking. This demonstrates the fact that silence is not about the lack of speech or thought, but more about the condition of the inner self.

Marr also relates silence with the act of listening and writes, “it is not possible to listen to another if we are doing the talking or if our hearts are burning hot within us

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ready to burst into angry speech. We must stop talking before we can listen.” Marr also goes on to explore the role of silence in active listening and discernment. He writes, “In practice, the hierarchy between master and disciple dissolves if real listening takes place, because the master needs to listen to a disciple in order to discern what should be taught. The point is, silence is not a virtue; in fact it is nothing at all, unless it fosters the art of listening.” These insights on the relationship between silence, listening, and discernment are valuable and can inform the practice of spiritual direction in the ministry project.

Federico Villanueva explores the close link between creation and meditation in the Psalms. In his commentary on Psalm 19, he muses, “Creation, though full of words, does not need words to communicate. The heavens have their own way of speaking. Creation speaks out of silence; that is why it is deep.” And he goes on to say that human beings can understand what is being said by creation, but they need to do so from a “certain kind” of “posture that is meditative; it demands a lifestyle that is not in a hurry but lingers. It is a kind of living that knows how to stop just to listen to creation. It is a kind of listening that is open to all things—not just to spiritual things but to all of creation . . . it is the kind of vision that sees in all things the fingerprints of God.” Therefore, believers who are always in a rush will miss out on hearing God speak through His

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22 Ibid., 82.
23 Ibid.
24 Federico Villanueva, Psalms 1-72, Asia Bible Commentary (UK: Langham Global Library, 2016), 118.
25 Ibid., 118.
creation unless they intentionally carve out time and space in their lives for this to happen.

Villanueva also develops Pope Francis' principle on achieving “serene harmony with creation.” According to him, the psalmist in Psalm 19 demonstrates this “serene harmony” with creation when he shows his "capacity to see beyond the appearance of things into the reality of creation" with “awe and reverence.” “Serene harmony” can come about when there is a “posture of openness . . . to listen, to see, and to hear what God is trying to tell us and making known to us through creation and his word.”

Therefore, Villanueva proposes the necessity to “develop the ability to see God in the events of everyday life, including ordinary events like the rising and setting of the sun. Such listening enables us to discern the hidden things of our hearts.”

The New Testament

The incarnation of God as man is a call for believers to pay attention to the perfect life of Jesus, and not live by a “gospel of sin management” consisting of perpetual cycles of sin and forgiveness. The incarnation of the Son of God demonstrates in all its fullness that salvation is found in a life transformed to be more like Jesus. Believers are thus called to live a life that is “hidden with Christ, in God” (Col 3:3[ESV]) which in

26 Ibid., 122.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
ancient spirituality, is the ultimate goal of contemplative silence. When believers are united with Christ, they become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4). Descriptions of what it means to live a life of union with Christ is found in the writings of the apostle Paul, who exhorts believers to “imitate” Christ (1 Cor 11:1), to have continual prayer (1 Thes 5:17), and to have the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5). The believer is therefore called to follow Christ and live the life demonstrated by Him.

The incidences of silence in the public and hidden life of Christ are recorded in the gospels. Ross highlights examples of silences found in the Gospel of Matthew that may not be obvious, such as events surrounding the birth of Christ and his ministry. For instance, Ross notes in chapters one to three the five incidences of “silence” that “issue from beholding the angels . . . one of the means by which God communicates himself in the world” (Mt 1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19, and 4:11).  

She writes when this happens, "the mind's usual chatter is silenced for a moment and a new perspective opens up." This beholding or contemplation denotes an active listening that anticipates a readiness to receive and respond to a new revelation.

The discipline of silence required in acts of piety builds up character and self control, while it counters the human impulse to vainglory. This can be seen in Jesus' teaching on giving of alms in secret (Mt 6:2), praying in secret (Mt 6:6), and fasting in secret that is seen only by the Father in heaven who is secret (Mt 6:16-17). Ross also underscores the significance of silence when the woman with hemorrhage touches Jesus'
garment in silence (Mt 9:20, also 14:36), and in the command to the blind men healed by Jesus not to tell anyone but to remain silent (Mt 9:30). From these incidences, believers learn God honors the silence of the desperate, while He expects obedience from those who have received healing.

The practice of silence and solitude is also inherent in Jesus' spiritual life when he goes to a lonely place or to a mountain to pray (Mt 14:13 and 14:23). These incidences are also recorded in other gospels (Mk 1:35 and 6:46; Lk 5:16, 6:12, and 9:18). Jesus demonstrates to his disciples the value of silence and solitude in a life infused with contemplative spirituality. Ross also highlights the silence implicit in the glorious transfiguration, a context where Jesus reveals who he is, and the disciples respond in awe (Mt 17:1-10). It is often in silence believers can see Jesus as who He truly is, and not be distracted or overwhelmed by their problems and concerns.

Ross also notes how Jesus silences the elders in Matthew 21:23-27, while in Matthew 22:23-34, he silences the Sadducees. In Matthew 22:41-46, it is written Jesus silences the Pharisees once again. There are also Jesus’s own silences: he is silent before the high priest (Mt 26:63), when abused (Mt 26:67-68), before Pilate (Mt 27:12,14), while being mocked (Mt 27:30), and he is silent on the cross (Mt 27:39-44). Jesus demonstrates the discipline of silence in his suffering, and reveals his full submission to the will of God in his life.

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35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 87.
The Gospel of Mark also provides many distinguishing features of silence. Ross finds at least thirty-four different kinds of silence, and her list has been enclosed as an appendix because it is helpful for the purpose of Lectio Divina (Appendix C).37 Bill highlights in-depth the events after the murder of John the Baptist recorded in the Gospel of Mark, “The apostle returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves.” (Mk 6:30-32)38 Bill points out, “There is no record of anything being said on the boat trip to that “lonely” place. No doubt they were feeling grief, bewilderment, and depression over John, as well as weariness combined with exhilaration over their recent evangelistic mission. Perhaps silence was the only thing that spoke to their condition.”39

From the above examples in Scripture, the role of silence is evident in different scriptural contexts, especially in the life of Jesus. Silence is present in the contexts of creation, grief, revelation, spiritual disciplines such as giving and fasting, miracles and healings, and even in the prayer practice of the Lord that believers should emulate. As such, Christians need to be aware of the subtle yet pervasive importance of silence in their daily lives. However, its employment in Christian discipleship has been underplayed, especially among more "wordy" faith traditions such as evangelicalism.

39 Ibid.
Therefore, it is timely to introduce the role and use of silence as a spiritual discipline to an evangelical setting, for a more holistic approach toward cultivating the interior life.

Moreover, the role of silence is also seen in the contexts of rebuke and persecution. This is significant for the Malaysian context, where Christianity is a minority religion and the Christian voice is often drowned out by other louder influences. Malaysian Christians should explore Jesus' act of silencing the wrongdoer especially in issues of social injustice, and have the courage to speak out with authority. Moreover, since there has been increasing hostility by various Islamic groups, there will perhaps come a time when local Christians will face persecution for their faith in Christ. As such, there is much scope for exploring the role of silence in the face of suffering and persecution, especially for Malaysian Christians.

**Contemplative Silence in Ancient Christian Spirituality**

According to John Chryssavgis, Christian monasticism began on a Sunday morning church service in the year 270 or 271 in a small village of Egypt.\(^4^0\) He gives the account of a young man by the name of Anthony who heard the Gospel passage read in Matthew 19:21, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When Anthony heard these words, he sought a life “not merely of poverty but of radical solitude and silence.” And yet at his death at the age of 106, Athanasius of Alexandria who was his friend and biographer, announced in his writings the “desert had become a city” because thousands

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of people had sought out Anthony for his teaching and thus made their homes in the desert.41 As such Anthony of Egypt came to be acknowledged as the father and founder of desert spirituality.

The Desert Fathers believed the wilderness with its utter silence was a spiritual training ground from God because of the “nothingness” there and also because of the vulnerability to spiritual attacks. For instance, one of the stories concerns spiritual warfare with the demons at night, with the demons violently shaking St. Anthony’s room and “with terrifying noises the spirits took on the form of “lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves” to torment him.42 During the confrontation, St. Anthony declared, “If there were some power among you, it would have been enough for only one of you to come. But since the Lord has broken your strength, you attempt to terrify me by any means with the mob; it is a mark of your weakness that you mimic the shapes of irrational beasts,” and with this the demonic spirits were defeated and scattered.43 Therefore, one does not enter into the realm of silence lightly and ignore the possibility of spiritual attack.

Although the path toward cultivating desert spirituality can be hard and painful, the good news is the journey of faith is not made alone. The desert elders were sure humans could not overcome their passions alone. Bondi gives the reason why when she reminds believers of their sinful human nature which is always there to “blind us so that we cannot love,” and she says that these passions “create for us interior lenses through


43 Ibid., 37-39.
which we see the world, lenses which we very often do not even know are there. When we are under the control of our passions, even when we think we are most objective, we cannot be—we are in the grip of emotions, states of mind, habits that distort everything we see.”

Believers all have blind spots and no one is truly objective, but as a community of saints on the same journey, they can help one another. This accountability to one another is very important for authentic communal living in the seminary.

