Rediscovering Faith as a Transforming Way of Life: Creating Covenant Community in Mexico City

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Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

REDISCOVERING FAITH AS A TRANSFORMING WAY OF LIFE: CREATING COVENANT COMMUNITY IN MEXICO CITY

Written by

JAMES HENDERSON

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:

Date Received: April 13, 2020
REDISCOVERING FAITH AS A TRANSFORMING WAY OF LIFE: CREATING COVENANT COMMUNITY IN MEXICO CITY

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

JAMES HENDERSON
APRIL 2020
ABSTRACT

Rediscovering Faith as a Transforming Way of Life: Creating Covenant Community in Mexico City
James Henderson
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2020

This project is the creation of an initial learning cohort in Mexico City that will intentionally train in spiritual formation through retreats, common readings, and shared practices aimed at enhancing the awareness of God’s presence and activity in everyday life.

This project is designed to convene a Spanish-speaking pioneer cohort for spiritual formation that will gather with the intention of cultivating spiritual renewal and shared practices in community, thus providing a viable alternative to the exhaustion and joylessness so common in today’s residents of Mexico City. This project develops a monthly reading list, shared spiritual practices, and two weekend retreats that provide formational education and experiences for a group of self-selecting individuals to journey with great intentionality through one year in their spiritual life together. Ultimately this project has the potential of continuing in long-term covenant community, forming a very loose religious “third-order” through a shared Rule of Life.

The ministry challenge at the heart of this project is the distressed human condition of life in Latin American cities. Most are surrounded and bombarded by hurry, noise, and crowds, and the struggle often results in a noisy and disordered heart. As an alternative to the empty, feverish pace of Latin American city life, this collective group of spiritual friends can experiment with the life-giving rhythms of grace, modeled by Jesus Christ. Through intentional shared learning and practice, this project can address the unique burdens and hindrances to spiritual formation and inspire the with-God life for those who live in Mexico City.

Those of us who are participating in this doctoral project envision that through this intentional spiritual formation program, apprentice-circles like this pilot cohort will one day be found in other Spanish-speaking countries scattered across the hemisphere.

Content Reader: Gary W. Moon, PhD

Word count: 287
To my wife, Erin, and our children—Kate and Caleb—the greatest spiritual formation community that God has given me
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I heard Trevor Hudson say that when Jesus comes to us, he always comes with his arms around our friends. Throughout the writing and implementation of this project, Jesus has come to me with his arms around my friends, without whom this work would be unthinkable.

During the writing of this project, Jesus came to me with his arms around Gary and Regina Moon, whose mentoring and content feedback provided invaluable encouragement and direction. Special thanks to Randy Harris for your spiritual guidance over many years; your fingerprints are all over this project. Jesus came to me with his arms around Paul Miller — our conversations over many years and many miles of running have greatly influenced the philosophy of this project. I feel deep gratitude for Chadd and Nancy Schroeder, my mentors and missionary field-guides for the last 25 years. God used you to “write” much of this project into me.

Also, great appreciation to my aunt, Judy Prather, who cared enough about her nephew to come to my assistance with her years of editing experience at Baylor University—so special to work with you like this. Particular thanks to James Love for your attentive editing and friendship.

Jesus came with his arms around the spiritual formation pioneer cohort in Mexico City. Their brave approach to spiritual training and their commitment to covenantal neighborliness is as inspiring as it is joyous. Special thanks to Omar Palafox, Jorge Ortega, Andrea Candia, Leonor Rojas, Matthew and Lina Reed, Salvador Quintanar, and Alejandro Videgaray. Jesus came with his arms around our friends and cohort teachers, Daniel and Karly Napier, Nora Kviatkovski, Trevor Hudson, Michel and Claudia Hendricks, and Jim and Kitty Wilder. Special thanks to Edesio Sanchez Cetina and Juan José Barreda for sharing their theological perspective soaked with a Latin American spirituality. Also, deep appreciation to the church community, Shalomcito; the Red del Camino, Renovaré, Crucible, and Liminal communities.

Jesus came with his arms around the Ashrei board of directors, Flatirons Community Church, and the Childress, Westport Road, Turnpike Road, and Highland Oaks Churches of Christ. Thank you for believing in us and commissioning us to work in our sweet spot. Special thanks to the encouragement and friendship of Jim Burgen, Michael Koehn, Doug Calhoun, and Ken Hall.
Jesus came with his arms around my parents, Dr. Mike and Sue Henderson, and my brothers, John, Jeff, and Jacob. Watching you love the people around you has inspired every mission-step I have taken, even as I have walked so far from our good, west-Texas home.

And especially, Jesus came to me with his arms around my family. Erin, my wife, the highlight of my life is spending it with you, the single greatest person I know. I turn to God multiple times a day to tell him that he is so good to me — mostly because he lets me be around you. Kate and Caleb, I love your character, your cross-cultural appreciations, your grittiness, and the hilarious fun you share with me every day. I love watching you grow in wisdom, stature, and much favor. You all make me the luckiest man in the world. As we walk with God together, our joy as a family is the greatest thing about my life.
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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION
THE MINISTRY CHALLENGE

Dallas Willard wrote that “the modern age is an age of revolution—revolution motivated by insight into the appalling vastness of human suffering and need.”¹ Willard points out that “there is an epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence—all combined with an inability to sustain deep and enduring personal relationships.”² About this distressed human condition, whether seen at a social or individual level, he concludes: “So obviously, the problem is a spiritual one. And so must be the cure.”³ His well-known prescription for the distressed human condition is to “ruthlessly eliminate hurry from one’s life.”⁴

Other leading writers agree with Willard’s observations. Richard Foster also diagnoses the major problem of contemporary society when he writes, “Our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘many-ness,’ he will rest satisfied.”⁵ Foster notes that psychiatrist Carl Jung once

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁵ Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth (San Francisco: Harper One, 2018), 401, Kindle.
remarked, “Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil.” Christopher Hall names the problem the “noisiness of the disordered heart.”

