Learning to Live: A Curriculum for Cultivating Spiritual Transformation at Christ City Church, Washington, D.C.

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This ministry focus paper entitled

LEARNING TO LIVE:
A CURRICULUM FOR CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION
AT CHRIST CITY CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Written by

JUSTIN B. FUNG

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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LEARNING TO LIVE:
A CURRICULUM FOR CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION
AT CHRIST CITY CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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

BY
JUSTIN B. FUNG
APRIL 2019
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unless stated otherwise.

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ABSTRACT

Learning to Live: A Curriculum for Cultivating Spiritual Transformation at Christ City Church, Washington, D.C.

Justin B. Fung
Doctor of Ministry
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2019

The goal of this project is to create a twelve-week discipleship curriculum for the multiethnic urban setting of Christ City Church, Washington, DC, as a way of introducing congregants to the spiritual journey and to some of the individual and communal spiritual practices that will help cultivate spiritual transformation and growth in the character of Christ.

Christ City Church is a congregation located in the heart of Washington, DC. It is a young church, both in terms of the age of the congregation and in terms of the age of the congregants. Sunday gatherings are held at a local public school, located at a meeting point of neighborhoods, backgrounds, races and ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes, and the church seeks to reflect that same diversity, not just as a visibly multiethnic community but as a multicultural and multiclass one in the midst of the multitude of pressures of an urban environment.

One of the challenges of being a young church in a transient urban environment in the twenty-first century is that of spiritual formation. Not only are we faced with a simplistic, culturally-inherited understanding of the spiritual journey that ends—rather than begins—when a person chooses to become a follower of Jesus, but also with the individualism of American evangelical spirituality. The purpose of this project is to create a curriculum that will introduce (and re-introduce) the church to the individual and communal spiritual practices that Christians have used for centuries in order to help them not just identify as followers of Jesus but to grow in the character of Christ and to become more like Jesus, and to do so in a way that is sensitive to the ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and otherwise diverse backgrounds of the people who make up our church.

Word Count: 294 words
To my parents,
Ronald and Amy,
who showed me the way;

To my brothers,
Clem and Gabe,
who pioneered the path before me;

To my wife,
Carolyn,
who walks with me;

And to my son,
Daniel,
for whom the journey lies ahead.
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Gratitude abounds for the countless people who supported me in my doctoral work and in the completion of this project. Without them, I would not be who or where I am.

For the friends I made at Fuller Theological Seminary, particularly during my Master’s studies, many of whom continue to be colleagues in ministry and sources of great encouragement. Special mention (blame?) should go to Kurt Fredrickson, who first raised the idea of Doctor of Ministry studies—as befits his job!—and who has been a vocal cheerleader beyond school and into life.

The District Church was the place I first discovered my vocation and calling, the place I first became a pastor, and it was a wonderful landing. Indeed, the initial impetus and prototype for Learning to Live was created in that context. The community and staff of TDC, circa 2010-2016, were people I will forever be grateful to call friends.

The staff, elders, and community of Christ City Church have seen me down the home stretch and over the finish line with prayers, emails, and “You can do it” gifs. Thanks especially to Matthew Watson, my partner-in-crime.

My parents, Ronald and Amy Fung, have been a constant support and encouragement, as have my brothers, Clem and Gabe. It truly is an honor and a privilege to have family in whose footsteps—both in faith and in ministry—I am proud to follow. Thank you for your prayers.

Finally, to my wife Carolyn, who has come around on my schooling just as I’m about to finish! Thank you for bearing with me, supporting me, loving me, encouraging me, praying with me and for me, and believing in me. The next chapter beckons.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCC Christ City Church
ES East Side Parish
L2L Learning to Live
TDC The District Church

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, first published in 1997, Dallas Willard wrote:

Nondiscipleship is the elephant in the church. … at the present time intentional, effective training in Christlikeness—within the framework of a clear-eyed apprenticeship commitment and a spiritual “engulfment” in the Trinitarian reality—is just not there for us.¹

Over twenty years later, the elephant remains.

Jesus’s last command to his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel was to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Yet after several years in ministry, it was noticing the paucity of disciples who looked like Jesus and obeyed everything he commanded—loving their enemies, caring for the poor, welcoming the stranger, making a place for the marginalized—and feeling ill-equipped to address that deficit that led me to begin the Doctor of Ministry program in 2015.

Over the last few years, I have taken classes on spiritual formation in a postmodern context (which helped lay the foundations for this project), on spirituality and ministry, and on sexuality, inequality, power, and race in the church. Through all of the readings, all of the classes, all of the papers, all of the conversations, I have become increasingly convinced of the truth of Dallas Willard’s diagnosis and the vital importance of discipleship, not just for the sake of the Church’s work and witness in the world, not

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just for the sake of the Church’s health and vitality, but for the sake of our very souls.

Who we are becoming matters.

The assignment for one of my first classes was to design a curriculum for discipleship and I did so with great eagerness. Learning to Live was first birthed and piloted in early 2016 as an eleven-week program that would introduce each participant to the heart of discipleship: learning to live as Jesus would if he were in their place.² L2L, as it was known for short, was not comprehensive, nor was it designed to be; it was intended to be a foundational experience, a primer for the spiritual life. And it was received with great aplomb by The District Church (TDC), with whom I was serving at the time.

I say “at the time” because the world was different when I began the Doctor of Ministry program in 2015 and when I first created Learning to Live in 2016. At the time, I was serving in a church-wide role of teaching and overseeing spiritual formation at The District Church, a congregation I had helped plant in 2010 and that had since grown into two parishes with over six hundred attendees at Sunday services. Since then, I have left The District Church to serve as the Pastor of Liturgy and Spiritual Formation at Christ City Church (CCC), formerly known as the East Side Parish (ES) of The District Church; and Donald Trump was elected the forty-fifth President of the United States, voted into office by, among other things, 81 percent of white evangelical voters.

The former event changed the context in which I was working and the people for whom I was writing; the latter event—and what has happened in the two years since—

² While Learning to Live is also a (work)book, it will hereafter be cited without italics, denoting the curriculum and experience rather than the written work.
has changed the urgency with which I write. That almost three-quarters of white evangelicals continue to support Trump, per a March 2019 poll,\(^3\) even as his policies have separated immigrant children from their families\(^4\) and slammed the door on refugees fleeing the Syrian war,\(^5\) and his words have empowered white nationalist and white supremacist organizations\(^6\) while denigrating people of color, native Americans, women, Muslims, immigrants, Africans,\(^7\) and sexual minorities,\(^8\) reveals that something is wrong with the state of American discipleship, and particularly white evangelical discipleship in America. This relates to Christ City Church not only because our congregation, while multiethnic, is still majority white, but also because of the trauma and stress experienced by Christians of color in their everyday lives.

\(^3\) Philip Schwadel and Gregory A. Smith, “Evangelical approval of Trump remains high, but other religious groups are less supportive,” *Pew Research Center* (March 18, 2019), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/ (accessed May 3, 2019).


In John 10:10, Jesus said he came so that we might “have life, and have it abundantly.” The apostle Paul stated that his hope for the Christians in Galatia was that “Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). If this is a promise of our Lord, and if we are called—as disciples—to live as he would if he were in our place, and if we are truly being formed in his likeness and invited to participate in the work of God’s kingdom, then it is imperative that churches become training grounds for these kinds of disciples. For this reason, I have been prompted to revise and rewrite Learning to Live for my new context, specifically to explore the question of discipleship and spiritual formation in a multiethnic church faced with the challenges of living and working in the capital of post-2016 America.

My goals in writing this are four-fold. First, I hope to provide an accessible curriculum that serves as an introduction to discipleship and spiritual formation, particularly drawing attention to the language of a spiritual journey—sanctification, to use another term—and to some of the basic tools for the spiritual life—that is, spiritual disciplines. Participants will learn about and practice a spirituality that is individual and communal, that is not just intellectual but also experiential; they will learn a common language—of what we mean when we talk about the kingdom of God, for example—and have common experiences together of serving and praying and telling their stories. Living in Washington, DC means that people come and go; my hope is that, even if people do go, they go equipped with tools they can use wherever God leads them.

Second, I want to communicate the place of justice in the life of faith, namely that it should be central for Jesus-followers. If, in the words of Paul, “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal
5:14) and, in the words of Cornel West, “Justice is what love looks like in public,”¹⁹ justice ought to be an outworking of our faith. Justice is not an add-on to the gospel but rather the responsibility of all those who are made in the image of a justice-doing God (Dt 10:18; Mi 6:8) and all who commit themselves to the way of a justice-doing Christ (Lk 4:18-19). Moreover, as justice never takes place in the abstract or in a vacuum but always for and with real people in real places, doing justice requires an awareness of and an engagement with current events. I want to communicate this especially to those who have never considered how their faith and followership of Jesus might lead them to deeper engagement in the issues of the day, for example, how white supremacy and mass incarceration as it exists in America today are antithetical to the gospel and how we might be called to challenge those injustices.

Third, I want Learning to Live to be a lifeline for Christians of color, especially those who are committed to the justice-seeking work of Jesus, trying to navigate how to live the full life Jesus promised in the midst of the trauma and anxiety of America and the world today. It is my conviction that the spiritual practices that have sustained Christians for centuries, particularly the early Christians who lived as a persecuted minority under the Roman Empire, also have value for Christians who are living under the American Empire today. However, I do not simply want to act as though the application of the gospel in one life looks exactly the same as the application of the gospel in another life. Jesus did not offer cookie-cutter responses to everyone he encountered; rather, he treated

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those in need and on the margins with compassion, and he often met those in power and privilege with challenge.\textsuperscript{10} Likewise, speaking and writing as a person of color, I want to be aware of my own social location as well as the social location of those to and for whom I am writing. My primary audience is my own community, a multiethnic congregation seeking to press into the challenging spaces in order to grow into the church God would have us be; and my hope is that Christ City Church’s people of color, who have historically been marginalized and ignored in white-dominant spaces, would be seen, heard, and equipped for the work of the kingdom in our time.

Fourth, I hope Learning to Live will serve as an example for other communities, a prototype for what discipleship that forms us in the way of Jesus in spite of the influence of non-Christian, anti-Christian, and pseudo-Christian forces can look like in a multiethnic, multiclass context. It is my goal to elevate the voices of people of color in particular, to diversify the conversations and to bring new perspectives to the table, especially in the area of discipleship and spiritual formation. In a non-scientific study, a search for “discipleship and spiritual formation” on a popular online bookstore turned up over five hundred results, of which the first sixteen were authored by seventeen men and two women, many of whom I have appreciated learning from but none of whom speak from the social location of a person of color. To be responsible in our interpretation of the Bible is to pay attention to, among other things, what Jesus said and to whom. It makes all the difference in the world that Jesus’s challenge to “Sell everything you have and

\textsuperscript{10} See, for example, the juxtaposition of Jesus’s interactions with Nicodemus and the woman at the well in John 3-4.
give it to the poor” was issued to the rich young ruler (Lk 18:22) rather than to the widow with two coins (Lk 21:1-4), that Jesus issued messages of “woe” to those in authority and with power (Lk 6:24-26) rather than the Syrophoenician woman asking for mercy (Mt 15:21-28), or that Jesus told a parable to a Jewish audience in which a Samaritan was the hero (Lk 10:25-37). In the same way, it is vital for us that we learn about discipleship and spiritual formation from a spectrum of social perspectives, so that we might see a fuller picture of how God is at work among us.

This paper has three main parts. Part One explores the context of Christ City Church, the origin story of our congregation and its calling, as well as the neighborhoods and city in which we find ourselves located—Washington, DC. Our nation’s capital is a complicated city, with a complicated history and a complicated present, particularly as it relates to race and socioeconomic class. Over the last ten years, gentrification has brought a wave of development to DC, often at the expense of African Americans who have lived in the city for generations; churches are not exempt from this reality, and these dynamics play into the kind of church we are seeking to become.

Part Two examines the literature in order to construct a robust theology of spiritual transformation, particularly one which takes into consideration cultural, ethnic, and power dynamics. Cultivating a community of spiritual transformation as a multicultural and multiclass church, embodying the multicultural vision of Revelation 7 and the multiclass example of the Philippian church in Acts 16, requires a particular awareness and skillset—and a more nuanced theology.

Finally, Part Three lays out the process of content and curriculum creation, setting out the goals—introducing people to the spiritual journey, equipping them with tools for
the spiritual life, and giving them common experiences and common language to
navigate and understand the process of transformation—as well as the means to achieve
them. Due to the length of the full curriculum, only portions of the final curriculum will
be included, along with the findings and observations from a pilot of the experience.
PART ONE

CONTEXT
CHAPTER 1
COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

In order to understand where we are today, it is important to trace how we got here—and to identify the seeds that have taken root in our city’s history and are bearing fruit in the present. This chapter explores the history of Christ City Church and the city in which it is planted—Washington, DC—and some of the ways that history bears upon its present. In particular, the challenges—and opportunities—of spiritual formation in a multiethnic church in a diverse urban setting with a complicated racial history will be examined in order to best understand the needs of the congregation and the community. Identifying these factors will be a springboard to naming the barriers to spiritual formation—growth in the likeness and character of Christ—in our church, and introducing practices to address these barriers.

What Lies Beneath: A Brief History of DC

With the Compromise of 1790, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison brokered what historian Jacob E. Cooke described as “one of the most important bargains in American history”—a deal which, in exchange for the national
government taking on states’ debts, led to Congress passing the Residence Act and shifting the fledgling nation’s capital to the South, namely to a site on the Potomac River on the border between Virginia and Maryland.¹ These were two of the largest slave-holding states at the time, with more than half the American slave population in 1790.² Given the circumstances surrounding the selection of the capital’s ten-square-mile area, it is no surprise that “racism was a natural outgrowth of the city’s birth” as its location “saddled it with slavery and put it in the thrall of southern senators and congressmen.”³

Washington, DC has always had a complicated racial history. In the words of Charles Darwin, on his visit in 1842, it was “a city of magnificent intentions.”⁴ African American educator Mary Church Terrell put it much more plainly:

Surely nowhere in the world do oppression and persecution based solely on the color of the skin appear more hateful and hideous than in the capital of the United States, because the chasm between the principles upon which this Government was founded, in which it still professes to believe, and those which are daily practiced under the protection of the flag, yawns so wide and deep.⁵

From the very beginning, the federal district was “a city of contrasts: a thriving center for slavery and the slave trade, and a hub of anti-slavery activity among abolitionists of all

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⁴ Ibid., xix.

colors. Members of Congress represented states in which slavery was the backbone of the economy, and those in which slavery was illegal.\textsuperscript{6} This contrast was also seen in the fact that, even as nearly a quarter of the city’s population was African American, slaves were put to work constructing the U.S. Capitol building and the White House. In spite of restrictive laws known as “Black Codes,” which sought to buttress slavery and racial segregation and limit the freedoms of freed slaves, African Americans—free and slave—increasingly found their way to DC such that, by 1830, the city was one of only three in the United States whose Black population was more free than slave, and by 1850, “free African Americans outnumbered those enslaved by two to one.”\textsuperscript{7} On April 16, 1862, nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Compensated Emancipation Act, subtitled “An act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia,”\textsuperscript{8} and by the end of the 1860s, the African American population had ballooned to more than 43,000, making up one-third of the city’s residents.\textsuperscript{9} In 1871, Congress passed a bill setting up a territorial government to provide some local control to the city.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.


The racist backlash was predictable. Only three years later, after governor Alexander Robey Shepherd bankrupted the city in trying to modernize local sanitation and transportation systems, Congress abolished the territorial government and handed oversight to a three-member Board of Commissioners, accountable directly to Congress, an arrangement that would last almost a century, until the passing of the Home Rule Act in 1973, in the wake of the civil rights movement. Such congressional oversight included Alabama senator John Tyler Morgan, who, in 1890, explaining why the right to vote had been taken from the District’s residents, said it was necessary to “burn down the barn to get rid of the rats … the rats being the negro population and the barn being the government of the District of Columbia.” It also included Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, a proud member of the Ku Klux Klan who became the chairman of the District Committee in 1944 and, until his death in 1947, “did his best to deny funds to any cause that might help the city’s poor blacks”; and Congressman John L. McMillan of South Carolina, who “treated the city as if it were his plantation,” throttling any proposals on self-government as well as the city’s budget for social services, and doing favors for the white business community.

In spite of this, the city—and its African American population—grew, to more than 800,000 total residents by 1950. This included over 280,000 African Americans, buoyed by a flow of black sharecroppers leaving the Deep South and pouring into slums

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12 Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 8.

13 Ibid., 12.
in Southeast and Southwest DC. Infant mortality, crime, and the city’s murder rate all soared; and Congress refused to help. Congressman Ross Collins, who oversaw the House Subcommittee on District Appropriations, once cut the city’s requested budget by two-thirds, explaining to a city official, “My constituents wouldn’t stand for spending money on n-----s.”

The civil rights movement saw such leaders as Julius Hobson, Walter Fauntroy, Sterling Tucker, Willie J. Hardy, and Marion Barry take center stage in Washington, DC, advocating fiercely for the welfare and equality of the city’s Black majority—in education, employment, housing. Even when there were successes, such as the ratification of the Twenty-Third Amendment in 1961, which gave District residents the right to vote for President; the abolition of the Board of Commissioners and the establishment of a governing structure with a mayor and a council in 1967; or the addition of a non-voting congressional delegate to the House of Representatives in 1970, the country’s racism reared its head. In the case of the Twenty-Third Amendment, of the thirteen former Confederate States in the Civil War—of which Missouri and Kentucky were a part but never officially declared secession—only Tennessee ratified the amendment. Arkansas outright rejected it, nine states took no action, and Alabama did not ratify it until 2002. Amidst growing economic and racial

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14 Ibid., 11.

15 Asch and Musgrove, Chocolate City, 333-335.


inequality in the city, the powder was primed to explode. As Walter Fauntroy, DC native, protégé of Martin Luther King, and pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church in the Shaw neighborhood of DC, said in 1966, “There is legitimate fear among many that one or more of the area’s pockets of despair may simply explode if something isn’t done soon to relieve conditions.”

When news reached the capital of Dr. King’s assassination on April 4, 1968, the city erupted into rioting and looting. The H Street NE area, which many in our church now call home, was one of the neighborhoods that was particularly hard-hit. The H Street Community Development Corporation estimated that 30 percent of buildings on the thoroughfare were boarded up or left vacant for years after. It took 13,600 federal troops, including the National Guard and the Eighty-Second Airborne, to get the city back under control after three days of rioting, and the aftermath was sobering:

More than nine hundred businesses were damaged or destroyed, roughly 5,000 people lost their jobs, and 2,000 were left homeless. According to the Post, about 20,000 people had been involved in the rioting and the people had arrested more than 7,600 people (90 percent of whom were black men), primarily for violating curfew.

The 1960s, including the riots, had an impact on the population of the city as well. In 1970, Census data showed the Black population hit its peak of 71 percent while the

18 Asch and Musgrove, Chocolate City, 354.


20 Asch and Musgrove, Chocolate City, 358.
White population fell to 28 percent (from 45 percent in 1960). It was in this setting that Marion Barry, already a well-known community activist, rose to political prominence.

It is impossible to talk about the history of Washington, DC—that is, what has brought us to where we are today—without talking about Marion Barry, perhaps the most controversial and divisive figure in DC lore. Jaffe and Sherwood write:

America’s sickness in the last quarter of the twentieth century rises from the chasm between the races, and nowhere is the gulf wider, deeper, and more evident than in the capital, a small city where fear and racism rule the streets.

Which bring us to Marion Barry, Jr., the man who bridged the chasm to get elected mayor in 1978, exploited it to stay in power, and now more than anyone in American politics personifies the distance between blacks and whites.

For some, especially non-DC natives, Marion Barry is the national-headline-grabbing DC mayor who was caught on video doing crack cocaine while in office and convicted on a federal drug charge, leading to a six-month prison sentence, after which he was astoundingly voted mayor a fourth time. But for many locals, Barry was the one who fought for DC’s African American population, creating jobs for many and standing up to the continuing racist efforts to disempower the city.

Barry was the son of a Tennessee sharecropper who got involved in the civil rights movement while in college in Memphis, and moved to Washington, DC in 1965 to work for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). A charismatic leader, he was elected to the DC school board in 1971, to the DC City Council in 1974, and mayor in 1978. He would go on to win four terms as the city’s chief executive, earning

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21 U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990."

22 Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, xxi-xxii.
the moniker “Mayor for Life.”

He improved city services for lower- and middle-class communities and for the elderly, and handed out city contracts and provided jobs in city government to alleviate unemployment. Many of those who had until then felt disenfranchised and alienated from the life and power structures of the city found an ally with Marion Barry in the mayor’s office.

However, it could be argued that Mayor Barry also contributed greatly to the city’s decline. One of Barry’s strategies for combating unemployment was to create jobs in the city work force; however, by 1980, “the city didn’t actually know how many people were on the payroll [and the] work force soaked up half the city’s budget, which had grown from $1.2 billion to $3.2 billion under Barry’s regime.”

Two of Barry’s deputy mayors, Ivanhoe Donaldson and Alphonse Hill, were sentenced to prison for taking kickbacks. The infant mortality rate was more than twice the national average when Barry took office and it peaked at 23 per thousand births in 1989. The education system found its funds gutted by Barry’s budget, from making up one quarter of the total budget in 1978 to only 16 percent in 1988. “Buildings were in disrepair, schoolbooks were second-rate, violence in the schools was on the rise, and the dropout rate was above 40 percent, ranking the schools among the worst in the nation.”

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24 Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, 210.