Academic enquiry into desert spirituality must include the sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Desert Fathers were gifted storytellers, yet their inner strength was developed through silence and stillness. As St. Anthony said, “Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.”

For St. Anthony, the practice of silence and stillness in his own cell was essential to sustain his interior life. Without it, his spiritual life would drain and eventually die. This shows the importance of the disciplines of silence and solitude for cultivating a deep interior life.

Although silence is understood by many to mean just being quiet and passive, Kallistos Ware gives us this insight instead: “Hesychia [stillness] signifies concentration combined with inner tranquility. It is not merely to be understood in a negative sense as

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the absence of speech and outward activity, but it denotes in an openness of the human heart towards God’s love.”46 Kenneth Leech writes, “Hesychia was seen as the essential condition of prayerfulness” that is “more than silence . . . a state of soul characterized by sobriety, inner vigilance, attention to God.”47 This is supported by Abba Arsenius’ experience when he heard a voice telling him to “flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness.”48 These authors explore the relationship between silence, prayer, and attentiveness toward God, and how engaging in these can help believers remain close to God.

Leech also writes while Evagrius had used the phrase "Prayer is a laying aside of thoughts,” St. John Climacus adapted it to say “Hesychia is a laying aside of thought.”49 In addition, Christopher Hall notes, “We need to have a quiet heart in order for us to see our sins. It is like a cup of water. When it sits still, it can even see our face when we draw close. The desert wisdom is that we can see and hear ourselves more clearly when we stay alone in the desert.”50 Therefore, solitude and silence are two important spiritual disciplines in contemplation crucial for revealing the true state of a person's heart, which is a prelude toward genuine spiritual growth.

46Kallistos Ware, The Orthodox Way, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 122.


49 John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, trans Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 60. See also Evagrius, De Oratione 70.

50 Christopher A. Hall, Worshipping with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 236.
Leech shows the idea of inner silence in the hesychast tradition is closely associated with a stress on breathing. When “the remembrance of Jesus” is “united to your breathing,” then the value of hesychia is acknowledged.\(^{51}\) This is the concept behind the Jesus Prayer and for Orthodox belief, the Jesus Prayer is a wordless prayer. Leech writes,

> Before true prayer can begin, there must be a discipline of thought through the practice of silence and withdrawal, that is, a discipline of thought with some degree of physical solitude and stillness. Then, says St Basil, “When the mind is no longer dissipated amidst external things, nor dispersed across the world through the senses, it returns to itself; and by means of itself it ascends to the thought of God. It is in this context that silence can help us grow by reducing the overcrowding of the mind, and enabling the heart to become centred in gentleness and peace.”\(^{52}\)

Martin Laird also notes, “The use of a prayer word or phrase to recollect the obsessive dimensions of the mind reaches far back in the Christian tradition.”\(^{53}\) Therefore, the teachings of the early Desert Fathers are highly relevant to believers today. In this postmodern age of distraction and fragmented thinking, it is even more important to rediscover the discipline of the desert. For seminary students who have been called to serve God, there is even a greater need to cultivate interior watchfulness so they will be able to be effective in prayer and remain pure in their hearts towards God.

Since practice of the discipline of silence is challenging and makes believers open to spiritual attack, it is better done as a community along with the help of a spiritual


\(^{52}\) Ibid.

director or mentor. This will enable students to support each other and grow in authentic faith, as well as be transparent and accountable to one another.

**The Discipline of Spiritual Formation in Willardian Spirituality**

Reflections on the nature of God and the use of silence in the biblical texts have provided a foundation for the importance of silence in lives of believers. Moreover, the ancient Christian forerunners have taught believers how much they are in need of silence. In the relationship with the unseen God, silence plays a vital role to waiting and listening for what God may tell the believer through the words of scripture, and through his own heart.

For the believers of today, Dallas Willard provides contemporary insights into the practice of contemplative silence as a means to spiritual formation or transformation. His principles on spiritual formation, are based on his theology of salvation as life. Salvation is not just about entering heaven, as many Christians are inclined to think.

Willard defines spiritual formation as the “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”

He elaborates, “Spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimensions of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of a regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God. Such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by putting pressure on the will (heart, spirit) alone.”

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55 Ibid., 41-42.
formation is character formation as a result of personal choice interacting with grace from God. However, as a philosopher, he notes, “psychological and theological understanding of the spiritual life must go hand in hand.”

Willard coins the acronym VIM to describe his model of spiritual formation. VIM stands for Vision of living in the kingdom of God now, I is for Intention to be a “Kingdom person,” while M is for the means or practices that bring about spiritual transformation. Spiritual transformation pertains to “replacing the inner character of the “lost” with the inner character of Jesus, his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions, and character.”

According to Willard, this transformation is achieved by identifying and modifying six aspects of human personality (nature) that prevent believers from becoming like Jesus—thought, feeling, choice, body, social context, and soul. Once these failings have been identified, a person can take steps to reorient his or her inner self to a new worldview and cultivate new habits, attitudes, and feelings. Willard’s approach involves volitional intentionality on the part of individuals to take the necessary steps.

One of the foremost means of spiritual formation proposed by Willard in his works is the study of the Scriptures and practice of spiritual disciplines. Willard identifies the practice of silence as “a powerful and essential discipline” that will “allow us life-

56 Ibid., 19.
57 Ibid., 74.
58 Ibid., 85-90.
59 Ibid., 89.
60 Ibid., 30ff.
transforming concentration upon God."\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, he advocates the practice of not speaking and writes, “This discipline provides us with a certain inner distance that gives us time to consider our words fully and the presence of mind to control what we say and when we say it.”\textsuperscript{62} This practice therefore allows believers to be better able to “direct their whole bodies to do what is right” (Jas 3:2) and also to pay attention to others.

Willard’s model of Christian spiritual formation aligns living in the kingdom of God with intentional efforts to emulate Jesus Christ and attain maturity in Christ. This process to become like Jesus is both a work of God and human effort in daily living. Therefore, it is possible for a believer to become like Jesus according to Willardian spirituality. Most believers commonly understand the call to be more like Jesus, yet whether this aim is achievable is a moot point. For Willard, the key to succeeding is volitional intentionality based on a vision that Kingdom life is possible. As such, it is crucial seminary students are first able to catch the vision for Kingdom living here and now. Next, when students submit themselves to a program that facilitates intentionality through thoughtful and creative means, they will be able to, by the grace of God and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, experience life transformation not as theory but in practice.

Conclusion

The premise of this ministry project is spiritual growth in the inner life of seminary students is possible through structured spiritual disciplines, such as use of


\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
contemplative silence. From the reflection in this chapter, some key theological conclusions about contemplation have been reached. These insights drawn from the nature of God, the Scriptures and the life of Christ, Christian history, and contemporary practice provide the theological basis for use of contemplation and silence in this ministry project.

For example, the nature of God gives believers a motive for contemplation. The Trinitarian members contemplate and behold each other in eternal wonder. This insight necessitates a paradigm shift from a mind of consciousness to a mind of beholding for evangelical students. Besides providing a motive for contemplation, the Trinity as a community within the Godhead also provides a model for contemplation. This model of beholding within a community also necessitates a celebration of unity in diversity, and a posture of mutual submission. Therefore, it is helpful to observe how beholding as a community works out in a seminary class setting.

Moreover, the life of Jesus as the incarnated Son of God also provides a model for a contemplative life. Jesus offers the ultimate example of what it means to be human and in Him, believers can see what it means to live a Kingdom or with-God life, a life where there is perfect alignment to the will of God. Therefore, if believers seek to be more like Jesus, they need to be also open to the spiritual practices of their Lord, even those practices not commonly found in their own faith traditions. For evangelical students, these would include practices such as solitude and silence that are practiced mostly in contemplative traditions.

Since the authority of the Bible is held with high regard in evangelicalism, it is also imperative to go back to the biblical texts for the role of silence. Besides the
contemplative practices of Jesus, the Bible is also replete with many instances of silence. The relationship silence has with attentive listening, stillness, discernment, and prayer highlights its significance in Christian spirituality. These examples thus lend credence to contemplative practices and qualm suspicions that the practice of silence is only associated with non-Christian religious traditions such as eastern mysticism, Hinduism, and Buddhism to name a few.

The contemplative practices of the desert fathers in church history also demonstrate the helpfulness of these practices in spiritual formation, surprisingly more so in this current age of distractions. However, for those students who may find the sayings and practices of desert spirituality too archaic, the spiritual insights of a contemporary contemplative such as Dallas Willard are useful in understanding the process of spiritual formation and also guiding praxis.
PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
Seminaries exist to equip believers who have been called by God to ministry. Thus, the seminary also has a role to provide teaching and training to Christian leaders and pastors of the nation, so that they can lead their congregations to do what Jesus has commanded them. This is usually done through theological and biblical studies. However, the seminary should most importantly be recognized as a community of like-minded believers being transformed to be more like Jesus and living the Kingdom life.

The seminary, however, has not always provided the context, structure, or direction for such a spiritual pilgrimage. One of the reasons for this lack is the erroneous perception on the role of the seminary. Liefield and Cannell observe, “the evangelical Protestant seminary does not welcome easily an emphasis on spiritual formation, nor, by and large, has it ever done so. Perhaps a reason for this can be traced to a belief that the church is the proper environment for spiritual formation. Cognitive instruction is thought
of as the province of the seminary, with spiritual formation happening implicitly and informally.”

