Inner Healing Through Centering Prayer at Christ United Methodist Church, Salisbury, North Carolina

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This ministry focus paper entitled

INNER HEALING THROUGH CENTERING PRAYER
AT CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, SALISBURY, NORTH CAROLINA

Written by

JILL SCHNEIDER SMITH

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
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Tony H. Jones

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INNER HEALING THROUGH CENTERING PRAYER
AT CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, SALISBURY, NORTH CAROLINA

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

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

BY

JILL SCHNEIDER SMITH
JUNE 2019
ABSTRACT

Inner Healing Through Centering Prayer
At Christ United Methodist Church, Salisbury, North Carolina
Jill Schneider Smith
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2019

The goal for this Doctoral Project was to offer the spiritual discipline of Centering Prayer to a church community as a healing practice for people of the Christian faith. Not only does Centering Prayer foster inner healing, but the practice also creates a deepening relationship with God in ways other prayer forms do not. The ancient/new practice of Centering Prayer can bring emotional restoration and a more intentional connection to God. By utilizing a contemplative format of prayer, the individual benefits from physiological changes in the brain.

When Centering Prayer becomes a regular part of a Christian’s spiritual practice, it unifies the mind, body, and spirit holistically, while fostering healing through a contemplative relationship with God. This prayer form trains the mind to think in a different way, which changes the brain’s neuronal structure. Once the brain creates new pathways, it changes destructive thought patterns and improves emotional health by liberating the human spirit. As a prayer form, it affects the praying person’s mind while enhancing the intimacy of his or her relationship with God.

To test this thesis, two groups learned about Centering Prayer in different settings. One was a group from Christ United Methodist Church in the form of a seven-week Lenten study on various contemplative spiritual disciplines, one of which was Centering Prayer. The second group was a weekend retreat with a sister church, Christ United Methodist from Charlotte, North Carolina. Within the groups, each person’s life experience varied considerably. The receptivity of each participant also varied, leaving some perplexed and others intrigued. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit must lead every person to this practice at the right time in life and sustain him or her through its challenges to personally benefit from its multi-somatic advantages.

Content Reader: Tony Jones, PhD

Words: 288
To Wayne
whose faith surrounded me for this
long before I had the confidence to do it
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To J. Mason and Bryan, my children, I give all my appreciation and love. You have taught me much more about life and *agape* than I ever taught you.

To all the churches I have called home for your love and support. You have enabled me to transform every disappointment and heartbreak into something I needed to move forward in trepidation, but forward, nonetheless. Each of you has been my teacher.

To Christ United Methodist Church, Salisbury, NC, whose gift of safety has given me the courage to go into unknown places where I have found deep peace.

Lastly, to my Covenant Group who gives me a place to complain, cry, rejoice and just be, as we journey together in life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv  
GLOSSARY vii  

**PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT** 1  
INTRODUCTION 2  
CHAPTER 1: IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHURCH 8  

**PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION** 27  
CHAPTER 2: STANDING ON GIANT SHOULDERS 28  
CHAPTER 3: LEARN FROM THE PAST, PRACTICE FOR THE FUTURE 48  

**PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY** 71  
CHAPTER 4: THE SCIENCE OF GOD’S TOUCH 72  
CHAPTER 5: NUTS AND BOLTS FOR A LIFETIME: MAKING IT SO 91  
CONCLUSION 106  

APPENDIX A: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES LENTEN STUDY WEEK 1 118  
APPENDIX B: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES LENTEN STUDY WEEK 2 120  
APPENDIX C: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES LENTEN STUDY WEEK 3 122  
APPENDIX D: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES LENTEN STUDY WEEK 4 123
APPENDIX E: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES
LENTEN STUDY WEEK 5 124

APPENDIX F: INNER HEALING THROUGH PRAYER PRACTICES
LENTEN STUDY WEEK 6 125

APPENDIX G: RETREAT EVALUATION SHEET 126

APPENDIX H: RETREAT EVALUATION SHEET RESPONSES 127

BIBLIOGRAPHY 131
Glossary

**ascetic** - One who holds to a life of self-discipline often in simple, frugal or humble means. The Greek root of this word is *askesis*, meaning to train, discipline, practice or do with effort.¹

**apophatic prayer** - A practice of communing with God without using words, symbols, feelings or ideas. An interior, quiet way of knowing and being known by God through inner silence.²

**body prayer** – Communicating with God by allowing any movement to draw the mind to God. Examples are intentional breathing, yoga, drawing (coloring), artwork, walking, dancing, walking a labyrinth, or drumming, to name a few examples.

**centering prayer** – A contemplative prayer form to open one’s spirit to the heart of God in love. It uses a sacred word to release any distractions when they arise to commune with God by the pure intention.

**Christian spirituality** – The quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of fundamental Christian ideals and the whole experience of living by and within the scope of the Christian faith.³

**contemplative prayer** – A type of prayer without the use of words or other means.⁴

**hesychasm** – A school of thought focused on silence, particularly in promoting reflection and meditation. This refers not merely to an exterior absence of noise but the interior ability to quiet one’s thoughts to listen to God.⁵

**kataphatic prayer** (cataphatic) – Relating to God through words, icons, symbols, feelings, and thoughts or other tangible/oral means.⁶

**Lectio divina** – Meaning Sacred Reading it is a way to read and experience Scripture (or other writings) in various ways incorporating meditation (reading and thinking on the Scripture), expression (describing its meaning), and contemplation (sitting with the text

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⁴ Ibid., 472.

⁵ Ibid., 108.

and in union with the Spirit). The early practitioners used the Latin words for these three segments: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, and Contemplatio.

**mindfulness** – Mindfulness is a temporary state of non-judgmental, non-reactive, present-centered attention and awareness that is cultivated during meditation practice.

**mysticism** – from the Greek *mueo* meaning to fully instruct, or deeply connect with as in an intimate acquaintance. The act of moving from mere belief or belonging systems to an actual inner experience of God.

**perichoresis** – a way to describe the more challenging aspects of God as three in one, a Trinity. Athanasius (4th C.) understood the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit through the adoption of the creedal term, Homooious (homo: same, ousios: being), this describes the complete mutual indwelling in each Person of the Trinity. While each Person remains in Himself as Father, Son and Spirit, they are, nevertheless, wholly in the others and they are wholly in themselves.

**soul** – Along with mind, spirit, and self, generally refers to the non-physical dimension of human personality. Soul and spirit are the core or center of the human personality. The spirit often refers to the dimension of the human through which we are uniquely related to God.

**spirit** – See soul above.

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7 Ibid., 472.


PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Pastors who interact with individuals in their churches over many years of ministry have the sacred privilege to share in the joys and ravages of parishioners’ lives. The privilege of journeying with people in these circumstances, however, also requires great responsibility. The ability to comfort families and individuals in the moment is called the *gift of presence*. While many people weather difficulties and move on, not everyone can do so as quickly. There may be a sudden loss that cannot be fully processed or a long-simmering situation that has never completely healed. In these moments, when the individual must find his or her way to wholeness, the pastor does well to offer stepping stones along the way to healing.

One such stepping stone to bestow is the spiritual discipline of Centering Prayer. All prayer is a form of communion with God. Sometimes, it is talking to God. Other times, it is listening for God’s spirit. Prayer might consist of meditating on Scripture or crafting a vessel on a potter’s wheel. Every prayer initiates a physical, mental, or spiritual union with God or a synthesis of each. When there is a specific type of prayer that encourages an intimacy with God, while also promoting healing of emotional pain, pastors should be proficient in this type of prayer and know the importance of this gift to pass it on to others.

Often the first step toward healing an inner wound is to recognize and address where the pain is located. How to do this, however, is not always apparent to someone who is suffering. In Centering Prayer, God has provided a practice that allows individuals to enter into God’s presence, rest in a place of full acceptance from God, and find release
from the pain holding them captive. Regular Centering Prayer is one practice that initiates and maintains a transformational process, offering its practitioner new life every day.

Pain and healing intertwine in such a way that without pain to first draw our attention to the problem, healing may not otherwise occur. This is true in the physical world and the emotional world. For emotional pain, the process of healing often begins with a willingness to share one's feelings or experience. This sharing can be with another human being or with God through prayer. Initially, this feels like an admission of failure. It is not. Instead, it provides an opening to release the pain that constricts the spirit. Speaking the truth takes incredible strength; it is the courage of vulnerability.¹

When a prayer form allows us to focus on our breath and slow our racing minds, it becomes a body-mind connection to the Creator of Life. All forms of prayer attend to different parts of our being. This means Centering Prayer is not a replacement for other prayer practices. Centering Prayer offers its own unique reward: a place of peace while connecting with God in an intentional act of vulnerability.

The practice of Centering Prayer is particularly valuable for followers of the Christian faith because it fosters a sense of love and acceptance from God and for oneself. The New Testament affirms this when the Apostle Paul encourages the church at Rome to think of the human body and the mind together “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom

¹ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Center City, MN: Hazelton, 2010), 45.
The contemplative form of prayer helps the praying person find mental or emotional blockages and teaches him or her to turn them over to God. Since prayer is a conversation of love, Centering Prayer is a powerful way to deepen a relationship with God by allowing oneself to be truly known. When the connection to God is stable and secure, social interactions with other people are enhanced as well. The individual approaches others with more interest, perspective, and understanding.

Many pastors have encountered believers in Christ who have wounded spirits. Such persons have a conscious knowledge of the forgiveness of their sins through the death of Christ on the cross. They can cognitively believe that God’s grace was imputed to them. However, they would readily admit they do not believe they deserve such a gift. These feelings of unworthiness may stem from physical or emotional trauma that occurred early in life. They may be dealing with a grievous action they perpetrated or was perpetrated upon them that cannot be forgotten or, evidently, forgiven. These pains, wounds, or unreconciled evils diminish the individual’s outlook on life. Believers who live in this place know what Jesus Christ offers everyone, but they are unable to apply the life-giving aspects to their own situations and ultimately limit their capacity to love and be loved by others.

Dr. Kurt Thompson is a Christian psychiatrist in private practice. He often deals with individuals in counseling who are in this place of dissonance between faith and grace. Some of his patients want a quick fix so they will feel better and follow Jesus like they once did: free of guilt. Thompson is compelled to teach them what they are lacking.

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2 The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible will be used unless otherwise noted.
is a real sense of being known and truly understood by another.\(^3\) Thompson believes the affirmation of self that comes from connecting with another person is vital in life. Extending this concept to a relationship with God should provide a person with a life-altering experience that can be lived into every day.\(^4\) To be intimately known by God provides an ultimate place of personal inner security—something many human beings long to embrace. Thompson elaborates,

I argue that it is only through this process of being known that you come to know yourself and learn how to know others. There is no other way. To be known is to be pursued, examined, and shaken. To be known is to be loved and to have hopes and even demands placed on you. It is to risk, not only the furniture in your home (meaning soul) being rearranged, but your floor plans being rewritten, your walls being demolished and reconstructed. To be known means that you allow your shame and guilt to be exposed – in order for them to be healed.\(^5\)

Centring Prayer is one way a Christian can intentionally allow him or herself to be fully known to God. It is in that intimate space where human beings can break through some of the self-defeating attitudes they often carry throughout life.

Centring Prayer is also helpful for those who have been believers in the Christian faith for many decades but have entered a season of disaffection. They have lived lives of regular fellowship, worship, and Bible study and have participated in the many activities church has offered them over the years. However, they have developed a sense that something is missing. They cannot quite define the problem but sense that things are just

\(^3\) Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connection Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carrollton, TX: Tyndale, 2010), 56.

\(^4\) Ibid., 110.

\(^5\) Ibid., 23.
not right. They are ready for some new spiritual disciplines that will connect with their faith, their bodies, and their emotions. A pastor steeped in the type of communication that is unique to Centering Prayer can share it with others who are ready for the next step in their walk of faith.

A fascinating aspect of this ancient prayer form is how its effects have been substantiated by modern science. The desert mothers and fathers, early Christian devotees of contemplative prayer, discovered that it deeply connected them to God. There is current scientific evidence supporting the effects prayer practices can have on the body. In recent years, neuroscience has shown actual biochemical changes in the brain, heart, and gut of individuals who pray, meditate or practice intentional calming and resting techniques. Thus, there is scientific evidence of a link between the mind, body, and spirit of the individual that is fortified when the person intentionally uses all three to become healthy through a connection of prayer to God.

Different prayer forms honor a body-mind-spirit connection in various ways. One or all of them should be experienced to decide which ones fill a person's current spiritual need. When done mindfully and intentionally, practices like Yoga, Lectio Divina, the Prayer of Examen, Body Prayer, or Prayer Walking can promote healing in the body and spirit. When someone practices Centering Prayer in particular, it teaches one how to open his or her spirit to God in a self-giving way. Thus, it is a deeply personal gift.

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As a pastor who has had dry periods of faith where I wondered if Christianity was supposed to feel like merely going through the motions, I found Centering Prayer propelled my walk with God to another plane of understanding. I hope to introduce others to this practice to enliven their own conscious connections with God. Such a practice brings with it a new awareness of God’s unfathomable depth and breadth. All too often, we limit our connection with God to our own detriment. This contemplative prayer teaches us that God is not in the limiting business.

This doctoral project provides the practice of Centering Prayer for the individual’s interconnection of the mind, body, and spirit in a small church setting. I teach the practice with the hope of providing tools for inner healing to followers of Jesus Christ. That healing, in turn, cultivates a new and intimate connection with the triune Creator of the physical world. People of faith in the twenty-first century are ready for a new way to deepen their love of God and others with prayer as the healing force. This project will introduce that possibility.
CHAPTER 1:
IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHURCH

From rural Highway 150, the countryside becomes increasingly suburban. As the small city of Salisbury approaches, one will encounter the Highway to Heaven: a three-mile radius which is home to eleven churches. One of the eleven is Christ United Methodist Church.

Founded in 1923 as Rowan Mills Methodist Church, it was just off Main Street in Salisbury, one block away from a large mill that employed many workers in the town. In 1969, this church transitioned with congregations throughout the country in the merging of the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist denominations to become a United Methodist Church. Salisbury was in a growth phase then,¹ and the town became known for its mills, its location as the transportation rail hub, and as a destination for Civil War history buffs. Both the city of Salisbury and the church were vital and healthy by the cultural standards of economics and population. The late twentieth century showed a downturn in this manufacture-based town as less expensive products became available

than those made in the area. Salisbury did not have the capacity to transition to other forms of employment quickly enough to maintain the economic stability that it had been afforded previously by manufacturing.

Salisbury is the seat of Rowan County in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The county formed in 1753 by breaking away from nearby Anson County and is named after British landowner and then Governor, Matthew Rowan. Incorporated in 1755, Salisbury is named after a town in England. The indigenous inhabitants were the Catawba and Saponi Indians. In the mid-eighteenth century, European immigrants began to arrive. The tribal land was encroached upon by an influx of German and Scotch-Irish settlers. Several years after the founding of Salisbury, these early immigrants received land grants. To help develop the young town, James Carter, a land surveyor and a land grant recipient, formulated the streets of Salisbury and neighborhoods, modeling them after the city of Philadelphia. Blocks were laid out in a grid pattern with four square blocks surrounding a central intersection of the town. Designed primarily as a walking city, Carter kept the lot sizes small even when the house sizes grew larger.

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3 Pronounced row-ann.


In the nineteenth century, Salisbury was caught up in the economic and technological changes that fed the Industrial Revolution. Early on, the railroad was one of the main employers and industries. Trains were built and repaired in a hanger in Spencer just north of town center, deepening Salisbury’s dependence on the railroads for local employment.

Salisbury is the site of many Civil War events. It has two National Cemeteries, one housing memorials from other states to honor the Union soldiers who died in the Confederate prison in this city.

The Salisbury Confederate prison came into being in 1861 and following the first battle of Bull Run at Manassas, Union prisoners of war streamed into Salisbury. Joining the POWs were Southern political prisoners and conscientious objectors, as well as Confederate and Federal deserters. Originally a cotton mill and, for a short time, a boy’s academy, the prison grounds had held a meat packing plant for the Confederate Army. It was also the site of the general muster ground, where local boys joined the Southern Army.  

Post-Civil War Antebellum Reconstruction did everything possible to limit the freedoms that should have been granted to African Americans. One long time church member shared that within the past quarter century a nearby town was known to put out signs telling people of color to keep traveling through, or their safety could not be guaranteed after sundown.

Racial tensions continue today as a part of the fabric of the town. Prior to the 2017 City Council election, the local paper decried the community worry on increasing violence, drug addiction, and the defacing of Confederate statues in the area. The ensuing

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racial discussions contributed to the election of Al Heggins, an African American woman to the City Council. As dictated by city tradition, the candidate to receive the highest number of votes for City Council becomes Mayor, thus, Mayor Heggins assumed her role. Within months of taking office, Mayor Heggins courageously pushed the City Council to officially deal with three lynchings that had occurred in Salisbury in 1906. That 113 year-old event had never been fully addressed legally, morally, or spiritually in the city. The time had come to do this. Though it continues to make many people uncomfortable, until the town deals with its painful past, it will not move into a brighter future.

In January, 2019, Mayor Heggins led the City Council to pass a resolution “condemning the 1906 lynchings of three black sharecroppers, the murder of a family in their farmhouse the same year and manifestations of injustice as well as starting the process of racial reconciliation.” Though the passage of the resolution is noteworthy, it did not lead to the creation of a proposed Equity Commission which would have been charged with “the task of identifying, researching, and reporting policies and practices that obstruct equity or evidence disparity.” The desire for this Commission came primarily from people of color in the city, whereas the privileged positions of the voting

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10 Ibid.
members on the City Council prevented the Commission from forming. The majority did not see a need for it. Ironically, their dismissal of the idea rather proved the necessity of having an Equity Commission in Salisbury in 2019 and beyond.

Throughout its history, Rowan County has produced many agricultural goods, livestock, and manufactured products which include polyester fiber, furniture, trucks, textiles, yarn, furnaces, and mobile homes.\textsuperscript{11} Founded in the late nineteenth century, many of these industries grew to be substantive endeavors but waned in the mid-to-late twentieth century, when industries began to downsize and move out of the country. Manufacturing has not rebounded since that time. The mortgage crisis of 2008 further affected jobs and housing in the area. Many vacated homes from that time still sit empty and in disrepair.

Currently, Salisbury is attempting a comeback with progressive new school initiatives and an active Chamber of Commerce encouraging a diverse range of businesses. Rowan county has a strong winemaking industry, and some craft brewing has started up locally. A few technology-based companies have located their headquarters in town as a result of its midpoint proximity between the larger Charlotte and Greensboro metro areas. Salisbury boasts excellent natural resources as well, the Yadkin River, High Rock Lake, Dunn Mountain, and many local parks give the community several natural areas for recreation.

A 2015-2016 census shows the county population at 139,933 with eighty percent white, sixteen percent African American, and almost eight and a half percent Hispanic.

Rowan County is the twenty-first most populated county in North Carolina, with eighteen percent of the population living below the poverty line. In 2016, local school officials saw such a large percentage of children in food insecure situations that they prompted the school system to set up multiple feeding sites around the county, funded by the US Department of Agriculture. These sites ensure that local children have two meals a day during the summer months while out of school. During the 2017-2018 school year, a local paper reported “about 63 percent of all Rowan-Salisbury students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and many students receive meals only when they’re at school. For these children and families, summer vacation represents a long, hot stretch of not knowing where the next meal is coming from.” These statistics reveal a deep need in the community and prove that children’s basic requirements are not being met substantively.