26 Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, 211.
appointed by Mayor Barry to investigate the public housing problem concluded that the projects had gotten worse since he had taken over; the results were not published. And, most infamously, Marion Barry was videotaped by the FBI taking a hit of crack cocaine in a sting operation in 1990. The lauded promise of Chocolate City petered out in the 1990s to soaring violence, deteriorating services, and the city on the verge of bankruptcy.

**The Changing Landscape of the City: DC in the Last Twenty Years**

In the two decades since Marion Barry was mayor, the city has seen a wave of commercial investment and new development, and an accompanying influx of new residents, buoyed “by a nationwide housing boom and post-9/11 government expansion” and, more recently, by the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008. Younger, wealthier residents have moved into the city; many are White, although the Hispanic and Asian American populations have also grown. From a peak of 71 percent in 1970, the Black population in DC descended past the halfway mark in 2011; illustratively, one neighborhood (Shaw) was 90 percent African American in 1970, but by 2010, it was just 30 percent. Most recently, according to estimates from 2017, the city is

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27 Ibid., 212.


29 Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 429.


31 Hyra, *Race, Class, and Politics*, 77.
now 47 percent Black or African American, 45 percent White, 11 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 4 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI).\textsuperscript{32}

Many of the problems that have plagued the city continue to do so. In common parlance, there have always been “the two DCs”, separated by race, by class, by economics, and by opportunity. The present-day iteration of this looks like, on the one hand, transplants—those who come to DC seeking work or education or opportunity—who tend to be middle class, highly-educated, upwardly-mobile, and White; and on the other, DC natives, who tend to be poorer and Black. There are often stark contrasts between people’s attitudes depending on their race. In 2015, while 86 percent of White residents saw the redevelopment of DC in the early twenty-first century as positive, a majority of African Americans said that it was “bad for people like them.”\textsuperscript{33} The rise of luxury housing and the decline of low-income housing continues to push poorer, predominantly Black, residents out of the city. According to a 2015 report by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, “The number of apartments renting for less than $800 a month fell from almost 60,000 in 2002 to 33,000 in 2013,” a decline of 45 percent.\textsuperscript{34} This was


confirmed by a recent study, which found that more than 20,000 Black residents had been displaced from their neighborhoods between 2000 and 2013.35

Meanwhile, the school system continues to face the repercussions of its historical gutting by mismanagement, budget throttling, and congressional intrusion. In the 1990s, Republicans in Congress passed legislation introducing charter schools into DC as a solution to the city’s poverty; a decade later, despite the protests of local elected officials, Republicans enacted a voucher program. As a result, the city “emerged as a national leader in the charter school and voucher movement [but] city schools hemorrhaged students … from eighty thousand [in 1996] and fifty-eight thousand [in 2006], forcing the city to cut programs, fire teachers, and close schools.”36 Notably, in 2014, when then-Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools Kaya Henderson was asked if she thought DC schools would ever overcome the race and class divisions, she answered, “No.”37

It was in this city, with these racial, educational, and economic dynamics, that Christ City Church was established, and it is in this setting that we are called to minister and be a gospel presence. But even as it was important to know the history of our city in


36 Asch and Musgrove, Chocolate City, 449.

order to understand its present, it is equally important to know the history of our church in order to understand its present. It is to that which we now turn.

**A Neighborhood Church**

Christ City Church was birthed in 2013, the first parish plant of The District Church (TDC), which itself had been planted only three years prior. Almost twenty people had been living in Northeast and Southeast DC and making the four-mile trip across town to worship in the Columbia Heights neighborhood, where TDC was located. One of the values of the church was local engagement and a care for one’s neighborhood, and this group felt that same responsibility and desire for their own part of the city. In the summer of 2013, what became known as the East Side parish began to meet regularly at Miner Elementary School, just off of the H Street Corridor and two blocks south of the Hechinger Mall, a local landmark, and the Starburst Intersection, at the junction of five major roads and several different neighborhoods: Capitol Hill to the southwest, Trinidad to the northwest, Rosedale and Kingman Park to the southeast, and Carver / Langston to the northeast. We chose to be called a ‘parish’ rather than a ‘campus’ or a ‘site’ of TDC for the reason that we wanted to live into the historic—and more high church—concept of a parish, where a church was tasked with the stewardship and care of a geographic area, both to pastor those who were part of the congregation and to chaplain the neighborhood around it. As a parish, we had:

- a sense of responsibility for the neighborhood whether the people in that neighborhood worship with us on Sunday or not.
  - So if someone gets evicted and has no place to go, that is our responsibility. If someone is mistreated, that is our responsibility. If someone dies
and there is nobody or nowhere to have their funeral, we figure out what we can do. We serve as a chaplain to the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{38}

For four years, the congregation grew and thrived as TDC’s second location, living out the church’s core values of worship, community, and justice, seeking to reflect a holistic understanding of the gospel and to be “A Church for the City,” as its tagline read. Practically, this meant engaging in partnerships with local organizations and the local government to serve in places of need, whether by sending volunteers, by collaborating on projects or neighborhood events, or by giving financially. While we were also involved with internationally-based organizations, such as Life Raft in Thailand and Paz y Esperanza in Latin America, our church had a clear bias for local involvement. We served with and supported the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project, which worked in the city’s largest family shelter; Little Lights, which provided resources and support to under-served youth and families; and DC127, a foster care and adoption non-profit that was started by The District Church. Most notably, we cultivated relationships with the administration of Miner Elementary School (which included witnessing three different principals in our first four years) and with the Parent-Teacher Organization in order to serve the staff, faculty, children, and families, and to contribute to the flourishing of all, for example, by providing childcare at parent-teacher meetings, hosting teacher appreciation events, and participating in school clean-up days. In this way, we sought to be not consumers of the space, but actively seeking the good of the school through involvement and support.

\textsuperscript{38} The District Church, \textit{Annual Report 2013-2014} (Summer 2014), 16.
Sadly, in 2017, disagreements among the pastors of TDC about the leadership structure of the church and its overly-hierarchical nature ultimately led to a decision by the founding pastors to release the whole parish; so the East Side parish became an independent and autonomous congregation, and Christ City Church was born, our values embedded in our name: “We are called to Christ. We are called to the city. We are called to the Church.”39 Much of the DNA, the values, and the practices of our life as a parish carried over into our life as a church: we continued our partnerships with the Miner administration and parents; we continued serving with the same organizations; and we continued pressing into our identity as a justice-seeking, multiethnic church. The most significant shifts were in status—becoming an independent congregation instead of being part of a larger church—and in structure—rather than being centered on and built around one charismatic leader, we implemented a plurality of leadership: an elder board, which included the pastors and to whom the pastors were accountable, to oversee the strategy and vision of the congregation; a staff to implement the day-to-day and week-to-week operations of the church; and a Leadership Council of volunteer leaders and community influencers to ensure that every voice was heard and every person had a place. In this way, we hoped to guard against some of the dynamics and decisions that led us to where we ended up.

Our first year and a half as Christ City Church has been a testament to the faithfulness of God, and how “all things work together for the good of those who love

God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). It was a hard eighteen months in many ways, including in dealing with grief as individuals and as a congregation, and the instability of an uncertain financial future—at least initially. But it was also a time in which people rallied around the church and, through their participation, buoyed our relational, emotional, spiritual, and financial health; in this way, we were truly able to experience the life-giving nature of the Holy Spirit—and in August 2018, we were able to celebrate and give thanks for not only one year of Christ City Church but also five years as a worshiping community.

**Christ City Church Today**

Every two years, beginning in 2012, we (at both TDC and CCC) have undertaken a community-wide census “to keep our finger on the pulse of our community in order to be more faithful to our vision of seeing the kingdom of God on display in DC, in every life and every sphere of life.”

This has enabled us to regularly take note of certain trends, in terms of demographics, spiritual growth, and church involvement. In the words of Suzanne Stabile, “Your greatest weakness is also your greatest strength,” and vice versa; but in order that we might be able to identify those weaknesses and strengths, it is important to first know who we are. What follows is an analysis of the state and the trends of our church as of summer 2018.

40 Christ City Church, *Survey Report 2018* (August 2018). All subsequent Christ City Church statistics are from this report.

As a church in the heart of Washington, DC, it may not be surprising that our congregants tend to be on the younger side. Eighty-seven percent of our church are forty years old or younger, including 37 percent thirty years old or younger. The percentage of those under 30 is similar to DC’s rate of 40 percent, but we have a much higher proportion of thirty-somethings: half of CCC fall in the 31-40 age bracket, while the comparable DC figure is only 19 percent.42

However, it is also important to note that, as our church grows up, the trend is that its congregants are also getting older. In our first survey as The District Church, in 2012, almost everyone (96 percent) was 40 years old or younger, with over three-quarters (78 percent) 30 years old or younger. Over the years, these percentages have trended downward (Fig. 1).43 While the number of those under 40 appears stable, the continuing drop of the percentage of those under 30 suggests that our congregation may have had a sizeable number of late-twentysomethings who made the transition into the next decade within the last few years without a commensurate inflow of new twenty-somethings.


43 ES/TDC refers to East Side parish numbers specifically, rather than TDC as a whole. Although the East Side parish was started in 2013, the results of the 2014 survey were not separated by parish.
The band of congregants crossing the thirty-year-old threshold also correlates with a growing number of married people in the church, in line with the median age of marriage in Washington, DC (30.3 years old for women, 30.9 years old for men).\textsuperscript{44} While the latest data for Washington, DC estimates that 30 percent of the population are married,\textsuperscript{45} only 37 percent of Christ City Church congregants have \textit{never} married; three-fifths of the church (60 percent) are married or re-married. Again, this is a trend for our particular congregation; even when we were a parish of The District Church, our numbers skewed less single (Fig. 2).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig1.png}
\caption{Percentage of under-30s and under-40s at TDC and CCC}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig2.png}
\caption{Percentage of married congregants at TDC and CCC}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{44} U.S. Census Bureau, \textit{2016 American Community Survey}.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
A greater proportion of older and married congregants also seems to correlate with an intention to stay in the city for longer. In response to the question “How long do you plan to stay in DC (or the DC area)?”, just over half of our parish said more than five years in 2016, as compared with a churchwide percentage of one quarter; this year, that number dipped slightly to 45 percent (Fig. 3).

One of the reasons for this disparity between TDC and CCC, at least in age, marital status, and intention to stay, is geographic. The former is based in Columbia Heights, one of the busiest and densest neighborhoods in the city, and meets one block from a metro station. Meanwhile, CCC is in the Atlas District, around the H Street Corridor, which is home to just over half as many residents as Columbia Heights (as of 2015), and meets a mile from the closest metro. As a result, it is harder for those who are younger, single, and less likely to own cars in the city to make their way to CCC, unless they live fairly

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close. This is borne out in the 2016 data as 47 percent of the East Side parish lived within ten minutes of our Sunday meeting space at Miner Elementary School, while the number of those living within ten minutes of the Columbia Heights Educational Campus was just under 20 percent.

To put it starkly, though, we at Christ City Church are representative of the population influx. In terms of education, 92 percent have a college degree and over half have either done postgraduate work or attained a postgraduate degree; the figures for our city are 57 percent and 33 percent respectively.\textsuperscript{48} In terms of race and ethnicity, CCC is 59 percent White, 19 percent Black, 14 percent AAPI, 6 percent multiracial, and 4 percent Hispanic or Latinx, with a greater proportion of White, AAPI, and multiracial people than the DC average. We hail from thirty-four states and territories, and thirteen countries of origin; and we are excited about our diversity. However, just as significantly, six percent were born in the District of Columbia, one percentage point up from our parish results in 2016 and double TDC’s number; and more than one-fifth (21 percent) of our church have lived in the DC area for over a decade. These are important indicators for us as a church in our calling to minister to and to bridge the divide between the two DC’s; and our data appears to suggest that we are on the right track: in terms of how long CCC-ers have lived in and around the DC area, the spread is fairly even (Fig. 4).

\textsuperscript{48} U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey.
As it pertains to discipleship within the church, 83 percent were part of a small group in the last year, up from 73 percent for our parish in 2016, 67 percent for TDC in 2014 and 60 percent in 2012. This is a highly encouraging figure, not just for what we have done in communicating the centrality of small groups—and the cultivation of community within and by those groups—but also for any cohesive efforts moving forward. It would seem somewhat easier to generate collective momentum in the same direction when four out of five people are engaged beyond just a once-a-week gathering on Sundays. Whereas Sunday gatherings have some elements for participation—in singing, serving, and praying together, for example—small groups are venues for deeper discussions, relationship building, and becoming more connected.

Moreover, just over half of the church (56 percent) volunteer at least once a month, with one-sixth serving more than three times a month. Volunteering together, whether in church or in the neighborhood, is also part of our ethos—our faith must be accompanied by works (Jas 2:14-18). These figures illustrate the dedication of the committed members of our church, but they also offer a warning—to have 16 percent of the church serving almost every week is, in my opinion, a recipe for burnout.
Finally, having mentioned the importance of structures for non-Christians and new Christians, it is relevant to note that just under ten percent of Christ City Church attendees would fall into these categories: six percent said they either did not consider themselves followers of Jesus or were still exploring questions of faith, while three percent said they had been followers of Jesus for less than two years. In 2016, these numbers for our parish were two percent and five percent respectively. While the vast majority of the church might consider themselves long-time followers of Jesus, it is incumbent on us to ensure that our maturity involves journeying with those a few steps behind us as well.

**Everyday Battles: Busyness, Isolation, and Distraction**

Beyond the demographics and the trends, there are also cultural forces that weigh particularly keenly on us as a church, impacting our lives and, by implication, our spiritual formation.

First, there is busyness. Washington, DC attracts and cultivates a certain kind of person, for whom productivity, position, and proximity to power become metrics of one’s success and status. In our church, we have people who work in the government, non-profit, healthcare, education, consulting, and business sectors, where forty hours a week is the *minimum* rather than the norm and where work trips are common. We also have graduate school students, some of whom are studying while holding down work. On top of all of this, there are a number of parents in our congregation who can attest that raising kids seems to exponentially increase the busyness. There are also those who are
unemployed or underemployed, whose busyness is the grueling activity of working multiple jobs or pouring oneself into finding work.

Often, this busyness can add to two of the other challenges of our city: isolation and distraction. Cities can be intensely lonely places. Particularly for those for whom socializing does not come naturally or who do not have natural places to meet new people or are simply hoping for someone else to make space in their calendar, building relationships in the city can be difficult. Busyness—whether because of work or looking for work, because of long hours of overtime or school or travel or childcare—can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and limit the available time to build any sort of social connection, let alone the kind of deep friendships that make a place feel less foreign. One of the reasons The District Church was started in 2010 was to embody a welcoming Christ-centered community so that no one would leave the city because they could not find a place to call home; and we have that same mentality as Christ City Church.

There is also much to do in DC, and that is at the same time wonderful and exhausting. Moving to the city as a twenty-six-year-old, there was a drive—in myself and in those around me—to experience everything the city had to offer: all of the fun, all of the friendships, all of the experiences. Meanwhile, technology—and all of the distractions that come with it—is ubiquitous. In six years, smartphone ownership in the United States has more than doubled, from 35% in 2011 to 77% in 2018; cellphone ownership as a whole is at 95%. Among younger adults (18-29), these numbers stand at 94% and 100% respectively.49 We are constantly inundated with buzzes and bings, with avenues to

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pursue from social media to music to movies, all available at our fingertips. One survey from 2014 found that:

- 72% agree that 10 years from now relationships will be less authentic than today due to technology; 37% agree technology will allow them to maintain deeper relationships than they can today; 84% agree that technology has brought them closer to friends and relatives that live far away.
- A strong majority (77%) concede that it’s hard not to look at their mobile phone when it rings or vibrates. More than half (56%) of Millennials believe they would be happier if they used their smartphone less.²⁰

When I think of the distractions that technology brings—in the lives of those in our church as well as my own—Jesus’s parable of the sower comes to mind, and his allusion to those seeds which are “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (Lk 8:14). Distraction, isolation, and busyness have led to a situation where, as Paul Jensen writes, “loss of the sense of place and our addictive hurry sickness have drained spiritual vitality and power from the church in North America.”²¹

However, it is not all discouraging news. What are our greatest weaknesses can also be our greatest strengths. It is also true that the millennials of yesteryear are not the millennials of today. (Many in our church would fall into the millennial generation,

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which the Pew Research Center classified as those born between 1981 and 1996.\textsuperscript{52} In 2014, a survey found that “Millennials crave more experiences” and “FOMO drives millennials’ experiential appetite.”\textsuperscript{53} According to the survey, millennials, in contrast to the previous generation (Generation X) were more focused on experiences than on material goods. Four years on, the oldest millennials are now in their mid-thirties and the youngest millennials in their early twenties, constituting the largest generation in the American labor force. In short, millennials are no longer just the caricature of aimless youth but rather the entrepreneurs, the educators, and the executives of today. In its Annual Global Shapers Survey 2017, the World Economic Forum found the following about today’s young people:

- They saw climate change and the destruction of nature as the most serious global issue, followed by conflict and war, and then inequality (income, discrimination);
- By 34 percent to 29 percent, they considered “individuals” over “governments” as having the greatest role to play in positively impacting the world;
- Over half of those surveyed felt as if their voices were not adequately taken into consideration before important decisions were being made in their countries;


• There were low levels of trust in most institutions; notably, 45 percent said they did not trust religious institutions;

• They were overwhelmingly in favor of welcoming refugees.\textsuperscript{54}

As we can see, the young people in our churches—and in Christ City Church—are taking on the challenges and burdens of adulthood and the world today, engaging in a way that, whether spoken or unspoken, reflects their longing to see “the kingdom of God on display in every life and every sphere of life.” In that, there is much hope.

\textbf{Lessons Learned: Making Disciples at TDC and CCC}

As Christ City Church, we have only eighteen months’ track record to consider, but, as mentioned, as a worshiping—and discipling—community, we have several years to evaluate. From my vantage point as the Pastor of Liturgy and Spiritual Formation at Christ City Church for the past year and a half, and the Pastor of Teaching and Formation at The District Church for the four years prior, I have been in a position to observe, contribute to, and, at times, to lead the discipleship efforts of our church. In my experience, there are at least two observations that can be made of our disciple-making over the last several years.

First and foremost, we did not (at TDC) and do not (at CCC) have a comprehensive plan. Often, at TDC, we would describe small groups as the primary place for discipleship, and then delegate disciple-making responsibility to our small group

leaders without equipping them; for a brief season, we did not even tell them this was one of their responsibilities—we described their role as discussion facilitators. There was little communication about the potential steps for an individual’s journey of spiritual formation, nor of what it took to contribute to one’s own growth and receptiveness to the Spirit; there was little structure around having more mature Christians walk alongside newer Christians or non-Christians; instead, there was at the same time a centralization of decision-making authority around discipleship to the pastors and a lack of actual decision-making around discipleship by the pastors, and I bear at least a part of the responsibility for that.

Indeed, if the spiritual life is a journey, with making commitment to Christ as a starting point and increasing Christlikeness as one of the end goals, it is necessary for us to identify how we are resourcing Christians all along the way. At TDC, we had offerings for curious non-Christians and new Christians, such as an Alpha Course group and a group called Why God?, both designed to address many of the questions explorers of the faith and new converts often have. We have yet to establish something like this at CCC, though one of our small groups this past year was facilitated in such a way as to raise and discuss questions of faith.

However, where we fell short at TDC was in that we had little for mature Christians. There was a clear path for involvement—attending a Newcomers Dinner; joining a small group, volunteering on a ministry team; becoming a small group or ministry team leader—but no clear path of discipleship and formation. For those who were more mature in their faith, the only thing that seemed to be on offer was more and more volunteering and leadership—and, though leadership through service is one of the
marks of maturity in the faith, we were not supporting them in their own continued
growth, and as a result, many leaders would burn out and step down from their roles.

Second, our discipleship efforts have not been cohesive. While we would offer
small groups as the main disciple-making vehicle, we would also give small group
leaders a generous degree of autonomy in choosing what to study with their group. While
this lends itself well to a wide array of offerings—and utilizing the gifts and passions of
our leaders—it also disperses our discipleship efforts. At TDC, after several years of
allowing small group leaders the freedom to choose whatever topic they wanted to study,
we realized that, as the church was also growing larger, we were all growing in different
directions—and not just in different ways; this led us to think more intentionally about
rhythms of gathered and scattered disciple-making. For example, in the fall of 2016, the
whole church went through the first iteration of Learning to Live that I had written. We
constructed a sermon series in which each week focused on the week’s L2L topic and
supported the small group discussions; almost every single small group went through the
experience as well. It was the first time we had undertook as concerted and cohesive an
effort as that, and its reception and impact continue to be noted almost three years later—
however, we have yet to do something similar.

Over CCC’s first year of existence, we had fourteen small groups; just over half
of them would discuss Sunday’s sermons, while the others pursued a variety of other
topics: inductive Bible study, the Enneagram, and Christian community development. All
of these groups and their topics touch on our life and calling as a church, and my
intention in naming this spectrum of small groups is not to name them as distractions.
Rather, I make this point so that CCC, in being aware of our trajectory, might learn the lessons from TDC’s experience and benefit from them.

There are tremendous opportunities available to us when we consider where God has placed us and who God has placed in our community. Identifying those opportunities is but one step; formulating a plan is the next.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews several works that will lay the foundations for discipleship and spiritual formation at Christ City Church. To do this, I examine several intersecting topics, beginning with spiritual development in general, with a particular interest in the stages of faith. Without a robust concept of a spiritual journey, any thought of spiritual growth, maturity, or movement will be stunted. Second, I explore spiritual formation, or the methods by which character is cultivated. While all is grace and all is by God’s grace, the invitation of the Christian faith is to participation in God’s life, work, and mission in the world. Finally, I consider the challenges of multiethnic, multiclass churches, which will take us from the bird’s eye view down to practical application.