Siew Woh, a Malaysian theologian, who attributes this lack of emphasis on spiritual formation to differing priorities and a lack of personnel. According to him, “many seminaries are still very much inclined towards academic achievement” or “lack of human resources among faculty members and staff to be involved in the student’s spiritual formation.” Therefore there is need for seminaries to recapture the call to Kingdom living, and nurture seminarians that become healthy change agents while actively cultivating a robust and deep interior life.

The VIM framework

In this ministry research project, the VIM understanding of the spiritual formation process proposed by Dallas Willard provides a framework for the preferred outcome for this ministry among seminary students. As such, the vision that fuels this project is for second-year seminary students to grow spiritually and experience deeper intimacy with God as they live the Kingdom life. Although Willard's next approach involves volitional intentionality on the part of the individuals to take necessary steps, this responsibility falls upon the facilitator to design a suitable program and to hold the students accountable for their participation. The facilitator would then use the theological analysis in the

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previous chapter along with personal experience to decide on the most appropriate means to achieve this vision.

In this project, the facilitator seeks to focus the attention of the students toward the presence of God through contemplative disciplines such as silence, *Lectio Divina*, contemplating in nature, writing of spiritual autobiography, and spiritual journaling. The practice of *Lectio Divina* is selected as a means to immerse the students in the Scriptures. This choice is made based on the fact that all of the students are from a word-based evangelical background.

**Goals for the Facilitator**

Spiritual formation in an ongoing process imbued by both the grace of God and human intentionality. As such, the key elements in this effort have to include attentiveness and openness to God, and students should not just see this as a series of tasks to be accomplished. The first goal of the facilitator, therefore, is to increase the reception and realization of the presence of God in the life of the participants. This represents a shift in attitude away from a doer to a contemplator.

The second goal for the project is to equip participants for authentic and transformative contemplative silence in daily encounters. The exercise of increasing awareness of God’s kingdom and presence in the here and now is not only to be taught in theory, but also to be carried out in praxis. This process necessitates a methodology. As such, five disciplines such as the practice of *Lectio Divina*, silence and solitude, contemplating in nature, spiritual autobiography, and spiritual journaling are chosen as approaches to introduce the contemplative life to students. The use of these disciplines is
expected to contribute to students' spiritual growth. The facilitator also introduces the Rule of Life and carries out one to one spiritual direction sessions to structure and monitor the students' spiritual growth experiences respectively.

These seven spiritual exercises are chosen because of their identification with classical disciplines of spiritual formation related to contemplation. The engagement by participants with these seven exercises during the second-year spiritual formation classes is intensive. The exercises are expected to make a positive contribution to their practice of contemplative silence within the community of saints.

However, the effort of the protestant seminary to produce mature spiritual leaders is compromised when academics are emphasized instead of spiritual formation. This biasness means focus shifts more to individual effort rather than a communal one to foster spiritual growth. The third goal is therefore to design a format to encourage positive growth relationships among the participants. As such, the program structure is rooted in the communal elements found in Trinitarian spirituality. Therefore, spiritual growth will happen not only as an individual, but also as a caring and prayerful community in the Kingdom of God.

The fourth goal for this project is to adequately equip students to be future pastors and leaders of the nations. This means whatever students learn and practice in and outside the classroom setting has to be reproducible in their future ministries. At the same time, the project is expected to sharpen the ministry expertise of the facilitator in spiritual direction. The skills required for this type of pastoral ministry are unique and rarely provided in ministerial training in an Asian context.
Goals for the Participants

This project is designed to help students experience the presence of God in concrete and tangible ways. The curriculum is also designed in such a way it can be taught and shared not only in a seminary context, but also by the students when they pastor their own communities of faith. The experiences with the initial two batches of second-year students using the same method and resources contributed to the project design, though some restructuring is done each year to better facilitate students in deepening their relationship with God. After two years of trial and error, the facilitator is more confident and ready to guide the third batch of students with a structured program to experience the presence of God in a fresh way.

Spiritual Practices Used in the Project

The following is a more detailed account of how the different components of the ministry project are carried out. These components include the practice of Lectio Divina, the practice of silence and solitude, contemplation in nature, spiritual autobiography, and spiritual journaling. The intention and purpose for using these disciplines are also presented.

The Practice of Lectio Divina

There are some challenges surrounding the teaching of the Bible in the seminary context in spite of the value of the Bible in spiritual formation. Some colleagues express a deep concern on how to teach and nurture the word of God in students so that it does not remain solely in the intellectual realm. Rather, students are expected to reflect and express whatever has been taught in their daily lives and ministries. This is a crisis the
seminary is facing right now because they are many students who grow only with head knowledge of the Scriptures and do not internalize what they have learned into their lives. As a result, the public ministries and private lives of the students lack integration and authenticity.

Michael Casey traces the ancient art of *Lectio Divina* using the four moments of prayer—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation—to the work of Guigo II, the ninth Prior of the Grand Chartreuse. Casey considers Guigo's short letter on the contemplative life known as *The Ladder of Monastics (Scala Claustralium)*, based on Jacob's vision in Genesis 28, to be an excellent example of Latin monastic spirituality during the late twelfth century. Casey recommends that the spiritual ladder described by Guigo should be approached in a flexible manner to take into consideration “different characters, different vocations, different opportunities, and the changing seasons of life.”

This insight is helpful when introducing *Lectio Divina* especially to students who have differing backgrounds.

Eugene Peterson uses the phrase “eat the word” as he introduces the ancient reading of the word of God by *Lectio Divina*. This practice can bring spiritual breakthrough to the next generation and result in truly spiritual men and women equipped from the seminary. These future ministers are so sensitive to the voice of God, like the

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5 Ibid.

prophets from the Old Testament, and have a hunger for the Word of God that is demonstrated by the thirsting deer in Psalm 42:1. Life will not be the same again when students are willing to slow down, willing to be silent before the Lord, and willing to meditate on the Word of God like the blessed man in Psalms 1:2.

Prior to this third batch of students, Lectio Divina has already been introduced in the earlier spiritual formation classes. This method is used to guide students to meditate on the word of God, with focus on Psalm 139, Colossians 3:1-17, and Romans 8:26-39 for the three different batches. As students gradually ponder upon one verse for each week, a large portion of the scripture is saturated into their inner hearts by the end of the four-month long class. In the one-on-one meetings with students, the word of God is observed bringing transformation and sanctification in their lives through the action of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, by pondering upon the words day and night, students also begin to enjoy fellowshipping with God through the Scriptures.

The Practice of Silence and Solitude

Ruth Haley Barton in one of her books, Invitation to Solitude and Silence, writes, “I have chosen to write about solitude and silence because I believe silence is the most challenging, the most needed and the least experienced spiritual discipline among evangelical Christians today.” Speaking of the evangelical faith, she also adds “We are a very busy, wordy and heady faith tradition” therefore “It is much easier to talk about it and read about it than to actually become quiet.”

Dallas Willard also highlights the

importance of silence and solitude. He writes, “Solitude and Silence are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines because they most directly attack the sources of human misery and wrongdoing.”8 He continues, “When we go into solitude and silence we stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, that this world is ‘my Father’s world.’”9

Practicing intentional silence is a new activity for most of the students. Therefore, there is a need to introduce this practice at a slower pace. This is because many students from the media-savvy generation are actually afraid of silence and will easily become restless in a quiet environment. In his outstanding work, Pensées, Pascal writes, “All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room.”10 Furthermore, he also observes; “Hence it comes people so much love noise and stir, hence it comes that the prison is so horrible a punishment; hence it comes that the pleasure of solitude is a thing incomprehensible.”11 Therefore, it is not realistic to expect the students to initially cope with a long duration of silence.

The early batches of students are observed to calm down and sit still when the duration of silence is gradually increased. The students eventually open their hearts to God who is unseen, and actually enjoy the experience. There has always been one or two more restless students in the spiritual formation classes. However, after four months of


9 Ibid., 10-11.


11 Ibid.
classes, these students also learn to sit still and appreciate the silence. A couple of students in the group initially fell asleep during the practice of silence due to their physical tiredness. For these students, they were always allowed to sleep through the period because the resting of the body during this silent moment is also an indication of their trust in the Lord. These students eventually found good rest in the Lord.

Contemplation in Nature

One of the foundational principles in Ignatian Spirituality is finding God in all things. This is a brilliant truth discovered by St. Ignatius himself. The phrase ‘finding God in all things’ means that God is not only found in the classroom, or even in our spiritual devotional times. Many seminary students tend to have the fixed idea that they can only find God in the Scriptures. However, God can also be found in beautiful nature, which has been created by Him and testify to His presence. This is written in Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” Therefore, in this new ministry where the lives of second-year students can be influenced, this method of contemplating in nature is introduced in order that students can learn to experience God’s presence not only indoors, but also outside in nature.