**The Ministry Need and Relevance**

This common assertion that modern life has grown too complicated, noisy, and overcrowded begins to describe the challenge that this project addresses. Perhaps nowhere is this need more obvious than with city life in Mexico City. In his anthology, *The Mexico City Reader*, Ruben Gallo characterizes the spirit of Mexico City with the adjective “delirious.” Gallo portrays Mexico City, the largest city in the western hemisphere, as a scene “where one’s five senses are constantly bombarded by the cultural contradictions that make life in the capital unpredictable.” Authors Glen Kuecker and Alejandra Puga also note these contradictions, citing Mexico City’s disproportionate extreme poverty and extreme wealth as an example. André Breton famously called Mexico City the most “surreal” place on earth. To add to its complexity, he notes that it “jumbles historical periods” with its modernist high-rises that tower next to eighteenth-}

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6 Ibid.

7 Christopher Hall, “Spiritual Direction,” Year 3 lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry, Malibu, CA, September 19, 2016.


10 Ibid.
century palaces. Others have labeled this megalopolis as a “vast stage for unpredictable everyday dramas: a chaotic, vibrant, delirious city.”

Kuecker and Puga observe, “The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘delirious’ as an acutely disturbed state of mind resulting from illness or intoxication and characterized by restlessness, illusions, and incoherence of thought and speech.” These descriptions of Mexico City carry strong emotional and mental meanings as they describe the twenty-to-twenty-five million souls that constitute Mexico City. Illness, restlessness, and incoherence sound much like Willard’s descriptors of the distressed human condition—epidemic of depression, personal emptiness, and escapism.

While these descriptions have many implications, they carry with them the pull of this entire project. They describe the strain between order and disorder of Mexico City life and culture, and consequently point to the heart of the problem that this project addresses. Strained and stressed-out souls, commonplace in Mexico City, need a model for recovery and balance.

Though writing in a different context, Quaker spiritual writer and mystic Thomas Kelly observes that many people find themselves in a predicament where they are “over their heads” due to over-crowdedness that stems from the necessary pressures people feel they must meet. In regards to these impulses, Kelly stresses that compulsions seem to “grow overnight, like Jack’s beanstalk, and before we know it, we are bowed down with

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 22.
burdens, crushed under commitments, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments.”\textsuperscript{14} The breathless, hurried panting that Kelly wrote about in 1941 aptly diagnoses and confronts the urban spiritual landscape of overcrowdedness experienced by many in Mexico City today.

**A Glimpse into the Problem from a Personal Perspective**

These most relevant challenges are quite evident in this interview of one Mexico City resident, when asked: “What does living in Mexico City do to your soul?” She responded, “I do not think that it is Mexico City itself that is the main problem; it is the sum of a whole. Many of us experience toxic work environments, intolerant neighbors, an unwillingness to live with others due to lack of time or empathy and tiredness. Our egos and souls are disturbed, dejected, and desolate; there is no space and time in our lives for God, and you can imagine the result.”\textsuperscript{15}

It is a given that many who live in Mexico City are depleted of energy as they face everyday city life and its demands. To get to the root of the problem, the question was posed: “In practice, what are the difficulties and messages that underlie living in Mexico City?” One cohort participant reflected the feelings of others when she replied:

> For me personally, I carry a lot of stress most of the time. My family engagement and important conversations are limited to about once a week. On weekends, I just want to sleep. Sometimes, I take my little daughters to play at a neighborhood park, and instead of joyfully watching them play or taking time to swing with them, I just want to sleep on the park bench because I am so tired. In the day-to-day life of Mexico City, I often find myself uncompromising, intolerant, aggressive at the wheel, feeling desperate and isolated. I do not smile very much. I do not take time to enjoy my meals because I have a cell phone in my hand. If I


\textsuperscript{15} Leonor Rojas, personal interview, September 19, 2019.
were to offer a metaphor of my city life, it is as if I am at the subway station, and I have to push to get off the train, and everyone is running, so I must also run. At the end of the day, there is a great dissatisfaction and frustration of knowing that I work too hard to not be able to simply enjoy God, my home, my family, and my friends. And this reality makes me want to cry.  

**Reasons for My Interest in This Topic**

Two factors have influenced my selection of this project. The first, as discussed above, is that people that live in Mexico City—and large Latin American cities like it—face a particular kind of suffering. In one of the most touching narratives found in Scripture, Jesus responds to this certain kind of city-suffering that he found in Jerusalem: “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes’” (Lk 19:41—42).

Jesus’s tears were a “symbol of humanity that would not accept the gift of his unconditional love,” which would make for peace. Our tears, too, “represent our exile from Eden,” our gaps in wholeness, spiritual health, and peace—our detachment from God, from others, and even from ourselves. Like the tears that Jesus cried, many tears are wept over the suffering experienced in daily life in Mexico City. These tears may tangibly speak of the felt-distance from home, from “unitive consciousness,” and from

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16 Ibid.

17 All Scripture is cited from the New Revised Standard Version unless noted otherwise.


19 Ibid.
peace. The key assumption facing this new ministry can be summed up in a question by biblical scholar and writer Walter Brueggemann, wondering “whether there is anything that can be said, done, or acted in the face of an ideology of hopelessness?”