**Spiritual Development: Understanding the Journey of Maturity**


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Development. Groeschel was a Franciscan friar as well as a professor of pastoral psychology, and it was the two fields of theology and psychology that he wedded together in his work—and in this book in particular. Those of us who align ourselves with the Protestant line of the Church, especially the evangelical branch, have much to learn from our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters; and while the last few decades have seen an increase in interest in spirituality and spiritual development in the Protestant tradition, it is still less comprehensive and less mature than in older Christian traditions.

Groeschel begins his book with a consideration of the psychology of spirituality, describing the spiritual life as “the sum total of responses which one makes to what is perceived as the inner call of God.” He notes that while formal religion can help give language or expression to people’s experiences of the mystical, the spiritual life is something we all engage in since each of us has a spirit and our spirit is part of our life. Moreover, God draws each of us to Godself in different ways, of which Groeschel names four: the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful; it is in the pursuit of integration, truth, goodness, or beauty that God may turn our paths toward the divine, and therefore, he writes, “The first step toward understanding one’s spiritual life is to recognize what beckons us.”

Next, Groeschel considers human development theory, noting, as psychologist Erik Erikson does, “the basic insight of developmental psychology, namely, that human
beings are in a constant process of becoming.” In my experience, too often in the Church, we speak about our spiritual condition as a static existence, or if we exhibit an awareness of different stages of life or development, our place within those stages is static, usually triggered by some event, such as a marriage or a child’s birth. A more nuanced understanding of who we are—and who we are becoming—as human beings can only serve us well as we consider who we are—and who we are becoming—as spiritual beings as well, and the implications of such a mindset on our actions and reactions: “For to develop means always to attempt what is a bit beyond one’s capacity.”

In applying the concepts of spiritual development to the insights of human development, Groeschel offers a roadmap for the spiritual journey, offering the twin caveats that, as with any chart or map, every individual’s experience is more complex and that progress does not proceed in a straight line: “Any life map … will place a person primarily or modally at one point on the journey; yet he or she is at all stages in some way. … This illustrates the very interesting concept [of] becoming or being-in-time.” He draws upon the work and insights of other psychologists to suggest the following stages of religious development:

1. *Childhood religion:* this stage is primarily emotional since children primarily react emotionally. “Religion as it is practiced by children (and by many adults whose religion remains at a child’s level of development) is a matter of

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4 Ibid., 40.
5 Ibid., 41.
6 Ibid., 119.
attempting to control or manipulate the Divine Being by prayer, supplication, and good works.” As such, the developmental focus for people in this stage should be that of forming “the image of God with positive, theologically well-informed emotions and ideas.”

2. *Adolescent religion*: as adolescents develop the ability to understand abstract concepts, so we also begin to consider God in abstract terms—such as a spirit, invisible yet omnipresent. This stage involves what Groeschel calls “theological speculation”, which may even lead to a “rejection of God and of many socially connected attitudes.” Healthy adolescence is marked by an encouragement by those around the youth to develop and understand those thoughts, feelings, and questions, and the same is true when it comes to matters of faith. However, although adolescent religion addresses particular needs of young people, it is important that growth continues: “Unless the religions of young people mature and move on, they become stale, pedantic, and petulant in later life.”


The emotion and speculation of the earlier stages are transformed into a higher understanding, that is, that oneself is not the point or center of one’s journey but God—or, in non-religious settings, something higher—is: faith and hope become

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7 Ibid., 67.
8 Ibid., 68.
9 Ibid., 68-69.
10 Ibid., 69.
the markers of a person in this stage, and they “make an effective termination of self-centered aspects of childhood or adolescent religion, and prepare the way for contemplation, or listening to God.”

Alongside these are Groeschel’s categories of *spiritual* development, or “the effect of grace on [an individual’s] life and functioning.” What begins with an awakening, an experience—or several—of something beyond. Groeschel writes that this experience “may be consoling or threatening, or both,” and may take place in otherwise mundane circumstances, but it will stir within the person an awareness of something other than the material and the physical, something deeper than the superficial. However it may happen, “one fact is certain: When the awakening occurs in a person of real depth and dimension, and it is accepted or rejected, that person will never be the same again.”

After awakening come the three stages or ways of the spiritual life, a concept that has a long history in Catholic thought. Groeschel is also diligent in noting the moments of darkness, resistance, and rejection along the way, both internally and externally, including what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night”—what has become known as “the dark night of the soul.” These moments and experiences are just as much a part of the journey; they can even, on occasion, serve as a catalyst for the next stage.

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11 Ibid., 70.
12 Ibid., 66
13 Ibid., 73.
14 Ibid., 75.
1. *Purgation*, or the moral life, summed up by Jesus’s invitation to follow him (Mt 4:19) and characterized by integration: in this stage, the believer “brings his or her external behavior, activities, attitudes, and desires into increasing agreement with what he or she believes and accepts as reality.”\(^{15}\)

2. *Illumination*, or the God-filled life, where “[the] love of God, the loving call to Christ, the gifts of the Holy Spirit combine to make the presence of egoism, cupidity, spiritual immaturity, and lack of social responsibility almost unbearable.”\(^{16}\) It is the connection with and inspiration of the Spirit, rather than a need to prove oneself, that leaves believers to undertake good works—and they are seen no longer as responsibilities but as a response.

3. *Union*, or the perfected life, where one’s existence is completely bound up and absorbed in the existence of God. As Groeschel himself notes, “Words fail and thoughts evaporate as one attempts to describe the experience of union with God which comes to the very few … It is rather like trying to express the idea of eternal life and merely evoking an everlasting church service—not a very helpful analogy.”\(^{17}\)

When I was introduced to Groeschel’s conceptualization of a spiritual journey, I remember being astounded. I had been raised and educated in churches where the two states of faith were unbelief and belief, the two categories of person were non-believer

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 76; emphasis added.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 86.
and believer, and the moment of conversion—usually marked by a prayer asking Jesus for forgiveness and inviting him to be Lord of one’s life—was the only landmark. To begin to see that development and growth in the spiritual life are not only possible but natural aligned with a burgeoning sense of dissatisfaction with the simplistic binaries of my early years and inspired me to pursue the depth and maturity of the Christian faith in more intentional and attentive ways.

One challenge as Groeschel’s categories relate to my context is how to communicate them in a way that is accessible to our non-denominational, multi-class congregation, staying true to the concepts without becoming overly intellectual. A simple translation might be to say, in the language of the program, we are learning to live like Jesus (purification), with Jesus (illumination), and in Jesus (union).

Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck’s book *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace* offers a different angle on the stages of the spiritual life. Drawing upon previous theories of human spiritual development, especially the work of psychologist and theologian James Fowler, Peck suggests four stages:

1. Chaotic, antisocial: this is undeveloped spirituality, antisocial because “those adults who are in it … seem generally incapable of loving others” even though they may pretend to be loving, and chaotic because “these people are basically unprincipled [with nothing governing] them except their own will.”

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2. *Formal, institutional:* this stage is often brought on by a conversion experience—though not necessarily a religious one; any time a person comes face to face with the chaos within, if the result is growth or maturation, stage two is the result. The institution that provides clarity and a way out of the chaos may be the army, a prison, or a church; the defining characteristic is clearly defined structure. As such, it is the forms of the institution that people in this stage are drawn to—the external manifestations rather than the essence; so Stage Two people can be very sensitive—and even react violently—if those forms are tampered with. After all, “it is precisely these forms that are responsible for their liberation from chaos.”20

The Stage Two perception of God “is almost entirely that of an external, transcendent Being [with] very little understanding of the immanent, *indwelling* God—the God of the Holy Spirit …”21 As in Groeschel’s stage of childhood religion, God is often viewed as a judge in this stage—“a giant benevolent Cop in the Sky”—because it is the clear demarcations and boundaries—and even legalism—that a person in Stage Two needs.22

3. *Skeptic, individual:* as the rules and forms of Stage Two spirituality become internalized, and as a person matures into an understanding of nuance beyond binaries, they may begin questioning the point of such legalism and the truth of such black-and-white thinking; thus, they enter into Stage Three. “Although

20 Ibid., 190.

21 Ibid.; emphasis added.

22 Ibid.
frequently ‘nonbelievers,’ people in Stage III are generally more spiritually
developed than many content to remain in Stage II.” Those in this stage,
however, are not merely cynics but skeptics—seekers after the truth. While
initially this seeking may lead them away from faith, if their searching is
committed and fervent, they may catch glimpses of something that looks very
familiar—a larger picture and story—and they may begin to notice that this
“strangely resembles those ‘primitive myths and superstitions’ their Stage II
parents and grandparents believe in.”

4. Mystic, communal: this is the realization of the interconnection of all things, that
“we [are] integral parts of the same unity.” It is concerned with mystery and
with community at a deeper level: “they are the ones most aware that the whole
world is a community and realize that what divides us into warring camps is
precisely the lack of this awareness.” All of the other stages are transcended but
included in this most integrated and mature stage.

As does Groeschel, Peck emphasizes the non-linear aspect of spiritual development and
how the journey is often more of a movement back and forth between stages as we grow.
Peck also insightfully teases out some of the complexities of the dynamics of those in
different stages, including:

we are [mostly] threatened by people in the stages above us. … If you are not
ahead, it is unlikely that you will be able to lead [anyone] anywhere. But if you
are two steps ahead, it is likely that you will lose them. If people are one step

23 Ibid., 192.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 193.
ahead of us, we usually admire them. If they are two steps ahead of us, we usually think they are evil.²⁶

In our congregation, we have people all along the journey; and the challenge will be how we communicate these stages to all of them.

**Spiritual Formation: Understanding the Process of Discipleship**

The field of spiritual formation is one that, as with spiritual development, has only recently—meaning in the last few decades—begun to find a foothold in the evangelical Protestant spheres, particularly with the work of Eugene Peterson, Richard Foster, and Dallas Willard. Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline* was one of the first books I was given as a teenager, as a baptism gift, that introduced me to the topic of spiritual formation; and Peterson’s books—particularly his writings for pastors—have been a grounding resource in my ministry; but it was Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* that has been the most transformative, both personally and for ministry; even Foster describes it as “the book I have been searching for all my life.”²⁷

What Willard does in *The Divine Conspiracy*, which is the third of a trilogy on the spiritual life, is reintroduce Jesus to evangelical Protestant audiences as more than just a “magical figure … who fits only within the categories of dogma and of law” but rather as an actual person whose life and existence, not just two thousand years ago but even today, can have immeasurable consequences for our lives in the present and into

²⁶ Ibid.

eternity. Most notably, Willard wonders why Christians do not look more like Jesus, if that is the goal of followership, as Paul states in Galatians 4:19—“until Christ is formed in you.” He writes “to provide an understanding of the gospel that will open the way for the people of Christ actually to do—do once again, for they have done it in the past—what their acknowledged Maestro said to do,” and through the course of the book, re-centers the calling of discipleship, presenting it “as the very heart of the gospel” and framing it as learning “from [Jesus] how to live our lives as he would live them if he were we.”

From the outset, Willard identifies one of the key challenges of our day: “there now is no recognized moral knowledge upon which projects of fostering moral development could be based.” Willard wrote this diagnosis in 1997, but the problem has only grown since then, particularly with the advent of postmodernity but also with advances in technology that have contributed to a siloing effect among people with different opinions and worldviews. “And yet we have to act. The rocket of our life is off the pad. Action is forever. We are becoming who we will be—forever.”

Willard, a philosopher, lays out both simply and comprehensively the case against flawed understandings of the life of faith—what he calls “gospels of sin management,”—critiquing both a gospel without the cross and a gospel without real-life effects on the

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28 Ibid., xiii.
29 Ibid., xvii.
30 Ibid., 58.
31 Ibid., 11.
world; and the case for the alternative. Jesus came to make possible not just an eternal existence in the future but an eternal existence in the present as well—the kingdom of God, which Willard describes as “The Kingdom Among Us,” the very real Spirit-infused world we currently inhabit. Chapter by chapter, he draws inspiration from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount to construct a philosophical framework for what Jesus intended life to look like, from Jesus’s opening remarks on who is really well off, to the descriptions of anger and lust—and the importance of heart change, to uncovering the deception of reputation and wealth.

But Willard does not stop with the philosophy. *The Divine Conspiracy* is about whole-life change, about transformation, about the reality that the gospel can and should result in the kind of character and behavior that looks like Jesus and looks like what Jesus commanded:

The narrow gate [that Jesus talks about in Matthew 7] is not, as so often assumed, doctrinal correctness. The narrow gate is obedience—and the confidence in Jesus necessary to it. We can see that it is not doctrinal correctness because many people who cannot even understand the correct doctrines nevertheless place their full faith in him. Moreover, we find many people who seem to be very correct doctrinally but have hearts full of hatred and unforgiveness. The broad gate, by contrast, is simply doing whatever I want to do.

For this reason, Willard says, “Nondiscipleship is the elephant in the church. … The fundamental negative reality among Christian believers is their failure to be constantly learning how to live their lives in The Kingdom Among Us.”

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32 Ibid., 35ff.
33 Ibid., 68.
34 Ibid., 275.
35 Ibid., 301.
Elsewhere, Willard describes a model for transformation, but in this book he introduces “the golden triangle of spiritual growth” (Fig. 5), namely the factors involved in “the transformation of the self into Christlikeness”: (1) the action of the Holy Spirit, (2) the ordinary events of life—or temptations—and (3) planned discipline to put on a new heart, all carried out by a person centered in the mind of Christ. Of note, we as individuals and as disciples only have control or influence over the latter two, and our participation with the action of the Holy Spirit takes place in the context of the ordinary events of life but with intention and discipline. Thus, Willard emphasizes the centrality of spiritual disciplines for a growing, maturing, vibrant spiritual life, and, conversely, the consequences of not engaging in disciplined practice: “The training required to transform our most basic habits of thought, feeling, and action will not be done for us.”


37 Willard, Divine Conspiracy, 347.

38 Ibid., 345.
It is these disciplines that position us in such a way that the Spirit can transform us—heart, mind, body, and soul. After all, “all of the ‘spiritual’ disciplines are, or essentially involve, bodily behaviors.”\(^\text{39}\) As such, every discipline is reframed, to use spiritual development language, no longer as a responsibility but as a response—a participation with the Spirit in order to become more like Jesus.

One vital—indispensable, even—ingredient not included in Willard’s Golden Triangle, but which he mentions in the book, is that of community, namely that kingdom prayer “creates the community of prayerful love.”\(^\text{40}\) Yet the flow also goes the other way: a loving kingdom community cultivates kingdom prayer and develops kingdom people. Willard touches on it in highlighting Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reminder from *Life Together* that Christ is the mediator of every relationship between human beings,\(^\text{41}\) but Willie Jennings states it more forcefully: “The crucial matter today for Christian discipleship is

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 353.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 216.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 236.
not what you practice but who you practice with.”

Of particular importance to me in developing a curriculum for Christlikeness in a multiethnic and multiclass context, and particularly in the world in which we live today, is learning more of the communal nature of spiritual formation and also learning more from under-represented voices in the Church, especially from communities of color. This is not an area Willard delves into; indeed, this might be cited as a weakness of much of the literature of spiritual formation—that it is often written from a position of privilege. While this is not unsurprising, given the resources needed to write a book in the first place, and while Willard is one of the most formative influences on my own life and spirituality, this is nevertheless, in my opinion, an opportunity to hear out other voices.

Fortunately, Barbara A. Holmes offers such a perspective in her book *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, which “focuses on the aspects of the black church that point beyond particular congregational gatherings toward a mystical and communal spirituality not within the exclusive domain of any denomination.”

Holmes notes from the outset that the Black church—particularly the Protestant variation—is not known for its contemplative practices, acknowledging that they “remain a subliminal and unexamined aspect of black religious life.” Yet she points back to the

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44 Ibid., 1.
importance of contemplative practices in the Black church historically, and highlights the transformative possibilities if they were to be rediscovered and re-engaged:

In the twenty-first century the survival of the black church community depends on its spiritual diversity. This diversity must be remembered, nurtured, and reclaimed. A first step toward this restorative act would be the retrieval of contemplative practices that began on the African continent and sustained the community during slavery and during the formation of the black church.45

Holmes explores the history of contemplation in both European and Africana history, and the numerous roots of African spirituality, including indigenous and Sufi contemplative practices (birth and death rituals, drumming, and dancing), and also considers the form contemplation takes as circumstances forced it to “press beyond the constraints of religious expectations to reach the potential for spiritual centering in the midst of danger,” in this case, in the bowels of slave ships, on the auction blocks, and in the hush arbors.46 Out of these terrible circumstances comes lament, in the form of moans—“the very essence of protest and prayer … a sound that rides the crest of communal longing and angst”;47 but also ritual empowerment—at the hush arbors, where slaves would gather in secret to pray and sing together, and “when they were all finally gathered in one accord, the pain and distress could no longer be suppressed—tears and shouts were not unusual.”48 For Holmes, such experiences are contemplative “because they create an atmosphere for communal listening and responsiveness to the

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46 Ibid., 69.
47 Ibid., 73.
48 Ibid., 84.
manifestations of God, they impact the ethos and value system of a community, and they heal infected social and psychic wounds.\textsuperscript{49}

In addition to physical activities, Holmes also points to practical shifts as contemplative practices, such as \textquote{from the ‘star’ preacher to the guided and empowered congregation,}\textsuperscript{50} using Fellowship Church in San Francisco, the congregation co-founded by Howard Thurman, as an example of doing just this. One of the reasons for this shift is, quite simply, that idea of a priesthood of all believers, who are responsible for one another.

Finally, Holmes writes, action and activism are an outgrowth of contemplation, with Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks as the clearest examples. She writes, \textquote{The world is the cloister of the contemplative. There is no escape. Always the quest for justice draws one deeply into the heart of God.}\textsuperscript{51} While much of the evangelical Protestant church has separated activism from contemplation, or social justice from the fundamentals of the gospel, or labeled social activism as ‘political’ and therefore apparently out of the realm of gospel applicability, the Black church has always seen that faith must be matched with works: marching together, protesting together, taking action that is motivated by a deep concern for others and a desire to see the world be better. Contemplation and action go hand in hand. Both are formational, both individually and communally, and both are indispensable.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 138.
Diversity and Reconciliation:

Power and Difference in a Multiclass, Multiethnic Church

In *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson observed that “the world … is protean: each generation has the world to deal with in a new form.” Each church has to deal with their own context, too. The dynamics of a city are different from those of the suburbs; the church in America has to deal with challenges that look different from those in Africa or Asia; and every city has its own unique history that must be grappled with. And yet there are principles that may be applied and practices that may be undertaken to bring to bear the concepts of spiritual development and spiritual formation to the particular situation of Christ City Church.

In *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett explore the implications of their conviction that “when authentic relationships are built that embrace diverse backgrounds, tremendously positive growth in Christlikeness can occur,” and they do so from their varied perspectives—Conde-Frazier as a Puerto Rican-American, Kang as a Korean-American, and Parrett as a white American. From the outset, their questions drive straight to the heart of the issues, critiquing the structures as they are—asking, for example, “If a homogeneous church is planted in a community that is truly

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heterogeneous, how will members defend its shape in light of the biblical teaching that the cross destroyed the barriers that separated us not only from God but also from one another? … Is such a church simply a way station for people until they are ready to move on to more mature experiences of biblical koinonia?—and giving guidance to those who are building new structures—noting cultural differences around leadership and communication styles, as well as spiritual practices.

First, though, they lay the biblical foundations, beginning by stating the case from the creation of humankind and the cultural mandate in Genesis 1 to the various examples of boundary-crossing in the book of Acts to the final vision of Revelation 7 “that God’s heart is inclined toward people from every nation, tribe, and tongue on earth.” They explore the ways both scriptural and philosophical that kingdom citizens are formed through an encounter with the other, and particularly through exposure to voices that have historically been on the margins—womanist, Hispanic, and Korean-American expressions of the gospel and their conceptualizations of theology; approaches to pedagogy such as Paulo Freire’s, bell hooks’, and Henry Giroux’s.

“Christian education in a context that is diverse in terms of gender, class, culture, and ethnicity requires a multicultural sensitive pedagogy, or a pedagogy of reconciliation.” Likewise, Christian spiritual formation in a diverse context requires a similar cultural sensitivity and a similar understanding of reconciliation. Crucially, the

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54 Ibid., 10.
55 Ibid., 51.
56 Ibid., 105.
authors describe the process of becoming culturally sensitive since “cultural sensitivity requires ongoing growth and development.”\(^57\) Most commonly, this takes place at the intersections of kingdom citizens being formed together, learning from one another. The goal is a community of mutual learning and shared practice, characterized by honesty, openness, receptivity to the work of the Spirit, compassion, responsibility, involvement, mutuality, and accountability.\(^58\)

Spiritual formation is not simply a topic that needs contextualization in diverse contexts, nor is it merely the goal—as if learning from more sources is sufficient (though it is laudable); rather, spiritual formation is an integral part of the process of becoming a culturally sensitive leader and community. As Conde-Frazier confesses, “For me, multicultural teaching has entailed developing an understanding of my own prejudices and how the work of the Holy Spirit in me modifies and slowly eliminates them.”\(^59\) She notes five spiritual practices—“activities that provide concrete ways for us to flourish”—that are part of this spiritual journey, each of which reveals a different facet of God’s character and heart:\(^60\)

1. **Hospitality:** creating a space of welcome, a place of safety and acceptance, particularly for those in need or who are different from us. In a learning setting, for example, this involves:

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 168.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 169.
• being open to the voice and message of the stranger,
• allowing the space to consider something new and different,
• listening to the point at which even our own view is re-informed or expanded,
• giving all students the right to learn,
• creating a banquet table from which none are excluded.61

2. **Encounter:** where hospitality can be understood as welcoming others into ‘our’ space, encounter is the act of stepping out of our comfort zones, for example, in storytelling and listening, particularly with a view to being changed.62

3. **Compassion:** derived from the Latin meaning ‘to suffer with,’ compassion “connotes solidarity [and] works from a place of mutuality. It involves participating in the sufferings of another with a strength born of an awareness of shared weakness.”63 It may take the form of an act of mercy, such as the Good Samaritan; or it may take the form of doing justice. As Martin Luther King said, “Justice is love correcting that which would work against love.”64 Always, compassion requires a solidarity and connection with others, a humility and vulnerability that allows them into our lives—and to affect our lives.