The seminary is located on a very beautiful island called the Pearl of the Orient, a name given by the British colonialists in the nineteenth century. There are beautiful beaches with smooth sand and different types of seashells. It also has hills and valleys.

with a huge variety of trees and flowers. These natural wonders provide ample opportunities for Penang Christians to ponder and meditate upon God and His Word. There is also an attraction called the Tropical Spice Garden that is tucked away in the tropical forest, like a hidden Eden.\(^{13}\) This garden has beautiful walkways and resting places among the lush greenery. The garden also provides the visitor with a chance to learn more about tropical herbs and spices that are grown at various points along the paths. With this in mind, a route is designed for students to use their five senses to experience nature and eventually enter into the presence of God.

Another local attraction that provides an environment for contemplation is Entopia, where animals such as reptiles, amphibians and insects such as butterflies are exhibited in their natural setting.\(^{14}\) One of the educational displays is about the life cycle of a butterfly that holds many insights for spiritual growth. As such, students are encouraged to use the life cycle to contemplate their own spiritual growth in the Lord.

With some intentionality and planning, students who are brought out to experience nature can also benefit spiritually. The act of contemplating nature with its rhythms of life can hopefully be an exercise that Penang Christians, who are mostly evangelical in their outlook, incorporate into their spiritual practices. With the help of this Ignatian method, Penang Christians are able to appreciate the God-given nature around them and truly find God in all things, instead of being distracted by the spirit of consumerism and materialism prevalent in society, and sadly also in churches.


Spiritual Autobiography

Students in the spiritual formation class are required to write their own spiritual autobiographies. The student is encouraged to prepare the spiritual autobiography for around ten to fifteen minutes’ duration for sharing, and must write it down on paper. Following this, the autobiography is shared with the spiritual formation group. Each member chooses the preferred session and volunteers to present verbally parts of the story with the group. During the sharing, the group is encouraged to listen attentively and in silence without asking any questions. After the sharing, there is a sacred moment of silent prayer by the group. Each one will offer the shared spiritual autobiography as a gift to the Lord in wordless prayer. This session of transparent sharing also enhances group relationships, and at the same time students can thank God for his goodness in each individual's life.

Spiritual Journaling

The writing of a spiritual journal is the fifth discipline to be used in this project on contemplative spiritual formation. The instructions for participants to write the journal during the project duration are found in Appendix D. The contents of the journal are kept confidential and are for the private use and reflection by the student. The journaling helps students to be aware of how God is working in and through them.

Project Overview

The project consists of sixteen one-hour spiritual formation classes with the second-year Mandarin-speaking students that are to be held weekly. The use of silence as a spiritual discipline is emphasized throughout the project. In each subsequent class
session, the duration of the silence is increased gradually by five minutes of silence, until the final session when the students experience a complete hour of silence.

The members are encouraged to prepare themselves before the sessions by slowly reading a devotional book (one or two short chapters per week) and to prepare their bodies, spirits, and hearts during the sessions. It is helpful the process is done in a slow and steady manner. This is based on the past three years of experience when students were guided into the exercises of silence. The students should not be rushed into doing a long period of silence without proper guidance.

The exercise of silence in this project is not one of withdrawal and should not be done in a spirit of indifference. Instead, it is a holy silence where the Trinity is present in the midst of the group. The silence is also where the calling and the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ through wordless prayer are also demonstrated.

As mentioned above, the practice of silence needs proper guidance and preparation. At the same time, some creativity also enhances the participants' interest in continuing to practice the silence. For instance, the sessions of silence can include interceding during group silence, having a meal at the canteen in silence, meditating upon the Scripture in silence (to be elaborated more in the next chapter), or practicing centering prayer during the first half of the session. The latter can take from five minutes to twenty-five minutes, and a cross is always placed in the center to remind the participants of the suffering and the love of Christ.

Candles are also good to use. The lighted candle represents the presence of Christ in the group and the warmth of the light reminds the participants of the love of Christ. Evangelical students need to be taught the spiritual significance behind the symbols and
rituals because such explanations can reduce their fear and resistance toward other faith practices. During the second half of the sixteen sessions, the venue is changed from a class to a larger room at the library block in order to have more space for various activities to help students contemplate in holy silence.
CHAPTER FIVE
IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

In a class setting, there is value in limiting the learning and training experiences to a specific length of time. This is because there are already many programs being run in the seminary and local churches, and ministers often have conflicting time demands. Therefore, this program is structured only for sixteen weeks. Individuals can fully commit to this time frame and involve themselves in the growth experience.

The experimental group for this ministry project consists of second-year students from the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (MBTS). These eight students are all Mandarin speakers, with five of them from Malaysia, two from Taiwan, and one from Hong Kong. During the introductory session, all MBTS students from different classes are gathered in the main hall. After the introductory speech by the academic dean, each lecturer in charge of the different groups gives a short introduction to the students. After that, the students are divided by year and the person in charge of that particular group of students is given time to explain the theme, goal, and purpose of their spiritual formation class. Students are also given some instructions to prepare for the second session.

For this project, three different components are employed in order to facilitate the spiritual formation process: meeting in the classroom as a group, face-to-face, and out of
the classroom. The experimental group of eight second-year students meet as a group once a week for four months on Thursdays at 1000-1100hr during the first semester as scheduled by the seminary. The focus of the group during these four months is on each individual, the community, and their relationship with the Trinity. Therefore, the facilitator assists each individual to enter into the presence of God. As such, it is necessary to be flexible and willing to let go of any standard instruction and method of going to God. Rather, the unique ways through which each participant comes freely and boldly into God’s presence is respected.

However, this does not mean that there are no rules to be followed. In fact, instruction and teaching on the spiritual disciplines are the main activities in the initial meetings, after which the practice of silence is gradually increased by five minutes with each session. Besides the actual practice, it is necessary to create an environment in the class to enhance contemplation. For instance, seven stations are set up where participants can rotate freely and use to contemplate God's presence (Appendix E). During the sharing of spiritual autobiographies, classmates do not interrupt one another but give full attention to the person who is speaking.

The second component of the project consists of an hourly face-to-face spiritual direction session with each participant after every four sessions of practicing spiritual disciplines in class. This spiritual direction meeting mainly focuses on the overall growth of the student, their prayer life, and the hindrances they face spiritually. The third component of the project is encouraging students to contemplate nature in silence. This involves bringing students out to gardens and other natural sites of beauty to help them experience God beyond the classroom.
By the end of the project, participants of the experimental group are able to spend a total of an hour in silent contemplation and able to savor prayer time without hurry and restlessness. At the same time, the Scriptures nurture the students in silence. In addition, by listening to one another’s spiritual autobiographies, students learn to hold each story in silent prayer, offering it as a gift to God. This activity of attentiveness to others also enriches their faith. The venue for the sessions is assigned by MBTS and can accommodate around eight to nine participants. However, when the duration of silence during class is increased significantly, the class shifts to a quieter room at the Library block. This happens after the ninth session.

The details of the sixteen sessions carried out with the second-year students over a period of four months are as follows: In session one, group introduction and administrative housekeeping is carried out. During session two, there is a brief round of introductions to familiarize the participants with each other. In this particular session the participants are led by the facilitator to make a group covenant. The purpose of the covenant, which consists of seven commitments, is to contribute to group unity. The commitments includes the following statements: 1) To yield ourselves to God, to become teachable as we place ourselves in His hand; 2) To prepare for silence practice and to come with expectation and readiness; 3) To pray daily for the members of our spiritual formation group by name; 4) To keep confidences so that what is said and shared in the group remains in the group; 5) To be open continually to the work of the Trinity in each other’s life, by being humble and non-judgmental; 6) To arrive on time at 10am (student) and to end on time at 11am (facilitator); and 7) To listen to others, especially when they share their spiritual autobiography.
After committing to the group covenant, participants are then encouraged to share about the item of significance they had been told to bring to class. They are also free to share openly about their relationship with the Trinity God for that season in their lives. After the sharing from participants, the facilitator leads the group into a very brief moment of silence to honor all the items presented at the altar as sacred gifts from God. The session concludes with prayer to commit each student to the Lord for the whole sixteen weeks.

Following that, participants are given slips of paper to write down their spiritual autobiographies for sharing in the following sessions. The facilitator also distributes a small pot of cactus to each participant, and reminds students to water their own plant once a week. This provides a creative and concrete activity of nurturing to remind students of the importance of nurturing their interior lives as well. The meeting concludes with a five-minute session of silence, the first in the series of increasing duration. The participants are encouraged to use one word to record how they feel at the end of their silent moment.

Sessions three, four, six, seven, and eight are still held at the classroom. The main highlight of these four sessions is the introduction and experience of Lectio Divina to the students. The duration of silence is lengthened by five minutes at every subsequent class. Therefore, it is important to choose appropriate and shorter lengths of Bible verses to do the Lectio even as the silence becomes longer.

The second highlight is the sharing of spiritual autobiographies. During each class, one participant shares the prepared spiritual autobiography in less than ten minutes.
After the sharing, everybody is directed to be silent for one minute, and with wordless prayer present this person and his story as a gift to the living God.

Finally, as the group sits in a circle, the facilitator places a candle and a cross at the center of the group. This act is to help the participants learn to be still and silent before the Lord as a community of saints. The candle represents the presence of Christ in the room or the warmth of his love within this community. The facilitator then encourages students to continue to meditate upon the verses just as before, or to focus on the cross to remember the suffering Lord. At the end of the session, and before they leave the class, students will write down in one word how they feel at the end of the silent moment. The school bell signals the end of each session.