The second factor that influenced my selection of this project is my own experience of the “things that make for peace” (Lk 19:42). While Thomas Merton’s contemplative writings stem largely from his cloistered life with the Cistercians at the countryside monastery at the Abbey of Gethsemani, it is his encounter with a city and his well-documented “Louisville epiphany” that closely connects to the issues found in this Mexico City project, while also pointing to a possible remedy. Merton described his experience this way:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammad Ali), in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

The closest that I have come to Merton’s epiphany came while making the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Processing my experiences in spiritual direction with Sister Nora, an Argentinian nun, I shared an experience that I had the week before: At our family table, my dad had given a Thanksgiving blessing. He pointed at each person, and blessed the good he saw in each family member. I told Nora, “And it hit me—I have been

20 Ibid.


loved my whole life.” I understood how much I was loved and accepted. I felt close to God. I felt loved by him and I felt loved by my family and friends.

And on the subway ride home, I saw people differently. I saw young and old people, some tall, some short, some smiling, some sleeping, and I saw them all as beautiful and somehow connected by their goodness. I felt respect for people—we are not alien to one another—and I wanted good for all of them. I wondered if this is how Jesus consistently saw people, or how he felt when he approached Jerusalem.

What preceded this experience was my own sense of belovedness. I wondered, from the experience of that love, how might I love from that place and see that way most, if not all, of the time? How could I help people feel loved by God? This specific experience is a strong contributing factor in the creation of this project. I want others to know and experience their own belovedness, to feel close to God, and to feel loved by him. I want them to sense their innate goodness. I wish people in Mexico City somehow knew that they are radiant like the sun.

**Thesis of the Project (Who, What, and How)**

Beginning to see people as Jesus sees them (and as Merton began to experience humanity), is what I desire for these individuals. And for this to result in their experience of abundant life, not a delirious one. Combining my desire with the complications mentioned above as a backdrop and the setting for this project, Mexico City served as the laboratory for this experiment in spiritual formation. The target population was a learning cohort made up of forty self-selecting practitioners looking for a viable alternative to
counteract the urban complexities previously defined. Practicing spiritual indirection through rhythms that offset urban cultural norms, the cohort sought to respond to the hurry, noise, crowds, deliriousness—the distressed human condition—and to address the lack of deep enduring personal relationships. This most relevant challenge comes with a core question: Can Jesus’s Kingdom life of unhurried peace and power take root in a “chaotic, vibrant, and delirious city?”

To state this more informally, this project was built to lead a spiritually hungry pioneer group of “abundant-life underdogs” toward the strong and blessed life offered by Jesus, so they could overflow with joy and peace rather than live under the unbearable weight of the distressed human condition. If this Kingdom experiment could work in Mexico City, then maybe it could work anywhere.

After informal personal conversation with potential cohort participants, those who showed interest in the experiment were given an overview of the project’s vision, followed by the more specific written proposal underscoring the requirements of the program’s expectations. Potential participants were then interviewed to discern their own motives and enthusiasm to participate. Their willingness and ability to meet the rigorous requirements were gauged in light of their other obligations. Diversity was an essential desired element from the outset, so a wide range of socio-economic and educational

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23 Richard Foster and Gayle Beebe, *The Life with God Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Bible, 2009), xxxiv. “When we engage in the Spiritual Disciplines we are seeking the righteousness of the Kingdom of God through ‘indirection.’ You see, we cannot by direct effort make ourselves into the kind of people who can live fully alive to God. Only God can accomplish this in us. . . . We do not, for example, become humble merely by trying to become humble. Action on our own would make us all the prouder of our humility. No, we instead train with Spiritual Disciplines appropriate to our need.”
diversity, gender-balance, and ecumenical mixture was considered and heavily-sought out.

Over the course of a year, cohort participants were guided through readings of classic and contemporary books and articles on spiritual formation. They shared various spiritual disciplines (life-practices) and assimilated their experience through writing and dialogue. Even though the scope of this writing only takes into consideration the first year of study, the cohort experience is actually planned as a two-year journey in community. Meeting for three-day retreats twice per year, the retreats were designed with an ecumenical faculty drawn from around the world.

The cohort gatherings took place at Ashrei, a retreat center in Mexico City, which comfortably accommodated all. The model of leadership employed was highly interactive and dynamic. Due to the density of the program’s design and implementation, I chose not to be a content presenter during the retreat gatherings in order to focus on providing the relational leadership that the community needed. The driving motivation behind that decision to limit my teaching participation was a desire to be focused on steadily reminding the cohort of the vision and provide overall direction of the experience.

**An Overview of the Project Content**

This ministry project was designed to create a dispersed religious order\(^{24}\) (DRO) which attempts to embody a spirituality that fits into the everyday street-life of Mexico

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\(^{24}\) The Holy Catholic Church, “Code of Canon Law,” *Vatican Archives*, accessed February 15, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/__P11.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/__P11.HTM). A description of a dispersed religious order, also called a “third order,” can be found under title V in associations of the Christian faithful in the code of canon law 303. Third orders are associations whose members share in the spirit of some religious institute while in secular life, lead an apostolic life, and strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction of
City. This undertaking is driven by a commitment to live by a covenant that is designed to journey together with a shared Rule of Life. In this, the DRO intentionally deepens an attentiveness to its life with God and a missional responsiveness of learning to love all people.

This project provided training materials and programming designed to be one year in length with rhythms of retreat, predetermined readings, didactic materials, and shared monthly practices. The goal was to help a cohort of urban Latin Americans live a life of personal devotion to Christ while experiencing a taste of covenant community. This undertaking intended to cultivate meaningful mission engagement through enriching conversations and spiritual care with those that members of the DRO encounter in daily life, while giving continuing attention to their own soul renewal. The creation of the DRO was developed in association with Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation based in Mexico City, and the model was strongly influenced by principles and methods of the Renovaré Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation, the Tau Chi Alpha students at Abilene Christian University, and Life Model Works.