There are four institutions of higher learning in Salisbury proper that offer the area a rich diversity of learning. Catawba College (1851), is a private school connected to the United Church of Christ. Livingstone College (1879) has ties to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and is a historically black college that was formed to give African Americans a college education and access to missionary training. The current name was taken for David Livingstone, the missionary doctor. The African Methodist

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Episcopal Church also has Hood Seminary in Salisbury which offers Master and Doctoral degrees to its students. The largest educational institution in the county is the Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, with a current enrollment of twenty-two thousand students.

There is no lack of places to worship in this county. Despite Salisbury being the county seat, Rowan County’s population is predominantly rural. The county population of 136,000 boasts over 151 individual churches. One cannot drive more than a mile or two in any direction without coming upon a church. Rowan County has a higher percentage of Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, and Scotch Irish Presbyterian churches when compared to other parts of North Carolina.

Christ United Methodist Church has been a part of the Salisbury community from its founding in 1925 as Rowan Methodist Church. It completed its first stone edifice building in 1939. In the late 1980s, as the mills were closing and the town was losing industry, leaders in the church decided to move to a new location or die on the small landlocked piece of property. The church took a vote with only half of the people in support of the move. Regardless, land was purchased, and the move took place. The half that did not want the move started a new church with a former pastor who was previously appointed out of the area. His dissatisfaction with the Methodist system and the small flock now looking for a pastor convinced him to move back into the area. That church continues to exist under the leadership of its third pastor, a descendant of the original

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15 Ibid.
founder. The original stone building of Rowan Mill Church is still in use today by a Hispanic congregation.

In 1989 Church leaders purchased an eight-acre tract of property on Highway 150, four miles from town center driving southwest. Rowan Methodist Church was recommissioned to the new location and renamed Christ United Methodist Church. At that time, there was one metal storage building and a covered carport on the property. Over the next twenty years, the original building was redesigned and became the worship center with two classrooms, two bathrooms, and a closet for storage. In 1990, construction began on a larger building for a sanctuary and multiple classrooms with offices for a pastor, choir, and church administrator. This building originally housed a kitchen, but the space was reappropriated several years later to provide more worship space. The new kitchen became a gathering place in the original building and is now designated the Fellowship Hall. The carport was enclosed and is currently used as the Youth Building and a storage area.  

During the changes and construction over the early years on Mooresville Road (the local name for this stretch of Highway 150), the church increased its membership from thirty people to close to one-hundred worshippers over the next two decades.  

There are several families currently in the church whose roots go back to the first Rowan Mill Church. However, the majority in attendance today are those who have come to the

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16 This local church history was taken from paperwork submitted to the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church for approval of a Family Life Center building by the pastor, James King.

church since it has been in its current location. It is made up primarily of working-class people who were not raised United Methodist. In its current location, Christ United Methodist Church has been served by eight pastors, most of whom were either student pastors or licensed local pastors.

The church was at its highest membership in the early part of the 2000s with 180 worshippers in attendance. In 2006, the decision was made to build a larger sanctuary. As the plans became formalized, the church leadership decided that a Family Life Center building with a basketball court, professional kitchen, and more classroom space would be more beneficial than a larger sanctuary. The reasoning was that a multi-functional building would benefit the church and the community as well. Thus, the church shifted its focus to building the Family Life Center for its space and possibilities for evangelism.

The plans for the Family Life Center became a reality, and once accepted by the United Methodist District Committee on Buildings and Location, the church received a loan and started construction on the two-million dollar building in 2009. The Family Life Center is a beautiful, well-designed space, but is underutilized and still has a sizable mortgage. The current active seventy-five attendees are being stretched financially under the weight of the ongoing mortgage payment.18

The history of the county, the city, and the church are essential because this church was not created in a vacuum. Undercurrents in the church are affected by everything else around it. Like many other congregations, the DNA of this church is a patchwork of its geography, its genealogy, and all the past actions its membership has

taken or failed to take in its lifetime. The people of this church would define themselves as conservative, Evangelical Methodists, though their knowledge of United Methodist theology is not strong. In the previous decade, there was some discussion by the pastor and like-minded members to move to a more congregational form of governance or leave the denomination altogether.

The majority of the people attending Christ United Methodist Church grew up in North Carolina and attended churches from other faith traditions. Though some were raised in mainline denominations, a majority grew up with a distinctly Baptist proclivity. Over the past few years since my appointment, they have learned more about Wesleyan theology and polity which has given them a new understanding of Scripture and practical theology.

A strength of this church has always been its strong commitment to small groups and Bible studies. Its members have had a continual desire to learn about God and the Scriptures. In the past few decades, they have done Disciple Bible Study, Lay Witness weekends, multiple Andy Stanley studies, David Jeremiah classes, Adam Hamilton lessons, and Beth Moore women’s groups, to name a few.

One drawback to the mentality of small group proliferation is the false sense that more knowledge and study will strengthen and mature their faith merely by gaining information. With little or no emphasis on spiritual practices which feed the emotional aspect of the soul, or physical practices which create a way to connect to God kinetically, they are missing the full benefits that arise from linking body, mind, and spirit, holistically to the Lord. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, detailed in his Sermon XVI, titled Means of Grace, the sacraments which are, “an outward sign of an inward
grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.”19 He then listed examples of such acts of personal piety, all of which have a tactile aspect to them. “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord’s supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him: and these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”20 Reading, eating, praying, and meditating, are mind-body interconnected actions. When these activities are done mindfully, they amplify the God-createdness of the body and God’s presence within the body. Wesley maintained that each of these acts is important to create a well-rounded, healthy Christian. Bringing Centering Prayer to this church at this point seems like a God-appointed circumstance. If Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices help these believers complement their walk of faith, the spiritual benefits will touch every aspect of their lives.

One of the vital aspects of United Methodism is the freedom of thought it allows its adherents. The denomination does not require anyone to conform to a specific set of doctrinal beliefs or dogmas. Baptism is required for church membership, as is asking individuals to support the denomination and the local church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Wesley did not desire believers to subscribe to one solitary viewpoint of salvation or the Scriptures as that would needlessly constrain people of


20 Ibid.
differing beliefs. His goal was not to have a believer ascent to one specific set of beliefs but to see lives transformed by an experience with the Holy Spirit. Theological or doctrinal differences not considered salvific should leave room for differences of understanding.\textsuperscript{21} He details many of these thoughts in Sermon XXXIX: Catholic Spirit.\textsuperscript{22}

The lack of formal doctrinal requirements in the United Methodist denomination may appear too lax to those raised in different religious environments. Some groups emphasize coming to faith in a certain way and following Jesus with a tightly defined code of conduct. Such beliefs can lead individuals to think they must do things a specific way to affirm their salvation. That mindset runs the risk of people believing they have the only right belief on salvation, and any who disagree are wrong. It ultimately creates dissonance and antagonism between followers of Christ. Jesus came to erase limiting beliefs that existed in the Jewish faith. His purpose was not to create additional conflict or to fuel arguments about which particular group of believers was guaranteed salvation. Instead, his point was to equalize everyone so all might see their need for God.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 385.

\textsuperscript{22} “I do not mean, “Embrace my modes of worship: or, I will embrace yours.” This also is a thing which does not depend either on your choice or mine. We must both act, as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of church government to be Scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion. It appears to me that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitably to your own judgment. My sentiment is, that I ought not forbid water wherein persons may be baptized; and, that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master: however, if you are not convinced of this, act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment, upon any of the preceding head. Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight. If thine heart is as my heart, ‘if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: “give me thine hand.”’ (Sermon XXXIX).
Methodism invites people into a relationship with God that is then lived out one day at a time. Daily acts of love and compassion are proof of the love that resides within the individual. Thus, Wesleyans put a strong emphasis on the ability of each person to choose to love God daily through his or her actions and words. All people have regular opportunities to deepen their relationships with God and are also responsible for how they treat other people.

Methodists put a high priority on issues of mercy and justice for marginalized people. If we are not making the world a more fair and loving place, we are not contributing to the Kingdom of God on Earth. Wesley believed that as people saved by grace, we also love God by how well we love our neighbors. Acts of mercy are communal actions for the benefit of all by ministering to individuals. They reflect how believers engage in the world to be the hands and feet of God to others.

What this community of believers at Christ United Methodist has done so beautifully for many years is to love people where they are when they walk in the door. Many who joined the church over the last twenty years did so because they came in the midst of a personal crisis and felt a non-judgmental acceptance. Though many in this community were raised to believe that same-sex attraction was not biblical, its members continued to love and raise gay young people in the church, without denigrating the individual. Thus, fulfilling the call in Matthew 25:35-40, when Jesus said the righteous ones cared for him,

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king
will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

The members of Christ United Methodist Church lived out the spirit of grace by loving the gay children in their midst. The love-lived-out concept at this church was evident when I became their pastor in July of 2015, and it continued up until recent events in the denomination have led to divisiveness.

Early in 2018, a large group of the more conservative membership left the church when they learned of upcoming discussions in the United Methodist denomination of possible changes to the Book of Discipline regarding homosexuality. A group within the church did not wish to be a part of any discussion. Their leaving was particularly painful to church leadership, many of whom were their friends for many years. A perspective John Wesley shared on difficult topics was to allow a diversity of thought on any matters that did not concern salvation,

The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point… We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a Methodist.24

23 The Book of Discipline is the book of law for the global United Methodist Church. A specially called General Conference to decide on the language was held February 23-26, 2019. The majority of the decision making body was to keep the current language and enforce more punitive consequences for pastors violating the Discipline. These changes do not go into effect until January 1, 2020 for the United Methodist Church US, and a later date for Central Conferences outside of the United States. As of the date of this paper, many dissenting voices of the decision are still formulating how to proceed making the church inclusive of everyone.

Wesley formulated this message in a series of 18 lengthy paragraphs on a paper called “The Character of a Methodist,” as he begrudgingly assented to accept the derisive name of Methodist which had come to define his followers. Above all, Wesley wanted his followers known by their good and ordinary attributes demonstrating the grace of God as opposed to odd or eccentric actions or philosophies. For all of Wesley’s personal eccentricities, he did a remarkable job of guiding the poor and outcast people of his day into the love of Jesus Christ.

The people of Christ United Methodist Church in Salisbury, North Carolina are precisely the right group to learn about prayer practices that will deepen their experience with God. It will allow them to find healing and wholeness in their everyday lives. Every person of faith deserves this opportunity, but whether or not he or she will avail him or herself of the prospect remains to be seen.

There are some formidable obstacles for the people in the church to overcome before they consent to such an introspective and revealing practice as Centering Prayer. The first is to get over the fear that there may be something wrong with being a part of an ancient prayer practice. Members will need to be educated on the origins, the purpose, the effects, and the rewards others have received by adding this prayer form to their spiritual disciplines.

25 Ibid.

26 While in University, Wesley was labeled as being highly methodical about how he practiced his religion and how he expected others in his group to do the same. His expectations included taking the sacraments, being in a covenant group, visiting the sick and prisoners.
A second obstacle to overcome is the aversion to self-reflection as a community. The people of this church need to spend honest, mindful time looking at their individual lives to determine what troubles them and what gives them joy. They must then assess the same for the congregation collectively. Together, we must ask critical questions of ourselves: Where have we helped or hindered ourselves and others in this community of faith? Do current difficulties remind us of previous situations and were those events ever resolved? Much like the city addressing racial tensions, Christ United Methodist also needs to claim its past in order to move forward into a new space for ministry.

The next aspect that the people in this church need to address is the insular way we live our lives. Only a small percentage of the congregation is involved in serving the community’s needs and addressing injustice in and around the town. Like many cities and towns in the United States, Salisbury is dealing with alarming rates of poverty, increasing violent crime, heart-crushing numbers of opioid and addictive situations, as well as overt and covert forms of racism. If we do not get involved in more intentional ways locally, if we ignore the crises in our own midst, the light of Christ will not glow as brightly. If this church can begin to claim some of the many needs of this community, it will go a long way in teaching us to love our neighbor as ourselves. If our people can do that, perhaps together they may even be willing to learn an ancient prayer practice that offers to bring them union with God, too.

The final issue this church needs to address is the type of spiritual paralysis that occurs when the fear of doing something wrong is so great that it prevents people from doing anything at all. Evangelism, from the Greek word *euangelion*, means “Good News.” In the Gospel of Mark, the Good News is equated with Jesus proclaiming the
Kingdom of God to the people of Galilee and beyond (Mk 1:14,15). There is currently a mentality that evangelism is going out and getting people to come in our doors. Some groups have defined evangelism as a form of proselytizing others to accept specific beliefs rather than rejoicing with others that Jesus came to live with us. Many people in the southeast have been raised to believe if they do not tell others about Jesus, those people will go to hell. Instead of motivating church members to evangelize, this ingrained belief has produced guilt-filled Christians who are reluctant to share a faith that is more condemnatory than loving. This passive resistance to sharing may be their intuitive way of choosing not to inflict judgement on people knowing the approach is not effective. The adverse effect is a lack of follow-through to determine if their instincts were correct. Ultimately, Jesus is not shared at all, and these ambivalent evangelists lose an opportunity to tell others the positive aspects of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism should not hinge on our words alone but must also be an authentic sharing of our lives with others.

Evangelical Christians everywhere need to redefine evangelism in the spirit that began first with Jesus’ ministry when he proclaimed in Luke 4:18-19, “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.” As followers of Christ, this should be the foundation for our witness to the world: freeing people from bondage and oppression of the spirit and the physical body (institutional forms) to fulfill the two

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greatest commandments. He (Jesus) said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:37-40).

James 1:27 also addresses our responsibility to care for people as a basis of our faith saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” These goals for God’s people do not complete the Good News we proclaim to the world; they are merely the beginning of the message. To fulfill the sharing of the Gospel is to share our own stories of encountering Christ and to mirror the early disciples’ message as evidenced in the speeches in the book of Acts. Nowhere in the book of Acts is the subject of hell discussed or threatened as the foundation of telling the story of Jesus. It would benefit pastors to teach their people the history of evangelism through the ages since its original meaning has evolved over the years. The recent formula of merely saying a prayer to ask Jesus into your heart to guarantee salvation has only been a part of the American religious vernacular since the early nineteenth century. Thus, evangelism or sharing the life changing news about Jesus Christ, is not simply saying a prayer, or threatening others to do so. The Gospel is about beginning a relationship with another to gain the space to say, “I once was lost, but now I have found a home in love. Would you like me to tell you how?”

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The membership of any church can undoubtedly invite people to worship services, but that is not evangelism. The real evangelism is the hard work of getting to know different people, accepting them where they are, and loving them in the spirit of Jesus. Until the people of Christ United Methodist Church can try something new, even when fearful of it, the fear will prevent them from ever moving forward. Fear extinguishes the possibility of the Spirit moving in unexpected ways, and this stagnancy will inaugurate the beginning of a long, slow spiritual death.

Unfortunately, these obstacles are not unique to this church. They are emblematic of many churches throughout the southeastern United States that have lost their first love: a real and dynamic, self-giving, relationship with Jesus Christ. If individuals in churches changed how they heard and followed God, it could change our world in God-honoring ways that would benefit everyone. That is the hope, and that is the benefit of Centering Prayer—the chance to live genuinely free and contented lives. It is my prayer that perhaps a small church, on a rural highway near the small city of Salisbury, on a little strip of road called the Highway to Heaven, can bring that hope to others.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2:
STANDING ON GIANT SHOULDERS

Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships is the foundational book behind this doctoral project. The premise of the book is that lives can be changed by the renewal of the mind that can lead to the wholeness God intends for everyone.\(^1\) To some extent, the renewal of the mind refers to the Scripture already referred to, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Some people of faith may say, it is certainly prayer that renews the mind, and they would be right. However, neuroscience tells us how prayer does it.

Scientists can document how the brain rewires itself by the individual intentionally changing his or her own thought patterns. This discovery gives hope that people are not hardwired to be one particular way due to genetics or family of origin dynamics. While both are important aspects of our personality development, the ability to

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\(^1\) Curt Thompson, Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connection between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships (Carrollton, TX: Tyndale, 2010), xvi.
choose our inner thoughts and emotional responses allows us to change from whom we were to whom we want to be. This allows us to live into 2 Corinthians 5:17, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Thompson gives four ways to improve our relationships in life. First, telling one’s own story in a nonjudgmental space invites rest for the soul. When individuals feel safe enough to be vulnerable and let another person hear their story, it fulfills an intimate need to be fully known by another person. The author explains that the uniquely human need of being known by others is part of our design by God at creation. When God took the first human being and divided the one Adam into two whole new individuals, God conveyed the intention that the two beings from one will foster an interdependence (as opposed to independence or codependence). This biblical concept teaches that people have an innate desire to connect deeply with others. It also presupposes a desire to have an inner connection with the Creator. Without such a connection to others (at least one other) an integral piece of life is missing. It does not demand a life-long connection such as marriage; it merely recognizes that people need people to thrive in the journey of life.

Second, as a psychiatrist, Dr. Thompson shows how the structure of the brain itself reveals that the personality of each individual is affected by two differently functioning brain halves. This reveals a God-created interdependence within the physiology of the brain. The different operations for the left brain and right brain

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2 Ibid., 247.

3 Ibid., 118.
themselves are necessary for the body and mind to work synergistically. Each half of the brain, or hemisphere, controls a different aspect of the nervous system, making awareness of one’s emotional makeup dependent on a left brain, right brain interaction. Beginning very early in our lives, the right half of the brain governs visuospatial orientation, non-verbal communication, emotional awareness, imagination, and the development of social cues. The left brain gives us language, linear, logical, and literal processing. In general, our left brain tells us how to do things, and the right brains gives us the reasons for doing them. Thus, integration of both hemispheres gives the human being a complete set of necessary skills to live in the world and find meaning within it.

The two lobes of the human brain are connected to three different brain structures that give us different bodily responses, depending on which structure is triggered: the reptilian complex, the limbic circuitry, or the neocortex. When mindful of our reactions to experiences, we begin to discern if we are responding reactively or proactively to events around us. If we allow our minds to become panicked at a particular thought, the neurons will trigger our limbic or reptilian mind response (fight or flight) and flood our bodies with cortisol. If we respond this way on a regular basis, the cortisol negatively affects our bodies. Only when we are able to control the panic response, can our bodies learn how to relax and respond thoughtfully and rationally. This process maintains better health for our physical bodies as well as our minds, utilizing our neocortex for control. The more aware we are of our thinking patterns and responses to life situations, the better prepared we are to face the events of everyday life and act maturely. This mindfulness

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4 Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 33-34.
benefits our interpretation of and interaction with the world around us. This interdependence of the brain structure mirrors our thinking mind, reflecting the needs in the human emotional make-up to be in connection with other human beings.

Third, persons are not destined to have fixed responses to the same stimulus throughout life. People can change how they act and react to life events. Neuroplasticity allows for this by providing new wiring patterns in the brain which translate into new coping mechanisms. Contemplative prayer forms directly stimulate this activity in the brain.

Lastly, Thompson concludes that science and religion commingle in such a way that practicing spiritual habits promotes self-awareness and self-reflection. When developed, both of these traits allow an individual to train the mind and spirit to respond in healthy and affirming ways. Thus, one’s mind and spirit together can be in communion with God while at the same time changing one's perceptions and moods. Specific thought patterns can also regulate heart rates and minimize stress which bring a healthy stasis to people who practice these prayer forms in conjunction with their daily devotions with God. Mindful, spiritual disciplines foster a beautiful union between the body, mind, and soul.