Sessions nine, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen and sixteen are carried out in one of the larger classrooms in the library block. The intention for this change is to enable set up of six to seven stations for contemplation. Participants are directed to take turns going through stations so that each one can experience different practices of silence in creative and meaningful ways. The six stations are set up with the following items: A Bible with selected verses from Genesis to Revelation—the participant to spend enough time in God's presence by immersion into the word of God; a display of various devotional books on a long table—the participant to spend time reading them slowly; art and craft materials—the participant is free to use his creativity during the silence; a globe and some prayer resources centered on world mission—the participant to intercede for God's mission and missionaries; various icons and symbols (the hospitality of Abraham, mosaic of five fishes and two loaves, the cross etc.)—the participant to contemplate in silence.
and attend to God; and a window seat with an ocean view—the participant to meditate and contemplate God's nature.

During these sessions at the library block, the order of activity is the same. As the silent period becomes longer, the *Lectio Divina* period becomes shorter. During each session, participants also listen to one person's spiritual autobiography while learning to uphold others in the holy presence of the Trinity. Participants are still directed to write down their feelings as one word at the end of the session. Since the library is located at the top of the hill and the school bell cannot be heard, the facilitator plays some soothing music such as Gregorian chants to let the participants know the end of the hour.

At the final session, each participant is expected to practice silence for the whole one-hour session. Therefore, there are no verbal instructions from the facilitator during this session at all. Prior instructions are instead given through email or social media by the class monitor. At the end of the session, participants record their feelings as one word after the silent moment. They are also requested to fill in a post-program survey form at the last session.

During sessions five, ten, and fifteen, the facilitator met face to face with each participant for spiritual direction. The purpose of these encounters is to find out more about the student's relationship with God after experiencing a few sessions as a group. In an Asian setting, it is useful for the spiritual director to give some brief explanation about the roles of spiritual directors and directees, and the purpose of such sessions. It is also helpful during the first spiritual direction session to use facilitation exercises such as icebreakers to encourage dialogue. An icebreaker known as the “weather forecast” is
used to help directees be comfortable to express their spiritual condition at that moment—whether it was fine, stormy, rainy etc.

During these one-to-one sessions, the facilitator also helps the directee to evaluate the one word recorded after every session of silence. The facilitator as a spiritual director leads the directee to discover and discuss openly his or her relationship with God. These spiritual direction sessions provide the facilitator opportunities to bond with the directees and at the same time allow the Creator to deal with His creature. All this is possible but requires wisdom and discernment on the part of the facilitator. Overall, the facilitator is able to see students grow spiritually in the Lord.

**Feedback Methodology**

A survey is used to ascertain the impact of contemplative disciplines on spiritual growth among Mandarin-speaking students of the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (Appendix F). Due to limitation of class numbers, the seventy-five participants in the survey are pooled from student groups who attended three different programs. However, all these programs are focused on spiritual formation and spirituality, and carried out within the duration of thirty to forty class-hours. Moreover, the discipline of silence is consistently introduced and practiced during class time throughout all the programs.

The purpose of the survey is initially to find out the general views of students toward contemplative disciplines. It is also intended to reveal the backgrounds of students, and whether these or any other factors influenced their experience of contemplative exercises. Last but not least, the survey reveals whether practices
introduced during classes are reproducible in the students' devotional lives and in their ministry context.

**Analysis of Data**

An analysis of survey results found in figures 5.1 to 5.12 is carried out (Appendix G). After analysis and evaluation of data, the implementation of the discipline of silence in a class setting is further examined in detail. For this, personal interviews with participants are also carried out to identify strengths and challenges found in the program. The impact of the discipline of silence on participants is ascertained from these interviews. Finally, based on the analysis and feedback from participants, recommendations for the facilitation of spiritual disciplines, especially the discipline of silence, are made.

**Student Profiles**

In the first category of results, figures 5.1-5.4, the background and profiles of students are presented. From figure 5.1, the majority of participants are matured students who have been disciples of Jesus Christ for more than ten years, with only twenty percent indicating a commitment of less than ten years. From figure 5.2, the majority of participants (42.7 percent) is between thirty-five to forty-two years old. This is not surprising as believers within this age range are generally very active in ministry, and find the need to be equipped in theological studies. Many of these students have also years of experience in pastoral ministry, though age and years of being a disciple of Jesus Christ cannot be equated to spiritual maturity. For instance, some of the students from Mainland China were young, but are spiritually matured due to their backgrounds, while
others may have only come to faith during their middle age, yet are also spiritually matured.

Concerning the level of education among students shown in figure 5.3, at least 90 percent of the students have a diploma or upper secondary certificate, with 40 percent of the students with degree qualifications. It is possible some matured students were not able to do their studies due to lack of financial resources when they were younger. Hence, the spiritual life of these students is not in any way less matured than those who were more highly educated. Although academic qualifications do not imply spiritual maturity, it is still useful to know the academic level of the participants because it affects the choice and delivery of course content.

In figure 5.4, the nationalities of students are either from Malaysia or another country. From the data, there is almost equal numbers of participants in these two categories, with Malaysians at 45 percent and foreign students at 55 percent. A brief breakdown on the nationalities of these Mandarin-speaking foreign students is also given. The majority of these Mandarin speakers are from Mainland China, while others are distributed evenly between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Myanmar, and South Korea. Although all are Mandarin-speaking, it cannot be assumed that the cultural context is the same. Cultural values and even geography does affect to a certain degree the personal and spiritual development of a believer. Since detailed information regarding specific provinces of the Mainland-Chinese students is not gathered, this presents a limitation to the data. Overall, increase of foreign participants at the MBTS result in a variety of cultural backgrounds that shape the students’ perspective on learning from other cultures
and faith traditions. This has greatly enriched the spiritual journey of the students as a community.

Devotional Practices

The second category of results reflects devotional habits of participants and challenges they face, especially in the area of time management and the presence of distractions (figures 5.5-5.7). In figure 5.5, majority identified the preferred time for devotion only as thirty minutes, though 47 percent still find that this time can be flexible. In view of this, there is a challenge to facilitate students into just an hour of silent contemplation. As such, patience and creativity on the part of the facilitator is essential to encourage participants to prolong their personal encounter with God.

It is also note-worthy to find out around 26 percent of participants indicate mismanagement of time is the factor that most affected their devotional times. This is most obvious among the millennials who struggle in areas of discipline, be it waking up early or allocating time for devotion with God. Unforeseen interruptions also figure high on the list of factors distracting the students. In view of these challenges, elements such as intentionality and accountability need to be incorporated into a program for facilitating contemplative disciplines.

Although in figure 5.7 students indicate a multitude of distractions during devotional times, these distractions can instead become positive motivation for prayer. For instance, when students are distracted by their own personal problems, it might be an urge or call to become more prayerful for that particular season in their lives.
Contemplative practices are then useful to help them rise above these distractions to focus on God during these moments.

Impact of Contemplative Practices

The third category is to determine whether the program is useful to students and this is one of the highlights of the whole project. The survey include whether students will apply what they have learned about contemplative disciplines, especially the discipline of silence, into their own lives and future ministry. Five questions are used to elicit the answers and the results are presented in figures 5.8-5.12.

From the data, three quarters of participants agreed the program is helpful or very helpful in their spiritual walk with God, and none indicated it is not helpful at all (figure 5.10). This result shows participants in the program are impacted and are willing to learn something new. Moreover, the students respond that they were most impacted by the practice of silence (39 percent, figure 5.8) and benefited from the ability to quieten down and be still (71 percent, figure 5.11). This considerable positive response to the use of silence as a spiritual discipline is indicative of its impact on students' spiritual walk. It demonstrates that when this practice is implemented in a small group setting with clear instruction and guidance, the outcome for learning is desirable, as compared to an individual attempt to do so. In the latter, factors like a lack of discipline and distractions make it a challenge for many of the students to contemplate and behold God. As such, there is a lack of intimacy in their relationship with God, and hence the usual feedback of "dryness" in their spiritual walk.
One of the ways to determine the impact of a teaching, technique, or practice is to see it reproduced in the lives of the receivers. In this survey, it is necessary to find out whether what participants learned in this program is readily reproducible and useful for future ministry. From figure 5.9, it is observed more than 45 percent of participants were definitely going to use the contents of the spiritual formation course in future, while 38.75 percent committed to use what they have learned regularly. When asked regarding which aspects of the program the students will use in their future ministry, their responses include silence (20 percent), scripture reading (16 percent), meditation (14.75 percent), and nature (2.6 percent). Out of the responses, 38.7 percent also indicated they would use more than two of the above mentioned. Results are quite evenly spread between silence, scripture reading, and meditation and this is not surprising as it reflected the evangelical traditions of students. While many students enjoy contemplating in nature, they do not feel confident to facilitate this in their future ministry because it is something still unfamiliar to them. Overall, 70 percent of students responded this spiritual formation course with its emphasis on the contemplative disciplines is helpful and very helpful in their own spiritual growth (figure 5.10).
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is not unusual for various ministry programs within the seminary to take place without evaluation. Considerable energy may be expended in planning and execution of a ministry program activity without doing the equally important work of examination and evaluation. If the ministry activity is repeated, it is likely to duplicate the errors and mistakes that occurred previously. More important is the danger that positive values of the ministry activity are not strengthened and improved upon. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the ministry project. The evaluation process also outlines suggestions for use of the ministry project in other seminaries, as well as in churches students will eventually serve.