Conclusion

In the creation of a new dispersed religious order in Mexico City, this project convenes a spiritual formation cohort, developing an environment where personal devotion is enhanced and where strong friendships and even covenantal bonds can be

the same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name. A good example of a third order is the Third Order of the Society of St. Francis, an Anglican/Episcopal religious order for people of all kinds—single and in committed relationships, lay and ordained—who live by Franciscan principles “in the world.” This is the order founded by Francis himself for those who were drawn to his way but felt called to live it out right where they were. For further reference see: https://tssf.org/.
formed. The hope of this project begins with the intention of becoming more like Christ in internal character through the experience of drawing closer to God and one another.

The setting for this experiment is not easy. It will take place in the midst of the chaos of Mexico City life and culture where hurry is a problem, and where noise and crowds are the norm—where life is made to feel delirious. The problem is not just the city, but is also an interior issue where the structure of a person’s internal life has grown too complicated, noisy, and overcrowded.

This project proceeds believing that Jesus offers a vision for life in his Kingdom where his love and guidance is always accessible, and that those in Mexico City are not excluded from the potential this holds—a life consoled by unhurried peace and power, bursting with joy and love, grounded in the confidence and freedom that God has made available for those he loves. This project seeks to develop a covenant community that can provide a place for God to be experienced in real life and to offer a structure for belonging that counters urban escapism and emptiness that is so personally prevalent. This project is needed and is long overdue.
CHAPTER 1
COMMUNITY CONTEXT

This doctoral project investigates some of the problems that city-dwellers face in the modern cities of Latin America. The target audience and location for this project is Mexico City, Mexico, a megalopolis filled with noise, hurry, and crowds. Mexico City, or La Capital as it is known, is the largest city in the western hemisphere. Until just recently, with the urban boom of mega-cities in Asia, Mexico City was the most populous city in the world. This doctoral project speaks to the point at issue: the headache and heartache of life in urban Latin America. This initiative addresses the distressed human condition of people in Mexico City who live with a hurry-accelerated life-rhythm, with its unruly noise and the suffocating crowdedness of life.

This chapter addresses several dimensions of the community context. It describes and analyzes the relevant history, demographics, and characteristics of Mexico City, and it considers the implications of these relevant cultural aspects for the ministry challenge. Taking a look at data, it seeks to summarize the quality of life in Mexico City in broad terms. And finally, this chapter looks at current and historical influences as a backdrop to the spiritual landscape of the city today.
Relevant Aspects of the Community Story and History

Some anthropologists have claimed that “no other people have ever lived so well” as the earliest immigrants in ancient Mexico. Apparently, they “led lives of leisure and contentment . . . there were no scarcities, there was probably no need to form hierarchies and an egalitarian society may have existed as these early people developed art, religion, and philosophy.”\(^1\) Subsequently, with the rise of civilization in this region with the people-groups of the Olmecs, Toltecs, and ensuing invasion of the Aztecs, history shows that the idyllic scenario of the early immigrant period waned. Then, with the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, the pre-Hispanic civilization came to a collapsing end. “Suddenly, and incredibly, the natural evolution of Mesoamerican civilization ceased. In the future, Western civilization, as interpreted by Spain, would merge with Indian culture to form a new hybrid mestizo society.”\(^2\)

On a wall of the great pyramid of Tlatelolco in Mexico City, in the Plaza of the Three Cultures, there is a plaque that reads, “On August 13, 1521, Tlatelolco, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, fell into the power of Hernan Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat, but the painful birth of the Mestizo people who are the Mexico of today.”\(^3\) It is hard to know what to make of this, because what happened in the conquest of Mexico

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2 Ibid., 2.

3 Ibid., 3.
and the subsequent incorporation of the region into the world system became one of the most significant events in modern world history.4

This conquest seems to be both curse and blessing. The curse is the “demographic tragedy conquest, that brought Spanish, old-world epidemic diseases which decimated the native population of the new world.”5 The historically negative dynamics of the conquest—such as exploitation, violence, and the racism that were a part of this new hybrid culture—cannot be denied.

On the other hand, the conquest also facilitated something truly amazing—a new society was birthed. An ethnic and cultural integration formed that became known as Mexico. Historians call it “the formation of a hybrid, or mestizo, people,” and this new, dominant society was called Mexican. It is now seen through the eyes of history as “the cultural and biological intermingling of Indians, Europeans, Africans, and Asians that created a new people and a new society.”6

This blending of four races in Mexico created a new people—“a cosmic race,” to use José Vasconcelos’ evocative phrase.7 According to MacLachlan and Rodriguez, “No other part of the Spanish empire attained a comparable integration of peoples and cultures, and no similar achievement can be found in any other region of the world where different races and culture met.”8 Only a few conquerors arrived in Mexico (400 total)

4 Ibid., 4.
5 Ibid., 2.
6 Ibid., 3.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 3.
and could not overwhelm the strong and vibrant Indian culture, but they could combine with it, and so “significant aspects of native culture blended easily with Spanish traditions and provided the foundations of the new colonial society.”9 This composite of curse and blessing seen as the hybrid mestizo of the Mexican people created an extraordinary race of people, commonly called la raza.

The Mexico City of Today - Demographics

Mexico City’s 2020 population is now estimated at 21,782,378; this estimate represents the urban agglomeration of Mexico City, which typically includes Mexico City’s population in addition to adjacent suburban areas. By comparison, the population of Mexico City in 1950 was 3,365,081. Just since 2015 Mexico City has grown by 442,597, which represents a 0.41 percent annual change.10 As Mexico City’s population rose steeply, it progressively began to absorb hundreds of nearby small-towns (pueblos) in its growth path in every direction. Based on Worldometer’s elaboration of the latest United Nations data, Mexico City is now home to 20 percent of Mexico’s entire population.11 It has continued to grow at an extraordinary rate, sitting at the top of the

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9 Ibid., 2.