4. **Passion:** stated simply, as we listen to each other’s stories, becoming more

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61 Ibid., 176.
62 Ibid., 176ff.
63 Ibid., 191.
64 Quoted ibid., 193.
conscious of ourselves, of others, and of God, we are moved. “Passion is intimacy and sympathy with God and humanity.”

5. *Shalom:* the vision of wholeness and connectedness for a community, shalom “is not about shifting power from one center to another. Rather, it involves distributing power among all equally.” Conde-Frazier writes that because equity and reconciliation are the end goal, no single perspective or group can be elevated as the definitive perspective or group.

Cultural *kenōsis*, or emptying, is a concept that we learn from Christ’s example in Philippians 2, and which invites a posture of humility, imitating the incarnation, and leading us into a relationship with power that is what Conde-Frazier calls “power with … the type of social power shared among people who value one another as equals.”

As such, we close our literature review by considering the book sociologist Christena Cleveland lauded as “one of the best resources around on power dynamics and analysis in the church”: Eric H.F. Law’s *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. The key takeaway from Law’s book is that leadership in a multicultural community requires cultural awareness, which includes an awareness of power and power dynamics. It is knowing oneself, knowing the other, and knowing the context. This is true in a sociopolitical sense, as

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65 Ibid., 201.

66 Ibid., 206.

67 Ibid., 218.

68 Comment in “Power, Inequality, and Reconciliation in the Church,” class at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA, October 2017).
theologian Joerg Rieger writes: “Theology never exists in a vacuum of power. Not addressing the question of power—like not addressing the question of politics—amounts to endorsing by default the powers that be.”\textsuperscript{69} It is also true in an interpersonal and cultural sense, as Law explains: “To be interculturally sensitive, we need to examine the internal instinctual part of our own culture. This means revealing unconscious values and thought patterns so that we will not simply react from our cultural instinct.”\textsuperscript{70}

The animals in the title of the book, drawn from Isaiah 11, provide the clearest paradigm shift involved in multicultural leadership. Our motivating vision is the kingdom of God, or what Law refers to as “the Peaceable Realm,” a reality that is not based on fear. Instead, it is based on the lack of fear. … This lack of fear is created by the even distribution of power. The lamb is equal to the wolf. The calf is equal to the lion. Therefore, they can live peacefully together. True peace cannot be attained without justice. To do justice, then, is to be able to see and recognize the uneven distribution of power and to take steps to change the system so that we can redistribute power equally.\textsuperscript{71}

The two steps Law mentions are (1) seeing and recognizing power inequities; and (2) taking steps to change the system. With regard to the former, this may involve learning about different cultural approaches to power. Law offers the example of the belief, held by “most whites … that inequality can be countered by simply physically including the powerless and disadvantaged.” And yet, he notes, even inclusion in a space does not mean equality or equity; moreover, especially if the person of color comes from a culture

\textsuperscript{69} Joerg Rieger, \textit{Globalization and Theology} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 54.


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 14.
that emphasizes the collective over the individual, the act of including that one person may “[strip] the power of the person by not including a collective group from which he or she comes.”

Law develops a biblical perspective on power and powerlessness, noting the different responses of God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament to those at different points on the power spectrum: the emphasis for the powerful is on being humble and redistributing their resources; the emphasis for the powerless is on endurance and faithfulness. Insightfully, he uses the early church in Acts as an example of a multicultural church, not simply because people were from all over, but because the miracle of Pentecost was as much about people listening as it was about people speaking. He concludes that, in any given situation, the main invitation to those with power is to listen and the main invitation to those without power is to speak.

Thus, it is paramount that leaders, especially those navigating multicultural spaces, cultivate the ability of power analysis. Law calls it “essential”; after all, “it is dangerous for the powerful to identify themselves as the powerless victims.” Power analysis involves asking questions like, “In this social, economic, and political [and, I might add, spiritual] context, who has power and who does not? Who is perceived to be powerful and who is perceived to be powerless?”

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72 Ibid., 34.
73 Ibid., 41.
74 Ibid., 55.
75 Ibid., 57.
However, the goal is not simply analysis but a change in status. The kingdom of God is not just about the poor and rich worshiping together but the barriers of wealth and poverty being done away with. Power analysis is one step—an important step, but one nonetheless—on the path to living out the reality of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. “There needs to be movement between the two [powerful and powerless] in order for the Gospel to come alive for each group.”

He offers some practical suggestions for navigating multicultural situations: a discussion paradigm he has found helpful, called the ‘mutual invitation process’, where the facilitator gives up their power and intentionally empowers others; using media—such as photographs or drawings or writings—to diffuse power and encourage two-way communication within group settings; and, in the context of a church community, utilizing and adapting our liturgy—the forms of our worship that create spaces for an encounter with the holy—to a place at the table for others, inviting participation and sharing power.

Law acknowledges the complexities of power dynamics, of intersectionality, of the effect of context and circumstance but nevertheless continues to point to the example of Jesus—dying to self and dying (literally) to be raised to new life—as the path that all, but especially those with power and especially those leading in multicultural settings, must tread.

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76 Ibid., 72-73.
77 Ibid., 82-83.
78 Ibid., 92.
79 Ibid., 100-101.
CHAPTER 3
A THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Chapter 3 presents a biblical and theological case for the cultivation of disciples who are on the journey of spiritual formation, that is, submitted to the process of growing in the likeness and character of Christ.

Identifying the Gaps in our Discipleship

Christianity in the United States has suffered from an incomplete understanding of discipleship and spiritual formation, one that views conversion as an end goal rather than the beginning, and one that fails to sufficiently acknowledge the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the kingdom of God. This has contributed to a history—and present—of injustice, especially racial, that has been sanctioned and supported by Christians. As such, it is imperative not only to articulate the importance of spiritual formation per se but also to present a scriptural understanding of Jesus, his kingdom, and the gospel that shapes not only the journey and the end goal of individual discipleship but also the Church’s formation in Christ’s likeness.
Conversion: A Premature End Instead of a New Beginning

In his study of the birth of evangelicalism, David Bebbington identified four key characteristics, of which one was “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed.”¹ It is my contention that one of the key contributors to the current situation the American evangelical church finds itself in is a warped theology of conversion. As Gordon T. Smith writes, “A sound theology of conversion has remarkable potential to facilitate personal self-understanding.”² The obverse is also true: a superficial theology of conversion has the potential to hinder and hamper personal self-understanding. Smith continues, “Our whole life is in one sense the working out of the full meaning of our conversion. To live in truth is to act in a manner consistent with our conversion.”³ If a person holds an inadequate understanding of their own conversion, the working out of that conversion will also be lacking. In short, I would propose that one of the reasons for the crisis of discipleship we are facing now is a flimsy theology of conversion, one which frames conversion as an end rather than a beginning.

Under this framework, Jesus’s call to “make disciples” (Mt 28:19) is stripped down to a simplistic command to make converts, which in turn is measured by the number of people who pray the Sinner’s Prayer—labeled “a hallmark of evangelical

¹ D.W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London, UK: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. The other three are: “activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”


³ Ibid.
conversionism”⁴—rather than being understood as a commission to cultivate committed apprentices to Christ, people following in the way of Jesus, submitted to the kingdom of Jesus, and dedicated to becoming more like Jesus, in thought, word, and deed. Even in 1957, pastor and theologian A.W. Tozer was bemoaning an overemphasis on the moment of ‘conversion’ and an insufficient understanding of what came after:

Today all is made to depend upon an initial act of believing. At a given moment a “decision” is made for Christ, and after that everything is automatic. … In our eagerness to make converts we allow our hearers to absorb the idea that they can deal with their entire responsibility once and for all by an act of believing. This is in some vague way supposed to honor grace and glorify God, whereas actually it is to make Christ the author of a grotesque, unworkable system that has no counterpart in the Scriptures of truth.⁵

This is the same critique that Dallas Willard has noted time and again, including in The Great Omission:

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. … So far as the visible [American] Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional.⁶

To diagnose the problem using theological terminology, the American evangelical church has tended to overemphasize justification and forgotten about sanctification.

Indeed, both terms have lost their place in the vernacular, even in the Church; and, as


⁵ A.W. Tozer, “Faith is a Journey, Not a Destination,” The Alliance Weekly 92, no. 45 (1957), 2.

evidenced by the prevalence of one over the other, the distinction is often not clearly
drawn—but it is vital. Gordon Smith describes justification as “a good beginning—
accepted, forgiven and set right in Christ” and sanctification as “the goal of our human
life and identity in Christ—that we be mature, whole and complete in Christ.’”

Justification is what takes place whenever a decision to receive Christ is made, when our
sin is forgiven, our relationship with God is set right, and we are declared righteous
because of Christ’s sacrifice (Rom 3:21-26, 5:16; 2 Cor 5:21); this is what we tend to
think of as conversion. Sanctification, on the other hand, is the process of becoming more
and more Christlike, being formed increasingly in the image of Jesus; we will explore the
biblical roots for this in the next section. Both justification and sanctification are
described in the Bible; both are integral and essential to the life of faith. Sanctification
without justification could be caricatured as self-help, trying to be a better person;
justification without sanctification is the bastardized Christianity we see in modern-day
American evangelicalism.

Without a holistic understanding of conversion that is joined with the goal of
becoming more like Jesus, without an integrated theology of justification and
sanctification, we will be left with an inadequate and incomplete view of the gospel and
what it means for us. Todd Hunter and Keith Matthews spell out the implications of this
flimsy theology:

1. Because conversion emphasizes justification and the accomplished work of
   Jesus—a transaction that is already completed—without mentioning our invitation

\[ \text{Smith, } \textit{Beginning Well, } 22. \]
to participate in the mission of God, it induces a passivity. No response is asked or expected, except perhaps gratitude. The eternal life that Christ offers those who believe in him becomes a ticket to heaven or a promise of life after death.

2. However, without an understanding of sanctification and the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives—and our submission to and participation in that activity—we may expect to have ‘arrived’ and thus have no language or theology to name or deal with the things in our lives that continue to serve as evidence as sin at work or the fallenness of creation. We may experience a vast chasm between what we think life should be like after being saved and what life is still like; and we may try to make up that difference by working harder to deal with our problems or by papering over what life is like and pretending that life is as it should be, even when it is not.

3. Eventually, the façade will fall or we will get tired of keeping up pretenses or our experience of the chasm will become so large that we can no longer explain the disparity except that perhaps we have walked away from God or, worse, that God’s salvation may not be all that it purported to be.8

The process of becoming more like Jesus is not simply a matter of trying harder to deal with our problems, though; it is a matter of spiritual formation, a process that takes time, training, and an understanding that there is a goal beyond conversion, that conversion is not a premature end but a new beginning.

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8 Paraphrased from Keith Matthews and Todd Hunter, “Spirituality and Ministry,” class at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA, June 2016).
An Incomplete Gospel

An overemphasis on conversion is not simply an inadequate theology of conversion; it is also an inadequate gospel. Understanding that we as individuals are invited to the path of sanctification and spiritual formation in Christlikeness is infinitely better than living as passive recipients of a ticket to the afterlife, but it is still not the fullness of life that Jesus offers (Jn 10:10). The Christian gospel is not only that we have a journey and a future—if we were to stop there, we might not be too different from the individualistic calls to self-improvement that form the backdrop of the American mythos—but also that we have a purpose beyond ourselves, a picture bigger than our own lives, and a story in which we are not the main character. A Hindu scholar once said to Lesslie Newbigin:

I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.9

As Newbigin notes, what the Bible—and the Christian faith—offers is “an interpretation of the whole of history from creation to its end, and of the human story within that creation.”10

In response to the dearth of robust discipleship, a number of responses have risen to contend for a more holistic and comprehensive gospel; there is a growing

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10 Ibid., 5.
understanding that the fullness of the biblical narrative is needed for a robust and complete gospel—it all matters and there is no part that is indispensable. Lisa Sharon Harper points out the numerous occurrences of the concept of *shalom*, the Hebrew understanding of a wholeness of being and relationship, in Scripture—550 times, including the Greek equivalent in the New Testament.\(^\text{11}\) Her concept of *The Very Good Gospel* is predicated on this idea of wholeness and restoration, “God’s vision for the emphatic goodness of all relationships.”\(^\text{12}\) Meanwhile, N.T. Wright conceives of the grand sweep of Scripture taking place in five acts—creation, fall, Israel, Christ, and the Church\(^\text{13}\)—and Albert M. Wolters has three categories: creation, fall, and redemption.\(^\text{14}\) This framework has also been called “The Grand Narrative”\(^\text{15}\) and “The Gospel of the Kingdom.”\(^\text{16}\)

The kingdom of God is a key component of this gospel, reflecting the fact that the kingdom was what Jesus talked about more than any other topic. In Mark’s Gospel, it is the very first thing he mentions:

> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 14.


God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mk 1:14-15)

Dallas Willard describes the kingdom of God as “the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom.” One analogy that I have heard used is that when we express ourselves, we might raise a hand, turn our bodies away, or speak words; when God expresses himself, there is light, healing, goodness, justice, and restoration.

It should be acknowledged that the language of ‘kingdom’ can, especially when understood from the perspective of history and experience, conjure allusions to subjugation, to hierarchical power, to feudal, male-dominated systems—kings are men, after all. For this reason, some prefer to use terms like the ‘reign’ of God or the ‘kin-dom’ of God; this is understandable, however, at least for this present moment, I would suggest that understanding the kingdom as Jesus understood it—and as Jesus defined it, inaugurated it, and embodied it—is a path forward much preferable to discarding the

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18 Matthews and Hunter, “Spirituality and Ministry.”

19 For example, as Deborah Krause and Raj Nadella argue, “Kingdom tends to be very exclusive [whereas] the metaphor of kin-dom allows us to envision an inclusive community, built on common humanity and shared values. . . . kingdom sees relationships as a zero-sum game, operating on the assumption that if one community gains something, another community ends up losing. Such a worldview can breed mutual suspicion between different communities and engender violence.” Quoted in Eva Stimson, “Bible study at GA223 will explore ‘kin-dom’ versus ‘kingdom,’” *Presbyterian Church USA website* (February 12, 2018), https://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/2/12/bible-study-ga223-will-explore-kin-dom-versus-king/ (accessed September 21, 2018).
phrase and concept Jesus referred to more than any other.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the language of kingdom was specifically and intentionally political, pointing to the supremacy and authority of God over every other system that might set itself up over human beings; in Jesus’s case, it was the oppressive Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{21} To lose this connotation might blunt the incisive power of the gospel to confront other kingdoms or entities, political or otherwise.

The kingdom-centered gospel paradigm we use at Christ City Church has four chapters: \textit{Creation}, \textit{Fall}, \textit{Redemption}, and \textit{Renewal}; some iterations have \textit{Restoration} as the final chapter.\textsuperscript{22} In Creation, drawing from Genesis 1-2, we learn that every created thing was made by God and he declared it all good. This includes human beings, created “in the image of God”, commissioned to be image-bearers—or reflections—of God by exercising wise stewardship over all of creation (Gn 1:26-28). James Choung describes humanity as having been \textit{designed for good}.

In the beginning, there was a rightness of relationship—shalom—that pervaded the universe, flowing between humanity and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} To use a different example, I would suggest reframing our understanding of parenthood based on how God parents his children rather than understanding God as Father and Mother in the same ways—and often the negative ways—we have experienced our earthly parents, or even discarding the terms ‘father’ or ‘mother.’
  
  
  
  \item \textsuperscript{23} James Choung, \textit{True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 67.
\end{itemize}
creation, God, and one to another. God’s reign—or kingdom—was paramount:
everything was as God intended it to be.

However, sin enters the world at the Fall: with humanity’s disobedience to God in
Genesis 3, separation and enmity break into each relationship—between humanity and
creation, God, and one to another. Individuals, families, communities, and subsequently
people groups and systems are corrupted, perverted, distorted, and turned away from their
original goodness; even the ground is cursed (Gn 3:17). In other words, to use Choung’s
categories, we are damaged by evil, choosing our own kingdoms over God’s.24 The bulk
of the biblical narrative that follows involves the tension of goodness and evil, and we see
God’s good intentions in the midst of evil play out as he works through one family
(Abraham’s) and then one nation (Israel), all in order to bring blessing, wholeness, and
restoration—his kingdom—to the world.

Redemption is the apex of the story, where God chooses to bring blessing and
wholeness to the world himself, in the person of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity.
By Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, he heralds, inaugurates, and embodies the
kingdom of God, taking on the effects and consequences of sin, serving as a sacrifice for
sin, thereby making possible new life—free from the damaging effects of sin and evil—
and demonstrating a new way of living for those who place their trust in him. Indeed,
Jesus instructs us to pray that God’s kingdom would come “on earth as in heaven” (Mt
6:10), not simply that we might make it to the afterlife. Here, we are restored for better.25

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24 Ibid., 96.
25 Ibid., 139.
justified by the work of Christ, a path opened up to right relationship once more.

Finally, in Renewal, we are sent together to heal, both to continue the kingdom work that Jesus did—and that God has been doing since the beginning—and also to live toward the restoration of all things when Christ comes again, to join with God in setting right all that has been warped and broken—individual lives, relationships, families, communities, and nations; relationships between humanity and creation, God, and one to another. There is a vision of a new shalom laid out in the book of Revelation, and it is like Creation but also noticeably different: instead of a garden, there is a city; instead of a man and a woman, the partnership is between Christ and his Church. It is imperative to note that God’s ultimate vision is not simply a return to the way things were but a maturation, a transformation, a work that brings wholeness out of brokenness and makes all things new (Rev 21:5).

Thus, there is not just a goal for us as individuals—to become more like Jesus—but also a purpose and a mission—to be about the work of the kingdom and to see that kingdom, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray, on earth as in heaven (Mt 6:10). Moreover, discipleship is not simply an individual calling but a communal one; when we are converted as followers of Christ, we are joined with Christ’s body—the Church—in order to do Christ’s work.

The conversionist gospel includes only the middle two chapters—Fall and Redemption—and misses the vital reminder that God’s original creation was good and

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26 Ibid., 166.
that those who have been redeemed have a role to play in the ongoing work of the kingdom. Meanwhile, the tendency in a progressive, justice-oriented city like Washington, DC is to ignore the first and third chapters, neither acknowledging God’s hand in the goodness of creation nor understanding that redemption is only available through Christ and the cross; instead all that is acknowledged is that there is something wrong (Fall) and we have a responsibility to fix it (Renewal). All four parts of the gospel are necessary and all four contribute not only to a robust understanding of our place and purpose in the world but also of conversion and an individual’s spiritual journey, and it is within this holistic framework—this four-chapter, kingdom gospel—that a biblical understanding of discipleship and spiritual formation can be cultivated.

Discipleship and Spiritual Formation in the Bible

The following section examines a biblical understanding of discipleship and spiritual formation, drawn not just from the words of Jesus but from the thread of Scripture as a whole.

“In the Image of God”

From the very creation of humanity, our purpose and potential was named—“God created humankind in his image, in the image (tzelem) of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gn 1:27). Over the years, the question as to what it means to be made in the image of God has been one that has been debated: is it our rationality that makes us like God? Our relational nature? Our morality? Our soul? Our commission to steward creation? Preeminent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes:
It is now generally agreed that the image of God reflected in human persons is after the manner of a king who establishes statues of himself to assert his sovereign rule where the king himself cannot be present.  

It was established ancient practice for rulers to set up carved images of themselves in lands over which they ruled to serve as reminders to the residents of who was in charge and what the ruler looked like. In the case of God and humanity, it is significant that the image of God was reflected not in fixed, lifeless statues but in living, free-willed human beings. As Brueggemann continues:

The human creature attests to the Godness of God by exercising freedom with and authority over all the other creatures entrusted to its care. The image of God in the human person is a mandate of power and responsibility. But it is power exercised as God exercises power. The image images the creative use of power which invites, evokes, and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind.

Thus, from humanity’s inception, our purpose was to reflect God, to be like God, to be God’s representatives on earth, to care for creation, to care for those under our care, to establish God’s reign and kingdom on earth.

When Jesus came to earth as “the Word [who] was with God [and who] was God” (Jn 1:1), he came as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15), in whom “the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily (Col 2:9). “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). In other words, Jesus was not only the fullest, truest embodiment of God and the clearest visible evidence of what God was like—and thus the fullest, truest carrier of God’s kingdom—but also, therefore, the fullest, truest

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28 Ibid.
embodiment of humanity and the clearest illustration of human beings were supposed to be like.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that both Jesus Christ and human beings are described using “image of God” language. Indeed, it should be all the explanation we need as to why we are called to be and become like Christ: it is that we might live into the very purpose for which we were created for the sake of the world in which we live. To be made in the image of God is not a static identity but a calling to actively pursue; it is not a status but a commission, not just a badge declaring our specialness and uniqueness but a title to live into and up to.