Thompson relates his personal story and professional experience as a psychiatrist to show how neurological wiring of the brain causes humans to react in specific ways. People who respond self-defensively to particular stimuli often form these reactions early

5 Ibid., 172.
6 Ibid., xv-xvi.
in childhood. Thompson focuses on attachment patterns people form, usually to their earliest caregivers. The degree of attachment, or lack thereof, show responses to emotional circumstances are relatively predictable. The young brain directs the body to react in certain patterns, causing neurons in the brain to develop specific firing patterns. However, there are ways to circumvent predictable responses. Human beings have control over their minds and emotions if they are paying attention.

Thompson’s findings in working with people psychologically over many years have shown that people can rewire their thought patterns. The rewiring happens through a series of methods enumerated in the book. For the author, healing from a painful past begins when someone is willing to be deeply known by another person and receive his or her acceptance. Healthy coping skills practiced after that give individuals power over their lives, which in turn helps build a strong character and allows healing to continue in many personal ways.

Anatomy of the Soul was written from a Christian worldview. This gives it credibility for use as a focus on a prayer practice. The book springs from a painful and difficult time in the author’s life, as he witnessed the slow decline and death of his mother. When he needed his faith most, it gave him no solace or comfort, and he relates having felt only an emotional emptiness. His lack of feelings during this time brought him to a crisis of faith, and that realization triggered him to look deeper. The intensely

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7 Ibid., 113.

8 Ibid., 135-156.
personal experience of the author legitimizes his findings, making it easy to identify with the topic and allowing others to find a similar application in their own spiritual lives.

Thompson reveals how our personal stories affect our faith life:

Scripture evokes and reveals the various parts of us that are wounded, healed, delighted, resentful, affectionate, or sad. Our reactions to the Bible, then are rooted in our stories. Perhaps you have been gently bathed, forgiven, and enlivened in the waters of its story of grace and adventure. You may breathe it in daily like oxygen, a practice first mediated by a mindful spiritual overseer, partner or friend. On the other hand, maybe you’ve been on the receiving end of Scripture used as a bludgeon by an over assertive parent or authoritarian church leader. If so, you may want to scream at the very mention of it, given the memory, explicit and implicit, of the role of “religion” in your history.\(^9\)

For some, the Bible is life-giving, and for others it serves as a reminder of abuse they may have endured. No one comes to the Scriptures as a blank slate. This resource gives the reader permission to be healed by Thompson’s compassionate application of passages and allows the reader to reclaim Scripture in a life-giving way. When the Scriptures are reframed with unconditional love from God, a secure attachment bond can take hold in new and life-giving ways.

The main limitation of this resource is that it is not specifically about Centering Prayer. Even so, it alludes to how contemplative practices are essential for maintaining a healthy ongoing relationship with God. Additionally, the book gives precise information on the brain and Dr. Thompson offers advice that would benefit most individuals. This book’s information was beneficial in determining the scope of the ministry challenge, but ultimately unnecessary for the application of the spiritual disciplines. The author’s psychiatric profession gives much credibility to his assertions, and he is also willing to

\(^9\) Ibid., 140.
recognize how an individual’s faith plays a specific role in the formation of brain activity.

Thompson elaborates,

Long before neuroscientists began advocating these approaches,\(^{10}\) believers engaged in spiritual practices that foster the mind’s development – whether we call it an undivided heart or an integrated prefrontal cortex. These practices, which are usually called spiritual disciplines, include the inward disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, and study: the outward disciplines of simplicity, solitude, submission, and service: and the corporate disciplines of confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. In many ways, these disciplines, when practiced faithfully (but without adopting new coping mechanisms is possible due to neuroplasticity), do the very things that we have been discussing to help integrate our brains.\(^{11}\)

This statement explains why Centering Prayer can be transformational in the life of the practitioner. The author’s conclusions offer the scientific perspective to the somatic aspect of prayer practices. It is probable that those who are using prayer for a religious or spiritual connection to God are not doing so simply to rewire their brains. Deepening a relationship with God is the primary motivation for practicing Centering Prayer. The secondary grace this prayer gives is the inner healing that comes through the intimate connection with God. Being open to God’s Spirit naturally becomes an experience of the *sozo*,\(^{12}\) the Greek word for salvation. Interestingly, the word is also synonymous with the healing or wholeness of God.

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\(^{10}\) Thompson previously stated things that currently help connect us to each other and to God are: attunement to the body, writing our stories, feeling felt, and engaging in the neuroplastic triad.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 175.

Curt Thompson affirms that “God is in the business of changing your story from poorer to richer, from harsher to gentler, from rigid to flexible, from sadder to joyful, from shameful to confident and free – and by extension the story of those with whom you have intimate emotional contact.” Many Christians are longing for this kind of joy in their relationship with God.

**Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer**

*Intimacy with God*, by Father Thomas Keating, was an influential resource for this topic. This book provides a history of how the modern practice of Centering Prayer came into being. This is particularly helpful as Fr. Keating is one of the primary reasons this prayer form was revived in the twentieth century. The volume then goes on to explain how to practice this prayer as well as articulate other spiritual practices that will enrich one's relationship with God and the Bible. His writings end with more historical information about the prayer, giving the reader a solid understanding of the evolution of this type of prayer from the third and fourth centuries to the present time.

The book purports that over several hundred years some of the misconceptions of Christian spirituality have been formulated and sustained to the detriment of people of faith in the Western world. Spirituality shaped during the enlightenment had a focus on rational thinking which burdened ensuing generations with certain unfortunate religious dispositions. Keating contends that these misappropriated beliefs have tainted the concept

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of God for many people today. This has harmed modern-day seekers, who in trying to connect to God, receive inconsistent religious messages.

The first Western misconception on spirituality was the attitude that external acts are more important than internal ones (external acts are rituals and behaviors, while internal acts are the motives of those actions).\(^\text{15}\) One such attitude is exemplified by the American concept of rugged individualism: the belief that nothing happens unless someone makes it happen. This belief is often supported in churches that over emphasize programs and activities for members. The western church often affirms that idle hands cause problems, so keeping busy means accomplishing something. However, this focus on action belittles the importance and value of slowing down, contemplating life, being intentional, and living simply. Unfortunately, many westerners consider these internal acts indicative of laziness or simply a waste of time.

The second trait ingrained in Western spirituality is that when someone does something good, God rewards it.\(^\text{16}\) Human beings are expected to deal with their sinfulness to placate a God who abhors sin. This is a misunderstanding that humans can do something about their standing before a holy God, and if they cannot do it, God will punish them. This is the antithesis of the Good News of right standing before God by the grace of Jesus Christ.\(^\text{17}\) It also ignores that God’s love for the created world has provided and accomplished all that is needed for the healing or salvation of humanity.

\(^{\text{15}}\) Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 3.

\(^{\text{16}}\) Ibid.

\(^{\text{17}}\) Ibid., 4.
The third mark of Western spirituality twisting the gospel as it was initially taught in the centuries following Jesus death, is the belief that faith is about getting to heaven instead of modeling Jesus’ behavior and loving God with heart, soul, strength, and mind and loving others like ourselves in the present.\(^{18}\) This emphasis by many churches has crippled any depth to Christian maturity in the United States and around the world. It is a narrow, self-focused concept of what Jesus was offering human beings when he was on Earth.

Each of these misconceptions has been uniquely strengthened in churches across the United States and has caused deep thinkers, or anyone desiring real transformation in a relationship with God, to lose heart. Those who witness these developments as they are still propagated in many denominations today have often lost trust in the people who represent God. By extension, some have lost trust in the God who was preached to them from this mindset.

Keating’s life-long desire was to live a cloistered life with deep contemplative practices. While living that out, Fr. Keating simultaneously saw older and young adults of the 1960s seeking out eastern meditative practices to deepen their connection to God. They were not looking to their local churches to find this.\(^{19}\) He was heartbroken that they did not know the historic Christian church has a deep history of spiritual practices for just such a connection. Thus, Keating set out to develop some spiritual practices that could be taught to people of every walk of life. He and other monks living with him in a monastery

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid. xii.
developed the form of Centering Prayer taught today. It is a contemplative prayer form that fosters an interior connection God for everyone desiring to commit to the practice. This was not just for those who commit themselves to a devotional or cloistered life in the church, but for anyone willing to make the prayer a regular part of his or her spiritual discipline. The remainder of Keating’s book gives detailed information on how to develop and live the practice of Centering Prayer.

Though the content of the book *Intimacy with God* is tantamount to the subject matter of this project, it does not address the application of the subject to the local church setting. This means the book is crucial to the teaching portion of the project, but it does not provide the logistics of taking it to pastors and churches. Over the past four decades, Thomas Keating’s work on the topic of Centering Prayer has contributed to a resurgence of the contemplative movement here in the United States. It appears that Fr. Keating and others were used by God to convey the message that contemplative practices will be a part of the future of the Church. Keating is now considered one of the spiritual fathers to the modern era of Centering Prayer.

The only possible limitation of the book is that Keating’s identity as a Roman Catholic priest may worry individuals from a tradition with different doctrines. This need not concern anyone. There are ways to adjust the prayer so as not bother the conscience of other faiths. Once exposed to the Father’s humble yet directive teaching style, it is evident he is not trying to bring anyone into his specific religious practice, but simply desiring that all who come in search of a connection to God, receive it.
Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening

This book by Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault is a warm, thoughtful read into the reason for, the psychology of, and the practice toward the joy of Centering Prayer. Bourgeault trained under Fr. Thomas Keating as he was teaching others to share Centering Prayer in a broad ecumenical context. Keating’s energy can be seen in her writings as well.

Bourgeault’s book gives details to the method, tradition, and psychology of Centering Prayer. She adds depth to certain aspects of what is happening emotionally and physically during the practice. Bourgeault’s approach is from the vantage point of an Episcopal priest. Her training has allowed her to connect aspects of the Centering Prayer to a Protestant understanding of the practice. She also has a way of explaining the practice in clear and concise language. Her deep intellect comes through in the range of her observations and her ability to share them cogently. Having traveled extensively around the world teaching Centering Prayer as a mindful way to enter into God’s presence, Bourgeault has become well known in contemplative circles. Bourgeault’s definition of Centering Prayer draws people to experience the prayer rather than worry about it. She explains,

It’s very, very simple. You sit, either in a chair or on a prayer stool or mat and allow your heart to open toward that invisible but always present Origin of all that exists. Whenever a thought comes into our mind, you simply let the thought go and return to that open, silent attending upon the depths. Not because thinking is bad, but because it pulls you back to the surface of yourself. You use a short word or phrase, known as a “sacred word” to help you let go of the thought promptly and cleanly. You do this practice for twenty minutes, a bit longer if you like, then you simply get up and move on with your life.20

The practice itself is about learning to let go of the entanglements of the world, and her invitation is a soft beckoning to come deeper and find God’s unique gift. If anyone is drawn to do this prayer consistently, he or she will find Bourgeault has not called them to something frivolous. The special gift God gives through this practice is for each person to find his or her true self, naked before God and utterly consumed with love.

Bourgeault anticipates and addresses the protestations early practitioners voice and diffuses them as “perfectly normal.” She also discusses aspects of the prayer people may over complicate, and she gently gives cogent explanations of what can happen during this prayer time as well as what we should not allow. One such area she emphasizes is based on a quote from an anonymous book written by a monk in the fourteenth century: *The Cloud of Unknowing*. She is adamant that the purpose of this type of prayer has a “naked intent direct to God.” For Bourgeault, Centering Prayer is not primarily about our attention, which is central in many other meditative practices but distracts from this practice. Instead, she sees intention as the driving force. Attention has active, not passive energy, which prevents the individual from offering a truly open heart with the simple intent to be still before God. The intent for Centering Prayer is for the pray-er to experience *kenosis*, a pouring oneself out, a self-emptying, or self-forgetting quality found in Philippians 2:6-7, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not

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21 Ibid., 24.

22 Ibid., 37.

regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself.”

*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* is central to the topic of this project in that it encompasses the background, theology, and instructions for Centering Prayer, demystifying it for the more conservative congregant. Her purpose is to educate the individual reader to this contemplative, apophatic act. Bourgeault very effectively makes the reader believe that he or she can do this practice. It makes Centering Prayer seem accessible, so not only can monks and nuns benefit from it, but also the average person who wants a closer walk with Jesus.

The only limitation of this book is it does not explicitly address how to apply the concepts to a class or novice group. It focuses exclusively on the individual pray-er. Any other limitation of this book is self-imposed. Some people fear they have some singular condition that keeps them from getting quiet, and this fear prevents them from ever being successful. Bourgeault would be the first person to call their bluff and challenge their purported intention: the desire for a serious relationship with God. Not all who claim they want that will make a concerted effort.

**Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation**

The books *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* and *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, were written eleven years apart by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel. Medically trained at Harvard University, Siegel did post-graduate work at the University of California, Los Angeles, with a concentration in pediatrics, general adult psychiatry, and child and adolescent
psychiatry. He has worked in a child, adolescent, adult, and family psychiatric clinic and directed training programs at UCLA. Siegel has also been the director of the Center for Human Development, a program that focuses on the development of individuals, families, and communities by helping examine the interface of human relationships and basic biological processes. This is only a fraction of his considerable curriculum vita.

“The Developing Mind was written to provide a scientifically grounded view of human experience that can help facilitate the development of psychological well being and emotional resilience across the lifespan.”

Both of Siegel’s books deal with the same relevant concepts, and the more recent book provides more updated brain science and practical application. These books speak to the early formation of generalized personality responses as strictly dependent upon the type of attachment made with caregivers (typically parents) early in life. The psychology of life these individuals demonstrate tends to follow predictable patterns. Neuroscience reveals that our brains form neural pathways that follow specific patterns, causing expected responses to similar events.

*The Developing Mind* relates to this doctoral project by reinforcing the idea that our physical body is an integral part of the thinking processes and, in turn, shapes our emotions and reactions to events. This means that the mechanism of our emotional responses is an open system that can be shaped by our thoughts; humans have the capacity to direct and focus their thinking. This also means each person can re-shape the

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neural networks in his or her brain and ultimately change how he or she acts and reacts to life. The book reveals how the mind,

Develops at the interface of neurophysiological processes and interpersonal relationships. Relationship experiences have a dominant influence on the brain because the circuits responsible for social perception are the same as or tightly linked to those that integrate the important functions controlling the creation of meaning, the regulation of bodily states, the modulation of emotion, the organization of memory, and the capacity for interpersonal communication.²⁵

The intricate internal inter-relationship between our bodies and minds affects our emotions, revealing how interconnected we are within our skin. Each of us has a body that uses the mind and affects the soul, demonstrating that humans are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14). This book goes on to explain what memory is, how attachment affects who we are as we grow and mature, and the nature of emotion and how we regulate ourselves through all of this. Such information has implications for every human life. The final chapters on Interpersonal Connection and Integration help put all of it into perspective.

*Mindsight* is the term Dr. Siegel coined to describe “the ability that allows us to see and shape the inner workings of our own minds.”²⁶ This is why Centering Prayer helps individuals heal inner pain when they are open to having God as their comforter and counselor. Siegel elaborates,

Mindsight is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds. It helps us to be aware of our mental processes without being swept away by them, enables us to get ourselves off the autopilot of ingrained

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²⁵ Ibid., 21.

behaviors and habitual responses, and moves us beyond the reactive emotional loops we all have a tendency to get trapped in.\textsuperscript{27}

The principal behind Mindsight is the same scientific principle that explains the healing properties of Centering Prayer. It teaches the practitioners to change and renew their minds, literally and spiritually.

The Siegel books contribute to the topic by articulating the science behind the practice. Prayer does not have to be an ethereal concept of spiritual uncertainty where one struggles to communicate with a whimsical or capricious God. Prayer can be the conversation with a triune God who is Spirit but also entered creation to demonstrate unconditional love for creation. That same prayer conversation, in turn, provides the interconnected reliance of the body and mind to become physically responsive to the intentions of the one praying.

The limitation of this book is the author makes no reference to God or prayer or how these concepts might provide healing for people outside of a counselor’s office. Siegel’s asserts that any person using the emotional and social intelligence he shares can change the way he or she reacts to stimuli. This is vital information to help all people gain control over their own lives and responses, even if there is not a spiritual dimension involved in it.\textsuperscript{28} Siegel offers those who follow his techniques a fuller, more vibrant and happier life. The purpose of utilizing his work is to extend the properties of neuroplasticity and employ them, not only for inner healing, but to use the contemplative teachings through a God-given vehicle like prayer to connect to God in a body-mind-
spirit totality. A consistent Centering Prayer practice is available for people of faith today. This reveals why the ancient church monastics considered it a union with God. Indeed, that is just what is happening.

**The Cloud of Unknowing**

Students of Centering Prayer have the unique opportunity to delve into a seven-hundred-year-old book by an anonymous author to see the ancient application and intuit how it works in the twenty-first century. *The Cloud of Unknowing* was written in Middle English and has been translated many times. Some find the original English too wooden and the many foreign sounding words dissonant to the modern ear. The beauty of the translations, much like differing Bible translations, is everyone can find one that speaks to his or her specific personality and learning style. One translator, Ira Progoff, describes *The Cloud of Unknowing* like this, “It is a profound text with many veiled meanings that have to be understood as deeply and as clearly as possible if the point of the book is to be grasped and if the personal experience it seeks is actually to be achieved.”

Thought to be penned by a fourteenth century monk in England, the identity of the writer has never been revealed. Even with this air of mystery, “The ultimate goal of the work of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is union with God, not as God is thought of or as God is imagined to be, but as God *is* in His nature (italics and gender reference his).”

In the midst of the black plague in the late fourteenth century, British writings on spirituality offered a new means of redemption. Carmen Acevedo Butcher conveys that

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30 Ibid., 24.
English mysticism arose just in time to avert hopelessness among the massive deaths, the ego-triggered wars, a divided church, social disorder, and class wars. *The Cloud of Unknowing* and many other medieval devotional writers such as Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton, allowed a movement of the Spirit to flow across a devastated Europe, bringing hope.\(^{31}\) Such hope was needed in that difficult time.

The premise of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is simply one sage and experienced guide teaching a younger devotee the ways of contemplative prayer. The book is divided into seventy-five deliciously small nuggets of wisdom that examine the joys, sorrows, and pitfalls of a pray-er seeking union with God. The unknown author waxes eloquent with deep experience on how to begin: what is a presumption, how evil spirits might lead one astray, and how love is the only way forward. The instructions are supplemented with both Scripture and biblical examples of people who also met, and struggled, and were touched by God.

This treasure from so long ago can be used as a current primer for someone wishing to practice Centering Prayer. The term Centering Prayer is a recent development not found in the book. The common way the author describes the experience, which fits well with modern contemplative prayer, is with the phrases “the cloud of unknowing” and “the cloud of forgetting.” The former is the pinnacle of the journey. Place “the cloud of unknowing above you and between you and your God. Add the cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and creation. If the cloud of unknowing makes you feel alienated from God, that’s only because you’ve not yet put a cloud of forgetting between

\(^{31}\) Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Tran., *The Cloud of Unknowing with the Book of Privy Counsel* (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), xv.
you and everything in creation.”32 This book provides confirmation that the prayer form has been used for many centuries and gives it gravitas for anyone's life. The book, when read by a heart that has experienced Centering Prayer, becomes a remembering of the reader's spirit of their emotions, perceptions, and previous practice. Any book that can evoke such powerful memories is an offering of love, received.