11 Ibid.
world’s megalopolis cities.\textsuperscript{12} Growing numerically in ways unprecedented in Western history, sociologists refer to Mexico City as “an alarming giant.”\textsuperscript{13}

In the process, Mexico City became strikingly congested, and convolution became the norm of the lives of Mexico City’s inhabitants. There are more than thirty million vehicular trips in the city each day. To simply go from home to work and back, people in La Capital commute up to four hours a day. To bypass Mexico City’s manic streets, residents cram their way onto already-full busses and subway trains. As a point of comparison, the Mexico City passenger transport system (subway) handles about twice the daily passengers of New York City’s MTA.\textsuperscript{14}

The rapid growth rates and the swallowing up of small-town life have had significant implications. The simple, laid-back way of life in the quaint pueblos has been overtaken by the hustle and bustle of mega-city life. Mexico City’s rapid growth led to making its citizen’s lives so complex and overcrowded many feel claustrophobic. Hence, the relaxed small-town culture of siesta and neighborliness has been replaced by bumper-to-bumper traffic, street hurry, and acts of violence caused by stress.


The Mexico City of Today - Socio-economic Data

Thirty-three percent of the population lives in “moderate poverty” and another 9 percent lives in “extreme poverty.” Nearly half of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, meaning a lack in economic conditions and social deprivations including one or more of the following six elements: educational lag, lack of access to health services, shortage of access to social security, housing with inadequate quality or insufficient space, deficiency of basic housing services, and scarcity of access to food.

Mexico City’s population is extremely diverse, made up of Indians, blacks, mulattoes, mestizos, Spaniards, Jews, priests, nuns, men and women of business, and many others. Street vendors and fire-breathers fill the spaces between lines of traffic. All of these play their roles in the wild life of Mexico City. Jonathan Kendall calls these players the “always expanding and complex pageant of the great capital, the wealthiest, most beautiful, and most important political and cultural center of the Spanish New World.” The disparity of sprawling Mexico City is packed with “festering shantytowns and luxurious mansions that share the same noxious air. It is a megalopolis of precarious imbalance, a powder keg awaiting the inevitable explosion.”

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18 Ibid., 7.

19 Ibid.
The Mexican capital relies on aquifers below the city for its drinking water, which has definitively compromised the integrity of the “city foundation;” Mexico City is sinking three feet annually because of its water usage. Adding to an overall sense of unease, crime is an issue across Mexico and keeps the population on edge. For more than a decade, Mexico has suffered one of the world’s highest murder rates. Mexican drug cartels account for forty-nine billion dollars every year, and the city has dozens, if not hundreds, of gangs of organized kidnappers. What is more, adding to the sense of unsafety is that “it is common for police officers to be directly involved in crime, any crime.”

Mexico has a longstanding history with corruption. The nongovernmental organization Transparency International defines corruption as the misuse of public power for private benefit. Mexico, known for its deadly drug cartels, follows Colombia as the second most corrupt country according to 2020 rankings. The corruption or even the perception of corruption adds to Mexico’s disquiet.

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20 Johnson, “11 Unbelievable Facts About Mexico’s Economy.”


Implications for Ministry

This doctoral project cannot confront the many multidimensional problems that exist in Mexican urban life. However, it can address overall spiritual well-being and present a viable solution to that problem through the cohort learning project. The principle spiritual problem this project examines is part of the distressed human condition which is common to the experience of many people who live in Mexico City. Many residents are familiar with a multifaceted crumbling of life that occurs as a result of a chaotic, delirious culture. For many, the problem is heightened by a felt alienation from God, from oneself, and from those around them. The effect of this is magnified due to the concentration of people in claustrophobic geographic proximity. This project seeks to face the problem of overall spiritual well-being. When people do not have the margin to slow down and take time for rest, prayer, meditation, and relaxation, the result is an impoverishment of their spiritual lives. This project aims at specifically increasing a sense of intimacy with God and others.

An impoverished spiritual life is frequently accompanied by a lack of strong relationships. A large percentage of the population of Mexico City came from the provencia (province - that which is outside of Mexico City). Many in the city are without family and are relationally isolated, thus heightening a sense of spiritual poverty. This uprooted aspect of Mexico City subculture lends people to being open and hungry for both the giving and receiving of relationship in community, with God and others, but the need is unusually apparent.
This spiritual poverty has many side-effects. The urban strain of hurry interrupts essential relationships and family cohesion. The effects of anxiety, stress, and unease weigh heavy on families, both on marriage health and in the lives of children. Often, a type of marital and family sliding occurs. Disconnectedness often adds to separations, divorces, and overall family dysfunction. The effects of this family fragility can be seen statistically; a staggering 70 percent of marriages in Mexico City end in divorce.24

Cultural and Sub-cultural Influences on Religion and Spirituality

In consideration of the religious and worldview perspective of Mexico City, Mexican thought on Christianity has been influenced by its religious history and social context. The conquistadors, and Hernán Cortés in particular, believed his expedition and conquest to be “a Christian crusade—hence discovery became, in essence, a spiritual revelation, with God directing, as well as protecting, the Spaniards. Already familiar with elements of the Indian religion, Cortés had no doubt that an important part of his task was to introduce the natives to Christianity, by force if necessary.”25 As MacLachlan and Rodriguez explain, “With little rationalization, the Europeans envisioned themselves as the forces of salvation come to do battle for the souls of the deluded inhabitants of the region. Cortés’ strong sense of mission complemented a desire for the fruits of conquest.”26


25 MacLachlan and Rodriguez, The Forging of the Cosmic Race, 70.

26 Ibid.
From the earliest stages, the psychological nature of this spiritual conquest took root in the minds of the Mexican people and its leadership. In his theological confusion, Moctezuma, the civilization’s leader, mistook Cortés for the native god Quetzalcoatl, and thus gave access for Cortés to take over the seat of power of the entire civilization. This fatal weakness crippled Moctezuma, and he subsequently stayed the hand of his army.\textsuperscript{27} In many ways, the lingering effects of this passivity and ultimately conquest can still be felt today—from language, to religion impact, to national feelings of subordination and inferiority.