“Follow Me”

It is also no coincidence that Jesus was a rabbi, and that he invited people to “Follow me” (Mt 4:19). Long before ‘follower’ became twenty-first century lingo for a person who passively sees and consumes the content that someone else posts on social media, this was an invitation to become disciples of a rabbi, learning from them how to live and, in turn, how to teach others.29 (It is interesting to note that people often asked rabbis if they might become their followers, and even then, many would be turned away. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is the one who makes the first move and it is to an uneducated fisherman, unlikely to be considered the cream of the religious crop; and in so doing, he demonstrates both the initiative and the inclusiveness of God.)

The Greek word used for *disciple* is *mathetes*, “one who engages in learning through instruction from another” or “one who is rather constantly associated with someone who has a pedagogical reputation or a particular set of views.” The word and its cognates appear in the New Testament over two hundred and fifty times.

Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of the term into our contemporary context is that:

*Disciple (mathetes)* says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing-learning relationship, always. A disciple is a learner, but not in the academic setting of a schoolroom, rather at the work site of a craftsman. We do not acquire information about God but skills in faith.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be a disciple, a learner, and an apprentice, not simply a consumer of wise sayings or even just a beneficiary of Christ’s redemptive work. Dallas Willard described this latter category of person as a “vampire Christian,” one who is saying to Jesus, “I’d like a little of your blood, please. But I don’t care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won’t you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I’ll see you in heaven.” It is because we were created to be image-bearers, reflectors, representatives of God and his kingdom that Christ, the true image-bearer, calls us to learn from him how we might also become like him, disciples apprenticed to a master,

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and to invite others to do the same: “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 Jn 2:6, NIV).

“When Christ is Formed in You”

Similar language is used by the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the church in Corinth, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Elsewhere, however, it was language of growth and formation that predominated. In the first epistle he wrote, to the Galatians, he talked of his longing for the young church: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you …” (Gal 4:19). To the Ephesians, Paul wrote that the goal was for “all of us come … to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ [and to] grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:13, 15). To the Romans, he described the process of being “conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom 8:29), and to the Corinthians, he spoke of the promise of “being transformed into the same image [that is, Christ’s] from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). The goal, as it is throughout Scripture, is that we might—through the sanctifying work of the Spirit—become like Christ, agents and ambassadors of God and his kingdom, being transformed into the truly human divine-image-bearers we were created to be so that all of creation might flourish, knowing both the goodness of God’s creation and the wonder of Christ’s redemption through the continuing activity of the Spirit in and through us.

It is imperative for us to note, however, that we have a part to play in this. Contrary to the conversionist gospel, which can encourage a passive receipt of grace at conversion and thereby discourage any further engagement, the holistic gospel includes a
calling to become like Christ, not simply by passively submitting to the transforming and sanctifying work of the Spirit, but by actively engaging in it. Three passages help elucidate this idea.

First, to the church in Corinth, a city that would occasionally host major games in Greece, Paul used the analogy of athletes, disciplining themselves so that they might win the prize: “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor 9:25). As Craig Keener notes, the listeners would have been well-aware of the connotations of Paul’s words: “A long period of intense discipline was mandatory for any who planned to participate in the [games]. For instance, participants for the Olympic games had to swear by Zeus to follow ten months of strict training beforehand.”34 For this reason, Dallas Willard posits that we are not called to try to be like Jesus but to train to be like him.35

To his protégé Timothy, Paul uses this very language: “Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tm 4:7-8). The word for ‘train’ is gymnazo, from which we get the English words ‘gymnast’ and ‘gymnasium.’ The implication is that there is a discipline and an intention to training that is not passive nor simply a spontaneous activity; rather, there is a goal and a target, which require a plan and commitment to carry it out. Indeed, Paul does not leave any doubt that

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this path requires effort: “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Tm 4:10). We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that the spiritual life is simply one in which we are passive recipients; instead, we are invited to be active participants in what God, through his Spirit, is doing.

Finally, Paul uses the same language of “toil and struggle” in his letter to the church in Colossae:

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me. (Col 1:27-29)

Here we see clearly laid out once again: (1) the goal of becoming like Jesus “present[ing] everyone mature in Christ”, “Christ in you [as] the hope of glory”, and also (2) the synergistic relationship between God and humanity: as Paul acknowledges, he works with effort and energy but it is God who powerfully inspires and provides that energy within him.

Knowing and living into our place and purpose as individuals and as humanity, as well as a sense of what it requires to live out our calling and commission, requires a more substantive theology of conversion, a more holistic formulation of the gospel, and a more robust definition of discipleship; each of these can be gleaned from the pages of Scripture, as I have shown. However, as previously mentioned, our faith is lived out in a particular context and may look different in different contexts; as such, it is to discipleship specifically in multiethnic contexts, such as the one I minister in, that we now turn.
CHAPTER 4
DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN A MULTIELTHNIC CHURCH

Context matters. Discipleship and spiritual formation look different in different contexts, just as they look different for different people—even if we are all seeking to grow in the likeness of Christ. Scripture tells story after story of God interacting with specific people in specific contexts: Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah; Moses, the Hebrew-born, Egyptian-raised deliverer of the people of Israel; Ruth, a Moabite widow struggling to support herself and her mother-in-law; in the New Testament, we see Jesus’s challenges to the rich and powerful—“Go, sell your possessions … It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:21, 24); “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24)—and his compassion for the poor and vulnerable—“This poor widow [who gave two pennies] has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury” (Mk 12:43); “The Spirit of the Lord … has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). As René Padilla points out:

To contextualize the gospel is to translate it in such a way that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and that basic criterion in relation to which all
cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization, the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.¹

Where this project is concerned, our particular context is the urban, multiethnic setting in which Christ City Church finds itself, but my hope in writing this is that others seeking to practice context-sensitive and context-appropriate spiritual formation in our increasingly urban,² increasingly multiethnic³ country might also be served. In this chapter, I will address three factors that are particularly important when thinking about discipleship and spiritual formation in a multiethnic context: race, place, and power.

**Race Matters: Colorblind No More**

From slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching to mass incarceration, from the genocide of Native Americans to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers in the late 1800s, and Executive Order 9066, which interned Japanese Americans during World War 2, the United States has a sad and deplorable history when it comes to race and racism.⁴ While progress has been made, with advances in civil rights and voting rights, with the first African-American president elected in 2008, the effects of centuries

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⁴ Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2015) provides a unique, insightful and needed perspective on American history, that is from the viewpoint of those who have been oppressed and marginalized.
of racist behavior, policies, and structures continue to leave their mark. In 2013, it was found that “the top 10% of white families own 65.1% of all the wealth in the nation.” According to the Federal Reserve, in 2016, when comparing wealth by race, the median White family had a net worth of $171,000, compared to only $20,700 for a median Hispanic family and $17,600 for a median Black family. White families were almost two times more likely to own a home, and twice as likely to have a retirement account and to hold business equity. Blacks, on the other hand, have consistently experienced much higher rates of unemployment, job discrimination, incarceration, felony disenfranchisement, housing discrimination, to name but a few;
Black children are even more likely to be disciplined in school than White children.\textsuperscript{12} Yet in the face of this reality, a particular challenge exists today: colorblindness. Sarah Shin explains:

In the past, seeing color meant believing that society should be unevenly and unjustly divided by color. Today, many see colorblindness as a corrective to the problems of racism and prejudice. People who are eager to separate themselves from overt racists like to declare themselves colorblind.\textsuperscript{13}

The problem, as Shin points out, is that those “claiming colorblindness cannot address racial issues they cannot see.”\textsuperscript{14} In other words, the term ‘racism’ is often used to refer to overt racism but continues to be expressed through the systems, structures, and subconscious, through implicit bias and an overemphasis on intention over impact.

What does all of this have to do with discipleship and spiritual formation? Quite simply, we engage our spirituality with all of who we are—and all of who we are is formed and shaped and impacted by the circumstances of our lives. To use my own example, I can say that some of the times of deepest spiritual engagement for me have been on a two-week overseas mission trip, at a four-day retreat in the woods, and at a graduate school class. For the first, I was not only able to raise the money I needed (from my family and friends) but also to have the time to travel while in school—and not, for example, working to cover my tuition. For the second, I had the privilege of having one


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 5.
well-paying job (meaning I did not have to hold multiple jobs) that allowed me the time off, as well as owning a car to drive to the retreat. And for the third, I once again had the money (via family support) to afford graduate school—and this particular class—as well as airfare to help me get to the class. In each case, certain benefits and privileges enabled me to participate in and benefit from these spiritually-nourishing experiences. Or, to pose a question from another angle, how might a single mother, raising four kids in transitional housing while working two jobs in order to make ends meet, and who, statistically speaking, would likely be Black, find the time and space for silence, solitude, or a retreat? Unless we are to conclude that spiritual formation is only for those with margin—or those with privilege—and that Jesus did not explicitly come to preach good news and blessing to the poor, we must take into account—and seek to address—not only people’s spiritual condition in their present situation but also the conditions that led to those present situations. Colorblindness, particularly in how it ignores systemic and structural injustice, is no way to engage in spiritual formation for all in a multiethnic church. What we need instead is what Sarah Shin calls “ethnicity awareness,”¹⁵ to be formed—and to invite others to be formed—with eyes wide open to, as much as possible, all of the things that bear upon us and our spiritual formation, including color—not as a way of separating and dividing but as a way of seeing more clearly.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.
No life is lived, nor is any faith practiced, in a vacuum; we both shape and are shaped by our surroundings, from our families of origin and most intimate relationships to the neighborhoods, cities, and nations we may call home. Nor does God relate to us in a vacuum. Just as race matters, so also does place.

David P. Leong writes, “the convergence of race and place, particularly in urban contexts, is essential for a Christian understanding of moving toward reconciliation in our communities.”¹⁶ Wayne Gordon and John Perkins, founders of the Christian Community Development Association, talk about a “theology of presence” as one of the central pillars of their approach, otherwise known as ‘relocation.’¹⁷ Both statements are grounded in a particular aspect of Jesus’s identity, namely the Incarnation. In the first chapter of John’s Gospel, we are told how Jesus, the Word—“who was with God and who was God [and] who was in the beginning with God,” through whom all things were made and without whom nothing is that has been made—“became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:1-3, 14); or, as the Message puts it, “moved into the neighborhood.”

In his life and ministry, Jesus quite clearly identified and referenced the ethnic tensions that dominated his cultural milieu; it was not for no reason that he told the controversial parable where a despised foreigner was the hero to be emulated (Lk 10:29-37) or that he went out of his way to speak to a Samaritan woman of ill repute (Jn 4:1ff)


or that he challenged long-held Jewish understandings of sabbath, sin, and even God. He was a Jewish man, born in Palestine to an unwed mother and a manual laborer, who lived under Roman occupation, who redefined people’s cultural and religious expectations of messiahship and kingship, who stayed within a small geographical area for his entire life, and was eventually unjustly tried and executed by the state—an embodied human being in a particular time and place. Moreover, the New Testament writers often used language in speaking about Jesus that explicitly undermined the dominant narratives of the culture of the day—imperial Rome; for example, the term ‘gospel’ (euangelion in Greek) was used in imperial cultic worship, and the phrase “Jesus is Lord” was in direct opposition to a common greeting of the day: “Caesar is Lord.” The better we understand Jesus, the more we see how incarnational he really was, how engaged he was with his surroundings and his context.

Likewise, in our day and age, it is vital that we understand how our surroundings and our context interact with our faith and our ideas about spiritual formation, how they shape and are shaped by one another. Hence the unpacking of the history of DC in an earlier chapter; it is difficult to get to the root of the problem if we continue to play in the branches or pick off the leaves. “In Christ, God is local.” And we are called to be the same.

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19 JR Woodward and Dan White Jr., The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 203.
Place-based spiritual formation in the likeness of Christ means we are becoming the most aware, most engaged kingdom citizens we can be, as Jesus was. One of the tools needed for this journey is an ability to exegete our neighborhoods and our city, which JR Woodward describes the process of ‘‘draw[ing] out’’ the meaning of a people and place in order to see the power of the gospel more fully transform the neighborhoods in which we live.”20 This may involve asking questions about a place’s narratives (“What story is our neighborhood calling us to embody?”), ethics (“How do people in our context define success?”), associations (“What primary organizations and institutions are shaping people’s identity and destiny in our context?”), and rituals (“What core practices do people engage in that shape their identity and sense of mission in life?”); or it may involve thinking about our porches (our homes and our neighbors), our pathways (the “routes we take daily [that] shape our understanding of the city”), our pivots (the places where we mingle with others), and our parish (“a manageable section of our city we feel some sense of responsibility for”).21 These are practices for us as individuals and for us as communities of faith, seeking to truly and fully emulate and embody the incarnate Christ.

Power, Inequality, and Reconciliation

It is common practice among cable news outlets to address a particular issue by having a voice from either side, one for and one against; often, especially where politics is


21 Woodward and White, Church as Movement, 191ff.
concerned, this ends up being a Democrat voicing one perspective and a Republican voicing an opposing perspective. It is true that, as an old Sojourners bumper sticker declared, “God is not a Republican, or a Democrat.”

22 The kingdom of God is not fully—or even mostly—represented by either—or any—political party in the United States. However, the answer is not simply to post oneself in the middle of the two parties, triangulating one’s own position based on where the other two stand; after all, political parties change and shift, rightward and leftward—sadly less and less toward the center. Instead, I would propose we use the approach that God takes throughout Scripture: caring for and protecting the most vulnerable.

In the Old Testament, the four groups who make up the “quartet of the vulnerable” are widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor.23 These were the populations most at risk of being taken advantage of: in a patriarchal society, widows no longer had the status afforded them nor the provision made for them by their husbands; orphans were without the covering of a patriarch and the protection of a mother; immigrants were often treated not only as other but as less than; and the poor were often mistreated, taken advantage of, or denied justice. We know this because of some of the stipulations that were laid out as part of the Law of Moses—such as “You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits” (Ex 23:6)—but also because of how God self-identifies: as

22 Sojourners, Twitter Post (October 20, 2016, 2:56pm), https://twitter.com/sojourners/status/789178485772201988.

one “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Dt 10:18).

Time and again, God hears the cries of those in need, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, through Jesus Christ, the Incarnation. We know Jesus healed the sick and the demon-possessed, that he raised the dead and fed the hungry. But it is vital that we do not miss out on Jesus’s acute awareness of power and inequality. As mentioned in a previous chapter, Eric Law notes how Jesus responded differently to people depending on where they fell on the power spectrum—with comfort and encouragement for the powerless but with challenge and strong words for those with power.24 This is encapsulated in the idea of the Great Reversal, most clearly depicted in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), where Mary sings:

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (Lk 1:51-53)

Indeed, it is to those who care for those in need—the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned—that Jesus extends the invitation, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34), while those who neglect the vulnerable are denied and turned away by Jesus. Matthew 25 might be—and has been—seen as just a call to compassion and individual charity, but when combined with Jesus’s actions and attitudes toward

24 Law, The Wolf Shall Dwell, 41.
those in power as well as with the consistent witness throughout Scripture of God’s care and concern not only for individuals in need, not only for groups of people in need, but also for the integrity of systems, structures, and practices in how they deal with people in need, we must conclude that God not only cares for those in need but for how they came to be in need—and calls us to do likewise.

In other words, we need to remember and be reminded that the gospel was not a story utilized in order to maintain the status quo in society but a message that proclaimed good news to those who had been pushed down and pushed out of society, to those who had been mistreated or marginalized. Our discipleship and spiritual formation in the likeness of Christ must logically follow the same path that Jesus did, meaning that we too must become aware of power and powerlessness, equality and inequality, and we must, as Christ did, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable; this social engagement is as much a part of our spiritual formation as is learning to pray and read the Bible.

One example of this is seen in the work and writings of Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, who co-wrote Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism.\(^{25}\) Boesak is a South African theologian who, together with Desmond Tutu, was a vocal opponent of and activist against the apartheid regime in the twentieth century. They noted that, in their experience, the word and concept of reconciliation was often “used merely to reach some political accommodation that did not address the critical questions of justice, equality, and dignity that are so prominent in the

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biblical understanding of reconciliation.” 26 Indeed, because of this, Willie Jennings refuses to use the term, stating, “I have purposefully stayed away from the theological language of reconciliation because of its terrible misuse in Western Christianity and its tormented deployment in so many theological systems and projects.” 27

Christ came to reconcile humanity to God (2 Cor 5:18-20) and one to another (Eph 2:16) and, indeed, all things to himself (Col 1:20). We are agents and ambassadors of reconciliation. But reconciliation does not simply mean coming between two opposing parties and splitting the difference; a truer understanding of reconciliation is something more than conflict resolution and political accommodation: a reconciliation that resists the temptation to domesticate the radical Jesus, pandering to our need for comfortable reconciliation under the guise of a kind of political pietism and Christian quietism that deny the victims of affliction the comfort of justice. 28

The kind of reconciliation Christ brought—that we are to emulate and imitate—was one that names our sin and convicts us of it, individually, communally, systemically, and structurally, and points out our complicity in taking advantage of the vulnerable and the marginalized, often benefiting from those systems and structures. In that knowledge, we are called to repentance, changing our ways for God’s sake, for our own sakes, and for the sake of others. Thus, in Learning to Live, I name current issues that need gospel engagement—poverty, immigration and refugees, racial justice, and creation care. In order to discern and effect transformation now, we cannot simply speak in generalities from the past but must name and engage with specifics in the present.

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26 Ibid., Kindle location 98.


28 Boesak and DeYoung, Radical Reconciliation, Kindle location 195.
PART THREE:
FORMULATING THE NEW MINISTRY INITIATIVE
CHAPTER 5

DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND ASSESSMENT

Chapter 5 develops the structure of the Learning to Live discipleship curriculum, beginning with the goals for the experience. In designing this curriculum, I reviewed research from education specialists in an effort to incorporate best practices for adult education, multicultural education, and Christian education.¹ In particular, I have drawn from the work of Norma Cook Everist and Talmadge Guy, the former in delineating eight facets of Christian adult learning (community, confrontation, study, discussion, individual, reflection, experience, and presentation),² and the latter in offering tangible proposals for effective culture-aware education.³ Each Learning to Live practice, tool,


² Everist Cook, ibid., 103.

³ Guy, ibid.
experience, and term—and even the structure itself—is crafted and included for a particular reason, which will be explained in this section.

**Goals**

The curriculum is intended to address the discipleship deficiencies identified in Chapter 3, namely the understanding of conversion as the end of the spiritual process rather than the beginning and the incomplete gospel framework. Thus, the first goal is for participants to understand the concept of a *spiritual journey*, that conversion is not the end of the spiritual process but the beginning—and an ongoing activity. As Diogenes Allen writes:

> The most common activities of church life today are revivalism, Christian education, pastoral counseling, and social action. With revivalism, being a Christian is virtually identified with a conversion experience, so *not enough is done to guide people’s subsequent spiritual growth.*

Guidance will take the form not only of laying out the end goals of conformity into Christlikeness, that is, becoming more like Jesus, but also some of the concepts of maturation and stages of spiritual development, as laid out by Benedict Groeschel (purgation, illumination, and union) and Scott Peck (chaotic, antisocial; formal, institutional; skeptic, individual; mystic, communal). Thus, participants will learn not only that there is more to come beyond conversion, but that there are different phases, including some that may seem like backward steps—such as Peck’s Stage 3, in which the person actually becomes more skeptical of institutional religion.

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However, simply being introduced to such concepts is insufficient, so the second goal of the curriculum is to provide *tools for the spiritual life*, individual and communal spiritual activities that Christians have practiced, some for centuries, such as engaging Scripture through *lectio divina* and praying using the Examen. The practice of *lectio divina* was noted by the early church father Origen of Alexandria as long ago as the third century.\(^5\) The Examen prayer, a spiritual exercise developed by St. Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century, has likewise been utilized by Christians around the world to help cultivate their awareness of God. As Eugene Peterson wrote, disciples are to be a people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing-learning relationship, always. A disciple is a learner, but not in the academic setting of a schoolroom, rather at the work site of a craftsman. *We do not acquire information about God but skills in faith.*\(^6\)

These spiritual tools are skills in faith, practices to help us engage in continual learning from Jesus.

The third goal of the curriculum is that participants would engage in *common experiences* and cultivate a *common language* around Christian spiritual formation and discipleship in the way of Jesus. It is my hope that this would unify our congregation—from different walks of life and different backgrounds—around some common understandings and some common experiences. The Gospel of the Kingdom framework


\(^6\) Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 13; emphasis added.
which redresses the deficiencies of the incomplete gospel would fall into the former category of common understandings, while some of the weekend learning events would be counted in the latter. It is vital that participants engage in experiential learning, some sort of action that follows on from any intellectual acquisition—it is the most effective kind, as attested to by numerous authors and researchers.

Moreover, research shows the value of learning in community. While each of us is responsible for our own spiritual journey, we also need each other for that same journey. Too often, discipleship curricula—and discipleship in general—are overly individualized and privatized—made for personal reflection or devotion time alone. Personal work is indispensable—if the learner chooses to do nothing, nothing will get done—but if the individual does not engage with others as part of the learning process, they will be the poorer for it, not least because they will not be able to benefit from the variety of perspectives, experiences, and even reactions to the same material: “Within the faith community people learn from one another by being models and mentors.”7 As such, Learning to Live will have both personal and corporate facets, putting the onus on the individual to take responsibility for their own growth and learning while also setting them in a context in which they can learn best, namely, with fellow learners.