If you ask me how to actually contemplate, I have to ask God in his immense grace and kindness to teach you himself, because I’ll admit that I can’t tell you myself. That shouldn’t surprise you, because contemplation is God’s work. He chooses which souls participate, and his decision isn’t based on individual merit. Without God’s intervention, no saint or angel would even think to desire contemplative love. I also believe our Lord deliberately chooses life long sinners to do this work, perhaps even more often than he selects others who have not grieved him as much. He wants us to see that he is all merciful and all powerful and can work, however, wherever, and whenever he wants.33

The essence of Centering Prayer lies in these beautiful words from an unknown monk who lived centuries before our time. This anonymous author affirms that the God of yesterday, today, and forever is gracious beyond measure, and every era has access to this life-giving and life-connecting One.

32 Ibid., 19.

33 Ibid., 78.
CHAPTER 3:
LEARN FROM THE PAST, PRACTICE FOR THE FUTURE

In order to move forward with the understanding that prayer can bring inner healing, it will be helpful to explore some aspects of Christian history and several related definitions. Even within the Christian faith, people hail from diverse religious backgrounds. It is not unusual for believers to be raised in one denomination and only be familiar with the practices experienced exclusively in their own church. What joy it is to explore the spiritual practices of the faithful around the world as well as throughout history. This realization can also foster dismay when we begin to understand the extent of our own ignorance. Discovering the spiritual experiences of others offers us an expanse of information to be assessed and where prudent applied to our own lives. Still, this process can be difficult as learning new aspects of other faith practices can trigger distrust for new approaches. However, such a reaction would only serve to forfeit the wisdom, rich history, and knowledge of others who have traveled this road of faith before us. For Centering Prayer, the journey begins in the fourth century with the desert mothers and fathers.
The period following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must have been as exciting as it was tumultuous. It is easy to imagine their excitement, as the disciples\(^1\) processed and re-imagined all the things Jesus had said and taught in the light of the new understandings and implications of the resurrection. The time must have been chaotic as all the followers of Jesus had to decide who he was and how they would apply his message to their lives going forward without his physical presence. The New Testament book of Acts reveals the disciples had to negotiate many different aspects of their communal life. These changes often necessitated relinquishing their former beliefs as they altered their views on faith practices once considered sacred and ordained by God. The Apostle Peter experienced this in a dream or vision. He was meditating one day and felt God asking him to eat unclean animals. This would have been a violation of God’s commands from the purity laws detailed in Old Testament books Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Peter discerned this message as an affirmation of God’s desire for him to preach the Gospel not only to the Jewish nation, but also to the Gentiles and to the utter ends of the earth. The message was “what God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:14).

Church history tells us that it took several millennia to hash out the many theological implications of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The doctrine of the Trinity affirmed the deity of Jesus but also complicated the definition of monotheism.\(^2\) The

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\(^1\) Disciples includes the all the believers in Jesus Christ following his earthly ministry and resurrection, not only the initial twelve, which with the vote for Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot who took his own life.

Church fathers eventually understood the Trinity as a construct where the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, but unified as the essence of each is identical in the nature to the essence of the one divine being. In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus were known as the Cappadocian Fathers. They were proponents and formulators of the Nicene Creed and staunchly defended the Trinity as a theological precept. They also had strong ascetic and mystical leanings.³

The Trinitarian concept of perichoresis gives nuance to a “corporate understanding” of the mutuality of sharing between members of the Godhead.⁴ Catherine Mowry LaCugna describes it as “each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self into the other.”⁵ Modern contemplative, Fr. Richard Rohr contends that the Cappadocian Fathers in eastern Turkey took the word perichoresis from the Greek theater meaning “circle dance,” to describe the foundational quality of God’s character: relationship and communion.⁶ Thus, the Trinity is depicted as a dancing, moving together of the three persons of the one God. It conjures up the image of a unity of beings in a perpetually loving, joyful embrace. There are several ways to understand the concept of the Trinity. The one that best intersects with the theology of this paper is

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the social understanding of God as the Trinity: three persons co-equal in being, each
wholly loving and self-giving to the others. One description likens it to,

Genuine acceptance (which) removes fear and hiding and creates freedom to know
and be known. In this freedom arises a fellowship and sharing so honest and open and
real that persons involved dwell in one another. There is union without loss of
individual identity. When one weeps, the other tastes salt. It is only in the Triune
relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit that personal relationship of this order exists,
and the early church used the word ‘perichoresis’ to describe it.7

A more hierarchical view of the Trinity has been supported since the fourth century in the
Christian church in the west.8 Based on St. Augustine’s description, this view of the
Godhead has been better suited the patriarchal interests of western cultures.

In the early years, Christianity was considered a sect—an offshoot of the Jewish
faith. Because their faith stood in opposition to the Roman government, many Christians
faced brutal persecution. It was not until the rule of Constantine (AD 306-337) that
Christian thought was accepted and even propagated by the Roman Emperor. Once the
faith was supported by the ruling powers, many early Christians believed this to be in
direct opposition to Jesus’ teachings of humility, peace, and charity. When religious
leaders began to align with the Emperor, committed believers saw that coalition of power
as the undermining of true faith. Many of them fled from the cities and arenas of power to
the deserts and remote places to practice their faith in ways not affected or corrupted by
close ties with the political powers.9

7 “What is Perichoresis?” Trinity In You, accessed February 15, 2019,

8 Evan B. Howard, The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos
Press, 2008), 120.

9 Laurence Freeman, Journey to the Heart, 93.
These believers, referred to as desert mothers and fathers, lived out their faith in isolation, primarily in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. These practitioners of prayer in solitude found ways to live lives bathed in communing with God. Those in cloistered communities developed various ways both individually and collectively to draw closer to God. Some of these practices were handed down and many have been propagated and expanded on throughout the history of the Church: meditating on the Scriptures, chanting the Psalms, using Hesychastic prayers\(^\text{10}\) (of which Centering Prayer is one), praying with icons, the Ignatian Examen,\(^\text{11}\) fasting, Stations of the Cross, or taking a pilgrimage. Each of these practices originally encouraged followers to live an ascetic lifestyle and give themselves in service to the poor. The various prayer practices also allow the practitioner to connect to God in a multitude of unique ways.

When Jesus was incarnate on Earth, he took the time to be alone, to pray, to offer physical and spiritual healing, and to share meals with both the “righteous and the sinful.” As a member of a community, Jesus was able to teach others these practices as well. We can learn from Jesus’ example, from the practices of the desert mothers and fathers, and also from more modern personages who through their lives show evidence of spiritual maturity, deep love, and a connection to God.

Unfortunately, not every believer embodies these traits of Christ. Richard Foster’s book, *Prayer*, lists numerous forms of prayer any person can practice. He expresses that Contemplative Prayer specifically is not for everyone; only mature believers who

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\(^{10}\) Continuous prayers or interior prayer is called an apophatic form.

\(^{11}\) Ignatius was an early church Father who lived in the first Century and developed prayer practices which are followed to this day.
understand the implications of the practice are willing to work through any discomfort it evokes.12 While young believers often feel the need to pray actively in ways that show their love, it takes a degree of maturity to understand that silent stillness with God is more active than it appears. Those who have weathered the many storms of life and survived the testing of their faith understand that to be loved and deeply known requires total presence with another. By refraining from talk and activity, one is able to form a deeper spiritual connection, because in that still, silent space, there is total peace and assurance of love.

**United Methodism is a Good Fit**

The contemplative life and practices can be a natural fit for followers of United Methodism, as the denomination allows for a diversity of thought for those under its umbrella of faith. While Methodism values and claims its place in church history as being Orthodox, it does not force a specific viewpoint of orthodoxy to be observed in a specific way. It leaves room for the Holy Spirit to guide. The church’s *Book of Discipline*, the official form of church order and polity states “the various traditions that presently make claims upon us may contain conflicting images and insights of truth and validity. We examine such conflicts in light of Scripture, reflecting critically upon the doctrinal stance of our Church.”13 Thus a pastor who preaches the Gospel as it was understood and

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articulated in the time of the writing of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds is still in good standing with the governing powers of the denomination.

The wisdom of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, came with his embracing of diverse viewpoints. He had experience with many people from a broad range of denominations and faith traditions. These relationships informed his faith and experience. It broadened his understanding of the Gospel and how one should approach life. Above all else, Wesley loved the Scriptures, but he knew they were not the totality of faith. When he crafted a template to assist Christians in evaluating their decisions, he began with what the Scriptures said on the topic, but he also included wisdom imparted by tradition, reason, and experience. These were all used for a healthy form of discernment in making difficult decisions. To this day the United Methodist Book of Discipline details the importance of these aspects in the life of a Methodist pastor and layperson.

Like Wesley, the United Methodist Church sees Scripture as an essential starting point for life. The church’s website confirms that our primary source of spiritual wisdom and guidance is the Bible. It is God’s unique story to Israel; it is the account of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and of the Spirit’s work in the early church. The Bible is our sacred canon, making it the source of our Christian witness,

We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. They
quicken our faith, open our eyes to the wonder of God’s love, and clarify our understanding.¹⁴

This gracious view of Scripture allows freedom within the denomination for pastors and individuals to see the Bible holistically and discern its meaning for their lives. This freedom means the Bible can—through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—touch each person in a manner consistent with what each individual has encountered in his or her life. Thus, God’s word may imprint differently upon each person’s heart. Inviting all people to experience how God is revealed in Scripture ensures God’s accessibility to all. Though not every person is open to this invitation, it is present, nonetheless.

When seeking an answer from Scripture or deepening one's understanding of God’s word, the next aspect Wesley encourages people to explore is tradition. In this context, tradition refers to the history of God at work in the world, and it takes into account a much broader time frame than that in which the Bible was written. Tradition can also be the oral history of what defined a people like the Israelites, or it can encompass customs that the church has handed down because they give the comfort of dependable practices. Tradition allows us to interpret the Scriptures with an understanding that as we learn more about the world through science, art, and the humanities, we can adapt our understanding. Tradition gives us the freedom to recognize the Bible as a living document, and this freedom allows our beliefs a certain pliancy in the face of new information. *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* expounds, “The

multiplicity of traditions furnishes a richly varied source for theological reflection and construction. For United Methodists, certain strands of tradition have special importance as the “historical foundation of our doctrinal heritage and communal existence.” Thus, we cherish what we have learned in the Scriptures from those who have gone before us, but we are not forced to see it through only one lens.

Believers must always approach Scripture with eyes that are willing to see and a heart that is willing to learn. We can always trust the Scriptures to teach us. However, we cannot assume that we will always take away the correct lesson.

We are now challenged by traditions from around the world that accent dimensions of Christian understanding that grow out of the sufferings and victories of the downtrodden. These traditions help us rediscover the biblical witness to God’s special commitment to the poor, the disabled, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the outcast. In these persons, we encounter the living presence of Jesus Christ. A critical appreciation of these traditions can compel us to think about God in new ways, enlarge our vision of shalom, and enhance our confidence in God’s provident love.

By nature, people are egocentric, and as a result, we are often quick to understand things primarily for how they affect us personally. Oftentimes, Scripture is addressing humanity as a whole and not our particular cultural or socioeconomic reality. If individuals and communities are not able to broaden this myopic view, we self-limit the message of Scripture and fail to seek how it speaks to all tribes and nations.

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16 Ibid.
According to Wesley, our own experiences are yet another gift we have to view Scripture and gain insights into the human condition. United Methodists are told, “In our theological task, we follow Wesley’s practice of examining experience, both individual and corporate, for confirmations of the realities of God’s grace attested in Scripture. Our experience interacts with Scripture. We read Scripture in light of the conditions and events that help shape who we are.” Engaging experience is when we can ask Scripture to speak to our personal understanding of life,

All religious experience affects all human experience; all human experience affects our understanding of religious experience. On the personal level, experience is to the individual as tradition is to the church: It is the personal appropriation of God’s forgiving and empowering grace. Experience authenticates in our own lives the truths revealed in Scripture and illumined in tradition, enabling us to claim the Christian witness as our own.

To deepen our concept of experience, we must consider both the things that happen to us, and the way we interpret these events. People who are willing to look deeply at what happens in life will not only see the events, but also the motivations behind them. “This new life in Christ” is what United Methodists refer to as “Christian experience.” Christian experience gives us new eyes to see the living truth in Scripture. It confirms the biblical message for our present. It illumines our understanding of God and creation and

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17 Ibid.


19 Ibid.
motivates us to make sensitive moral judgments.”20 This is what makes our own experience so personal and transformative.

Experience has a corporate component as well. Wesleyan theology reminds us that the experience of the whole church is as relevant as the human experience of all peoples. God’s Good News cannot be liberating for some if it puts others in bondage. “In our attempts to understand the biblical message, we recognize that God’s gift of liberating love embraces the whole of creation.”21 This explains how oppressed groups can find compassion and love in the same Scriptures that their oppressors cite as justification of their own superiority. Thus, “Some facets of human experience tax our theological understanding. Many of God’s people live in terror, hunger, loneliness, and degradation. Everyday experiences of birth and death, growth and life in the created world, and awareness of wider social relations also belong to serious theological reflection.”22 Personal experience should be the foundation on which we interpret each situation, but we must also be willing to embody the experiences of others in order to see with the eyes of Christ.

John Wesley saw the human mind as a complex and mysterious gift from God. Thus, he believed that it is essential that we bring our own reasoning to Scripture when we seek to learn and grow. God gifted humanity with the ability to think through situations as well as to be self-aware. In Scripture when a teacher of the law inquires

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
which is the greatest commandment, Jesus responds, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30-31). Jesus gave all of humanity the gift of being fully present, body, mind, and soul. Our minds were created with the capacity to think and question, and this is yet further evidence that human beings were made in the image of God.

It is profoundly liberating to see Scripture affirm that the mind is as important as our feelings and physical beings. Reason also implies each critical reader of the Scriptures does not need to take another’s interpretation as the final word on any topic. By affirming our ability to reason, God invites us to question and wrestle with the meaning of Bible passages as we struggle to make conclusions about God’s desire for our lives. Even in our uncertainty, we are loving God with our whole minds. Jesus also acknowledges that in addition to loving God, fulfilling the commandments requires a loving engagement with our neighbor as well. This means,

By reason we read and interpret Scripture. By reason we determine whether our Christian witness is clear. By reason we ask questions of faith and seek to understand God’s action and will. By reason we organize the understandings that compose our witness and render them internally coherent. By reason we test the congruence of our witness to the biblical testimony and to the traditions that mediate that testimony to us. By reason we relate our witness to the full range of human knowledge, experience, and service.23

That God endowed humanity with the capacity to apply reasoning skills to all areas of life, including the faith walk, is a breathtaking demonstration of God’s trust. To be made in the image of a God who thinks, creates, reconsiders, and conceptualizes, reveals the joy God takes in people using all of themselves to their fullest capacity. At the same time, the Scriptures point out that it is not reason alone that honors God. We must also use our physical bodies (strength) as well as our spirits (emotions) in order to worship God in totality. Human beings are a complete union of physical atoms and ethereal contemplations.

While United Methodists hold to an Arminian understanding of God’s grace as preeminent in the Scriptures, Wesleyan theology also fuels the adoption of a contemplative, non-dualistic paradigm for living in God’s world. The United Methodist Book of Discipline speaks again,

In theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of Scripture without displacing Scripture’s primacy for faith and practice. These four sources—each making distinctive contributions, yet all finally working together—guide our quest as United Methodists for a vital and appropriate Christian witness.\(^{24}\)

This allows Centering Prayer to be a part of a faithful witness and discipline for Christians in this faith tradition. Though not everyone will find it beneficial, those who have been faithful to other Methodist practices of piety (personal holiness) and mercy (corporate holiness) may find that Centering Prayer is able to engage the spirit of the practitioner in life-giving ways not previously known.

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The Journey Has Many Helpers

Centering Prayer is meant to be practiced repeatedly in a certain way, so that the process becomes ingrained in the neuronal pathways of the brain. Regular practice also helps the supplicant maintain the interpersonal connection he or she has created with God’s Spirit. This allows the individual to foster a humble, receptive state of mind while living in the world. Centering Prayer fosters a sense of oneness and inclusion with all of God’s creation. Making Centering Prayer a daily practice changes the way individuals react with the world around them. However, not everyone can or will maintain this particular practice. There are other forms of contemplative practices that engage the heart, mind, and soul differently. These may be utilized in addition to or instead of Centering Prayer.

*Lectio Divina* is an ancient prayer practice that allows one to meditate on Scripture in such a way the word of God is experienced on a different level than can be achieved through simply reading or studying. Literally meaning “Divine Reading,” this practice requires that the practitioner select a section of Scripture as small as a sentence or paragraph, or as large as a whole passage. Then he or she should read the selection several times, listening to how the text speaks or inspires. The passage of Scripture then is turned over, perhaps several times, in the mind and meditated upon. Lastly, the passage is prayed over and further contemplated. Because each step is done mindfully and with the intention to unify the body, mind, and spirit with the Word of God, Lectio Divina is a different, more nuanced practice than mere meditation.

For anyone who deals with attention-deficit disorder or struggles to stay still and focus, prayer has many movement-oriented aspects as well. Body prayer is any practice
that uses the body or another activity as a way to enter into prayer while being physically engaged. It could be as simple as coloring names to be prayed over as *Praying in Color* teaches\(^{25}\) or praying with mandalas\(^{26}\) or praying the Jesus Prayer.\(^{27}\) Walking in a prayerful state invigorates the body as well as the mind and spirit. Yoga and other body movement forms can be used to allow the breath and kinetic movement to lift the prayerful heart toward God. Writing a gratitude journal does not have to be a mental process only. If done while addressing God and writing thoughts and remembrances of gratitude, this is very much a bodily form of prayer.

These prayer practices are only some of the ways people can expand their connection to God. People can pray many times a day in many ways by incorporating God into the ordinary aspects of their lives. Not all the prayer forms mentioned are necessarily contemplative, but all can achieve the goal of communion with God. Ultimately, each person should seek the prayer forms that bring him or her joy.

**Naysayers Abound**

The detractors of contemplative prayer forms tend to give attention to the more mystical aspects of spirituality. Howard Peth’s book *The Dangers of Contemplative Prayer* is a criticism of the contemplative disciplines, and the following is an overview of the author’s main objections.

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\(^{25}\) Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007). Praying in Color is a spiritual practice found in a variety of books by Sybil Macbeth elucidating the many ways people can actively engage their creative side while directing the outcome to God in a kataphatic form of prayer.


For some believers, contemplative practices trigger an innate distrust of a system that relies on emotion or inner reflection. For them, it evokes a fear of increased susceptibility to the darker forces in the world. Opponents like Peth, who tend to describe meditative and Quietist practices as unreliable and unbiblical, take a more literal approach to the Scriptures, preferring to interpret Scripture from a solely a cognitive or literal viewpoint.

Comprised mainly of condemnatory attacks masquerading as evidence, the arguments in Peth’s book attempt to describe what the contemplative movement is doing and why the various practices are non-biblical. Peth’s objections to contemplative prayer are neither comprehensive nor substantiated. His descriptions often misrepresent what a contemplative pray-er experiences and why he or she may feel called to practice it. A primary misunderstanding about Centering Prayer is evident in his description of it as an attempt to “empty the mind.” He believes this eliminates the subject’s moral defenses, leaving him or her susceptible to negative influences.