As the pre-Hispanic people handed their freedom over to an oppressor, Latin American spirituality today labors to become acutely aware of the power dynamics and the contributing factors of social injustice. Thus, from the voices of Latin American theologians and activists, Latin America is strongly influenced by liberation theology, God’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed as seen in biblical history.

In 1968, in a letter to Jesuits around the world, Pedro Arrupe, SJ, declared, “It is the task of the entire Church to carry the Good News as God’s answer to the poor of this world.”\textsuperscript{28} In this letter, Arrupe is credited with being the first to use the phrase, God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Latin American theologians—of which Gustavo Gutiérrez is a forerunner—began writing about a theology of liberation. While denounced as being too closely aligned with Marxism, Gutiérrez contends that liberation theology is, “an attempt at reflection, based on the Gospel and experiences of men and women

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human.”

He explains that the theology of liberation is “the rethinking of our faith, to strengthen our love, and to give reason for our hope from within a commitment which seeks to become more radical, total, and efficacious. It is to reconsider the great themes of Christian life within this radically changed perspective.”

Another strong influence in Latin American spirituality is that Mexico is not only home to the world’s largest Spanish-speaking population, it also represents the globe’s second-largest Catholic population. Most Mexicans come from a Catholic background, even though research indicates that Mexican Catholics are not in complete agreement with the Catholic Church worldwide. For example, half of Mexican Catholics think gays and lesbians should be permitted to legally marry (a right that exists in certain parts of the country), and most Mexican Catholics say the Church should allow contraceptive use (66 percent) and divorce (60 percent).

The impact of the Catholic Church’s influence on religion in Mexico carries with it both positive and negative features. For an everyday example of the positive, it is common for people to embrace a “God with us” attitude and the habits that go along

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30 Ibid.

with that mindset. It is not uncommon to hear people refer to this in colloquial speech. For example, while stopped at a streetlight, as one tips a car-window-washer, the window-washer might say in response to the tip, “Gracias, Dios te acompañe” (“Thank you. God be with you”) or “Gracias, Dios te lo pague” (Loosely translated: “Thank you, may God repay your kindness”).

The negative impact of the Catholic Church’s influence upon society is that, due to the abuse of power and corruption, many in Mexico are cynical and skeptical about organized religion. Many end up settling into post-modern or late-modern worldview perspectives.

In *The Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be*, authors Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh broadly describe and evaluate the cultural phenomenon of postmodernity. Writing about Columbus’ “discovering” of the “new” world and consequently, the conquest of Mesoamerica, Middleton and Walsh highlight the fact that in 1992 (the 500-year anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery”), many from both European and North American contexts took a different perspective. Rather than celebrating Columbus Day, they began to notice and name the shame around the “cruelty, lies, oppression, genocide and rape of what was truly paradise.”32 They point out that the debates around Columbus’ discovery and Cortés’ conquest “ruptured the familiar and surveyable geography of the Middle Ages and also opened up a new world of possibility, the beginning of a new epoch in human history.”33 But now, with this

\[\text{32} \text{ Richard J. Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 10.}\]

\[\text{33} \text{ Ibid.}\]
sensitive perspective of the plight of the conquered, oppressed, and colonized, it is not celebrated that the new world was “found,” in fact, most mourn what was “lost.”

And still, the voices of Latin America recognize that a shift in the historic period has happened. It is noteworthy now, recognizing this post-modern shift, that Mexico, too, has felt the cultural impact of postmodernism. Mexico has become a much more pluralistic society. Today, among the younger generations of Mexicans, there is a more syncretistic mixture of native and post-modern worldviews. There is a trend moving back to religion with indigenous roots—the throwing off of the religión de la conquista (the conquest religion). Many are going back to native traditions and religions, evidenced in a re-emergence of temascales (sweat lodges) and purification ceremonies.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, in Mexico City today, an assortment of religious influence and spiritual perspectives can be found. Many are staunch Catholics, holding tightly to religion. Others are inclined to a spirituality that fights for the oppressed through social justice. Many are completely disgruntled with the conquest religion of the Catholicism they know. Still others, in syncretistic fashion, have a spirituality that is shaped by a blended mixture of a pluralistic worldview. In light of this, some are exasperated and scarcely believe in anything anymore. These varying views all add to the sense of religious and spiritual chaos of Mexico City.

To compound upon the urban problems previously mentioned, religious attempts to make sense of Mexico City have primarily been shaped (or coerced) by
four options: scientific secularism, mainly in the universities; distant, superstitious, and stale religion, mainly by the Catholic Church; negative and hypercritical fundamentalism, mainly by Evangelical Churches; or a sentimental, nebulous belief, mainly by new-age spiritualism.\textsuperscript{34}

These off-the-mark and misconstrued religious attempts generated a spiritual dissatisfaction among the urban residents of Mexico City. By convening a learning and practice cohort of ordinary people from the diversity of Mexico City, this ministry project seeks to offer a simple and structured alternative to the urban and religious mayhem of modern Mexico City life and culture.

CHAPTER 2
MINISTRY CONTEXT

In consideration of the broader context of this project, Mexico City life and culture, this chapter describes the specific ministry context of Ashrei \(^1\) Center for Spiritual Formation, which is the base of operations for this doctoral project. In this chapter, an overview is given of the history, vision, and values of the center, as well as the theological convictions and leadership model upon which the ministry is founded.

In the heart of Mexico City, Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation is “an urban retreat center that offers a quiet place for group and personal contemplative retreats, spiritual direction, and soul care.” \(^2\) Founded in 2015, Ashrei was begun to create space for learning to pay attention to God, oneself, and to one’s community and to ignite and inspire spiritual formation towards Christlikeness in Spanish-speaking cultures. Ashrei provides practical resources in Spanish to individuals, communities, and churches in

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\(^1\) Ashrei is the first word in the Psalms: הָלֶסּ (ashrei), and is a Hebrew declaration of blessing. A more detailed explanation will be forthcoming in the following sections.