**Structuring the Curriculum and Shaping the Content**

Ideas and concepts are easier to understand when they follow an orderly sequence or progression, as Jane Vella writes, “from simple to complex and from group-supported

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7 Everist Cook, *Church as Learning Community*, 108.
to solo efforts.” Vella also includes the importance of reinforcement as a tool for consolidating learning. Just as stories are easier to understand when they are ordered well and we become attached to characters we encounter often, so too learning is easier to engage when the material is structured with intention and laced with repetition. Thus, in constructing the curriculum, the progression is key—and my goal is that participants would be able to naturally see, or at least intuit, how the topics tie into and build upon one another from day to day and week to week.

What distinguishes this curriculum for me is its focus on an awareness of context, namely what discipleship looks like in twenty-first century Washington, DC and in the United States and the world more broadly as well. Culturally relevant teaching and learning requires that I as the creator “always acknowledge the way social inequality manifests power relations that are at the heart of cultural analysis.” Multicultural educator James A. Banks proposed four stages of curriculum reform development:

1. contributions approach—adding a topic or unit to a curriculum;
2. additive approach—more substantially integrating cultural group content into an already existing curriculum;
3. transformative approach—presenting material from a number of different vantage points;

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9 Guy, *Culturally Relevant*, 17.
4. social action approach—encouraging learners to ‘use’ what they learn to address a problem and designing learning experiences to provide for them to do so.\textsuperscript{10}

While my hope is to achieve stage four (and all preceding stages as well), the content that I create will be crafted with an intentionality about the stories I include, the voices I elevate, the examples I give, and even the language I use.

**Designing the Interactions**

The interactions within the curriculum fall in four main categories: daily devotionals, weekly small group conversations, a weekly spiritual practice, and weekend learning experiences. Each piece is intended to combat the tendencies toward busyness, isolation, and distraction; even the length of the curriculum (eleven weeks) is intended to mirror the shortest time—about a semester—that a person might make their home in DC. This structure was adapted with permission from a curriculum called *Mizizi* (which means ‘roots’ in Swahili), which was developed by Muriithi Wanjau, senior pastor of Mavuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Daily Devotionals**

We begin with consistent practice, carving out space in our daily routines for time to reflect. Norma Cook Everist writes, “Unreflected experience slips away. Remembering and working with our own past experiences provide growth possibilities.”\textsuperscript{11} Journaling, in

\textsuperscript{10} Quoted ibid., 18-19.
particular, is a key practice for reflecting on and processing one’s life, self, and experiences, in which “the learner discovers learning is all about time: God’s time, human time, and personal time. We are part of history, a global and historical learning community. Our lives, even when seemingly chaotic or meaningless, have purpose and continuity and consequence.”

Sandra Kerka proposes a number of reasons why reflection and journaling are so pivotal in learning, including that it encourages the learner to draw connections between what was already known and what is being learned, that writing is a medium that allows the learner to demonstrate what has been learned, that journal writing “accentuates favorable learning conditions—it demands time and space for reflection, encourages independent thought and ownership, enables expression of feelings, and provides a place to work with ill-structured problems), and that reflection encourages engagement at a less superficial level.

A regular—often daily—time set aside for engaging with God is not an uncommon concept for Christians but my experience with congregants in our church suggests that it is not a common practice—and certainly not as consistent as they would like. Thus, there will be daily devotionals, with reading and questions to respond to, Scripture to memorize and reflect on, and prayer prompts to guide engagement with God. There will be five devotionals per week, enough to provide consistent material to spark

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11 Everist Cook, Church as Learning Community, 141.
12 Ibid., 142.
13 Quoted in Merriam et al, Learning in Adulthood, 212.
engagement and create some structured rhythms while also allowing margin for the participant to catch up if they miss a day and to have a day of rest. Each devotional will follow a progression along the weekly theme, and participants can engage as quickly as 15-20 minutes per session or longer if they wish to dive deeper into the questions. In this way, I hope to meet people where they are and help move them toward healthy rhythms of spiritual practice, even in the midst of their busyness.

Weekly Small Group Conversations

As alluded to above, it cannot be overstated how important the communal aspect of the curriculum is, particularly in light of the isolation that is so prevalent. Anyone who has ever sought to get into shape knows the value of having a gym buddy or a personal trainer, someone to help you stay on track even when you don’t feel like it. Similarly, the work of spiritual formation requires others and adult learning is at its best in interactions with others, not just to help keep us on track but to offer different perspectives and to bring different experiences to bear on the various topics and conversations that will arise. Knowing we will be sharing and learning from one another may help us focus when we are tempted to distraction. And we can learn from how God has been at work in others’ lives just as they can learn from us—indeed, it is vital that we do, lest we fall prey to the thinking that God only works in the ways that we have seen him work or speaks using words that we alone understand.

The curriculum is intended for use in a small group setting, ideally between six and twelve, enough to have a diversity of experience while small enough for the group to actually get to know each other and have deeper conversations. The hope is not only that
the group would talk about their different answers to the questions and the things they are learning in their reflections, but also their experiences throughout the week—how God has been at work in them and in their interactions with others.

Finally, in a city where people travel often for work or for pleasure, it is unrealistic to expect everyone to be at every week or at every event. Nevertheless, consistent engagement is needed to get the most out of the curriculum—as is true for any experience. One of the mechanisms for encouraging this would be a signed commitment, representing the participant’s intention and purpose in discipleship. It is not a contract but rather an outward expression of the participant’s desire to engage as fully as they can.

A Weekly Spiritual Practice

Each week, a different spiritual practice—or discipline—will be introduced and expounded on during the daily devotionals. The reason for this is to explicitly name the habits of holiness rather than assume that participants will immediately grasp the importance of the actions they are invited to take every day. For example, practicing sabbath is partnered with *Week 5: How to Live a Full Life* in order to demonstrate that rest is as much a part of spiritual growth as activity; in fact, we begin by listening and being present to God. Each day’s devotionals will highlight how even a small time set aside every day is in keeping with the purpose of sabbath—connecting with God so that we might operate out of that fullness and vitality.
Weekend Learning Experiences

As noted previously, experiential learning is key for retention. Scattered throughout the curriculum will be weekend learning experiences, times set aside for individuals and small groups to practice in a more intensive way the things they have been learning during the week. There will be three such experiences: *storytelling, prayer,* and *service.*

The first would follow on after reflecting on one’s own story and how God has been at work in it, and would provide an occasion for everyone in the group to share part of their story; coming earlier on in the curriculum, this would not only help to cultivate participants’ ability to evangelize—telling the good news of God in their own lives—but also to get to know one another better. The second would follow material on different kinds of prayer and different ways to pray, and provide an opportunity for participants to take a prayer retreat, with the accountability of doing it in a group. For many, praying for a few hours, let alone a whole day, can seem daunting, and it is my hope that this experience would encourage participants that time spent with God in prayer is both accessible and enjoyable—and worth prioritizing in our schedules. Third, the service event would take place after participants have learned about who we are to care for and why, and offer a tangible, practical way to love our neighbors. On the surface, this seems the most accessible, since some of our congregants regularly participate in service days, but we would aim to do something all together as a church, lending more collective momentum to our efforts.
Implementation

The Learning to Live curriculum, while crafted to be a resource for churches in multicultural settings, was created with a particular congregation and context in mind, namely Christ City Church in Washington, DC. As such, the pilot involves two small groups at our church, with feedback from the pilot being incorporated as much as possible before the full roll-out to the church. The pilot took place in the early months of 2019 and is evaluated later in this project; the full roll-out is scheduled to take place in Winter 2020.

Since so much of the curriculum is mediated through small groups, there is a guide for small group leaders to help them in facilitating the experience for their members. I learned from a previous experience just how important it is to get small group leaders on board and trained in leading the curriculum, if one is to have any hope of engaging their small group members, even for a church our size. Care will need to be given in helping leaders plan, coordinate, and execute the weekend learning experiences in particular.

Assessment

One of Jane Vella’s principles of learning is accountability, namely “How do they know they know?”14 As such, it is important that we engage our congregation in evaluation, not just so that they might be aware and reflective of their own learning but also so that I, as the creator and designer of the curriculum, might make any requisite changes. This takes

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14 Vella, Learning to Listen, 4.
place through pre- and post-experience surveys for the pilot groups and the church as a whole—at least as many as would like to participate. Moreover, there will be quarterly follow-ups for the year after the experience to measure effects over time; however, due to the size of the church and the challenge of trying to administer and assess surveys, these quarterly follow-ups will only be carried out for the pilot groups.
CHAPTER 6
LEARNING TO LIVE CURRICULUM

Since the full Learning to Live curriculum is well over two hundred pages, the following excerpts will be included in this chapter to give a sense of the full experience:

1. The introduction;

2. An overview and summary of the entire curriculum;

3. “Week 3: God’s Story” from the study guide;

4. “Leading the Prayer Experience” from the leader guide;

5. “Week 7: Overcoming and Enduring” from the leader guide.

I have tried to approximate the formatting as it would appear in the study guide; as such, quotations are uncited apart from in the overview and summary.
Introduction

Come, follow me.

- Jesus

The most important thing in your life is not what you do; it’s who you become.

That’s what you will take into eternity.

- Dallas Willard

What is it you want?

I used to think I wasn’t supposed to think about what I wanted. Growing up in church, I was taught that it really didn’t matter what I wanted, that the only thing that mattered was what God wanted. It is true that what God wants is better, more beautiful, and more life-giving than we could ever imagine. But God also meets us where we are, working in us so that God might also work through us.

So have you ever thought about the question of what you want? Have you ever considered what you want *from* life: a good job, some good friends, a spouse or family to come home to every day, a safe place to raise your kids, a stable income? How about what you want *for* your life? What kind of life do you want to live? A good life, a happy life, a content life, an adventurous life, an exciting life, the kind of life that would look good on social media? Come to think of it, *what kind of life are you living now?*

We live in a world that seems very full—of things to do, people to see, demands on our time, goings-on in the news. Technology, and the world available to us through it, is right at our fingertips, from the moment we wake up and check our email or social
media, to the moment we fall asleep doing the same. We’re promised greater
connectedness, greater opportunities, and greater experiences, while at the same time
being exposed to greater tragedy, greater pain, and greater distractions.

And yet, for all of us, there remains a discontent somewhere inside—some might refer to this as their ‘soul’—that stirs the ember of a thought: there must be more to life than this. There is a longing for something greater—something deeper—than the rat race of achievement and constant connectivity; the endless hustle of living and working; the desperate striving to satisfy our ambitions, our appetites, and our need for approval; even the exhausting grind for justice and a better world. There must be more to life than getting by.

Jesus often spoke of something called “the kingdom of God.” Once, he described it as so good and so wonderful that a person would sell everything in order to attain it; and he specifically invited those who were weary and burdened to him and his restful way of life. He said his purpose was that we might have a full, rich, good life; and he said that this life is possible and that this life can change the world.

What if “the good life” is not what the world has sold us but what Jesus has shown us? What if we were created to live full lives, and Jesus is the clearest example of that? What if it is possible to live well in this life, and following Jesus is how we do that?

Over the course of eleven weeks, I invite you to walk with me in learning to live like Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus. Individually and communally, we’ll discover what we were made for, the power of sharing our stories, the ways God works his transformation in us and through us, and the practices that will help us experience the joy of everyday
life with God; we’ll also discover what we’re called to, the exciting work and mission God invites us into.

Learning to Live is not going to solve all your problems; it’s not going to remove all of the busyness or stress or anxiety from your life. But Jesus didn’t offer the eternal kind of life only to those who have it all together or who have a lot of time or margin. Jesus says, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope.” You are who he came for. You are who he came to bring life to. You are who he invites to learn to live from him.

Before we begin, I want to be clear upfront about two things. First, I write as an Asian-American pastor of a multiethnic church in Washington, D.C. in the twenty-first century. I write as a person of color in a country with a complicated and tragic racial history—and present—about a topic—spiritual formation—that has largely been cultivated and commented on by white men, many of whom I owe a debt of gratitude as mentors in the faith.

I want to be explicit about naming my context and my perspective because, as theologian James Cone wrote, “one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers to the questions.”¹ In other words, context and perspective are the unavoidable lenses through which we see and the filters by which we interpret. If we are unaware of our context and perspective, it is not that they will not affect us; it is that we will not know how they are affecting us, even leaving us in the dangerous position of thinking we hold some ‘pure’ form of the

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truth. Jesus meets all of us where we are, no matter our ethnicity or race, no matter our background or baggage, no matter our sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, but he meets all of us with all of who we are, not in spite of it, and he offers to live his transformational life in our lives—in our particular, unique lives.

I first wrote Learning to Live in late 2015. At the time, I was just starting my doctoral studies, I was on staff at The District Church, and we were pursuing ways to live into our calling to be and to make disciples of Jesus. The project was originally inspired by a partnership we had with Mavuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya. In fact, the structure of Learning to Live was based on Mavuno’s discipleship experience, *Mizizi*, which means ‘roots.’ It was important for us to be learning from siblings in the faith from across the world.

Even so, it became evident over the last few years, that it was equally important for a curriculum of discipleship and spiritual formation that addressed specifically the context of the United States. Race, for instance, is a very different proposition in America than it is in Africa, and the ongoing legacy of racial injustice in our country is something that must be named and addressed in light of our faith. Context matters.

Second, I want to be clear about the cost that is involved. Everything that is worth doing demands something of us; no transformation comes without effort. The journey toward the good, God-filled life will require you to give of your time, as you show up to weekly small group gatherings and three weekend experiences, and work through the daily readings and reflections; your money, to cover the workbook; and your comfort, as you make new friends, as you share your own story, and even as you encounter thoughts or concepts you may not agree with.
But I have seen and come to believe that the benefits of pursuing God far outweigh the costs, that the eternal kind of life we are invited into is worth the effort, and that the journey of Learning to Live will pay back all that you put into it and more. I believe God can change your life—and through you, the world around you.

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**What to Expect**

There are **five daily devotional pieces** per week. Each devotional can take as little as ten minutes or as much as you want to go deep. My hope is that you see these times not as “homework” but as “soul-work.” Your soul is you—all of you—and our souls were made to be with God, so think of this soul-work as creating some space in your life to intentionally pause and be present to God—to what he may be saying to you, to how he might be challenging you, and to where he might be leading you. As we’ll learn, transformation happens when we engage with God individually *and* when God engages with us through others in community.

So there are **weekly verses** from the Bible that encapsulate the theme of the week, which I’d encourage you to memorize; and **weekly small group gatherings**, where you can dig a little deeper, share your experiences from the week, and learn from others as well. We’ll also look at **a different spiritual practice each week**, a way to tangibly and concretely live out your faith and what you’re learning; and we’ll participate together in **three weekend experiences**: you’ll spend a half-day sharing your story and hearing others’ stories, a half-day practicing prayer, and a half-day serving with your group.
How to Engage

The Learning to Live (L2L) format is structured for adult learning—it assumes that you are studying the material, and that you will ask questions about anything you do not understand. Be sure to read your daily devotional passages every day, and to note down any questions you might have so you can ask them during the small group sessions. Each week, please come to the small group gathering with your Learning to Live book, your journal, a pen to write with, and an expectant heart.

Let me also suggest you have at least one person who isn’t part of the group (or even part of the church) with whom you can talk through what you’re learning on a regular basis. Having an outside voice to talk and listen to can be tremendously helpful; it’ll also help you to think about how to communicate what you’re learning and experiencing.

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Pastor, author, and philosopher Dallas Willard wrote, “The most important thing in your life is not what you do; it’s who you become. That’s what you will take into eternity.” We are all invited to become disciples of Jesus, to follow him on a journey from death to life. Are you ready for this?

Overview and Summary

Week 1: An Invitation, in which we are presented with some of the challenges Jesus posed, and using them to understand how he always meets us where we are. The spiritual practice of the week is to “Get to Know Yourself,” a way of describing self-awareness in
more accessible terms and encouraging participants to begin to include all of who they are in their spiritual journey. Daily devotionals include:

*Day 1: What do you want?* Drawing on Father Ron Rolheiser’s insight that “Spirituality is, ultimately, what we do with … desire. What we do with our longings, both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us, that is our spirituality,”\(^2\) we explore where we are now and what our desires say about us.

*Day 2: Come, follow me.* Introducing what it actually means to be a follower of Jesus, that is, not simply a member of a club but a learner in the way of Christ, a student in the school of the one who lived life as fully as it has ever been lived.

*Day 3: What do you want me to do for you?* Jesus does not assume or ride roughshod over our longings and our stories; he desires to be involved in our lives, to engage us in our everyday living—and he asks the questions that lead us to consider whether we really want him to be a part of our lives.

*Day 4: Who do you say I am?* Allowing participants reflect on the state of their faith and relationship with and to Jesus at the beginning of the L2L journey.

*Day 5: Repent and believe.* Proffering Jesus’s great pivot, what it looks like not just to repent and believe as a matter of coming to faith but as a matter of life and lifelong discipleship.

**Week 2: Your Story**, in which we look back at where we’ve come from. While the spiritual practice for the week is to “Give thanks,” cultivating a habit of gratitude, this

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week also introduces participants to the practice of writing their spiritual autobiography, which then leads into the first group learning experience, a storytelling morning, itself an opportunity to practice sharing the story of God’s work in our lives—a form of evangelism. Moreover, the storytelling experience is intentionally earlier in the curriculum, so that participants may not only practice being vulnerable but also to facilitate their getting to know each other. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Experiences. Introducing the importance of story in general, and our stories in particular, and beginning by remembering key moments in our lives.

Day 2: Relationships. Looking back at the key people who have impacted us.

Day 3: Trials. Reflecting on the conflicts and challenges that have formed us.

Day 4: Blessings. Identifying and naming the ways we have experienced God’s goodness.

Day 5: God at Work. Finally, encouraging people to interpret—or reinterpret—their lives in light of how God has been present and active.

Week 3: God’s Story, in which we introduce the four-chapter, holistic, Gospel of the Kingdom to provide a framework for our understanding of life. The spiritual practice for the week is to “Spot the Story,” encouraging participants to cultivate the ability to discern underlying narratives as well as to hold to the narrative of the gospel. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Good News. Zooming out from our own lives to the grand narrative, we offer an overview of the four-chapter gospel in preparation for the following days.

Day 2: Creation. Exploring the original goodness of God’s handiwork and humanity’s calling to be God’s representatives on earth.
Day 3: Fall. Unpacking the concept of sin and why the world is as broken as it is.

Day 4: Redemption. Looking at where Jesus fits into the big picture and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection.

Day 5: Renewal. What does it mean that we have a role to play in partnering with God in his mission?

Week 4: Who You’re Becoming, in which we look forward to the goal of the spiritual journey. What does it actually look like to grow in the likeness of Christ? The spiritual practice for the week is to “Sit with Silence,” creating spaces for God to speak and for us to listen. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Like Jesus. The first step on the journey of spiritual maturity is to learn to live like Jesus (sometimes called ‘purgation’), to pattern our lives after his, as his life is the embodiment of God’s character and our original calling as God’s image-bearers.

Day 2: Freedom. Considering the freedom offered by the gospel and how it differs from common cultural understandings.

Day 3: Grace. Often we settle for being ‘saved by grace,’ when we are invited to live gracious and grace-filled lives.

Day 4: Love. Posing the questions for participants to consider how we might live out the Great Commandments, loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Day 5: Life with God. The second step on the journey of spiritual maturity is learning to live with Jesus (sometimes called ‘illumination’), living with a
consistent—and increasingly constant—awareness of the presence of God with us by his Spirit.

**Week 5: How to Live a Full Life**, in which we look at how spiritual transformation takes place. The spiritual practice for the week is to “Keep the Sabbath (Holy)”, a particular challenge in a city like ours, where identity is often a result of productivity or status. Daily devotionals include:

**Day 1: The Holy Spirit.** Introducing the person of the Holy Spirit, the one through whom Jesus did all that he did and the one through whom we are empowered to do all that we are called to.

**Day 2: How God Speaks.** Offering some of the ways God interacts with us.

**Day 3: Discerning the Voice of God.** Helping to answer questions about discernment, introducing the idea of Jesus as the interpretive key and concepts like the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

**Day 4: How We Participate.** Countering the idea that being saved by grace means we have nothing left to do, introducing the concept (if not the term) of sanctification.

**Day 5: Effort and Earning.** Continuing from the previous day’s thread, building on the idea that grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.

**Week 6: Prayer**, in which we dive deeper on one of the core disciplines—or soul-training exercises, as James Bryan Smith calls them.\(^3\) The second learning experience—a

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morning of prayer—will fall somewhere in the following weeks. The spiritual practice for this week is, unsurprisingly, prayer, and it builds not just on the learning from this week but from the previous week’s material about the role of the Holy Spirit and our participation in God’s transformation of us. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Prayer as Connection. For some, this will seem elementary, but a key part in my own journey of faith was beginning to relate to God as an actual person, with whom I could relate.

Day 2: Praying Others’ Words. Introducing the idea of praying others’ words, particularly helpful for our non-denominational context. We will particularly utilize the psalms but written liturgy from across church history will also be included.

Day 3: Praying Your Own Words. Learning how to pray extemporaneously or writing our own prayers. This may be particularly helpful for those who grew up in more liturgical traditions, of which we also have a few.

Day 4: Listening to God. Addressing one of the most challenging aspects of prayer—particularly for an intellectual audience: how to hear God.

Day 5: A Daily Prayer. Introducing another spiritual practice, that of Ignatius of Loyola’s Examen Prayer, as a tool for the kit.

Week 7: Overcoming and Enduring, in which we look at the things in our lives that might keep us from living as fully as God desires us to; some we learn to overcome and some we learn to endure. The spiritual practice for this week is to “Repent and Forgive”, an invitation and opportunity to engage in reconciliation both vertical (with God) and horizontal (with one another). Daily devotionals include:
Day 1: Sin. Diving deeper from our early foray into “Fall” in Week 3, we explore what sin is.