Peth’s description of this empty-minded prayer form conjures up images of a vast wasteland, or a passive emptiness, an untended mind that is fertile ground for negative thoughts or demonic possession. This is a misnomer. First, it assumes that emptying the mind—if possible—leaves the person unaware of what is happening. In Centering Prayer the pray-er is always aware, even if he or she is not necessarily active. The practice itself teaches the mind how to be present in a receptive, non-directive way. The desire is for the

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29 Ibid., 33.
mind to resist distraction, not to surrender its autonomy. Centering Prayer is not an emptying, but rather an opening of the mind into the hands of God.

Additionally, Peth criticizes the use of a repeated word during Centering Prayer, claiming it is a mantra and thus attributed to non-Christian sources.\(^{30}\) However, while a traditional mantra is prayed over and over to induce a different level of consciousness, the sacred word used in Centering Prayer is only utilized as a gentle reminder to let go of distracting thoughts when they intrude on the mind. The most important distinction between the sacred word and a mantra is that in Centering Prayer, the word itself is not the focus or the purpose of the prayer. Rather, it is a merely a training tool that allows the pray-er to let go of egoic chatter in the mind and find peace beyond thoughts.

Some of Peth’s distrust of Centering Prayer is also attributed to the negative experience he had with others promoting the concept. In his book, Peth chastises Richard Foster and early Quaker George Fox for their support of this prayer form, claiming Christian meditative prayer has no use for the Bible. Peth hyperfocuses on certain Scriptures to denounce contemplative prayer, stating, “the “Silence” of Contemplative prayer has NO USE of the Bible (emphasis his).”\(^{31}\) This makes the erroneous assumption that the Bible is necessary for people to be spiritually connected to God. It fails to account for the many people through the ages who either lived before the Scriptures were canonized or lived without access to a Bible. While “all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 75.
3:16,17), even this verse does not insist it is necessary for any of these things. As this Scripture was written in the first century, it is referring to the only Scriptures available at that time: the Hebrew Scriptures. To presume that the early Christians could not be in deeply loving relationships with God without direct access to the written Scriptures, is to discount any work of the Holy Spirit unless the Scriptures are present. While there are some prayer forms like Lectio Divina that use Scripture to connect to God intensely, others do not. This does not make these prayers anti-biblical but perhaps pre-biblical. Nor does it diminish their results.

Peth’s antipathy toward this type of prayer is evident when he describes, “this thing called “Contemplative Prayer,” is absolutely the wrong way to satisfy the hunger to get closer to God!” (emphasis his). 32 Again, this author presumes that he knows the wrong and right ways to commune with God. There is a fear that not all voices in the world are God’s voice. If proponents of the prayer say they can hear God’s voice in contemplative practices, detractors presume they may also hear the voice of the devil or evil powers in the world. This group sees Christ and Satan in an eternal, literal battle for souls, and it does not want Christians attempting forms of prayer that could make Satan’s work easier. 33

Peth and other critics of contemporary contemplation also believe that ancient prayer practices have been hijacked by evil spirits and are popularized by modernity and celebrity. The assumption here is that Christians are weak-minded and gullible and thus

32 Ibid., vii.

33 Ibid., 62.
unable to discern between evil and good. Peth wrongly assumes that the goal of contemplative prayer is to achieve an altered state of consciousness by the emptying of the mind. Blatantly untrue, Peth uses this misrepresentation of contemplative prayer to manipulate his readers and cause an aversion to alternative prayer forms. Peth claims that he fears contemplative practitioners will be swayed from The Truth, but more likely he fears a loss of the power he has as the solitary arbiter and interpreter of this truth.

Peth makes a valid point when he recognizes that some of contemplative Christianity’s practices resemble eastern religious practices, like Transcendental Meditation.\(^{34}\) His error is when he then immediately discounts them as evil. Peth’s narrow and rigid view of prayer does not allow him to see God at work throughout the world, meeting God’s people in the unique contexts of their own understandings and experiences. Any practice that draws people from many religions to the heart of God is a positive sign of God’s omnipresence. God is everywhere, in all places and at all times, and since all truth is God’s truth, Christianity cannot be the only place where God is present. Transcendental Meditation is not Christian prayer and Christian prayer is not Transcendental Meditation, but what Peth fails to recognize is that both have the same goal: creating a more peaceful, loving, empathetic people. This is the goal of many a Christian—to be more Christlike. When Buddhists or Muslims utilize prayer techniques bringing them to seek justice, peace, and love, it is insular and erroneous to assume that this will yield an evil outcome.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 46.
Peth also fails to acknowledge the divergent views of Scripture throughout history. Thus, his use of Scripture as a hammer is inappropriate. Because Peth views faith from a determinist standpoint, he will never legitimize practices that view God, and therefore a relationship with God, as mutable depending on the free will of the praying person. Yet moving beyond a strictly cognitive approach to God is precisely what practitioners of contemplative prayer are seeking.

In his introduction, Peth notes, “In just a few years, literally thousands of Christians—pastors, youth leaders, and ordinary believers—have paid large sums of money to learn techniques that take them into “the Silence” where they are told they can hear God’s voice.” He then goes on to share his belief that only diabolical voices are at work in this silence. What he is unwilling to consider is the possibility that these many people of faith have found a viable way to draw closer to God. He believes these people are being misled in spite of their own testimony that they are finding illumination in their relationship with God.

Many times in the book, Peth condemns Centering Prayer with a particular interpretation of a Scriptural verse he believes discredits the concept. He states that unless something is supported by the black ink of the New Testament, it is not a Christian teaching. While many Protestants hold to that belief, it naïvely discounts that much of the Judeo-Christian heritage involved people seeking to get close to God long before the Scriptures were codified, or most believers were literate. It is unrealistic to expect the

\[^{35}\text{Ibid., vii.}
\[^{36}\text{Ibid., 72-78.}\]
Bible to answer every question a Christian might encounter in his life, mainly when the
majority of the New Testament is comprised of historical narratives and letters written to
the church in the first century. Peth attempts to bolster his position by using words like
inerrancy and infallibility, yet these words were never used to describe the Bible until
after the Protestant Reformation. If there were only one understanding of New Testament
Scripture throughout the various Christian traditions, Peth might have a point. However,
the fact that various groups have never agreed uniformly on all aspects of either the
translation or interpretation of God’s Word is evidence that this ambiguity works by
allowing God’s spirit to move different people to different conclusions; it does not insist
every Christian experience must be uniform. Ironically, the same freedom that allows
Peth to choose a more literal interpretation of the Scriptures now prevents him from
offering the same freedom to others.

What Peth and his contemporaries fear is that contemplative habits tempt people
away from the true doctrine of the Church.37 That reveals this detractor believes he alone
has the one true doctrine of the church, thus elevating one person or group’s beliefs above
all other aspects of spirituality. Thus, contemplative practices, which were initially shared
by those in the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox faith, cannot be the source of the
single truth. Critics of Centering Prayer also cite the many examples of the ways in which
contemplative prayer mirrors aspects of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism,
and Islam. To their limited understanding, this is synonymous with dabbling in the
Occult.

37 Ibid., 54.
People with Peth’s perspective have a fundamental distrust of others who have experienced God in these alternative ways. The various Christian traditions that make claims upon us may contain differing insights of what is considered truth and validity. For United Methodists, it is not considered a bad thing to have differing views on any theological proposition.\(^{38}\)

Peth’s book specifically identifies contemporary practitioners as heretics: all Quakers, Richard Foster, Rick Warren, Robert Webber, Brian McLaren, Dallas Willard and anyone associated with the emerging or emergent church.\(^{39}\) It is unfortunate that many people of faith want what they consider the best for all other believers but are then dismissive of all experiences that are not their own. Since there has never been a singular Christian understanding of God, salvation, atonement, or Scripture throughout time, it is painful to know that some people who love and profess Jesus as their Lord consider others with different viewpoints to be among the followers of Satan or the Occult.

When Protestant detractors of the contemplative life assume there is only one specific way to read, understand, and experience the Scripture, they do a disservice to all the Christians who lived before the Reformation. They refuse to recognize that for the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity, various religious groups interpreted God’s

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 56.
Word in differing ways. Still, these discrepancies did not prevent the early Christians from having meaningful, faith-filled union with the Creator God in any age.

Richard Foster considers Centering Prayer a unique type of praying that is not suited for everyone. It is not for the novice he notes, “while we are all equally precious in the eyes of God, we are not all equally ready to listen to God’s speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence.”

The gift of Centering Prayer is that it does not merely allow a person to know God, but it also opens the heart of the praying person to be known by God. That is a wholly different, utterly vulnerable experience than traditional prayer. Not all believers are ready to trust God to that degree. Fear of what God will request of their innermost selves prevents some from seeking this type of an openness or union with God.

The spiritual journey must allow for a diversity of experience and understanding, or else people would never grow and mature from life’s lessons; they would merely exist in the ebb and flow of the world. Mere existence condones a spiritual loneliness that violates the image of a three-in-one Creator who is integrated with creation. To merely exist without experiencing the pain, joy, and diversity of life would be hell—a life devoid of God. Most believers are not willing to live in that space. Thankfully, God never asks us to do so.

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PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY
Faith in God is not meant to be merely a rational understanding of beliefs and doctrinal assent, but a connection of the human spirit to the Spirit of God. Love relationships, earthly and heavenly, are not sustained merely through the mutual belief of both parties, but rather through a connection of deep knowing one another. As Christians, the object of our love is Christ, the source of all creation. Just as with human relationships, the more time one spends in pure heart to heart bonding with the Triune God, the more accurately a person can reflect the Christ he or she strives to follow in mind, body, and spirit. This wonderous connection of a human being to God can be nurtured through the action of prayers to become a union of the two hearts spending time together. Prayer has the twofold benefit of allowing one to be present with God, while also fostering the betterment of the self as the person becomes less judgmental and critical of him or herself and others. While generations of Christians have undoubtedly observed these profound effects of prayer, science can now confirm how this is happening.

Scientific research in the past thirty years has made incredible strides in the field of neuroscience. Except for a few forward-thinking scientists in the early twentieth
century, most brain researchers believed that once a human being entered adulthood, all of the brain matter formed was fully intact and only had the capacity to diminish. Following this belief, neuroscientists generally taught that all damage caused by a brain injury or head trauma was irreversible. This theory of brain physiology has been proven false. Discoveries in the 1960s and 1970s offered advances in our understanding of brain development, correcting decades of wrong assumptions. Long Term Potentiation (LTP)\(^1\) is now the most intensively studied and best understood mode of neuroplasticity. LTP shows that the brain changes on the cellular level in response to learning and memory exercises.\(^2\) This means “the adult brain is not only capable of changing, but it does so continuously throughout life, in response to everything we do and every experience we have.”\(^3\) The ongoing advances in brain imaging technology are also giving us a new understanding of the neuronal changes that can occur in response to human thought, as a result of meditation, or through medical manipulation. It is anyone’s guess how these early findings will continue to evolve with time and technology.

The field of neuroscience is also examining how spiritual practices such as meditation can allow the neuroplasticity of the brain promote inner healing. In other words, the spiritual thoughts of someone practicing Centering Prayer actually affects the

\(^1\) Moheb Costandi, *Neuroplasticity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 54-56. Long Term Potentiation is the strengthening of synapses in the brain which fosters learning and memory in the hippocampus. This has been done through brain stimulation (individual and electronic) and through pharmacological means.

\(^2\) Ibid., 11.

\(^3\) Ibid., 3.
neurochemical makeup of the brain. Prayer offers a union of the soul via spirit, which impacts the body, and brings about a change in the mind of the individual. This process of healing actually mirrors the theology of a Trinity who is one God in three persons: inner healing of emotions can happen when the intentions of the thoughts (prayers) cause changes in the brain chemistry (body) which produce a substantive change in the outlook of the person (mind). A three-in-one wholeness.

Parneet Pal, a Columbia and Harvard trained physician, believes humans can create a compassionate society. Pal studied the effects of mindfulness on individuals in high-pressure jobs in order to explore what was happening to their brains on a cellular level. Her knowledge of various studies supporting the physiological benefits from regular meditative or prayerful practices pushed her research deeper.

Pal’s research with epigenetics has determined that while an individual’s DNA does not change, the expression or repression of certain genes can be influenced by what an individual eats, his or her level of activity, sleeping habits, and stress levels. This affirms Pal’s belief that humans have the power to impact their wellbeing at a cellular level. She contends, “Though we may inherit a genetic predisposition to various chronic

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6 Ibid. Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life.
diseases\(^7\) we are empowered through the choices we make each day, to keep those from turning into reality.”\(^8\) Another publication offers similar insights,

New scientific studies on epigenetics show the chemical modifications made to DNA that change phenotype without altering the underlying genetic sequence have benefits that are linked to meditation. Based on research from a group of international scientists, meditation may be able to stave off detrimental inflammation. Mindfulness meditation is based off of Buddhist practices that emphasize aligning one’s focus with the present in a nonjudgmental way to increase awareness, calming the mind and body.\(^9\)

According to these sources, prayer and meditation can lead to changes in the way that certain genes are turned off or on. Through prayer, we have the capacity to use our minds to heal our bodies. Instead of disputing its validity, science has now become a partner in explaining a spiritual-biological function of contemplative prayer. When people recognize and change negative, self-destructive neurological thought processes by thinking or praying, it benefits the body, mind, and spirit physiologically, fostering somatic health in addition to emotional healing.

**From Possibility to Practicality**

While the science behind brain neuroplasticity is becoming more common knowledge, some may not be convinced that it is a corollary of such profound emotional restoration. Because of this, it is important to look at the work of psychologists and

\(^7\) Some of these are heart disease, cancer, diabetes, anxiety, depression, and autoimmune disorders.

\(^8\) Ibid. Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life.

counselors who also specialize in brain science and psychology. Dr. Daniel Siegel has written several books linking our social and emotional health to brain changes. His work has confirmed that those who become aware of their internal motivations and have worked to change these, is what Seigel calls Mindsight. It is an “important ability that allows us to see and shape the inner workings of our own minds.”\textsuperscript{10} He wholeheartedly supports the premise that the synergistic integration of our mind, body, and soul brings about demonstrative well-being. Siegel’s book, \textit{Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation}, documents the plethora of positive outcomes for patients who willingly embraced mindfulness as an approach to emotional health.\textsuperscript{11} He also shares times clients did not have the patience or inclination to do the work necessary to change their thought patterns. Each one left his office annoyed that he refused to treat them with medication. When we are in pain, we often seek the quickest and easiest solutions. However, a simple answer to a complex problem rarely suffices.\textsuperscript{12}

As a clinical professor of psychiatry, Siegel is aware of the rich interior of the human mind, describing it as “filled with thoughts and feelings, memories and dreams, hopes and wishes. Also, a turbulent place where we experience the dark side of all these wonderful feelings and thoughts—fears, sorrows, dreads, regrets, nightmares. Each


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 145-165.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 126.
threatening to drag us down below to the dark depths.”

13 Siegel’s life work has been to help individuals connect their minds to their hearts by paying attention to their bodies.

Dr. Rick Hanson, a psychologist and author of *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*, has written extensively on the importance of a healthy self-image and how to develop it when struggling with feelings of disdain, contempt, shame, and unworthiness. He advocates for individuals to embrace the concept of being a friend to themselves, as it is essential for a healthy worldview. Hanson expounds on the same principles of neuroplasticity, claiming it is the medium through which people can approach the mind-body practices that facilitate emotional healing.

14 Secular scientists and faith practitioners are coming to the same conclusion: the mind-body connection is paramount to good mental health. The person of faith merely extends this conclusion to recognize the genius of a God who orchestrated the creation of human beings—inside and out—with everything needed for the journey of life and well-being.

With no knowledge of the neurobiological evidence affirming these practices, the ancient church patriarchs and matriarchs found faith-filled meditative practices that connected their spiritual hearts to God. They prayed because it created a real religious benefit to their walk with God. Today, skeptics may say that the neuronal changes caused by prayer do not have anything to do with God and are nothing more than electrical

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13 Ibid., xi.

impulses between synapses. Yet, the work of psychiatrists Thomas Siegel and Curt
Thompson\textsuperscript{15} gives credence to the idea that specific attention to our emotions allows
humans to react to our impulses in an appropriate and productive manner. This result
requires an emotionally mature response that must be learned, especially if one grew up
accustomed to responding to strong emotions reactively rather than proactively.

This dynamic between mind and body is not only biological, but also faith based.
First, the choice to seek inner healing in any way falls under the auspices of spirituality
and is therefore God’s domain. When people seek a higher meaning for life, they actually
seek a connection with God instead of abandoning themselves to a fatalistic
complacency.

Second, in the same way that our physical bodies have an immune system
designed to recognize and attack potentially harmful entities, our souls were also
designed with a type of spiritual armor.

When we develop the spaciousness of a receptive mind, we come to see mental
activities, including states of mind, as just the activities of the mind, not the
totality of who we are. Resting in the “hub” of the mind, we can achieve a sense
of our receptive self, opening ourselves to a world of new possibilities and
creating the underlying condition for state integration.\textsuperscript{16}

Though not everyone takes advantage of this, the ability is there, nonetheless.

Third, inner healing is observable. When a mentally, spiritually, or emotionally ill
person seeks out healing arts and practices that change his or her life in appreciable ways,
others witness this. Thus, witnessing someone overcome great difficulties to become a

\textsuperscript{15} Thompson, \textit{Anatomy of the Soul}, 247.

\textsuperscript{16} Siegel, \textit{Mindsight}, 209.
happy, healthy, whole person can provide the impetus that others need to seek help. When this is done in a community of faith where believers provide each other with support and accountability, a healthy Body of Christ becomes a healing place in the world.

Finally, because Christians believe in a Creator God who spoke the world into existence, we recognize that the physical world embodies the Creator. The same energy used to create the universe is a part of every structure and creature on Earth. Contemporary pastor and theologian Rob Bell describes it as the connection between energy and involvement.\(^{17}\) Bell reminds us of the scientific fact that everything is made up of atoms, tiny particles of energy in motion. If each singular atom that comprises our bodies is a tiny receptacle of God-created energy, the “Primary essence of reality is energy flow.”\(^{18}\) Thus, there is no clear delineation between the material world and the spiritual world. In the words of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, “Psychosomatic medicine recognized the extent to which a person can form and regulate the processes of his illness through his own physical and mental influence—what can best be described as his ‘human’ influence.”\(^{19}\) Additionally, Moltmann holds a Trinitarian understanding of creation; he sees God infused within all aspects of creation itself. This is not a form of pantheism. Moltmann explains this as he elaborates on insights of Heinrich Heine’s

\(^{17}\) Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 44.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 45.

panentheism,\textsuperscript{20} “God does not manifest himself to an equal degree in everything. On the contrary, he manifests himself to a varying extent in different things and the drive to achieve a higher degree of infinity is inherent in everything.\textit{Everything is not God: God is everything}” (emphasis his).\textsuperscript{21} This infusion of God’s loving nature in all things naturally corresponds to his belief that “The whole human being, body, soul and spirit is the image of God on earth.”\textsuperscript{22} This is why Centering Prayer brings one to unity in Christ. It is the very goodness of the created being (Gn 1:31), co-mingling with the Creator that inspired its existence: the image and the authentic are together at rest (Gn 1:27).

Humanity embodies the same energy as the Creator, a whole energy that God called good and provides our physical bodies with the capacity to correct that which has gone wrong.