Latin America and seeks to help synergize what God is doing in urban Latin America. Believing this is mainly done through the formation of the character of Christ, the ministry of Ashrei has as its primary intention to embody and promote a certain kind of life—the with-God life, that helps people become more like Jesus from the inside out.

Also, realizing that Christian workers and leaders give much spiritual care and attention to others and are often on the verge of burnout, Ashrei cultivates a space where they can also receive attention and spiritual care. While the test case for this doctoral project is Mexico City, the underlying assumption of the initiative is that this pilot cohort design and implementation could serve and impact other areas of urban Latin America in the future.

The History of Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation

In 1993, I was introduced to two important books on spiritual formation: The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives by Dallas Willard and Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster. Subsequently, those two authors and other Renovaré resources were steadily studied and put into practice. I am an alumnus of the Renovaré Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation and credit much of Ashrei’s origins, perspective, and practice to that experience. Additionally, much of Ashrei’s dreams for a Kingdom life of discipleship to Jesus in Mexico City have come from the spiritual guidance of Willard. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Willard’s teachings and Kingdom theology in this ministry endeavor. Along with Willard,

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Renovaré’s perspective pointed the people of Ashrei in the direction to go as a community and ministry, albeit in Spanish and within the framework of a Latin American urban landscape.

Ashrei was founded by several individuals that came from Church of Christ missionary training and consequently retain a high view of Scripture as a reliable and authoritative guide for life.4 I became more aware of global perspectives beyond my tradition and cultural lens through studying a bachelor’s degree in Latin American Studies from Texas Tech University and earning a Master’s degree in Global Leadership (MAGL) from Fuller Theological Seminary. The MAGL trains leaders to engage the world in the reality of post-modern and post-colonial contexts. The architects of Ashrei keep a deep rootedness in their tradition of the Churches of Christ, hanging onto the good that its tradition espoused, while also feeling the ability to let go of anything within the tradition that seemed to hinder, or might have been deemed unhelpful.5 In this, from its earliest stages, the founders of Ashrei determined to establish a theology and practice in a way that would fit the unique spiritual setting of urban Latin America. From its inception, the people of Ashrei did not simply want to transplant the ideals, worldview, or

4 Willard believes that the Bible can and should be considered a reliable and authoritative representation of the story and truth God willed to reveal to humanity. He stated, “The Bible is inerrant in its original form and infallible in all its forms for the purpose of guiding us into a life-saving relationship with God in his kingdom . . . the Bible reliably fixes the boundaries of everything God will ever say to humankind.” [First citation, Dallas Willard] as cited in Steven L. Porter, Gary W. Moon, and James Porter Moreland, Until Christ Is Formed in You: Dallas Willard and Spiritual Formation (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 30.

5 Brian McLaren, personal interview, Pattaya, Thailand, October 25, 2013. Author and activist Brian McLaren said, “I really appreciate every person in the Churches of Christ I’ve met. They have a knack for knowing Scripture, and I like that. In listening to your story, it sounds like you have been able to hold onto the good found in your tradition while setting down anything that was unhelpful.”
perspectives from theologies, churches, or ministries in the global North. Standing at the
crossroads of new ways of missional thinking and moving within post-colonial mission
contexts, the developers of Ashrei sought to shape styles of leadership and engagement
through a posture of meaningful dialogue, respect, and attentive listening to the voices,
lives, and culture of Latin America. Stated simply, they wanted the Mexican people to
take the reins of leadership in this mission.

**Contemplation and Action**

The narrative of Latin America is one of conquest and oppression. As a result,
Paulo Freire writes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that Latin American people often
fear the risks connected to freedom. He stresses that adult learning especially among
oppressed peoples is best achieved in dialogue. Freire emphasizes that dialogue “founds
itself on love, humility and faith; dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which
mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence.” Like the larger struggle
for liberation with which the oppressed are very familiar, dialogue means that both
reflection and concrete actions must go together.

In a critique of the one-sidedness often found between reflection and action,
Freire insists upon a healthy balance between the two—one must not be practiced to the
detriment of the other. Those developing the philosophy of Ashrei knew that the ministry

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6 *Dia* means “between,” *logos* means “word.” Hence, dia + logos = the word between us. Jane
Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco,

must be designed in light of a proactive equilibrium between contemplation and action—each one being an invaluable component of the learning process. This theme arises throughout the theological design and implementation of this project which emphasizes a learning model aimed at creating freedom among an historically oppressed people.

Early on in this work, the architects of Ashrei’s range of ministries were aware that the Church’s credibility in Latin America was questioned overall by many people. Carrying a strong conviction that the Church is God’s instrument for changing the world, the mystical expression of Christ’s Body on earth, it was uncomfortable to watch churches losing credibility, and along with it, moral and ethical authority in society. Wondering what could be an answer to people’s hunger to authentically grow closer to Jesus, the people of Ashrei were hopeful that churches could rediscover and become living examples of what a life lived intentionally with Jesus could look like. The people of Ashrei began to develop friendship and partnership with the Red del Camino para la Misión Integral en Latino-américa (the Integral Mission Network in Latin America — known as the RdC). The RdC’s practical approach to liberation theology came without any socio-political affiliations and was expressed as “integral mission” within networked churches across Latin America. Their approach and practice have had a strong influence

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8 The Red del Camino was born out of the Consultation for Wholistic Mission and Poverty at CLADE IV, 2000 (Latin American Congress on Evangelization), a gathering of 1300 leaders in Quito, Ecuador, sparked in collaboration with the Latin America Theological Society (FTL). A group of pastors and leaders was nominated by participants of the consultation at CLADE IV to dream about the formation of a continental network for the promotion of wholistic mission. The group developed a continental strategy for the formation of a network of churches and ministries committed to wholistic mission. Miguel Alvarez, The Reshaping of Mission in Latin America (Regnum, UK: Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol. 30), 111. and from “What is the Red del Camino” http://www.micahtnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/library/what_is_red_del_camino.pdf.
on how Ashrei envisions life in the Kingdom and the Church in particular. The RdC is composed of “local churches that manifest the kingdom of God and his justice, as they serve and promote transformation in their communities; they do so by serving and assisting churches, ministries and leaders through the formation of national networks that promote the life and practice of wholistic mission.”