Day 2: Self. Building on the spiritual practice of Week 1 (“Get to Know Yourself”), understanding how we can get out of our own way and allow God to work.

Day 3: Satan. Talking about the concepts of evil and the devil, and how we live out what we pray to God—“Deliver us from evil.”

Day 4: Suffering. Introducing the normalcy of suffering, a regular part of life, and what God can do in the midst of it, in spite of it, and even through it.

Day 5: Scars. Father Richard Rohr says, “If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.” Here we learn about identifying, naming, and addressing the wounds we carry.

Week 8: The Bible, in which we look at another of the core soul-training exercises: reading Scripture. The spiritual practice is to “Engage with Scripture.” This week goes with week six and the learning experience on prayer. It was important to spend a week each on prayer and the Bible as foundational, though increasingly neglected, elements of our faith. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Handle with Care. Acknowledging the ways we must responsibly steward the Bible in order to properly learn from it.

Day 2: The Jesus Lens. Just as with prayer—and perhaps even more so—Jesus is the interpretive key for understanding all of Scripture.
Day 3: Sixty-Six Books, One God. With dozens of books, written over hundreds of years, how do we discern the unity of Scripture and, more importantly, the voice of God?

Day 4: Understanding Scripture. Offering the very practical tool of inductive Bible study.

Day 5: Holy Reading. Offering the equally practical tool of lectio divina.

Week 9: Church, in which we look at the body of Christ, the community of which we are a part and the context in which we learn to live, and particularly noting some of the different facets of what the Church is called to be. The spiritual practice for this week is to “Be Radically Hospitable,” an invitation not just for us as a church but for us as individuals; this is the posture we ought to have in our city. This week would prepare us for the third and final learning experience: service in the city. While the communal aspect of spirituality and faith is provided by the weekly small group gathering, this week helps us understand how our individual lives are part of a communal life. Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: The Church. Using the biblical analogies of family and body to provide insight into what the community of faith is and ought to be.

Day 2: A Local Church. Unpacking the significance of caring for a place, of being rooted in a location, and of being present to our neighbors.

Day 3: A Blessing Church. As the body of Christ, the Church is called to be like Christ—just as we are individually to be characterized by love, so is the community of which we are a part.
Day 4: *A Suffering Church*. Continuing on from yesterday’s devotional: if we are to love as Jesus did, if we are to be his hands and feet, it may not lead to a life of ease and comfort—sometimes love involves suffering.

Day 5: *A United Church*. Highlighting a central theme from the epistles and Jesus’s own prayer, that his disciples would be one, and what that means for us as a non-denominational church in a world teeming with factions.

**Week 10: For the Sake of the World**, in which we look at why and how we are called to make a difference in our world. This week’s spiritual practice is to “Do Justice,” following the command in Micah 6:8. Every Christian and every church is called to participate in the work of seeking God’s kingdom and praying that we see it on earth. This week, in particular, is to redress what Howard Thurman described as American Christianity’s lack of relevance and response to “the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.” Daily devotionals include:

*Day 1: Called to Justice*. Reiterating the idea that the love, grace, and blessing of God is not to terminate with us but to flow through us to others; the world should be a better, more just, more God-reflecting place because of our presence.

*Day 2: Poverty*. God is on the side of the poor—“Those who mock the poor insult their Maker” (Proverbs 17:5); what does it look like for us to care for those for whom God cares, with whom God so identified that, in Jesus, he became one of them?

*Day 3: Racial Justice*. To be a Christian in America is to deal with the particular history—and present—of America, most tragically embodied in the wrongs done to non-White populations over the centuries.
Day 4: Immigrants and Refugees. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, how do we treat ‘the stranger’, another category of vulnerable people whom God “loves” (Deuteronomy 10:18) and in whom God is found (Matthew 25:35).

Day 5: Creation Care. Climate change is threatening the world we live in and the world we will leave our children—how do we return to our ancient calling as stewards of God’s world?

Week 11: What’s Next?, in which we consider what commitments we will make after L2L is completed. The curriculum has always been intended to be a beginning, an introduction, and a stepping stone to deeper, more active, more God-aware living. The spiritual practice for the week is to “Craft a Rule of Life,” charting a course forward.

Daily devotionals include:

Day 1: Communion. Explaining the significance of the Lord’s Table, one of the sacraments.

Day 2: Baptism. Explaining the significance of baptism, another of the sacraments.

Day 3: Rule and Rhythms of Life. Helping people think about life in terms of intentional structure and rhythms rather than simply reacting to the busyness and the overwhelming demands.

Day 4: Lessons Learned. Giving space to reflect on the last few months and what God has been revealing to them.

Day 5: What’s Next? Finally, inviting people to make commitments in relation to what God has been doing in them and what God is calling them to.
This week, we learn about the story in which our stories find their place.

*Spiritual Practice: Spot the Story*

As we have been learning, our stories are important. But we do not live our lives—or our stories—apart from others. As the poet John Donne wrote, “No man [or woman] is an island.” As important as knowing ourselves and owning our stories are empathy (learning the stories of others) and perspective (knowing the larger story into which our stories fit).

What is sometimes known as “the four-chapter gospel” or “the Gospel of the Kingdom” is one way of framing a more holistic understanding of the good news of Jesus. It goes beyond pat answers and simplistic diagrams to write a fuller, truer narrative, in which we experience both the original goodness of creation and the mission of renewal to which all Christ-followers are called. Choosing to follow Jesus is not the end; it is the beginning.

This week’s spiritual practice is learning to spot the story, cultivating the awareness of not only how God’s story is at play all around us, but also identifying the competing and opposing narratives that drive us and those around us.

*Verse of the Week: John 3:16-17*

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not
send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

**Week 3 | Day 1 | Good News**

“Familiarity breeds contempt.” So goes the well-known proverb. Sometimes we can become so familiar with something or someone that we start to take it for granted, whether that be a life-changing experience or person. It might be the person you chose to get married to, and while you were both excited to spend the rest of your lives together, the busyness and stress of life and family have squeezed out your appreciation and affection for one another. It might be when you chose to come to faith and be baptized, a moment that contained a degree of conviction and celebration that has faded over the years.

In the United States in the twenty-first century, “gospel” is a word that has become so familiar that it has lost its impact. Almost everyone has heard the word “gospel,” but everyone has a different understanding of what it means. For some, the gospel is about what we should and shouldn’t do. For others, the gospel is about believing the right things. For others still, the gospel is about your personal relationship with Jesus. But the gospel, though it includes these things, is so much more.

**The word “gospel” means “good news.”** Mark, who wrote one of the four accounts of the life of Jesus, begins: “The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The Bible as a whole points to this good news as well. It is the story of God, and it has four chapters, each of which we’ll be diving into this week. To summarize:
Chapter 1: Creation. Out of nothing, God created the universe. Everything that exists was first birthed in the mind of the Creator; and after all of the creating, God said that everything was good, that everything was as it was intended to be. This good creation includes human beings, created “in the image of God”, commissioned to be image-bearers—or reflections—of God by exercising wise stewardship over all of creation. In the beginning, there was a rightness of relationship—shalom—that pervaded the universe, flowing between humanity and creation, God, and one to another. God’s reign—or kingdom—was paramount: everything was as God intended it to be.

Chapter 2: Fall. This is where things went wrong. With humanity’s disobedience to God, separation and enmity break apart each relationship—between humanity and creation, God, and one to another. Individuals, families, communities, and subsequently people groups and systems are corrupted, perverted, distorted, and turned away from their original goodness; even the ground is cursed. In other words, we choose our own kingdoms over God’s. This is why the world as we see and experience it today is so broken.

Chapter 3: Redemption. Redemption is the apex of the story, where God chooses to bring blessing and wholeness to the world himself, in the person of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. By Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, he heralds, inaugurates, and embodies the kingdom of God, taking on the effects and consequences of sin, serving as a sacrifice for sin, thereby making possible new life—free from the damaging effects of sin
and evil—and demonstrating a new way of living for those who place their trust in him. Indeed, Jesus instructs us to pray that God’s kingdom would come “on earth as in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), not simply that we might make it to the afterlife. Here, we are restored for better, justified by the work of Christ, a path opened up to right relationship once more.

**Chapter 4: Renewal.** Though Jesus defeated sin and the Enemy with his death and resurrection, the final movement—the full fruition of Jesus’s work, the full realization of God’s kingdom—is yet to come. In Revelation, the Bible describes a new city, the city of God, the city where all things are renewed and restored; where we are no longer frustrated by the ways that sin and brokenness frustrate, oppress, and violate; where the isms of the world—racism, sexism, classism, ageism, tribalism—are no more; where flourishing and well-being are the hallmarks of life rather than exceptions to the rule; where we are fully rejoined in relationship with our Creator. This is the continuing work of the Spirit of God, sent by God to empower those who follow Jesus to live like him and to do the work in which we are called to partner with God, sent together to heal. Trouble can come, however, when we only believe part of the story rather than the full story. If we try and tell this story with only half the plot, it’s like showing up at a movie thirty minutes late, leaving thirty minutes early, and then trying to write a movie review. It wouldn’t be fair to the creators of the movie, it wouldn’t make very much sense to us, and it would all be rather unsatisfying.

Some of us, particularly those who have experienced American evangelical culture, believe in a story that starts with the Fall and ends with Redemption. This version
begins with our sin and culminates in Jesus saving us, but it neglects the part about God’s creation and how there is intrinsic goodness there, as well as the part about God’s final plan to make all things right, about what God’s Spirit is doing even now, and about the invitation for us to play a part in the story. When we subscribe only to a Fall-Redemption story, our faith becomes too privatized and too self-focused, and it loses sight of the broader implications of this good news.

Others, especially those of us engaged in justice work, see the brokenness that results from the Fall, and we want to see Renewal come. We see injustice, inequality, and oppression, and we commit ourselves to the fight against them. We long for the restoration that the gospel story tells us is ahead; we long to see the mountains made low, the valleys filled and the crooked made straight. But the temptation is to think we can get there apart from Jesus, apart from Redemption: perhaps we think that if we just protest enough, justice will be found; or if we develop the right policies, elect the right leaders, and secure the right economic engines, then we can find our way back to Eden or forward to the gleaming city of God.

But the gospel says that in order to go from Fall to Renewal, we have to go through Redemption—through Jesus Christ. It is because of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection that we have been given the Spirit in order that we might be transformed so we might also bring transformation to our world.

This framing of the story is sometimes called “The Gospel of the Kingdom,” because it highlights the importance of the kingdom of God; after all, the kingdom was what Jesus talked about more than any other topic. Dallas Willard describes the kingdom of God as “the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person
of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom.”

Thus, Creation was how God intended it to be, and he declared it good; Fall was when humankind expressed themselves in a way counter to their nature as representatives of a loving God; in Redemption we saw the fullness of God and his kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ; and in Renewal, we are invited to participate in the work of building for the kingdom.

REFLECT & RESPOND

• **Head:** What parts of the gospel story have you heard before? What parts were missing from your previous understanding, or what parts do you need to be reminded of?
• **Heart:** Which chapter do you find most challenging to believe or live—Creation, Fall, Redemption, or Renewal—and why? Which chapter do you find most encouraging, and why?
• **Hands:** Take two pictures today: one of something that is good news to you, one of something that reflects God’s good news.

PRAY

God, open my eyes, that I may see.
In the Creation chapter of the gospel story, we learn who God is and who we are.

Several years ago, when my wife Carolyn and I were on our honeymoon, we had the tremendous privilege of going swimming with whale sharks off the coast of Mexico. Whale sharks are the largest known fish still living in the world; they can grow to over forty feet in length! It was awe-inspiring to swim alongside them, even as we were under strict instructions not to touch them so as not to disturb the mucus on their skin, which protects them from parasites and bacteria. I remember being struck both by the wonder of creation—and its fragility.

I had the same feeling when I looked out over the Grand Canyon when I was first able to visit. It’s a similar feeling to when I sit on the beach and look out over the ocean, or when I get outside and am present to God in nature, but it’s also the feeling I get when I stop to pay attention for more than a moment, when I take time to try to notice God in everything around me.

READ: GENESIS 1

Genesis 1 tells of the creation of the world; it is a hymn to the God who created it all, a signpost pointing to the God who made all things, rather than a step-by-step recounting of how he made it all. God says:
I made the earth,

and created humankind upon it;

it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,

and I commanded all their host. (Isaiah 45:12)

And everything God has made he calls “good.” Everything is as it should be.

But the pinnacle of creation is humankind, made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), both male and female, equal participants with one another and co-laborers with God. It is only after the creation of humanity that God declares everything “very good” (Genesis 1:31). In the ancient world, rulers would create “images” of themselves and erect them in every corner of their kingdom as their representatives, so that the people would know who was in charge and what they looked like. This is our purpose:

- **to be representatives of our Creator to one another**, reminders of who is ultimately in charge; and

- **to show the world what our God is like**, in his creativity, his relationality, and, above all, his love.

We have a unique role in creation. James Choung describes humanity as having been “designed for good.” As Dallas Willard puts it, “You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe.” God loves you and has a purpose for you.

**LOOK AND LISTEN:** Joel Schat, “Made to be Seen” (YouTube video, 5:01)
REFLECT & RESPOND

- **Head**: Where do you see glimpses or traces of God around you?
- **Heart**: How might these truths of Creation change the way you look at and feel about yourself and the world you find yourself in?
- **Hands**: How can you take more opportunities in your life to see the goodness of God’s creation, whether by creating more times in your schedule or by cultivating an awareness in your everyday life? Take two pictures of some things that remind you of the goodness of God's creation.

PRAY

Ask God to show you goodness. Take note of what you notice.

**Week 3 | Day 3 | Fall**

*In the Fall chapter of the gospel story, we learn why our world is so broken.*

When we look at the world today, there is much to lament: war and conflict and violence, injustice and oppression, marginalization and racism, natural disasters and human-made tragedies. When we look at our city today, there is much to lament: racial division and tension, the growing divide between rich and poor, vicious cycles of brokenness in our schools and in our neighborhoods. And when we look at ourselves today, there is much to lament: our selfishness, the wounds and baggage we carry from our past, the ways we hurt others and ourselves.
Why is life this way? The Bible uses the word “sin.” Sin signifies brokenness and rebellion against God, the human propensity to warp and distort things—in our own lives and in other people’s lives, our inclination to separate ourselves from God, from one another, and from creation.

Two analogies may be helpful for understanding sin. Imagine you are walking along a path toward a destination; sin would be leaving the path or taking a wrong road. Or imagine aiming an arrow at a target; sin would be missing the target—or even aiming elsewhere! English author Francis Spufford explains:

what we’re talking about here is not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident, our passive role as agents of entropy. It’s our active inclination to break stuff, “stuff” here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s ...

READ: GENESIS 3

In the story of Genesis, the man and the woman choose to believe the Enemy over God, to doubt God’s provision and promise, to put their own appetites and needs and judgments above what God had said to them. And while they do not immediately die physically, death nonetheless resulted. Sin always results in death of some kind. To quote James Choung, we are “damaged by evil.”

There is alienation from God. God created people to be in relationship with him; and he wanted it to be a true relationship, motivated by love not obligation or coercion. Love requires choice, though, and free will; so God gave human beings the choice to
relate with him or not, to love him or not, to trust him or not. But the Bible tells us that humans used their freedom to willfully rebel against God, cutting themselves off from the source of life. Think about what would happen if your body started rejecting oxygen: you’d die. If you’re cut off—or if you cut yourself off—from the source of life, the natural—and tragic—consequence is death.

There is enmity between people. The man blames his wife for his own sin (Genesis 3:12), and as a result of their disobedience, God tells the woman that the way she and her husband relate to one another will become distorted (Genesis 3:16). Whereas at the end of Genesis 2, the man and woman are described as “naked and unashamed” (Genesis 2:25), a reflection of their complete openness and mutual trust, sin causes them to hide from one another. This is the death of trust, vulnerability, intimacy, and acceptance, and it is evident in individual relationships as well as in the ways we relate as communities, societies, and even countries.

There is disharmony between humans and God’s creation. The ground becomes cursed because of human sin, and the man’s work becomes a struggle rather than a joy (Genesis 3:17-19). Even today, we see how people misuse the earth and its resources—deforestation, dumping chemicals into waterways, over-farming, overconsumption of fossil fuels—rather than stewarding them as God intended us to. In turn, we experience the consequences of those abuses, as well as earthquakes, wildfires, droughts, famines, and floods. The Bible says that the whole creation suffers from bondage to the decay of human sin, groaning until the children of God are revealed—that is, when we live into our identity as image-bearers of God and responsible stewards of creation (Romans 8:19-22).
Every time we sin, we choose a reality opposed to that for which we were made. We choose by our actions to be separated from God, the creator and designer and source of life. When we lie or when we ignore someone in need or when we hurt those who care about us or when we choose to gratify ourselves at the expense of others, sexually, emotionally, relationally, financially—when we choose anything other than life with God, which is what we were made for, we choose death.

It’s as if we are keys, made to fit the door of life with God, and we’re grating and grinding and scraping and pieces are being broken off because we’re trying to open all these other doors, and it’s not getting us anywhere. Or at least, not anywhere good.

Now think about those selfish or hurtful decisions, drawn out over the course of your life, however many years you’ve been around. And now think about those decisions, drawn out across the planet—six billion lives. And now think about the course of human history, drawn out across time—thousands and thousands and thousands of years, billions and billions of lives, a multitude of decisions choosing death over life.

Is it any wonder our world is hurting?

REFLECT & RESPOND

- **Head:** What are some of the consequences of sin you have encountered in your own life and family? How do “sin” and “the Enemy” fit—or not—with the way you see and experience brokenness in the world?

- **Heart:** What brokenness grieves you right now? What are the things you do (or can do) to try to avoid or minimize brokenness and sin?
• Hands: Take two pictures today of things that are broken or that represent how things are not how they ought to be.

PRAY

Write down (some of) the things in your life and in the world that break your heart. Offer them up to God and ask him to meet you in the pain and longing for restoration.

Week 3 | Day 4 | Redemption

*In the Redemption chapter of the gospel story, we learn that Jesus, by his life, death, and resurrection, defeated the power of sin so that we might be reconciled to God, to one another, and to creation.*

I used to think Jesus was like a divine train conductor; only he could dispense the ticket I needed to get to heaven. And while I greatly appreciated the offer of a ride—and the fact that he’d already paid for the trip—it seemed like a rather transactional exchange, and not one that would make me feel an enormous amount of gratitude.

But over the years, as I’ve experienced and gotten to know Jesus better, both in the pages of Scripture and in my own life, I’ve realized that Jesus *is* so much more and Jesus *offers* so much more. Jesus shows us what God is like and he shows us what we—as human beings, as image-bearers of God—are supposed to be like.

READ: COLOSSIANS 1:15-20
Yesterday we read about the bad news.

But the good news is that God, knowing we could never find our way back to him and to fullness of life with him, took it on himself to make a way. In the person of Jesus, God came to the world as a human being and chose to bring blessing and wholeness himself. He loved us and desired relationship with us so much that he chose to suffer the consequences of our sin and rebellion himself so that we wouldn’t have to. That’s why it says, in John 3:16-17:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus came and lived the God-loving and others-loving life human beings were created to live. He began and embodied life in the kingdom of God, where everything he said and did was an expression of God’s rule and reign. In fact, as we read in Colossians 1, Jesus is God in human form; if we want to know what God is like, we need only look at Jesus.

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus explained his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

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The word ‘redemption’ comes from a Latin word meaning “to buy back.” Jesus came to bring us life in the kingdom of God, an eternal kind of life. And he gave up his life to defeat sin and death, so that our sin-stained slates might be wiped clean, our damaged souls might be made whole, and we might once more be reconciled to God—the source of life and the source of our lives. In fact, Jesus came to redeem and to reconcile not just human beings but all of creation—“all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 1:20). Just as God once declared all things good and very good, so also God will make “all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

God has given us a wonderful gift. It is the promise not only of a clean slate, but of a full life, a significant life, a life that really matters, life directed toward the end for which it was designed, life with God. Everything pales next to this gift! As Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10)—he was talking about all of us! Christ’s example, sacrifice, and friendship, and his gift to us of the Holy Spirit, mean we now have the potential not only to survive and get by, but to live purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling lives, growing more and more into the people God made us to be—people who live and love like Jesus did. Here, as James Choung writes, we are “restored for better.”

But there is one important piece to remember. If I were to offer you a gift, you would need to accept it in order for it to become fully yours, in order to fully enjoy and experience the gift. In the same way, Christ offers us this gift but we have to choose to receive it—remember, love always requires a choice made freely. We receive God’s gift of grace by:
• asking him, as our Savior, to forgive our sins and rescue us from wasting our lives;
• giving him, as our Lord, ownership—or final say—over our lives;
• committing to follow him and learn from him as our Teacher;
• walking with him and talking with him as our Friend;
• seeking him, as our King and the king of God’s kingdom, above all things and in every area of our lives.

Choosing to follow Jesus is the most important decision you will ever make.

REFLECT & RESPOND

• Head: What do you find most encouraging about God’s redemption plan through Jesus? What do you find most challenging about it?

• Heart: Have you experienced a problem that was too big for you to solve? How did you feel about it? What in your life—or in the world—feels too big to solve?

• Hands: Complete the sentence, “I want to commit to following Jesus this week by _____.“ Take two pictures of some things that give you hope.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, redeem all of the broken parts of my life and redeem all of the broken parts of the world. Amen.
Christianity marks the spot where, if noble dream joins hands with God-inspired hope and presses with great impatience against the insularities of life, for example, national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial, seeking the deeper ground upon which to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply a new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life already prepared and offered to us.