Christians believe God created the world, even if they disagree about the specifics. It is this created world, infused, and breathed into physicality that reflects the complete, self-reciprocal love of a triune being. Fr. Thomas Keating asserts that because every human being has a spark of the divine Creator within him, every person longs for something he has somehow once known or tasted.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, all human beings possess an

\textsuperscript{20} Panentheism from Moltmann’s Trinitarian point of view sees all of creation as an interconnected web which the Spirit binds together and differentiates between things bringing a harmony to everything. Thus the universe must be an open-ended system for God to work in all things and through all things.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 240.

\textsuperscript{23} M. Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating and Thomas E. Clarke, \textit{Finding Grace at the Center: The Beginning of Centering Prayer}. (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2007), 54.
innate inner yearning to reconnect with a God with whom they were once united. Centering Prayer allows the practitioner to find inner healing because it puts the human heart in the real presence of the creator God, whose very nature is one of wholeness and love. Centering Prayer, largely lost for centuries, is now finding an audience in the twenty-first century. In a time when so many people are struggling with feelings of depression, shame, anxiety, worthlessness, and isolation, this may be happening for a specific reason.

**A Theology Towards Wholeness**

The southeastern United States is sometimes called the Bible Belt. In North Carolina that has become a term of pride with the high concentration of conservative, evangelical Christians, Southern Baptists, Methodists, and in many parts of North Carolina, Scotch Irish Calvinists. Many congregants of these churches perpetuate a particular view of the Scriptures and requirements for salvation. Weaned on the concept developed by the nineteenth century revivalist Charles Finney, the Sinner’s Prayer and altar calls have long been staples of American Evangelicalism. Thus, revivalistic preaching moved from the original process of sharing of God’s love and inviting a response from the Holy Spirit, to developing a formula, a “mechanical methodology that

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24 Matt Rosenberg, “The Bible Belt Extends Throughout the American South,” ThoughtCo., updated May 26, 2019, https://www.thoughtco.com/the-bible-belt-1434529. Rosenberg reports the term Bible Belt was first used by the American writer and satirist H.L. Mencken in 1925 when he was reporting on the Scopes Monkey Trial which took place in Dayton, Tennessee. Mencken used it as a derogatory term for the southeastern United States. In 1961: Zelinsky defined the Bible Belt as a region stretching from West Virginia and southern Virginia to southern Missouri in the north to Texas and northern Florida in the south.

could be performed on any given night at any given revival meeting. The act of salvation went from something beyond our control to something we could plan for and lead.”

Finney did this by presenting salvation as a black-and-white, all-or-nothing choice; one chose salvation through Christ, or the only alternative was to go to hell. Ken Wytsma, founder of The Justice Conference and president of Kilns College in Oregon, calls this the Salvation Industrial Complex. In his book which uncovers the roots of racial injustice and privilege in the United States, Wytsma explains that the benefit of this form of evangelism was the effectiveness with which it encouraged people to get into a real, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The drawback of such preaching was its implication that one only needed a personal relationship with Christ to be assured of his or her salvation. It did not convey the biblical directive to care for the least among us and promote justice for all who are oppressed. Wytsma sees this self-focused, belief-centered interpretation of salvation as the foundation for religious forms of exceptionalism, a doctrine that permits Christians to ignore the fate of oppressed people if they are confident their own salvation is secure.

The “turn or burn” mentality of the Bible Belt is not what the early church taught or believed. As the Gospel was spread for several centuries following the resurrection, it was Jesus stories that were shared around meals and in homes. The Christ message was to

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27 Ibid., 117.

28 Ibid., 121.
love and care for neighbors as a sign of ones love for God. The new body being formed included everyone as Galatians 3:28 boasts, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians is full of teaching and coaxing the people from diverse nations, religions, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds to be unified. Salvation was meant to be a way of life that invited all others to become a part of the loving, self-giving dynamic humanity in the world was created to embody. A Trinitarian expression of a community of love.

Following writings of Athanasius (296-373) who helped author and defend the Nicene Creed we still recite today, there is no reference to hell or what penitent people must “do.” It is a statement of faith in the Christ and who our Trinitarian God is for us. To impart the love of God and not the damnation, Athanasius writes

If they ask why he did not appear through other more noble parts of creation, or use some nobler instrument, as the sun or moon or stars or fire or air, but merely a human being, let them know that the Lord came not to be put on display but to heal and to teach those who were suffering. One being put on display only needs to appear and dazzle the beholders; but one who heals and teaches does not simply sojourn, but is of service to those in need and appears as those who need him can bear, lest by exceeding the need of those who suffer he trouble the very ones in need and the manifestation of the divine be of no benefit to them.  

The teachings which the Eastern Orthodox Church still maintains the understanding of God as a Trinity, in a relational partnership, as opposed to the western Roman church which has perpetuated a hierarchical view of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Western view fits well with the Constantinian adoption of the Christian faith giving validity to a

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patriarchal view of God and church. These developments in western Christianity also coincided with the teaching of Penal Substitutionary Atonement\textsuperscript{30} and Original Sin,\textsuperscript{31} supporting the concept of human depravity that was so central to revival preaching. Paradoxically, these theologies which promulgated a negative view of humanity seemed to thrive even while the country itself promoted the self-privileging concept of Manifest Destiny.\textsuperscript{32}

When one learns that Original Sin is not a view held by all Christians across time and that the concept of total depravity has not been a part of orthodoxy from the beginning of Christianity, it causes one to wonder if there are unhealthy misperceptions of the faith that need to be reexamined and jettisoned. Dr. Tony Jones, Emergent Church leader, contends that our eternal fate is not in jeopardy when we consider the Apostle Paul's reference to sin in Romans 5, noting other Christian traditions do not lay the same burdens on its believers as post-Reformation western theologies. Jones notes the various viewpoints that evolved from the church have differing expectations of the atonement, Eastern (Orthodox, Coptic, and Byzantine Rite Catholic) Christians take Paul to mean what we inherited from Adam is \textit{death}.

\textsuperscript{30} Penal Substitutionary Atonement is often taught at the exclusion of other atonement theories.

\textsuperscript{31} Original Sin is the concept some believe the Bible teaches as disobedience in Garden of Eden initiates all of humankind into a state of sin or total depravity that is perpetually inherited by every human being and condemns each person outside of God's grace. Not all Christians hold to this understanding which is also referred to as the Fall of humankind (from grace).

Western (Augustinian) Christians take Paul to mean that our inheritance from Adam is death and guilt.

Reformed (Calvinist) Christians take Paul to mean that from Adam we inherit death and guilt and total depravity.\(^{33}\)

Each of these subsequent theologies saddles its followers with a ponderous burden of escalating shame. Jones posits that instead of holding to a contorted physiology of Original Sin passed on through Adam’s semen as began with St. Augustine and now Roman Catholic doctrine affirms. Instead, we should adopt the view that humanity does sin and accept the Apostle Paul’s view that something was passed on to humanity without micro defining it, “To understand the universality of the human proclivity to sin and admit our obvious fallibility in life means we are neither immoral nor perfect. Simply understood, we all make mistakes and we die.”\(^{34}\) Perhaps this honest assessment of our human condition would make it easier to forgive ourselves for our mistakes and would make our search for God less tortuous.

This project contends that many of the spiritual wounds that afflict present day believers living in the Bible Belt, stem from the punitive, shaming tactics of these reductionist methodologies. Many of these Christians experience such dissonance between what they are taught and what they experience from God that it stunts their ability to find peace within themselves. Many people are drawn to the loving, self-sacrificial, atoning death of Christ on the cross but never move on to accept the freedom that Jesus’ death is meant to offer. Instead, too many believers in Jesus continue to carry


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 127.
feelings of shame and unworthiness that they believe render them undeserving of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. They will give their love to Jesus knowing he loves them enough to die, but they do not take the next step of releasing their sense of guilt. Shame and guilt are insidious with claws that do not let go quickly, producing many born-again Christians who disavow themselves, or self-love—not in the egotistical sense, but with an unwillingness or inability to see themselves as God sees them, as “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). If the spirit of a person is not free, the body and the mind pay a physical and psychic price.

**Original Blessing Makes All Things New**

The Christian church needs a renewed understanding of Jesus Christ and how he relates to creation. This revisioning of Christ will facilitate the healing of the many people of faith who have been damaged by the shame-based, exclusive and deterministic teachings of the church. The concept of a Trinitarian, constantly loving, self-giving God must be resurrected and reaffirmed by God’s people as it was during the first three centuries of the church. Reverting to this original orthodoxy as the model for sharing Christ could result in the spiritual and emotional healing of countless believers.

When studying the creation account, it has become too easy to miss the original blessing God gives to humans in the garden. Created in God’s image, they are to be co-workers in the care and stewardship of everything in their dominion. They heard that the only negative in all the creation story was for “humankind to be alone.” These first blessings are rarely noted and cherished for all God gave humankind to do. Too many Christians focus inordinately on the third chapter of Genesis, to point out the “sin” as the problem with humanity, instead of the manifold blessings God bestowed beforehand.
Many churches spend endless hours bemoaning “the fall” and “original sin,” when neither concept is self-evident in the passage. They have been defined and attributed by later theologians and church overseers.

Current evangelistic strategies are already stepping into this place to correct the mentality that faith is about doing things the right way: saying the right prayer or confessing in a certain way. The post-reformation legalistic understanding of salvation pushes people to see faith as either right or wrong and actions as solely good or bad, and it is no longer an effective way to reach unchurched people. Pastor Verlon Fosner has partnered with a community called Fresh Expressions and is teaching the historical branches of the various atonement perspectives as a new way of evangelizing people in the United States with the message of the love of Christ. Fosner reminds us that John Calvin’s ‘sin-centric’ explanations of salvation had a place in a highly Christianized Europe. However, there are important distinctions to be made, as “substitutionary atonement and penal substitution are not the same things. The former is a Scriptural idea that dates clear back to the practice of the scapegoat in Israel’s history; the latter is a construct of Calvin by merging verses from the book of Romans.”35 The former view says people sin, the latter view says people are sinful (and depraved). Fosner continues to elucidate the fact that every time there has been a push to view the gospel as an oppressive right-wrong, good-bad construct, another voice has arisen to remind the world of God’s unconditional love for humanity. Churches must echo that message and

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35 Verlon Fosner, Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 87.
proclaim that while all are sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). United Methodists are grateful to Jacob Arminius’s voice acknowledging that God’s grace supersedes everything else, demonstrating the Trinitarian, co-equal, self-sacrificing love given to the whole created world.\(^{36}\)

The loving, self-giving mindset embodied by a Trinitarian theology is also the goal of contemplative prayer. Thomas Merton, one of the modern spiritual fathers of the contemplative movement in the twentieth century says, “contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is a spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.”\(^{37}\) To Merton, God’s will is not merely a decree to be followed, but a personal invitation of love. God seeks us in every situation and realizing this also reveals our need to dismantle the exterior façade we put up to the world. To shed our dependence on our exterior life. Fr. Keating says “the contemplative journey involves the purification of the unconscious, (it) is not a magic carpet to bliss. It is an exercise of letting go of the false self, a humbling process, because it is the only self we know.”\(^{38}\) This speaks to the Scripture “unless a grain of wheat dies, it cannot produce fruit” (Jn 12:24). In contemplative prayer, this dying to self then becomes a renewing of life. It is a healing, a saving of our life: the embodiment of our mind, body, and spirit. Only then can

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 88-89.


we be born with new eyes to see God’s world as a gift to love, and that humans are loved unconditionally.  

Fr. Richard Rohr defines contemplation as a quieting of the mind. Indeed, the word ‘contemplate’ comes from the Latin *contemplata*, meaning “to see.” Contemplation is learning how to see the world in a new way. This type of sight involves looking beyond a binary understanding of life as right or wrong, good or bad, black or white. Contemplative prayers provides a means of being present with and for God. According to Rohr, we cannot really be present with our minds, because we are either worrying about the future or reprocessing the past. Both of these preoccupations prevent us from focusing on the here and now. He sees contemplation as a different level of consciousness: one that can only be reached by living in union with God all around and being present to God in the form of daily prayer. For Rohr, contemplation is a long, loving look at the real, not by *doing*, but by simply *being* in the presence of God. 

There is renewed hope in many places as the overwhelming, universal love of God breaks through the walls of shame and guilt that surround so many Christians. Centering Prayer has a place and a purpose in Christian spirituality, and the Bible Belt is desperate for this voice of compassion and reason. The substitutionary death of Christ

39 Ibid., 15-16.


remains the primary sign of what God has done to show the sacrificial nature of coeternal love within the Triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the good news is that this message can be a healing balm for our fallen, fractured world.
CHAPTER 5:
NUTS AND BOLTS FOR A LIFETIME: MAKING IT SO

Learning new concepts can be challenging for people who are comfortable in the way they ordinarily do things. While Christ United Methodist Church has a strong background in intercessory prayer, general Bible studies, and weekend retreats, its membership had never delved into anything related to the mystic traditions. When I asked the members of my Sunday school class if they would like to learn a different kind of prayer, their uncertainty was palpable. Even after I explained contemplative prayer and its benefits, most members sat quietly, avoiding eye contact while others mumbled responses that indicated a combination of skepticism and distrust. The reluctance and reticence of this group revealed an automatic dismissal to try something new. Thankfully, there are other times throughout the Christian year when parishioners seem to be more receptive to something new and different.

Lent 2016 proved to be the best time to introduce contemplative practices to Christ United Methodist Church. I offered to lead church members in a six-week Lenten study exploring three different forms of contemplative prayer: Lectio Divina, Centering Prayer, and Body Prayer. I titled the class *Inner Healing Through Prayer Practices* and

91
the study group ran from February 16, 2016, through March 23, 2016. Each class met for ninety minutes in one of the Sunday school classrooms in the church. The same curriculum was offered on both Tuesday mornings and Wednesday evenings to encourage participation. Four willing participants populated each group.

Ideally, I would have liked to offer a six-week study focusing only on Centering Prayer that allowed the students to really delve into this practice. However, it seemed judicious to offer a variety of exercises to this suburban, evangelical church which, heretofore, had not been previously exposed to contemplative practices. I hoped that the element of choice would have been ideal to help the group navigate through the possible hurdles and stumbling blocks people often encounter when beginning a new habit.

During the first gathering, I covered the basic format and structure of the class and introduced the three types of contemplative prayer. The second, third, and fourth classes were dedicated to addressing Lectio Divina, Centering Prayer, and Body Prayer, respectively. The fifth week, we continued our exploration of Body Prayer with a yoga class that was offered to both classes as well as the entire church. After the Wednesday night meal, adults and youth came to the yoga class, led by a certified yoga teacher from Winston-Salem. The final week of the class, we revisited each of the practices. The last half of the last class was spent in Centering Prayer. Each class followed the same general schedule: opening prayer, questions designed to elicit personal information and allow group members to become acquainted, focused teaching of one of the prayer forms,

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1 Kathryn Tozier is a 500 hour Kripalu RYT. She teaches the Eight Limbs of yoga with special emphasis to Pranayama, alignment, and creative sequencing of asanas with awareness turned inward. She is also certified in Yin Yoga and Restorative Yoga.
reflection and sharing about the previous week’s practice, and a unison closing prayer. To create a calm, receptive mood for the start of each meeting, I made sure that the classroom was prepared prior to each class by eliminating clutter, adding tablecloths to the tables, and playing meditative music as group members entered the space.

**The Autobiography**

During the first session, I distributed a calendar and an outline (included in the Appendices to this project), detailing the focus of each successive class. I explained that over the following six weeks of Lent, the participants would be asked to write out their life stories. The whole assignment was spread out so as not to overwhelm them, and every week they were to write out one particular decade of their history. The first week they were instructed to write about the first ten years of their life. The second week I had them focus on the two decades after their tenth birthday and then they continued to add on each additional decade until the present time. Many of the participants had never written their autobiography, but I explained that as people mature in age and wisdom, the act of physically writing their story, as they remember it, can be revealing and cathartic.

The autobiography assignment had several purposes in the context of this prayer practice. It was meant to stimulate the writer to access parts of their life they may have chosen to ignore. The hope was that as they visited memories, they would become aware of some of the more problematic experiences they might need to unpack. Prayer—particularly Centering Prayer—tends to reveal places of pain that have been unconsciously repressed.

Writing an autobiography permits people to access their pain without being triggered by an external stimulus. Because they are in control of the writing, they can see
the events unfold with a more objective, calm eye as they move toward self-discovery.

Thomas Keating considers contemplative practices to be Divine Therapy,

Empirical evidence seems to be growing that the consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood are stored in our bodies and nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety, and various defense mechanisms. Ordinary rest and sleep do not get rid of them. But with interior silence and the profound rest that this brings to the whole organism, these emotional blocks begin to soften up, and the natural capacity for the human organism to throw off things that are harmful start to evacuate them.²

Keating acknowledges that the thoughts and feelings that emerge in Centering Prayer, “have a certain urgency, energy, and emotional charge to them. You don’t usually know from what particular source or sources they are coming.”³ The autobiography assignment allowed participants to think about their past, while also providing them with an opportunity to reflect on where they had been in comparison to where they were currently. It is important to Inform participants ahead of time that unearthing deep-seated emotional burdens can be an arduous and uncomfortable process, as this permits them to prepare for those feelings. Keating recommends that when these uneasy sensations emerge during prayer, the best approach is to let them come. By acknowledging these emotions and their validity, we give ourselves permission to experience them once again.⁴ Then, after processing these emotions, we are able to release them, just as we have learned to release thoughts. Opening old emotional wounds can be painful, but there


³ Ibid.

⁴ Keating, *Intimacy with God,* 76.
is healing in remembering, especially when individuals have control over the process. Be it autobiography or through exploring Centering Prayer, there is interior safety when it is done in the presence of God.

**The Women’s Retreat**

My second opportunity for teaching Centering Prayer was at an annual retreat for the woman of Christ United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. The women gathered at a beachside retreat center on Oak Island, North Carolina from Friday night through Sunday at noon. Similar to the Lenten study, the retreat taught each of the three prayer practices: Lectio Divina, Centering Prayer, and Body Prayer. Though the women did not write an autobiography over the weekend, they completed a similar writing assignment prior to attending.

The retreat format did not lend itself to having a formal agenda to hand out since tables were not available and the sessions were more relational than lecture style. Still, this allowed me to restructure the sessions to incorporate more discussion and hands-on activities. As the facilitator, I used the same notes from the Lenten study and transmitted the information orally. The group consisted of eighteen women who were full of joy and happy to be together, so they were highly receptive to learning the new prayer formulae together. This did not mean all of them understood what was asked of them, but each was willing to participate. Over the course of the weekend, we came together for four different sessions. The first three lasted 90 minutes, and each was dedicated to exploring

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5 Not to be confused with the primary home church of this project which is Christ United Methodist Church in Salisbury, North Carolina, which is forty-five minutes away from the Charlotte church.
one of the contemplative prayer practices. The final gathering on Sunday morning consisted of sixty minutes of teaching followed by a time of worship. The weekend concluded with all of the women celebrating Holy Communion together. When they were not attending sessions, the women had a fair amount of downtime which allowed them to take advantage of the beach environment. I encouraged them to take walks in a prayerful attitude, enjoying the area and the awareness of their souls in this peaceful place. This walking prayer is a form of body prayer that I taught them over the weekend, and the beach setting was the perfect place for the women to implement it.