**Strengths of the Project**

There is considerable interest in the program from the beginning. This is because the program is part of the facilitator's project in a doctoral degree program in spiritual direction. As a result, there is curiosity directed from students' involvement that is healthy and positive. Another reason for interest in the program is due to proper guidance given during the introduction of silence as a process. This has greatly helped participants to appreciate this tradition of silence that was initially very unfamiliar to them. For instance, gradually increasing the length of the silent period also motivated participants to learn more effectively.

The interest level remains high to the end of project because students are eager to apply what they learn in the program to their own contexts. This helps address the perennial problem within Christian education in which both lecturer and students face the
dilemma of how to apply knowledge learned in class effectively to their ministries. The data presented in chapter five shows the group is highly motivated to apply the practice of silence into their future ministries. It is encouraging to both facilitator and students to see the effectiveness of the program. This keen interest and ability to see the vital role of contemplative silence in both personal growth and the life of their churches are expressed during interview sessions.

The practical nature of the ministry project also lends strength to the program. While there is verbal and printed directions given regarding use of the disciplines, the major focus of the process is on the experiential engagement with disciplines by participants. The high level of satisfaction with the program reflects the effectiveness of the program on both individual and whole group interactions.

The intensive yet intimate nature of the program also proves a strong incentive for participation. The group setting is small with just enough space for individuals to share their lives with the entire group in an intimate manner. This openness with each other also enhances their relationship with the unseen God. Overall, the structure of the program is concise, practical, and life changing. Participation in a sixteen-week program on spiritual formation evidently does not deter involvement. On the contrary, this feature is most attractive because the program has a definite time frame and stands in contrast to other ministry activities that did not.

Another strength of the project is the students' daily interactions with the various disciplines that complement the weekly class sessions. Hence, the value of the project does not depend on a carry-over effect from class to class to develop the practice. Rather, daily engagement with spiritual disciplines creates a positive momentum for growth. For
instance, students are assigned to design their own Rule of Life and to apply it to their lives. With personal dedication and discipline, along with group motivation, this exercise enhances the progress of their spiritual growth.

According to the facilitator's experience that is collaborated by research data, the most significant strength of the project is the actual practice of contemplative silence. Some individuals in the project give personal testimonies on how they initially had no interest in silence or viewed the practice as almost an impossible task to do. However, after the program, they share freely about how much they appreciate the beauty of silence, with some even suggesting a longer period of silence.

Student A shared in his end-of-program reflection how he experienced breakthrough in his spiritual walk through the program (Appendix H). He wrote that he benefitted from the creative facilitation in class and the spiritual direction sessions. He also appreciated the *Lectio Divina* on Colossians 3:1-17 which helped him in his prayer life. Comments like these are most convincing for the use of silent contemplation because it shows that engagement was not because of obligation and fulfillment of academic study.

Another highlight for students is the instruction to jot down their feelings in one word at the end of the silent session. This was recorded for twelve times and helps them to see how cultivating contemplative silence in their interior world will eventually calm down their hearts and minds to enter into the silence with God. This recording of their feelings is also helpful for the spiritual direction sessions. An example of the form used by Student B for recording is given in Appendix I.
The practice of silence is prevalent in every spiritual discipline taught in this course. As such, the practice of *Lectio Divina* and contemplation of God in silence lead the participants to overcome distractions, remain silent, and to enter into God's presence. The practice of attentive listening to someone's spiritual autobiography along with silent upholding prayer before the heavenly Father, becomes a sacred moment for most of the participants. This is because during the session, students experience the fullness of love and acceptance not only by the unseen God, but also through the visible family of God. This practice enables participants to experience acceptance in a safe, loving, and prayerful community.

Another positive outcome of the practices is the deepening of relationships between students who have known each other since their first year in the seminary. The goal of the first year seminary course is to get students to know themselves deeper with the use of a personality test guided by an experienced counselor. However, when they enter into the second year, the facilitator assumes students have already some understanding of themselves. Therefore, the focus is to facilitate participants as a group to have intimate relationship with the Trinity using various contemplative spiritual disciplines. The purpose is not only to see individuals benefit from the program, but also to have the whole group grow together as a community by the grace of God.

Another strength of the program is the one-to-one spiritual direction sessions with the students. This is carried out at least three times during the whole sixteen weeks of the project. The sessions allow the student to have more personal time with the facilitator. For example, the spiritual director helped Student B explore more fully her spiritual journey by using the one-word feelings she recorded after each contemplative session in...
class. An interview with Student B revealed how she grew spiritually as she learned to contemplate during her own devotional times (Appendix J). During these meetings, the facilitator with the role of a spiritual director not only gets to know the student deeper, but also has a lot of opportunities to evaluate the usefulness of the program through their feedback. This allows adjustment to aspects of the program in order to benefit each person as well as the whole group. Student C shared his experiences in practicing an hour of daily prayer in an interview (Appendix K). He found the use of symbols and journaling most helpful during the silent prayer time.

Last but not least, the project presents an opportunity for the seminary to embrace with an open heart a different tradition—most importantly one that is still biblically based, Christ centered, and grounded on Trinitarian spirituality. Our seminary has been blessed in the Baptist tradition that is Word centered and faithful to the teaching of the truth of God. However, believers cannot just depend on a single strength as this may lead to spiritual pride, but rather Christians need to embrace other faith heritages throughout church history that will enrich the spiritual journey.

**Project Limitations**

There are certain factors that limit the project. For example, the number of participants is beyond control of the facilitator as this is dependent on the enrollment for each academic year. Therefore, there is no option regarding the balance of genders in the group, the cultural backgrounds, or even the age range. Therefore, the flexibility, creativity, and patience of the facilitator are really put to the test. For instance, the first batch of students is big at sixteen students, yet the second batch is reduced to twelve.
Initially it seems to be the perfect group size, yet the challenge was the imbalance of genders in the group as there were ten females to only two male students.

Another challenge is the visa issues of a few Mainland Chinese students. Some of them need to leave during the middle of class and this lapse distracts the progress of the program. Even though these students still continue with personal study and practice of various disciplines, the group dynamics is affected to a certain extent. However, the challenges are surmountable and the program is fully carried out without other disruptions for the past three years.

Another area of concern for the facilitator is whether participants can handle the time commitment for the practice of contemplative disciplines. As the students' schedules are usually packed with duties and assignments to be completed, there is the temptation of treating this spiritual formation course as just another subject to fulfill the credit hour. Furthermore, this program is also not under the GPA accreditation. Therefore, it is a challenge to assign appropriate amount of spiritual exercises and yet not burden students too much. If this is done, students lose motivation to be fully involved and active in the entire program.

Even though many students share in their own testimonies that they are called to serve God, the level of spiritual maturity among them is often very varied. Hence, the selection of exercises and expectations for the group is challenging. Age and temperament are factors that have impact on the experience of contemplative silence for some students. For example, practicing silence during the initial stages is often very hard for certain type of students, especially those who are younger and those who find it difficult to remain still on the chair. There were also some who obviously did not have
enough rest the night before. These students find it very difficult to concentrate and find no benefit at all if they are not prepared before the session. The facilitator needs to treat each one as an adult and not force them to fulfill all the requirements, yet this might eventually encourage some of them not to take the program seriously.

Another challenge is the attendance of part-time students during class every week. If some off-campus students, who take classes on a part-time basis, see they do not have any other classes during a particular week, they are easily tempted not to attend only an hour of the spiritual formation program. However, if this happens for a particular week, the facilitator will ask them to replace the missed session in their own time slot. Therefore, it is very troublesome sometimes to contact them to fulfill the period of silence in order to note down the one particular feeling after the silence. Though helpful for discussion with most students during the spiritual direction sessions, there is limitation in using just a word because some students find it difficult to accurately express their own feelings, or generally lacked the vocabulary to do so.

The large group also contributes to other limitations of the project. In some sessions there is not enough time for them to share their spiritual autobiography, so there is the feeling throughout the project of being rushed. This feeling of hurriedness is certainly not in keeping with a project designed to help one learn how to contemplate in silence. If the enrolment is more restricted, there can be enough time to experience the project without the necessity of watching the clock.
Suggestions for Use in Other Settings

If the design of this project is to be carried out in other seminaries, it is necessary to introduce the lecturer's role as the facilitator or even a spiritual director of spiritual formation. The seminary leadership, especially the president, should empower such facilitators to carry out the task with spiritual authority. Moreover, before the facilitator implements the program in his seminary, he should first receive training and have personally gone through the program. Therefore, the facilitator needs to have a detailed training manual. It is also important to note that while teaching some of the principles of spiritual disciplines, the facilitator needs to be given an avenue to hear the struggles and spiritual longings of those in the group.