- Willie James Jennings

*In the Renewal chapter of the gospel story, we learn that of the ongoing mission of God, which he invites his church into by the power of his Spirit.*

**READ: REVELATION 21:1-5**

The story doesn’t end with the work of Jesus and with us being saved. We’re actually saved into something: another way of living and being. James Choung describes it as being “sent together to heal.” Jesus told his disciples that they have been adopted into a new family, drafted into a new mission, and commissioned into a new adventure. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, he said:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
God has a mission to redeem and renew all of creation, to rescue it all from the effects and consequences of the Fall, and to restore it to right relationship with himself. We read this about Jesus yesterday:

For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

That’s the mission Jesus was on during his time on earth; that’s the mission God’s Spirit is still on. And that’s the mission on which Jesus sends his followers—his church—in the power of the Spirit. In other words, it is not God’s church that has a mission; God has a mission and he calls his church to partner with him.

The vision seen by the apostle John in Revelation 21 portrays the world that God is actively working to bring about, a world where the effects of sin and the Fall no longer hold sway. And we have a part to play: we are sent together to heal, both to continue the kingdom work that Jesus did—and that God has been doing since the beginning—and also to live toward the restoration of all things when Christ comes again, to share the good news of Jesus and his kingdom and this coming reality, by what we say and by what we do, and to join with God in setting right all that has been warped and broken—individual lives, relationships, families, communities, and nations; relationships between humanity and creation, God, and one to another. There is a vision of a new shalom laid out in the book of Revelation, and it is like Creation but also noticeably different: instead of a garden, there is a city; instead of a man and a woman, the partnership is between Christ and his Church. It is imperative to note that God’s ultimate vision is not simply a
return to the way things were; instead, it is a maturation, a transformation, a work that brings wholeness out of brokenness and makes all things new (Revelation 21:5).

This is the invitation offered to us, the challenge laid down before us. As theologian James Cone wrote in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, his searing analysis of Christianity in light of America’s history of slavery, segregation, lynching, and injustice, “The cross is the most empowering symbol of God’s loving solidarity with the ‘least of these,’ the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustice.” We are called to participate with God in seeing more of the kingdom on earth—and its accompanying effects of justice for the marginalized, liberation for the oppressed, and grace for all and love between all.

There are many different ways we can begin to engage in God’s mission and share God’s heart for his creation. It can take the form of evangelism, a word which comes from the Greek word for ‘gospel’: sharing the message of the good news of Jesus and life in the kingdom with others. But life in the kingdom is not only about what we say but about what we do: thus, not only do we compassionately care for and give to those in need, but we are also called to address the systems, structures, and factors that lead to those situations of need, sometimes through community organizing, nonviolent protest, or political advocacy.

It was by such means that William Wilberforce campaigned to abolish slavery in Great Britain and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for civil rights for African-Americans. Empowering people and communities to cultivate the means to care for themselves through community development is another form of kingdom work. And, of course,
caring for and responsibly steward our world and its resources was one of the first charges given to humanity in Genesis (1:26-28).

REFLECT & RESPOND

- **Head:** What are some ways you currently participate with God in what he is doing? What are some ways you might not be participating—or even opposing—what God is trying to do?

- **Heart:** We are called to be a renewing presence wherever we are, co-laborers with God in his work. How does that make you feel?

- **Hands:** Take two pictures today of some things that signify new life.

PRAY

God, open my eyes to the ways you are already present and at work around me, and give me the courage to go where you call me to go and to stay where you call me to stay, to do what you call me to do and to stop doing what you want me to stop doing. Amen.

Study Guide Excerpt: Learning Experience: Prayer

The purpose of the Prayer Experience is:

1. to give you space to try the different kinds of prayer you will learn about;

2. to be able to process your experience together with your group.
At first, the idea of praying for a whole morning—or anything longer than a few minutes—may seem daunting or difficult. My hope is that as you experiment with different ways of communicating and communing with God, you will begin to see how simple it is to “pray without ceasing” (2 Thessalonians 5:17). Remember:

- prayer is a discipline that we grow in—it takes work, intentionality, and sacrifice to hone your awareness of and interaction with God;
- sometimes it takes a while for our hearts and minds to calm down from the constant buzz of connectivity—this is why we set aside a whole morning.

Your small group leader(s) will structure the time and let you know the schedule for the Prayer Experience. As part of the experience, you should have two sessions for prayer over the course of the time. My recommendation is that for the first session, you pray in the manner most appealing to or resonant with you—praying others’ words, praying your own words, listening, using the prayer of examination; writing, drawing, singing, listening to music, being silent, or speaking out loud. You can also ask:

- What am I thankful for?
- Where have I experienced God’s grace?
- Where do I need God’s grace?

Or you can choose to pray by intentionally not doing anything but enjoying the space to be present with God.

For the second session, choose to pray in a manner you might be less inclined to choose, whether because of your personality, because you’ve never done it before, or you don’t think you’d enjoy it. Give it a go!
Let me suggest that, for at least half an hour of your time, you practice silence before God, resisting the temptation to make noise or fill the space with sound. It’ll be good practice for when you’re back amidst the distractions of everyday life!

After each session in prayer, your group leader(s) will bring you back to together to share feedback on your experience.

**Some practical guidance:**

- Bring a Bible, journal, and pen. You can always access the Bible on your phone, but the likelihood of getting distracted by your phone is also fairly high! Do whatever you can to eliminate distractions.
- If you find yourself getting sidetracked by remembering things to do, write a list in your journal so you can come back to it later.

If you have any questions, contact your small group leader(s).

**Leader Guide Excerpt: Leading the Storytelling Experience**

**Preparation**

*Pray:* that your group would grow closer as a result of the experience, that people would learn how to see God at work in their lives and how to listen to each other well.

In the run-up to the experience, make sure people are bringing enough food to share.

On the day of the experience, either you or one of your co-leaders should keep time. (It can be helpful to give a two-minute warning to whoever is sharing so that they are aware of time and you can all stay on track.)
Things to Know

The purpose of the Storytelling Experience is to help the members of the group grow in:

1. their ability to notice God in their lives;
2. their comfort and confidence in sharing their story with others, particularly how God has been at work in their lives;
3. friendship with one another as they get to know each other better.

As always, it is important to debrief the experience with everyone afterward, whether immediately or by making space in your weekly group meeting:

- What did you learn about others?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What did you learn about God?

Group Time

As you begin, emphasize the group is a safe place, remind people about the importance about confidentiality, and encourage vulnerability.

After each person has shared, give two or three minutes for feedback, where others can ask follow-up questions or give comments, either affirming what they most connected with or sharing constructive input on how the storyteller could improve their delivery. Then ask one other person to pray for the storyteller and to commit their story and life to God.

At the end of the experience, offer a prayer of thanks for getting you through!
Leader Guide Excerpt: Week 7 Session: Overcoming and Enduring

Preparation

Pray: for strength and healing for those in your group as they face the difficult realities of life.

Identify with your co-leaders who might be a good apprentice for a future L2L group or small group. Ask that person to think and pray about the possibility of serving in such a role next semester.

To prepare for the Service Experience, touch base with your Parish Outreach Leader about the options available and whether there is a choice or if it’d be easier to just plug in. Remember, this is not necessarily about doing what we want to do but rather about serving wherever we are needed.

Group Time

Welcome (10 min)

Ice breaker: What was the high and the low of your week?

Announcements (5 min)

Remind people of the date of the next Learning Experience: Service.

Recap (10 min)

Ask if anyone wants to share what they did or learned during the last week.
Discussion (50 min)

Begin by acknowledging that this week’s material was heavy and may have stirred things up. Remind people that you are in a safe space of mutual vulnerability and support. Offer up a prayer, asking God to meet each person where they are.

Feel free to use any of the following questions to draw out the conversation:

- What was difficult or challenging in terms of the things that were brought up in your own life?
- How can we be praying for you—particularly framed in light of the five topics we looked at this week (sin, self, Satan, suffering, and scars)?
- Which day was most encouraging to your relationship with God?
- Which day was most challenging to your walk with God?
- What was the most important thing you learned this week?

You can also pick one or two questions from the devotionals this week and use them to initiate the dialogue.

Prayer (15 min)

Have people break into their prayer partnerships and pray for one another.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Learning to Live was created in response to need. There was the need for a discipleship vehicle for our specific context, Christ City Church. There was the need for a curriculum written for our demographic, a multiethnic urban congregation. There was the need for material on spiritual formation written by a person of color. There was the need for a reimagining of faith in the era of Donald Trump and a white evangelicalism that seemed to exist counter to Jesus’s admonitions to care for the immigrant, the poor, the prisoner, and the vulnerable (Mt 25:31-46). There was the need for a robust understanding of discipleship and spiritual formation that provided hope and vision for communities of color. There was the need for an integration of justice into discipleship, not an addendum but a central part.

This project was never intended to comprehensively meet all of those needs (and to think it might would be ill-advised!), but it is my hope that it was a beginning.

Observations and Evaluation

In early 2019, this version of Learning to Live was piloted by two small groups at Christ City Church. In evaluating the pilot, I sought to assess the efficacy of the curriculum on the following criteria, in line with the aforementioned needs and stated goals:

1. Communicates the reality of a spiritual journey, i.e. choosing to follow Jesus is not the end goal but the beginning;
2. Equips with tools for the spiritual life, such as different forms of prayer, different ways to engage with Scripture, learning to tell our own stories, and learning to pay attention to God and to others;

3. Teaches participants a common language—or at least, some common terms or concepts—such as “the four-chapter gospel” and the kingdom of God;

4. Engages participants in common experiences, specifically sharing our stories, praying individually and communally, and being a gospel presence in our neighborhoods;

5. Connects participants’ faith with the call to do justice and invites participants to connect the dots with current realities, such as immigration, race, and poverty;

6. Provides participants of color in particular with tools for living life as fully as Jesus intended us to in the midst of the trauma and anxiety of America and the world today.

Each of these goals were reframed and included in some form, along with other questions, in the pre- and post-experience surveys, samples of which can be found in the Appendices.

The two groups were chosen both for their availability to undertake the pilot and for the ways they served as a fairly representative cross-section of our church community. There was a total of eleven respondents to both surveys, hereafter referred to as the ‘respondent group,’ and they were fairly evenly split between the two small groups. The number of respondents to both surveys also closely approximated the average for weekly attendance for both groups. (Participants who only completed one survey could not, by definition, be included in any pre- and post-experience comparisons.)
group was constituted similarly to the church as a whole: nearly two-thirds female (compared to 60 percent in the church as a whole), married (56 percent in the church), and close to 55 percent white (59 percent in the church). The entire respondent group was in the 23-40 range, and while nearly nine out of ten congregants also fall into that demographic, the pilot study unfortunately did not include older Christ City congregants, who make up over 10 percent, or congregants with children. The missing populations would have been most helpful in offering a different perspective on the material, the experiences, and Learning to Live as a whole; parents in particular would have been able to speak to the challenge of completing the curriculum amidst the demands of raising children, especially as busyness had already been identified as a potential hindrance to L2L’s effectiveness.

Busyness was quite evidently a factor for the respondent group as only three of eleven (27 percent) completed all of the daily devotionals. The average response estimated engagement with just over half of the daily devotionals. However, on average, respondents were able to attend just over three-quarters of the small group gatherings (one group met twelve times, the other thirteen), and all but one respondent was able to attend at least two of the three weekend experiences. (Notably, though, only one respondent out of eleven was able to make every one of their small group gatherings.) I might speculate that the communal aspect of the small groups and weekend experiences helped to make them easier to attend, or perhaps the pace of having five devotionals per week was too much to keep up with. On the whole, though, respondents were involved in about 75 percent of the curriculum, an encouraging figure.
The findings provided encouragement as to what was accomplished, hope as to what can still be accomplished, and next steps to both better accomplish the goals that were set out and to revise the goals themselves. Among the positive findings of the surveys was a slight uptick in the group’s sense of connection with God, with the church community, and with the work of justice. The respondent group was asked how much they agreed with statements about these connections—for example, “I feel very connected to God”—with 1 being “Not at all” and 5 being “Completely,” the average pre-L2L response to questions was 3.61 while the average post-L2L response was 3.73. It was not as significant an increase as one would have hoped, but it is still an improvement.

Among the comments that respondents left were indicators that progress was being made toward at least the first five of the goals stated above. Ninety-one percent of respondents (all but one) said that L2L had helped them grow in their understanding of the spiritual journey; one person wrote, “Learning to Live really helped place my spiritual journey in the greater context of God's story and how God is always moving regardless of if we can see it in the moment or not.” Eighty-two percent of respondents (all but two) affirmed that L2L had helped them grow in their practice of faith, with several explicitly mentioning the spiritual practices introduced and the rhythm of study as being particularly beneficial.

As pertains to the common language, most of the respondents had been part of the church for longer than a year, so many of the terms and concepts introduced were familiar; however, one long-time congregant said, “There were a couple of sections that raised ideas I didn't have before. That was very helpful in reframing ideas like sin and the Holy Spirit.” Regarding the common experiences, a few people mentioned difficulty
focusing during the prayer exercise, a few others commented on the challenge of sharing their stories, while others still appreciated the service experience but wondered if, for example, there were “bigger needs [for which] our city could use our time, help, and capabilities.” However, all of the respondents who participated in the weekend experiences recognized the value of them, even if—for reasons they identified themselves—they were unable to participate as fully or intentionally as they would have liked.

I sought to address the fifth goal with Week Ten’s devotional material, covering poverty, racial justice, immigrants and refugees, and creation care. While the average pre- and post-L2L score in response to the statement of “I feel very connected to the work of justice and/or service in our community/city/world” saw a marginal improvement (from 3.36 to 3.45 out of 5), ten out of twelve respondents reported no change. This may be an indicator of their spiritual location on this front—after all, our church is one that has a reputation of caring about and speaking about various justice issues, including during Sunday sermons, so it would make sense that people would already be quite aware of the connecting lines that we have sought to draw over the years. This may also be a byproduct of being a church in Washington, DC, a city that attracts some of the most socially aware, civic-minded people. Alternatively—or perhaps additionally, this may reflect the difficulty in spanning the gap between personal piety and public faith, and putting into practice a discipleship that goes beyond one’s own prayer life (as important as that is) to action on behalf of others as well.

With regard to the sixth goal of providing tools for participants of color (in particular) to better follow Jesus in the midst of the trauma and anxiety of America and
the world today, there remains work to do. In parsing the numbers, only six of the eleven respondents noted any changes in their pre- and post-L2L responses: three had a higher overall score, two had a lower overall score, and one’s net score remained the same (with one change in response negating another). To drill even deeper, the three respondents whose scores either stayed the same or went down were people of color or multiracial while the three respondents whose scores went up were white. While Learning to Live can bear neither the full praise for positive change nor the full burden for a less than transformative experience, it would appear that in trying to cater to all, I failed to specifically create pathways and tools for those Christians of color who have felt particularly marginalized in recent years. This is a key point of improvement and critique for the next revision.

On the whole, I was greatly encouraged by the impact of Learning to Live on the respondents. My intention was to create a foundational curriculum for discipleship in a church rather than a customized program for individuals. None of the feedback has been a surprise to me, but rather confirmation of the challenges of discipleship and spiritual formation in my context—Washington, DC in the twenty-first century. However, the feedback received was tremendously helpful in giving direction to needed changes. For example, several respondents asked for more engagement with Scripture passages; others asked for slightly less material to have to read every day and every week; one respondent noted that it would have been helpful to have had advance warning—at least more than was given—as to the level of time commitment the curriculum demanded.

I do not foresee Learning to Live ever becoming set in stone; large parts of it will continue to need to be rewritten. The context around us will change—as will we all—and
this will demand discernment in how to apply biblical principles and a worldview that looks through the lens of Jesus and his kingdom to a protean world. Practicing prayer, engaging with God through the Bible, understanding the bigger picture of the gospel narrative, giving of your time to serve others—these are all practices that Christians have participated in for two millennia, following in the footsteps of Jesus; and yet the nuances of when and where those Christians lived has impacted how they have lived out their followership of Christ and how they have sought to learn to live like Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus. Learning to Live has been an exercise in not only pointing people to the spiritual formation taking place within them and through them and around them, but also in allowing those very people to shape the methods and practices by which others in their community are shaped.

**Final Thoughts**

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. described eleven o’clock on Sunday morning as “the most segregated hour in this nation.”¹ Understandably, then, multiethnic congregations are a recent phenomenon, and a spirituality of and for multiethnic spaces is even more recent. And yet, as the demographic landscape of our country continues to shift toward what Robert P. Jones called “The End of White Christian America”,² the need for a theology of culture- and context-sensitive spiritual formation will only grow,

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¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “MLK at Western,” Western Michigan University Archives (December 18, 1963); https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf (accessed December 8, 2018).

both for those who have been part of the dominant culture and those who have historically been in the minority. As such, Learning to Live is but one piece of the larger mosaic, one tiny pebble to add to the work of those who have gone before and those who will follow.

Discipleship and spiritual formation require an awareness of self and context that resists easy packaging and mass marketing. At the same time, the truths of the gospel and the call of God are always lived out in communities of faith, made up of individuals committed to the mission of God and to one another. Learning to Live has sought to set out a common path for us to walk together while leaving the responsibility for each step at the feet of each participant in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

The words of James Cone, which I included in the introduction, continue to reverberate in my mind: “one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers to the questions.”3 The questions I have posed, the observations I have made, the issues I have raised are for my context: Christ City Church, a multiethnic urban congregation in the nation’s capital in the early twenty-first century. Other churches and succeeding generations will have to figure out their own questions, their own observations, and their own issues—as well as what Christ compels them to in the midst of them, and what it looks like for each individual, each community, and each congregation to be and become more and more like Christ. Nothing less than the fullness of Christ formed in us (Gal 4:19), the fullness

3 Cone, God of the Oppressed, 14.
of life in God’s kingdom (Jn 10:10), and the fullness of that kingdom on earth (Mt 6:10) is the invitation before us. May it be so, for the sake of the world God loves.
APPENDIX A

Pre-Experience Survey (Winter 2019) - Learning to Live Pilot

Please respond to the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers, but your input will be invaluable in discipleship and formation efforts at Christ City Church.

Name:

Group Name/Leader(s):

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
   - Under 18
   - 18-22
   - 23-30
   - 31-40
   - 41-50
   - 51-60
   - 61 and over

2. Please specify your gender:
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other

3. How would you describe yourself? Please check all that apply.
   - White / Caucasian / Anglo
   - Black / African / African-American
   - Hispanic / Latinx
   - Asian / Asian-American / Pacific Islander
   - Native American / Alaskan
   - Middle Eastern / North African
   - Other (please specify): _________________

Questions about Faith and Life

Please mark how much you agree with the following statements:

4. “I feel very connected to God.”
   - Not at all
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - (5) Completely

5. “I feel very connected to my / the church community.”
   - Not at all
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - (5) Completely

6. “I feel very connected to the work of justice and/or service in our community / city / world.”
   - Not at all
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - (5) Completely
APPENDIX B

Post-Experience Survey (Winter 2019) - Learning to Live Pilot

Please respond to the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers, but your input will be invaluable in discipleship and formation efforts at Christ City Church.

Name:

Group Name/Leader(s):

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**Demographic Questions**

1. What is your age?
   - Under 18
   - 18-22
   - 23-30
   - 31-40
   - 41-50
   - 51-60
   - 61 and over

2. Please specify your gender:
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other

3. How would you describe yourself? Please check all that apply.
   - White / Caucasian / Anglo
   - Black / African / African-American
   - Hispanic / Latinx
   - Asian / Asian-American / Pacific Islander
   - Native American / Alaskan
   - Middle Eastern / North African
   - Other (please specify): _______________

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**Questions about Faith and Life**

*Please mark how much you agree with the following statements:*

4. “I feel very connected to God.”
   - Not at all (1) 2 3 4 (5) Completely

5. “I feel very connected to my / the church community.”
   - Not at all (1) 2 3 4 (5) Completely

6. “I feel very connected to the work of justice and/or service in our community / city / world.”
   - Not at all (1) 2 3 4 (5) Completely
Questions about Learning to Live

*Please mark your level of involvement in Learning to Live.*

7. Daily Devotionals
   Little to none (1)  2  3  4  (5)  All of it

8. Small Group Gatherings
   Never there (1)  2  3  4  (5)  Every week

9. Weekend Experiences
   None  0/3  1/3  2/3  3/3  All

   9b. If you missed an experience, please specify which one(s): ______________

10. To what degree did Learning to Live help you grow in your relationship with God?
    Not at all  (1)  2  3  4  (5)  Considerably

11. Did your experience with L2L help you grow in your understanding of the spiritual journey?
    Yes  No

   11b. If “Yes,” how?

12. Did your experience with L2L help you grow in your practice of faith?
    Yes  No

   12b. If “Yes,” how?

13. Was L2L relevant to you and your faith?
    Yes  No

   13b. If “Yes,” how? If “No,” why not?

Reflection
14. What are three things you learned or experienced as a result of L2L?
   1. ____________________________________________
   2. ____________________________________________
   3. ____________________________________________

Storytelling Experience
15. Share a couple sentences on how the storytelling experience was for you.

Prayer Experience
16. Share a couple sentences about your prayer experience.

Serving Experience
17. Share a couple sentences about your experience serving with your small group.
Questions about Group Structure & Style

18. How was the experience of this group's structure and style compared to other small groups you have been a part of?

(1) Very challenging 2 Average 3 Surpassed expectations 4 (5)

18b. Please share the reason for the number you selected.

19. How did you experience the leadership style of this group compared to other previous experiences?

(1) Very challenging 2 Average 3 Surpassed expectations 4 (5)

19b. Please share the reason for the number you selected.

Additional Feedback

20. What would you like to see stay the same and what would you like to see change?

21. Other comments:
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