First, We Breathe

To glean the benefits of Centering Prayer, one must choose a time when he or she can dedicate at least twenty minutes of uninterrupted time. During Centering Prayer, the positioning of the body should leave one feeling comfortable yet attentive. Sitting upright in a chair with feet perpendicular to the floor is a suitable place to begin. Centering Prayer should always begin with a few minutes of preparation. Slow, deep breaths calm the mind and leave the body receptive for prayer. The initial deep breathing floods the body with fresh oxygen which is both invigorating and cleansing. While quick, shallow breaths cause lightheadedness and stimulate the body for a fight or flight emotional response, the slow, deep breaths stimulate the vagus nerve which connects, in some manner, to most of the major organs. The deep breathing allows the praying person to calm down, slow his or her heart rate, and mentally and physically prepare to enter prayer.

Before starting, the participant should choose a single, sacred word to use when a distraction comes to mind. Distractions come in the form of intrusive thoughts, noises,
muscle twitches, or even slight pains in the body. All of these are normal and to be anticipated. When distractions arise, they pull the mind away from centering on God. Using the sacred word allows one to acknowledge the thought and consciously let it go. Selecting a word with a single syllable is recommended but not required, as the word itself is not central but meant to signal a willingness to let the intrusion go. Some people like to use a descriptive word relating to God such as peace, Jesus, joy, trust, or heal. If using a sacred word does not resonate with the pray-er’s learning style, he or she can form a sacred image instead. This is acceptable, but the image should be the same each time, so the mind does not have to create a new image each time one is needed. Long-time practitioners of Centering Prayer recommend keeping the same sacred word or image for a long time, even for years. This repetition keeps the word more neutral so that it does not become a distraction itself.

If the sacred word or image does not initially help release the distractions, it is helpful to focus on the breath. Taking deep breaths brings the mind immediately to the present. To think about breathing releases whatever was in the mind. Another re-centering action is to push the feet into the floor. These re-starts are not only acceptable, they are part of the practice. Having thoughts and distractions appear should not cause discouragement or frustration; the process of learning to let them go is actually a central part of the prayer itself.

Centering Prayer is not about human will or personal accomplishment; it is about letting go. As Keating wisely asserts, this prayer is about being receptive to God:

“Receptivity is not inactivity…This prayer is a journey into the unknown. It is a call to follow Jesus out of all structured, security blankets and even spiritual practices that serve
as props for the ego. They are all left behind insofar as they are part of or under the influence of the false-self system. Humility is the forgetfulness of the self." When one practices Centering Prayer on a consistent basis, it can become like second nature to the pray-er. Becoming God-conscious through a practice of unconditional love allows one to see herself with new eyes—not through the cloudy lenses of self-interest, but clearly, with new knowledge of her connection to all things. This is transformation from the inside out.

No two prayer sessions will be identical. During any one prayer time, the supplicant may find that his or her mind is constantly distracted, while another time is marked by intense focus. Some prayer times will evoke intense emotions from an overwhelming sense of God's loving spirit, while other prayer times will be quiet and tranquil. There is no correct way to do Centering Prayer; it must unfold naturally within the heart of each individual. “Surrendering oneself to God is a more developed kind of consent. Transformation is completely God's work. We can’t do anything to make it happen. We can only prevent it from happening.” The goal then is simply to be present and open, resting while God works within. Keating would say the intention to be present is more important than the attention given to the practice. Learning to let go of thoughts is to enter into a life of surrender to Christ and to willingly embrace all the unknowns that may entail.

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6 Keating, Open Minds, Open Hearts, 66.

7 Ibid.
Though twenty minutes is the minimum amount of time that should be allocated for this prayer, this does not mean that the pray-er should expect to achieve inner quiet and openness for the entirety of that time. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal Priest who has written books on Centering Prayer, confesses that by committing to at least twenty minutes per session, the pray-er may get two actual minutes of non-intruding thoughts.\(^8\) The other eighteen minutes are spent recognizing thoughts, allowing the mind to attach the sacred word, and gently releasing the word and thought together. She insists one should not downplay the importance of releasing these thoughts that come. It is in exercising the release that the brain is changing its neural pathways through neuroplasticity. As thoughts are redirected, the brain creates new pathways, rendering old, negative, or destructive thought trails obsolete. By eliminating the thought patterns that originally resulted in pain, the pray-er is free to embrace a life that is more positive and affirming.

Letting go of distractions with the sacred word is teaching the praying soul how to deal with distractions, in the brain and with life itself. The release provides experience, one thought at a time, which develops that habit. The letting go should also vanquish all self-imposed expectations, shame, and pain that has caused harm and left a false self-perception. Father Keating believes Centering Prayer is not to be about concentrating correctly but about receiving God’s spirit. The sacred word is designed to foster an open attitude. At times the interior movement toward God does not even need the word. The

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human spirit learns how to connect to God’s Spirit, which is always ready and waiting. This sacred place of union with God is often missed because of our busy lives, hurrying to do instead of quietly being. Using our thoughts to refocus our mind gives our own inner spirit room to expand in ways we might once have resisted. Finding peace in a prayer relationship provides growth and development one might not have considered.

**A Word of Caution**

Centering Prayer is prayer, but it is also a means to promote profound self-awareness of one’s inner essence. Thomas Merton calls this our “self” and describes it as what remains when a person strips away all protective mechanisms of the personality. In contrast, our “false self” is the protected facade that we present to the world. Richard Rohr calls this the “ego self,” and it is not necessarily a negative part of our personality; it serves functional purposes in day to-day living. The danger comes when the ego or false self becomes so powerful that it is the only driving force behind the mind and body. The ego allows human beings to survive in a harsh world, but it does so from a place of pure self-interest. The true self is the pure inner person—the God-created individual with no fears and no defenses. Self-awareness is the process of awakening to the real inner world where an individual can see oneself authentically. Only when people begin to

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9 Keating, *Open Minds, Open Hearts*, 41.


12 Ibid. xxi.
distinguish the voices within themselves—the good, the bad, and the ugly—can they choose which voice to follow.

Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We often gave them a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of “Christian” countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else—and often more so, I am afraid.¹³

The goal is to recognize when the ego defense is controlling one’s thoughts or actions through fear. If the false self has become an excuse to justify unloving actions, Centering Prayer makes this evident.

In Centering Prayer, the mind is being trained to come before God with a complete vulnerability that may initially be uncomfortable. To avoid this discomfort, many people construct walls around their true selves, protecting them from the pain that they fear will come with being truly known. They do not allow themselves to fully trust others and may even extend this wariness to their relationship with God. Centering Prayer actively initiates the pouring out of the soul precisely because this is the only way to be fully known by God. In the Scriptures, the Apostle Paul used the Greek verb kenōō meaning “to empty oneself,” when he described Christ pouring himself out for humanity (Phil 2:5-8). Centering Prayer becomes our opportunity to pour ourselves out to God, to be Christlike with our willingness to expose our inner selves to God, and by extension others. This activity is a self-revealing, over and over again. It is love pouring itself into the world.

¹³ Ibid.
Centering Prayer is learning to live a life of kenosis. While it does get easier over time, this does not mean it will always be easy or comfortable. Early in the prayer-learning process, the opening up reveals the bare heart to the Lord, allowing God to see the dark or shadowed places in our souls. Just like a physical injury, the wound is real, and it cannot heal without exposure to medicine, air, or time.

Centering Prayer tends to bring painful issues to the surface. Therefore, prior to engaging in this practice, one must be open to the possibility of revisiting old or unhealed emotional wounds. This is not because anyone desires to revisit painful events, but rather because until they are exposed and addressed, the pain they cause cannot be alleviated. Unaddressed, they are still present, and the resulting emotional pain takes up space in the mind, saps emotional energy, and blocks one’s true essence. Once healed however, these silent impediments to inner freedom no longer cause fear or worry. It is the willingness to sit with our sins and shortcomings which ultimately enables us to control the power they have. During Centering Prayer, we are provided with a safe place to look at our failings and wrongdoings, to cry over them, and to witness them in God’s presence. God is not surprised by anything we bring. In prayer, the Lord has been waiting for the praying soul to give these things up willingly. In the openness and vulnerability of this prayer, each person is held by God and loved precisely for who he or she is. This is the moment when healing occurs.

There is no perfect recipe for this prayer to be effective. There is no right or wrong way to be with God; there is only an open and willing heart. This is the center of true love. This is what the ancient church mothers and fathers called union with God,
For Christians who have gone to their own depths, which is not all of them I am afraid, there is the uncovering of an indwelling Presence, which might even be experienced as what Martin Buber calls an “I-thou” relationship. It is a deep and loving “yes” that is inherent within you. In Christian theology, the inner Presence would be described as the Holy Spirit, which is precisely God as immanent, within, and even our deepest and truest self.¹⁴

Union with God does not mean the person becomes God. Instead, the soul is healed and elevated to its previous position as the Creator’s masterpiece, the apple of God’s eye.

True union provides a place of complete rest.

During the process of Centering Prayer, there will always be distractions. Some days they are a constant bombardment, while other days they are rare and fleeting. It behooves every praying person to resist the urge to compare the praying experience from day to day. Centering Prayer should bring the pray-er to realize each moment spent with God, no matter how laden with distractions, is a gift of presence. Keating encourages the reader to consider that any time spent with God—regardless of quality—serves to strengthen the relationship. In the same way that one might strive to deepen a friendship through frequent meetings, one must remember that even when the conversation stays on trivial matters, it is time well spent, because it is still time together. A long-term friendship is the overall purpose, and no one can judge the depth or impact of a friendship based on a single encounter with that person. It is the sustained commitment to meet and be together that makes it a valuable gift of presence for both parties.¹⁵ When prayer is thought of as a gift, it relieves the tendency to judge the quality or worthiness of the time.

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It is not about expectations; it is about being with the One who loves us best of all. Every time this happens, our souls are deepened and drawn closer to God’s heart.

**Technical Difficulties**

I found that there were several downsides of teaching Centering Prayer in the six-week study and weekend retreat model. The first problem in each meeting was the brief time allotted to spend learning this simple but challenging prayer. Centering Prayer must be consistently practiced to receive the benefits of the exercise. The common expectation is to practice this prayer daily for a minimum of twenty minutes, ideally twice a day, morning and evening. Because each church group in this project practiced the prayer in a group together, each time it was in a room with other people which multiplied the types of distractions encountered. Doing this prayer quietly in one's own home is a different experience and affects the practice of the individual.

The second problem I encountered was that, like many people beginning to learn Centering Prayer, these students were daunted by the way that distracting thoughts seem to come relentlessly in an endless stream. The brief time of each session did not allow them the time to learn that the prayer does get more comfortable with practice. Both groups learning this prayer also experienced some initial frustration and discouragement as they struggled to release their intrusive thoughts. Some participants saw this as a sign of personal failure and worried that they could not continue with such a prayer. Self-doubt is never the intent of the prayer; in fact, it is the very practice of letting go that creates the eventual muscle memory that makes the practice easier over time,

The goal of prayer, as any good Christian would agree, is to give you access to God and to allow you to listen to God and to actually hear God, if that does not seem presumptuous. But mostly, prayer is to allow you to experience the
Indwelling Presence yourself. You are finally not praying, but prayer is happening through you (see Romans 8:26-27), and you are just the allower and enjoyer.\textsuperscript{16}

Learning to let go of unnecessary expectations of perfection is also a benefit of regular prayer. It fosters the ability to accept one’s own goodness as well as foibles and to see oneself as a loved child of God.

One unforeseen problem that led to limited teaching time for each session was the tendency of some people to talk at length on topics or stories that strayed far from the intended focus of the class. While quieting the mind is the intention of Centering Prayer, this was quite challenging in—what seemed to many—a social setting. I did not anticipate the amount of time and energy I would spend keeping the conversations on topic and the students on task.

Another problem I encountered during the Lenten study was when one person was not willing to do the work asked of all class participants. While missing an occasional assignment is understandable and even expected in any group of people, this student consistently refused to write the autobiography or practice the prayer at home. This non-preparation was very frustrating as it was disrespectful to everyone who was doing the work and sharing at each session. After some reflection, I realized that this person’s inaction stemmed from loneliness and self-involvement, and he had no real concern for the topic. Though the class suffered from this to a small extent, it also provided a learning opportunity for me, the facilitator, to listen and change my expectations for future classes.

\textsuperscript{16} Rohr, \textit{Silent Compassion}, 55.
CONCLUSION OF INNER HEALING THROUGH CENTERING PRAYER AT CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, SALISBURY, NORTH CAROLINA

Did Centering Prayer heal people at Christ United Methodist Church of Salisbury, North Carolina? The answer to this question is subjective. If success is gauged by an individual's spontaneous transformation from depressive, chronic illness to robust emotional equilibrium and somatic stamina, the answer is no. None of the individuals at Christ United Methodist Church, Salisbury or Charlotte, who received the teachings, had that type of spontaneous healing. However, if you have a more nuanced idea of what constitutes healing, the answer may be, perhaps.

Verlon Fosner,¹ believes that a lot of healing happened around the dinner tables of the early disciples because, “the theme of healing feels more natural with sinners than it does with many Christians. Those who have been in the faith for a long while tend to have some baggage attached to the idea of healing.”² Fosner shares many stories of healing at the Dinner Churches he pastors. More often than not, a story of healing comes from individuals that come to the dinners before they would acknowledge they had any faith in Christ.³ He confides that his church people had to learn to pray for individuals in any moment, no matter how small or large the need. His church has learned that “healing is not an event. Healing is a relationship with the healer, Jesus. When we pray for someone at one of our dinner tables, we are not asking for an instantaneous fix; we are

¹ Fosner advocates Dinner Church as a renewal of a first century style church which would share the good news of Jesus life at meals around tables interconnecting lives on a weekly basis open to all.

² Fosner, Dinner Church, 48.

³ Ibid., 53.
asking the Healer to come into the individual’s story and start to breathe healing into his or her situation.”

If the success of Centering Prayer were to be measured based on how effectively it allowed practitioners to establish a long-term relationship with the Healer, then I believe that this Doctoral Project was successful. Still, many of the seeds that were sown over the course of this project have yet to bear fruit. So, while the long term answer is yes, a more immediate accurate answer would be, “I cannot tell yet, but my ongoing prayer is that it will be successful at some point.”

Perhaps “Inner Healing” was too broad and therapeutic sounding as the title for this project. If inner healing gives the impression that all emotional problems and psychological trauma can disappear through the use of a prayer practice, that was not my intention. This is not to say that true healing is impossible, but one must remember that the injuries and false beliefs within our own psyches took years to form and, even with God through prayer, will likely take years of work and attention to heal. True inner healing, like Fosner teachers, is a process. We may never finish in this lifetime, but certainly while we live we can have a healthy expectation of moving forward in maturity and emotional quotient. The benefit of prayer as a form of Divine Therapy, is that it allows the patient to collaborate with God in the healing process. That alone is worth the effort.

As a facilitator of Centering Prayer, I hope I did not give the impression that this practice will do something for the pray-er without his will or consent. God will not do for

4 Ibid., 51.
5 Keating, Divine Therapy and Addiction, 88.
a person what he is not willing to do for himself. Each individual must willingly submit to the purifying love of God in order to rise above the harmful thought mechanisms that brought him or her to his current place in life.

What God does with us through Centering Prayer is draw all of those hurts and fears to the surface. Only then can they be exposed as impotent and ineffective protectors of our hearts. The deeper we are willing to go with God, the wider the dimensions of our own understanding. Though each step of this journey is frightening, this fear is also something which must be experienced and overcome. On the other side of the chasm, the Holy Spirit is ready to guide our landing as we alight into the nail-scarred hands. That is the journey of Centering Prayer: the fear, the doubt, the purging, and then the safety, and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Of course, Centering Prayer is not meant to be a replacement for psychotherapy, because deep inner work should be done with another individual or witness. While we can attempt healing through prayer alone, the process is more effective when we are held accountable by a human being as witness to our story: a professional counselor, Spiritual Director, or a mature friend who speaks the truth in love. Fr. Thomas Keating in his book, Divine Therapy and Addiction walks through the spiritual dimensions of Alcoholics Anonymous 12-Step Program. After extolling the importance of the sponsor, Keating reveals the power of the process,

What causes God pain, I believe, is not our sins as such (I don’t think God is easily offended), but the consequences of our sins that cause us so much pain: humiliation, frustration, guilt for harm done to others. In actual fact, the moment we accept negative feelings, sit with our despair, desolation, hopelessness or frustration, and the overwhelming sense of failure, God takes them all upon Himself, makes them His own, and joins us in our sufferings. As Christians, we believe that this is what Christ does. The acceptance of ourselves just as we are
enables God to take all our sufferings and weaknesses to Himself and to transform us. This is inner resurrection, freedom from the bondage of our emotional programs for happiness and over-identification with our social group.”

Every person is in need of some kind of healing, and believers in Jesus Christ should avail themselves of one or more of these avenues. My desire in offering Centering Prayer was that perhaps one out of ten people would be able to claim it as his or her personal connection to the Author of Creation. For all the others, I hoped it might open their minds to the idea of seeking other prayer forms that speak to their souls and allow them to connect to Creator God as well.

When enough people begin to see things through the lens of God’s unconditional love and kindness, they will project this love into the world. Though there may not be good in every situation, every situation has God. Richard Rohr has long had this belief that “the divisions, dichotomies, and dualisms of the world can only be overcome by a unitive consciousness at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, in interreligious dialogue, and in spirituality in particular.” Centering Prayer is one way to divine this path to unitive consciousness. Rohr further points out this is the unique and central job of healthy religion. The word ‘religion’ is derived from the Latin re-ligio meaning “to re-ligament” oneself. While a ligament is a physical concept, the re-ligio is

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7 Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, xi.

8 Ibid.
a spiritual concept, and this re-linking or re-binding is yet another example of the body-mind connection in the universe.

When Christians utilize this contemplative prayer practice, they hone new mind-muscles that can accomplish change in the world. This may explain why there is a new interest in and application of contemplative practices in various sects of Christianity. The political, social, and spiritual unrest of the world in the twenty-first century fuels a discontent for many people of faith. I trust that these feelings are the nudges of the Holy Spirit, prompting them to dig deeper and look further to see what we can do with an open and unrestricted view of God.

*The Interfaith Observer* is an independent digital publication for those interested in advancing interfaith understanding and cooperation. In 2017 it shared the view that “Contemplative Life stands at the intersection of technology and spirituality with a vision to help millions of people connect more deeply with one another and their truest selves.”9 The Holy Spirit is at work in the world, and if we dare, if we do not fear what God is doing, Christians can be conduits of Christ’s love to all of humanity.

At times, a pastor may lapse into the misguided belief that the spiritual healing of her parishioners is somehow contingent on her actions. If this occurs, it indicates that she has confused her power and purpose with those of God. Teaching contemplative prayer redirects clergy to connect people directly with God. Pastors do not need to internalize the resistance of parishioners to seek God; they need to remove the barriers that create the

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illusion that God does not already love them unconditionally. There is no penal
substitutionary atonement—only an “at-one-ment” with the Lord and Giver of Life, who
has loved humanity from the foundation of the world. As we are reminded repeatedly in
Scripture, God’s primary message is one of love: “the steadfast love of the Lord is from
everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 103:17); “with everlasting love I will have compassion on
you, says the Lord, your Redeemer” (Is 54:8); “I have loved you with an everlasting
love” (Jer 31:3); “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so
that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).