This project reinforces the significant role of the facilitator in leading the group into the contemplative life with God. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for a facilitator to authentically teach the practice of silence without personally doing this discipline regularly. Before one attempts to direct others into the inward journey, one would surely be on a self-pilgrimage. It would also be advantageous for the facilitator to receive the benefits of contemplative silence as a group experience and also other spiritual disciplines.

Besides the seminary, churches can be encouraged to use the structure of this program to train their leaders and members in contemplative disciplines. Maturing leaders are always motivated to enhance their personal relationship with God. However, this might be new to certain traditions such as the Pentecostals or the Assemblies of God. But if the leaders are open to learn from other traditions, they will surely benefit on a deeper level in their spiritual lives.
Other ministries can also benefit from this program. A weekday ministry for women or men can also use the principles from the project. The short term but intensive nature of the program is attractive for those who look to the church to provide growth experiences on days other than Sunday. The same idea can be also applied to a youth group. With some adaptation, the project can also be designed for use in a religious retreat. However, at the retreat it is recommended that only one component in the program should be utilized. For example, a silent retreat can be one using the method of *Lectio Divina*. A retreat setting does not provide adequate time for introducing all the disciplines used in the project. However, with whatever limited time available, a retreat involving even one of the disciplines can be a deeply meaningful experience contributing to spiritual growth.

However, it is important to note that when contemplative disciplines are introduced, the pastor should realize that not all within his parish would respond to the invitation to participate. The practice of the contemplative disciplines is for all Christians. However, it is presumptuous to assume that all will respond with enthusiasm to the approaches developed in this project.

**Adaptations for Future Use**

The adaptations for future use should take into consideration the limitations of the project. Firstly, the design of the program needs to be doable and customized for each individual and for the whole group, while not losing focus on the practice of silence as the one thing that needs to be accomplished. If the program is carried out in the church context, the number of participants in the group setting must not be more than fifteen
people. The suggested ideal is between eight to twelve participants. This smaller group size contributes to a better use of time, assuming that sixteen weeks is the time period.

An adaptation of this ministry project may include limiting the number of disciplines. There should be an awareness not to have too many activities. To call an activity spiritual does not mean that it necessarily contributes to spiritual growth. Future ministry projects can be designed to help the students practice the contemplative disciplines around only one of the disciplines. For this particular context, the practice of silence was the most ideal one.

Further research should include using extensive follow-up surveys and interviews. A survey given at a six-month or twelve-month interval after the research project will add insights to the research data. If possible, the project should also be extended beyond the sixteen weeks. The participants can also be encouraged to have a consistent daily hour of a particular spiritual discipline. This suggested procedure is not only doable but will anticipate the spiritual transformation of each individual after putting his effort and discipline to carry out the disciplines.

**Concluding Remarks**

An analysis of the research data and personal interviews suggests the project on the practice of contemplative disciplines made a positive contribution to the participants’ spiritual growth. The ministry project helped the Mandarin-speaking students at the MBTS discover some contemplative disciplines that can assist them on their spiritual pilgrimage. Besides this, it is encouraging to find out that the program is reproducible in the students' ministry contexts.
Through the program, the facilitator learns to live within a curious tension, of being apprehended by the spirit of the living God and managing the event by some preplanned process. Any system of spiritual disciplines that is structured to lead to a predictable outcome may not, in fact, produce the desired result. This tension is therefore a call to prepare for the contemplative experience to the best of one's ability, and to trust God that the preparation leads to a desired outcome. Disciples on the journey should not be presumptuous even as they structure their lives toward contemplation. There are experiences of spiritual serendipity both within and without structure. John the Solitary in the fourth century writes,

How long shall I be in the world of the voice and not in the world of the word? For everything that is seen is voice and is spoken with the voice, but in the invisible world there is no voice, for not even voice can utter its mystery. How long shall I be voice and not silence, when shall I depart for the voice, no longer remaining in things which the voice proclaims? When shall I become word in an awareness of hidden things, when shall I be raise up to silence, to something which neither voice nor word can bring.¹

It is hoped this project raises up many more Mandarin-speaking seminary students to experience spiritual growth through contemplative disciplines such as silence. Moreover, may the openness and transparency shown in a group setting encourage authentic living among students. Finally, may there be further insights on how to adapt the practice of contemplative silence more effectively to facilitate spiritual growth among Asian believers in the 21st century.

APPENDIX A

Map of West Malaysia
APPENDIX B

Map of Penang Island (Pulau Pinang)
APPENDIX C

New Testament Silence

Ross says, “In reading through the Gospel of Mark, I found thirty-four instances of silence of different kinds. I suspect that more could be found using a more subtle and expansive interpretation from the Greek.” The following is her list:

- Silence of the wilderness (by implication) (1:12); also, Jesus binds Satan (by implication-Satan’s temptations are noise; Jesus silences him) (3:27);
- Silences demon (1:25); silences demons (1:34, 39);
- Goes to a lonely place (implicit silence) (1:35);
- Commands healed leper to be silent (1:44)
- People in synagogue are silent when Jesus asks if it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (3:4);
- Jesus silences unclean spirits (3:12);
- He who has ears to hear, let him hear (4:9);
- “Silence! Be still! (spoken to the sea) (4:39);
- Woman touches his garment in silence (implicit) (5:27-29);
- Tells Jairus and wife not to tell of the raising of their daughter (5:43);
- Goes up alone on the mountain to pray (6:46);
- The sick touch his garment (implicit silence) (6:56b);
- Quoting Isaiah “teaching as doctrines the precepts often” (implicit is the idea that God’s word comes out of silence) (7:7);
- Healing the man who is deaf and dumb – he charged them to tell no one (7:36);
- Healing of blind man (8:26);
- “do not tell that I am the Messiah” (8:30);
- Transfiguration (9:2-8); silences Peter, James, and John not to talk about the transfiguration (9:9);
- Jesus doesn’t want people to know where he is going because he is teaching the disciples (prediction of his death and resurrection) (9:30);
- Crowd tell Bartimeus to be quiet but he won’t (10:48);
- Jesus won’t tell the chief priests, scribes, and elders who he is (silences them; glory is self-evident for those who can see, as in many of the examples that follow) (11:33);
- The stone which the builders rejected (12:10);
- No one dared to ask him any questions (12:34);
- “stay awake”(vigilance requires silence) (13:32-37); to disciples in Gethsemane to “stay awake” (14:34); the same after they are found sleeping(14:36); the disciples fall silent when he finds them asleep; there is no relief from desolation (14:40);
- Silence before the high priest (14:61); he does not respond when mocked and told to prophesy (14:65); silence before Pilate (15:5); silence before the mockers (15:18-20);
- Silence of tomb (15:46);
- Silence of the woman at the tomb who did not obey the young man and report to the disciples (16:8).
## APPENDIX D

### An Example of a Journaling Log


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: Journaling (Personal Updates)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since <strong>/</strong>/__ until Today: <strong>/</strong>/__</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key events/Issues</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts about self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance/Steps/Solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Body and Soul (Physical and Spiritual)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key events/Issues</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts about self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance/Steps/Solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Any Other Aspect that is significant but not mentioned above

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key events/Issues</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts about self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance/Steps/Solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Summary/Way forward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What have I accomplished?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What am I looking forward to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What am I anxious about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have I focused on?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I want to be prayed for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part 2: Individual Spiritual Direction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do I feel now about the past two weeks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did I learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did I do well?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could I have done better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is God in all these situations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is God saying to you in this situation/issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you want to tell God?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

Seminary Class Setup
APPENDIX F

Post Program Survey

Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been a disciple of Christ?
   A. Less than Below 5 years
   B. 5 to 10 years
   C. 10 to 20 years
   D. 20 to 30 years
   E. More than Above 30 years

2. How old are you?
   A. Less than 25 years
   B. 25-35 years
   C. 36-45 years
   D. 46-55 years
   E. More than 55 years

3. What is your educational level?
   A. Secondary school
   B. Diploma or upper secondary
   C. Degree
   D. Masters
   E. Doctorate

4. What is your nationality?
   A. Malaysian
   B. Other (Please indicate your nationality: _____________)

5. What do you think is the best duration for your devotional practice?
   A. 15 minutes
   B. 30 minutes
   C. 1 hour
   D. Over 1 hour
   E. Flexible

6. Which aspects in this spiritual formation program impacted you most?
   A. Scripture reading
   B. Silence
   C. Meditation
   D. Nature
   E. Reading devotional materials
7. Will you continue to use the contents of this spiritual formation course in the future?
   A. Occasionally
   B. Regularly
   C. Definitely
   D. Probably never
   E. Definitely never

8. Do you think this course is helpful to your spiritual growth? Please indicate from least helpful (1) to most helpful (5).
   A. 1 (not really helpful)
   B. 2 (a little bit helpful)
   C. 3 (moderately helpful)
   D. 4 (helpful)
   E. 5 (very helpful)

9. Which of the following situations will affect your devotional time?
   A. Personal emotions and moods
   B. Surrounding environment
   C. Unforeseen interruptions
   D. Mismanagement of time
   E. All of the above
   F. None of the above

10. What preoccupies you during your devotional time?
    A. Personal problems
    B. Interpersonal relationships
    C. Family problems
    D. Church, society or national issues
    E. All of the above