A Gallup poll in December of 2018 lists clergy as the eighth most trusted
professional by Christians and average Americans.\(^{10}\) To put this in context, pastors rank
below accountants and funeral directors, but just above journalists and building
contractors. When pastors accept being the eighth most trusted person in their
congregants’ lives, they can begin to see themselves in that same light, as one person of
many who can help others spiritually. While this realization may bruise the ego of a
pastor who believed he was the sole source of spiritual counsel in the lives of his
parishioners, it also provides a realistic space that more clergy should willingly occupy.
Today’s clergy endure countless defeats for the hope of witnessing a sign of
transformation in another person’s life. Yet pastors continue to guide faith communities
for those rare glimpses of a person set free in the love and forgiveness of Christ.

\(^{10}\) Griffin Paul Jackson, “The 7 People Christians Trust More Than Their Pastors,” Christianity
I never had the expectation that this Doctoral Project would cure all emotional or institutional problems at Christ United Methodist Church. That would have been unrealistic and unfounded. What the project did accomplish though, was to broaden the spiritual experiences of people at the church by providing them with another way to heal and to reconnect with a God who loves them.

It is important to reiterate that Centering Prayer was never meant to be touted as the only avenue for healing from God. For those who were willing to open themselves to the experience, it was meant to help them approach their inner pain in the presence of God’s loving Self. Centering Prayers allows the pray-er to practice releasing destructive thought patterns and forging new neuronal pathways for healthy emotions. Thus, Centering Prayer is a collective enterprise of the mind, body, and spirit; it is a gift of healing and intimate communion that God has provided to human beings. The Triune God allows people to be a part of their own healing process by providing a framework that rewires the brain and promotes the healing of painful memories. The healing then provides each person with wisdom and experience from something that was previously painful. Thus, Scripture affirms the practice when it says, “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28).

Interestingly enough, my first exposure to this prayer form did not inspire me to start the practice. I was with a large gathering of pastors who were part of a health study through Duke University. The study’s initial findings about the health of clergy were alarming.

Research by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative has found that compared to other North Carolinians, United Methodist clergy have higher-than-average rates of obesity (40 percent versus 29 percent), as well as higher rates of diabetes, asthma,
arthritis, and hypertension. They also exhibit symptoms of depression at nearly
double the national average: 10.5 percent vs. 5.5 percent.\textsuperscript{11}

This study highlighted the fact that many clergy need to prioritize their physical and
mental health before they can hope to help others. To this end, the Clergy Health
Initiative offered all participants access to a series of retreats that focused separately on
promoting physical, mental, and spiritual health.

I was first introduced to Centering Prayer at one of these retreats. Since I was not
in a healthy place either emotionally or spiritually, I did not continue the prayer practice.
However, I did sense that it held something valuable that I might need at some point in
the future, so I tucked it away in the back of my spiritual toolbox. Several years later
when I began having a conflict with a colleague, I sought counseling and exercises to
deepen inner spirituality through the Enneagram.\textsuperscript{12} Shortly after that, I requested a new
pastoral appointment from the Bishop. It was in this new location that I committed to
Centering Prayer as a spiritual discipline for my personal life. I knew I needed a deeper
connection to God and took the word of practitioners who said this prayer was worth the
effort. I considered it spiritual armor for serving a new church. Centering Prayer has been
a singularly effective practice that has offered me transformation of both heart and mind.
Therefore, I am an evangelist for Jesus Christ and the Centering Prayer practice.

\textsuperscript{11} Kate Rugani, “Clergy Health: Who Cares for the Caregivers?,” \textit{Duke Today}, June 12, 2012,

\textsuperscript{12} The Enneagram is a spiritual system that utilizes nine personality types to describe human
motivations. The system offers sign of health (integration) or collapse (disintegration) of actions, and can
inform relationships, work, leadership development and communication in the personal or business world.
The Inner Healing through Centering Prayer project was important because it exposed people to a contemplative practice which they may utilize at some point in time. The responses in the evaluation found in Appendix H reveal that people can be open to learning new prayer techniques even if they do not plan to utilize them right away. Though ultimately free will will determine if any of the participating individuals reach for this effective tool in the future, I trust the Holy Spirit to bring the practice to mind for any of the persons who may later seize the opportunity to try something both ancient and new.

In the End

As the world evolves technologically, ecologically, economically, politically, and sociologically, humanity should also expect to mature emotionally and spiritually. When people from every continent can experience a breakthrough in interpersonal relationships, it will elevate the level of discourse for every nation. Through prayer, Christians can be at the forefront of changing the world by reflecting the open, loving heart that God has for all creation. It is my hope that as the world matures, diverse groups may embrace systems that offer solutions engendered through the inner work of practices like Centering Prayer or the aspects of Integral Theory. If applied in diverse cultural settings, more people will see God’s universal Truths and their worldwide applicability.

As vastly diverse nations begin to seek out their commonalities to determine what is best for all people, it will inspire global problem-solving rather than the narrow machinations of self-protectionism. If all of God’s people saw the world as a place worth healing, they would utilize the strength in this diversity of race, culture, and religion to create a safer, cleaner, more functional world. Should this arise, more people than just United Methodists could claim the refrain from John Wesley: “All the world is my parish.”

In a small way, Centering Prayer offers a beginning point for this a broad vision. When individuals willingly give away their time, power, ego, and thoughts to sit with the Spirit of God, the love of the Cosmic Christ will overwhelm them in love. When people are overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit on a regular basis, it becomes apparent that God desires to cooperate with human beings to bring about the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. As individuals experience inner healing from wounds that once bound them, the freedom they enjoy will not be contained. They will be compelled to seek healing for individuals throughout the world, one person at a time. Healing in small, individual ways should be what all that clergy aspire to do. Changing the world is a task only for God.

The concept of doing what we can do comes to us in Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast. The passage begins, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to” and the story tells of a king who calls to all those invited for the wedding day of his son. When those who were invited refused to come, everyone else from the streets was invited (Mt 22:1-14). Inner healing is a byproduct of living in union with Jesus Christ. When those who have ears to

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hear receive the invitation of God to join the feast, their pain shall no longer prevent them from coming.

As each Christian is drawn to contemplative practices that foster an appreciation of creation and a unitive spirit for all people, healing will begin for that person. This healing, in turn, benefits that individual’s family, church, and community. In this way, the healing of one person may create solutions for an ever-widening community of people. Perhaps we could all benefit from following the advice of an unknown fourteenth century monk who wrote,

If, however, you still feel awful, burdened by your weaknesses, and if you’re not sure what to do with yourself, I can suggest something that might help you: Take God at face value, as he is. Accept his good graciousness, as you would a plain, simple, soft compress when sick. Take hold of him and press him against your unhealthy self, just as you are. Or try this. Make yourself get up, sick as you are, and try to complete your desire touch the kind and generous God, just as he is, because those who touch him know good health that never ends.15

If this simple connection to God, with all of the healing aspects it brings, were adopted by the preponderance of pastors in the Church of Jesus Christ around the globe, the body of Christ would find more and more opportunities for healing. It is unlikely the Church universal will ever be cured of all that ails it, but when the sozo-healing of God comes to those who are open to the movement of the Spirit, believers sharing in the woundedness of Christ offer others the kenosis of Christ. It is love poured out for others. Only then will the people of God truly follow Philippians 3:10-11, when Paul says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming

15 Carmen Acevedo Butcher, trans., The Cloud of Unknowing with the Book of Privy Counsel (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 178.
like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” When the death of our false-self becomes the resurrection of our real selves for the healing of others, the blessed followers of Christ can become the healing blessing for all others: beginning where we are, but with a willingness to follow the Holy Spirit, even to “the ends of earth” (Acts 1:8).
APPENDIX A

Inner Healing Through Prayer Practices

Lenten Small Group
Christ United Methodist Church, Salisbury NC

February 17 Introductions / Explanation of The Prayer Practices; Centering Prayer / Practice of Centering Prayer / Our Lives in Print: writing a biography of our lives over the 6 weeks

February 24 Group bonding / Discussion of past weeks’ practices / Explanation of Lectio Divina / Practice of Lectio Divina / Our Lives in Print

March 2 Group bonding / Discussion of past weeks’ practices / Explanation of Body Prayer / Practice of Body Prayer / Our Lives in Print

March 9 Group bonding / Discussion of past weeks’ practices / Practice of Centering Prayer / Our Lives in Print

March 16 * This will be an evening meeting for everyone to experience body prayer through the practice of Yoga with Christian Lens 6:30 class meeting in the Sanctuary for more space. Please bring a beach towel and comfortable clothing to move in *

Discussion of past weeks’ practices / Practice of Body Prayer / Our Lives in Print

March 23 Holy Week / Group Bonding / Discussion of weekly practices / Practice of Lectio Divina / Our difficult and best experiences in this small group

Each day between sessions you are encouraged to practice the various forms of prayer. After you have done this at home, make notes on the following observations:

- Type of prayer practiced
- How long did it last
- What are some insights you garnered
- Were there difficult moments
- Did you complete your time allotted or stop early
2/17/2016

Introductions

- Name; favorite nickname over the years
- state and cities in which you have lived
- Find out who has made the longest journey.
- What is one day you would like to live over again?
- Who knows what 'Hippopoto-monstro-sesquipp-edalio-phobia' is a fear of?

Opening Prayer,

Set me free, O God, from the bondage of my sins, and give me the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to me in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Closing Prayer,

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy before he first suffered pain, and did not enter into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that I, walking in the way of the cross, may find it to be none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son, my Lord. Amen.
Group bonding

- What does the word Arachibutyrophobia mean?
- The weirdest thing you have ever eaten?
- When you get emotional, where do you feel it?
- What was your image of God as a child?

Discussion of past weeks’ practices

- Did you try and practice Centering Prayer this week?
- How did it go?
- Biggest frustration with it? - Biggest surprise with it?
- What worked for you and what did not?

Explanation of Lectio Divina

Practice of Lectio Divina (We will do some time of Centering Prayer first)

Our Lives in Print

- You were asked to begin writing your own biography for the first 10 years.
- Did you start? How far did you get? If not, why?
- Did you remember things you have not thought about?

Opening Prayer - O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing; Send your Holy Spirit and pour into my heart your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Closing Prayer - O God, the source of eternal light: Shed forth our unending day upon all of us who watch for you, that our lips may praise you, our lives may bless you, and our worship may give you glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Lectio Divina (Isaiah 30:15-21)

Week 2 2/24 (con’t)

Unhurried Grace Website
By Bill Gaultiere

Lectio Divina Rhythms/Process (Repeat these three times responding to below):

a) Read the Scripture passage (Lectio)
b) Reflect on the focus question below (Meditatio)
c) Respond in quiet prayer/journaling (Oratio)
d) Rest in God’s invitation for you then pray/share out loud (if you would like to)  (Contemplatio)

Read the Scripture: Isaiah 30:15-21

15 This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:
   “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it. 16 You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’ Therefore you will flee! You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’ Therefore, your pursuers will be swift!
17 A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill.”

18 Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

19 People of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. 20 Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes, you will see them. 21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

1st Reading: What is one word or phrase the Holy Spirit impresses on you? Meditate on that.

2nd Reading: Enter into the Scripture passage. What do you feel? What specific situation in your life today related? Write down a prayer or pray quietly.

3rd Reading: What is God’s personal invitation to you from the Scripture? You can write down what God may be saying to you or a prayer of thanks. Or rest quietly in God.
Inner Healing Through Prayer Practices
Lenten Small Group
Week 3
March 2, 2016

Opening Prayer
Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. Keep me both outwardly in my body and inwardly in my soul, that I may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul: through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, forever, Amen.

Group bonding
- What does the word hierophobia mean? (Syn. of hagiophobia)
- Describe a time you were very embarrassed?
- Who was an important teacher in your life?

Discussion of past weeks’ practices
- Did you try and practice Lectio Divina or Centering Prayer this week?
- How did it go?
- What Scripture did you use?
- Biggest frustration and surprise with it?
- What worked for you and what did not?

Our Lives in Print
- Let’s look at your biography. How far have you written in it?
- How is it going? Is it difficult or fun?
- Did you remember things you have not thought about?

Explanation of Body Prayer

Practice of a body prayer (We will do some time of Centering Prayer first)

Scripture: 9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now, none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Closing Prayer Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give me this bread that he may live in me, and I in him, in my comings and in my goings, in all my ways. To you be the glory, with Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen
APPENDIX D

Inner Healing Through Prayer Practices
Lenten Small Group Week 4
March 9, 2016

Opening Prayer
Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep me both outwardly in my body and inwardly in my soul, that I may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Group bonding
● What does the word Amaxophobia mean?
● If you could spend a billion dollars, what would you buy?
● Who taught you to drive? How did it go?
● Which of the five senses could they live without?
  (sight;sound;touch;taste;smell)

Discussion of past weeks’ practices
● Did you try and practice Body Prayer, Lectio Divina or Centering Prayer this week?
● How did it go?
● What Scripture did you use?
● Biggest frustration and surprise with it?
● What worked for you and what did not?

Our Lives in Print
● Let’s look at your biography. How far have you written in it?
● How is it going? Is it difficult or fun?
● Did you remember things you have not thought about?

Insights on Centering Prayer

Closing Prayer  O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring us again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word; Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.
APPENDIX E

Inner Healing Through Prayer Practices
Lenten Small Group Week 5
March 16, 2016

Group bonding
- What does the word Cynophobia mean? Decidophobia?
- Who was your best friend as a child? As an adult? (other than a spouse)
- Best childhood vacation experience?

Discussion of past weeks’ practices
- What prayer practice did you do this week?
- How did it go?
- Biggest frustration with it? - Biggest surprise with it?
- What worked for you and what did not?

Our Lives in Print: What do you think about writing your story?
- "Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. 1 Peter 3:15
- Did you have roadblocks? In what ways can these help reveal your story?

More on Lectio Divina Practice of Lectio Divina (We will do some quiet centering first)
Psalm 32
4 When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. 5 But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. 6 David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it:

7 “Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight.
8 Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of sin.”

9 Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith. 10 But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!

Opening Prayer - O Lord, whose glory it is always to have mercy; Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring us again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Closing Prayer - Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought me in safety to this new day; Preserve me with your mighty power, that I may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all I do direct me to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Opening Prayer - O God, who by the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light: Grant that I, who have been raised with him, may abide in his presence and rejoice in the hope of eternal glory; through Jesus Christ my Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit be dominion and praise forever and ever. Amen.

Group bonding
- Aphenphosmphobia – The fear of intimacy. Fear of being touched and loved.
- Metathesiophobia? The fear of change.
- Before making a phone call, do you rehearse what you will say?
- What would surprised people if they knew about you?

Discussion of past weeks’ practices
- What prayer practice did you do this week?
- How did it go?
- Biggest frustration with it? - Biggest surprise with it?
- What worked for you and what did not?

Our Lives in Print
About our Story - Is there someone you can share your story with?

Some practice of body prayer – through color Practice of Lectio Divina (We will do some quiet centering first)

James 1:2-5 1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. 2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Closing Prayer - O God, the source of eternal light: Shed forth your unending day upon all of us who watch for you, that our lips may praise you, our lives may bless you, and our worship may give you glory; through Jesus Christ. Amen.
1.) What is your general reaction to the content of the prayer practices part of the retreat?

2.) Had you ever heard of Centering Prayer before?  
   If so, have you ever practiced it before?  
   If so how often?  
   If not, do you think you will try to use this prayer practice more often?

3.) Have you ever heard of Lectio Divina before?  
   If so, have you ever practiced it before?  
   If so is it a regular practice of yours?  
   If not, do you think you will try to use this prayer practice more often?

4.) Did you draw or create prayer beads? YES NO Did you find it relaxing?

5.) Did you learn anything new about yourself over the weekend?

6.) Did you learn anything new about any of the people at your church?

7.) The title of the content is ‘Inner Healing through Prayer Practices.’ Did you sense that healing Can be gained through Centering Prayer? Through Lectio Divina? Can you rest in God coloring or creating beads?
APPENDIX H

Responses to Evaluation Form for Women’s Spiritual Retreat
22 responses sheets filled out of 25 participants

1) What is your general reaction to the content of the prayer practices part of the retreat?
   - different, ok.
   - I am uncertain if I get out of it what I was expected to
   - was new and not thoroughly understood – could not hear all that was presented (my disability)
   - I am open to trying
   - It was new to me, could be beneficial
   - new information, helpful
   - wonderful
   - pleased
   - the Prayer practices were not really my thing but the coloring & prayer beads were great. I am an artistic person so that spoke to me
   - I enjoyed them, especially the centering one
   - loved most of this
   - surprised, but loved it
   - good for growth
   - it was different than I expected but it was cool to learn new techniques
   - didn’t’ like sitting for long time during the contemplative prayer practice
   - good to know
   - did not enjoy
   - great
   - I enjoyed learning about different aspect of prayer
   - educational

1.) Had you ever heard of Centering Prayer before?
   Yes – 4
   No – 15
   - Centering, but not associated to prayer
   - yes, in yoga class

If so, have you ever practiced it before?
   Yes – 1
   No – 8
   - Always
   - yes, 3x or so
(Inner Healing survey continued page 2)

(Have you ever practiced Centering Prayer before?) If so how often?
  Yes –
  No -
If not, do you think you will try to use this prayer practice more often?
  Yes – 2
  No – 1
  Maybe - 6
  Perhaps - 1
  - I would like to but maybe start at 10 minutes & work my way to 20
  2 - I will try
  - sorry, no. I will try…maybe… some time
  - yes, when I can
  - seems like a good thing…

2.) Have you ever heard of Lectio Divina before?
  Yes – 5
  No - 16

If so, have you ever practiced it before?
  Yes – 4
  No - 4

If so is it a regular practice of yours?
  - no 4
If not, do you think you will try to use this prayer practice more often?
  Yes – 3
  No - 2
  - Maybe – 4
  - Probably - 1
  - Maybe, I would need someone else to practice

3.) Did you draw or create prayer beads? YES NO
  Yes – 17
  No - 3
  - drawing very relaxing; beads NO!
  - my favorite
  - like the beads, good to have a tangible thing
  - yes, loved drawing
  - enjoyed making prayer beads
Did you find it relaxing?
Yes – 9
No – 1
- found it anxiety-producing, but that’s me. I want to be perfect
- yes, because I love to draw

4.) Did you learn anything new about yourself over the weekend?
Yes – 5
No – 3
Not really – 2
- my past can be affecting who I am today
- I don’t like to color!
- I am blessed with a wonderful group of women at my church
- learn to relax more to calm my mind down from overworking too much
- taking time for yourself allows you to be more present for others
- take time = center God

5.) Did you learn anything new about any of the people at your church?
Yes – 14
No - 0
- fun-loving people
- a little more history
- Joyce does Zumba
- that there are a lot of people who have my same story, we are more alike than we think.
- yes. Met people I didn’t know before
- yes a lot of diversity personalities

6.) The title of the content is ‘Inner Healing through Prayer Practices.’
Did you sense that healing Can be gained through Centering Prayer?
Yes – 10
No – 2
Maybe - 2

Through Lectio Divina?
Yes – 6
No – 2
Maybe – 2
- sort of
(Inner Healing survey continued page 4)

Can you rest in God coloring or creating beads?
  Yes – 13
  No - 1
  ? - 1

(2 comments found on the back of the evaluations)

  Thanks for your wisdom, your leadership, your time, your hard work in serving God by leading us at the retreat.
  
  Thanks for your time and message, Jill!
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