11. Which of the following best describes the benefits you gained from this program?
    A. Understanding different devotional approaches
    B. Knowledge of the Bible
    C. Intimacy and relationship with God
    D. The ability to quieten down and be still
    E. How to pray

12. Which of the following aspects of the program will you apply in your future ministry?
    A. Scripture reading
    B. Silence
    C. Meditation
    D. Nature
    E. Reading devotional materials
    F. More than two of the above
APPENDIX G

Figures 5.1-5.12 Results of the Survey Done by the seventy-five Mandarin-speaking Students

Figure 5.1: Years been a disciple

Figure 5.2: Age

Figure 5.3: Education Level

Figure 5.4: Nationality
Figure 5.5: The best duration

Figure 5.6: Distraction

Figure 5.7: Preoccupies

Figure 5.8: Most impact
APPENDIX H

Student's End of Program Reflection (translated from Mandarin)

Student: A  Guided mentor: Matthew Leong  Date: 6 September 2016

Thanks be to God! My spiritual growth has been enhanced by the guidance of my
lecturer and the introduction of the textbook, *Journey of Silence*. I now have a deeper
understanding and experience in the discipline of silence. Frankly speaking, for a long
time I have lost the art of true silence. I found that it is indeed a difficult task to learn how
to be silent, and experience true silence. But through this book, along with the teacher's
guidance during our Thursday group meeting on practicing the discipline of silence, I was
truly facilitated to meet and experience God's presence once again in real silence.

Praise be to God! In these sixteen-weeks of classes on spiritual formation, I had a
fruitful and abundant breakthrough in my spiritual walk with the Lord. I thank especially
the facilitator for his dedicated and patient guidance and teaching. Besides the creative
and careful planning for the weekly meetings, he also guided us to do the *Lectio Divina*
on Colossians 3:1-17. This was also my first experience to memorize and mediate on
such a long passage of Scripture. The experience was not merely memorizing but
afforded us a lot of time to slowly chew on the Word, mediate and reflect on it, and
finally implement it in my daily life. In addition, the three spiritual direction sessions that
I had face to face with the facilitator also helped me to understand myself better, and also
to share my struggle and pain to him in private. It eventually also enhanced my prayer
life.
APPENDIX I

Spiritual Formation second year (sample)
Use one expression to describe your feeling at the end of the silence practice.
Student: B

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<td>Meditative</td>
<td>Awakening</td>
<td>Vast</td>
<td>Changeable</td>
<td>Togetherness</td>
<td>Deep</td>
<td>Solid</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Transform</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
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APPENDIX J

Sample: Reflection on the Practice on Silence During Class

Student: B  Date of Interview: 24 July 2018  Time: 1115-1230hr

Note: The one-word adjective used by students was in Mandarin.

Student B gave feedback that was overall very positive. Prior to this exercise, she never took notice of the discipline of silence. However, during this half year of intentional and gradual increase in the duration for contemplative silence during class, she began to enjoy the exercise. She used it to contemplate in nature while jogging daily with her husband.

Student B was one of the examples chosen for her one adjective response after each session of silence in class. These responses were recorded over 12 sessions of increasing silence in class. From her initial feedback of “emptiness”, it was clear that she took some time to settle her heart during the 5-minute session. During the second meeting when the time of silence was increased to 10 minutes, her feeling she recorded was “comfortable.” At the end of 15 minutes of silence cum Lectio Divina on Psalms, her response was “meditative.” After 20 minutes of silence, she recorded her feelings as “awakening” as she reflected on her relationship with others in the church body. When the 25 minutes of silences ended, Student B noted her feelings as “vast.” This was because she felt that God wanted her to show her the necessity to have a big heart to accept and forgive others. She explained to me that as a perfectionist, her personality did not allow her to identify with others as she often expected too much from others. After the 30-minute session, she used the word “changeable” and reflected on the need to respond instead of react to the feedback of others.
The second half of the practices was held in a big room in the library block. There the facilitator arranged eight stations for each individual to contemplative in silence. During the 35 minutes, she contemplated by looking out of the window at the trees, especially the branches. At the end of the session, her feelings were noted as “togetherness” as she later shared with the facilitator that each tri-lobed shaped leaf reminded her of Trinity, and how the whole universe is under God’s sovereign control. For the 40-minute and 45 minute sessions, Student B stationed herself at the OT and NT stations where she pondered upon the word of God. The feelings she recorded was “deep” and “solid” respectively, and she was reminded in her reflection that her spiritual growing must be grounded in the word of God.

It was interesting to discover that during her 50 minutes of contemplative silence Student B contemplated by just looking at the lamp outside the window. Her word chosen was “reflective.” because the contemplation left a very deep impression and a desire to reflect the image of Christ in her life. For her 55-minute session, she continued to reflect while looking at the different shapes of the leaves belonging to the trees outside the window. She noticed that some were new and some had withered, and noted down “transform” as her word. She later shared that the reflection left her with a very deep impression and gave her the desire to reflect on the image of Christ in her life during the different seasons in life. This was a constant reminder for her to be renewed and refreshed in Christ at all times, yet not forget that life has seasons, and that one day all human beings will also experience death too.

Finally, during an hour of complete silence, she contemplated using the mosaic of five loaves and two fishes. She reflected as she observed how the different shapes of the
individual pieces can be put together as a beautiful mosaic, so she noted down the word “harmony.” She was reminded of the mercy and love of God as His hand mounds each individual into harmony and union with Him. Student B reflected that the church is the body of Christ in unity, with God as the head of the church.
APPENDIX K

Sample: Interview on the Practice of An Hour of Daily Prayer (Summarized)

Student: C  Date of Interview: 29 June 2018  Time of conversation: 1120 to 1250hr

Student C seemed eager to share with me concerning his experience of the 24 days of daily hour prayer. Student C started by mentioning that the "praying hand" method was very helpful for him to remember to pray more effectively. Furthermore, during devotion times, he now prefers to open the window and look at the nature outside the window. He has found that the sound of the bird, even the sound of the car will help him to be centered in the present moment.

Student C shared that one very significant thing he had learned was the use of symbols to pray. He shared that he finds it helpful to look at symbols such as a cross. Actions like lighting a candle have also been a great help to center his thoughts. Student C also told me honestly about his inability to focus during his drive back to his hometown, as well as the time spent there. However, when he got back to routine seminary life, he found it more conducive to contemplate and easier to be still.

Besides the use of symbols, Student C also found journeying down his thoughts very helpful during that the hour of devotion. During this time, he used about 15minutes to pen down his thoughts. Concerning the practice of the 20 minutes of silence during that hour, he however found it not so easy to achieve. This was because he was always very cautious about the time, and by looking at the time often, he was not able to be still. At this juncture, I suggested that centering prayer would be helpful for him during this silent period.
The main obstacle that distracted him from focusing his thought in prayer was busyness. When I asked him what he meant by busyness he shared that for him it basically meant keeping to a tight schedule to study and taking care of his young children. These tasks were always occupying his whole time such that his mind could not really get a good rest.

The observation on his concept of prayer life was that prayer is carried out more as a mental activity. This concept is typical to an evangelical, where real prayer is usually more of words and conversation. The moment of silence, the holy silence is yet to be experienced. However, Student C has since found the need to be still before the Lord a very important part in his own devotion.

Student C shared that he also admires the Korean brothers and sister who pray regularly, and are very disciplined to pray in the early morning, and to pray together as a married couple. But the tension that is between our own effort and God’s grace for this discipline was also discussed. We both agreed that when we put in the effort, God’s grace eventually comes along to be our helper to sustain the discipline. It was also mentioned to him that sometimes when believers do not feel the mood to pray, that could be actually be the time that they needed the most to pray.

Concerning the prayer of examen, Student C was not very clear on mentioning the precise feeling deep inside his heart as it was not easy for him to find the right word to describe his true feelings. Therefore, I tried to assist him by asking him to vocalize his feelings toward his mother church in East Malaysia, which he said was negative, and also his feelings toward his son, which was positive. With some examples and encouragement, he gradually learned how to identity his feelings accurately.
One of the highlights during our conversation was when Student C mentioned about treating me, his lecturer, as his spiritual father and mentor in the prayer life. This was a highlight because it validated what I wanted to achieve and discover in my thesis question: how to guide other into the contemplative discipline of silence not just for their personal growth, but also for communal growth. After all, spiritual growth should not be just an individual concern. God has given us the entire body of Christ, so believers should be accountable with each other, live a genuine and perfect life in the world, and as a prayerful community.

We also touched on the issue of having a specific place, or time to do devotion, and whether this would make an impact on the prayer life. We discussed whether an hour of prayer had a biblical basis, and if we were to follow Christ's example, how much time would be enough. We also explored that since stillness and contemplation is a state of prayer too, does that mean that we can, like Paul, pray without ceasing? What would it be like, to have an hour of prayer without ceasing and the constantly experience the presence of God? How would that make a difference in the believer's life? Since it is God's heart for his own children to practice his presence at all time, how would it work out in the midst of the pervasive human feelings such as worry, guilt, pride, fear, anger, lust? We explored the need to get rid of these in order to attain the fullness in Christ (Col 3:1-17).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