The Red del Camino network began to show evidence of how churches could partner together, thus offering a more credible witness of what the Church was meant to do. Instead of fighting over doctrine, as was customary of many churches and still is today, these Latin American churches began to work together. This openness turned into shared projects between a wide-range of churches, particularly in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Argentina. Ecumenical in nature, with networks in the Red del Camino, one could appreciate that community development initiatives might even be shared between Catholic and non-Catholic believers. When churches with diverse traditions came together around a need in a community, that need became the point of shared mission, regardless of doctrinal stances that were obviously and historically divisive.

Along with friends across Mexico, and particularly with connector and convener Jorge Ortega, the founders of Ashrei helped coordinate Red del Camino initiatives, convening gatherings of like-minded practitioners, churches, and organizational leaders. This led to multiple coworking relationships. I volunteered as an executive team member and director of pastoral care for six years with Mosaico Urbano (Urban Mosaic), a slum

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ministry dedicated to integral holistic mission and community development along the eastern rim of Mexico City.

With friends from the *Red del Camino* and ministries like Urban Mosaic, we saw that the diversity of groups such as Baptists, Methodists, Charismatics, and Mennonites could work together with Catholics. Unconditional positive regard for one another was a special posture that all involved were embodying. As friendship and mutual blessing were shared along the way, the Christian communities were proving that Kingdom collaborators could be working together across previous dividing lines. While not making an intentional attempt to build a merger between the Catholic and non-Catholic communities, many could begin to see that through simple friendship and working together for the spiritual growth and the good of a community with deep need, something beautiful and unexpected can emerge. What was remarkable was that those shared mission points of overlap actually became a contextual proving ground—the spark that paved the way to an openness for sharing more deeply around spiritual growth together in spirituality.

One example of this was in 2016, when I was guided through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises by Sister Nora Kvitakovski, a nun from Argentina who was living in Mexico City at the time. In meeting Sister Nora, there was an immediate mutual desire to help bring Protestants and Catholics a little closer together. At that time, she had never given the exercises to a non-Catholic. Sister Nora believed the sisters of the Religious Jesus Mary (RJM) congregation could work in partnership with Ashrei toward the
building of an ecumenical school of accompaniment to train spiritual directors in the art of listening.

In 2017, Ashrei’s board of directors met together to discern a long-term vision that would lead to lasting change in people’s lives. At that retreat, the board discussed and prayed about identifying the character and contributions of the people and movements they admired, and then they determined that they would stay with those ideas until Ashrei had accomplished what it envisioned. The founders of Ashrei asked themselves what they thought was most valuable in the work that was being done through the ministry, and they began to identify more specifically what they would want others to know about God and his Kingdom. They also desired to make sure that whatever was identified as important would be lived-out tangibly through life-practices. It was through this process of learning to discern that Ashrei began to make more focused decisions and became more intentional as an organization.

The help that Ashrei has had along the way has been significant. This encouragement and spiritual accompaniment contributed to Ashrei’s belief and trust in community. This sense of collaboration and friendship is what the ministry of Ashrei hopes to propagate in every corner they find themselves in, believing that God’s mission in the world is to create new trustworthy communities, not just change individuals.

In an ongoing process that began in 2005, the founders of Ashrei began to partner with learning friends like the Luke 10 initiative (LK10), the Greenhouse workshop, and others from the organic, simple church movement. In Mexico City, church communities began to meet in homes, on Mexican patios, and in simple and small life transformation
groups in the workplaces of Mexico. Many layers of unnecessary expectations and conditions that had been imposed upon people across Latin America were being dissolved, offering relief to a people-group that have historic experience with oppression. What that pruning process and ecclesial deconstruction left with those Christian communities is seen in the character of this doctoral project.

Beginning in 2010, and continuing through that detaching process, some “churchiness” began to dissolve and people became more openly vulnerable and authentic. What was often revealed were layers of trauma and the need for a healing process. In response, the founders of Ashrei were certified as teachers and trainers in strategies for trauma awareness and resilience (STAR)\(^\text{10}\) from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University.

Men and women’s retreats and soul groups helped initiate the cathartic process,\(^\text{11}\) with deep emotional healing and real-life results. Men and women had deep longings to be responsible and committed to change in their families, workplaces, churches, and neighborhoods, but needed help making such changes. Thus began slow, but substantial, transformation. Ashrei and its partners were beginning to connect with people from around the world who were noticing the same needs, testing similar approaches, and

\(^{10}\) Hugo and Sandra Monroy, Colombian ministers in New York City were using the STAR training to pastor and accompany families and survivors at ground zero in New York City post 9/11. In 2007, Hugo and Sandra conducted a seminar in Guadalajara, Mexico, with us and a number of our coworking friends, to introduce us to trauma recovery strategies. In 2008, two of the Ashrei founders were then trained and certified in STAR at Eastern Mennonite University’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding.

\(^{11}\) The Crucible Project, Liminal Weekends, Richard Rohr’s Male’s Rite of Passage; Women Revealed and Soul Beauty retreats. The fruit of working closely with these organizations bore fruit that was being measured in lives with more peace and joy, noting family integration, and seeing marriage reconciliation.
discovering ways of meeting those needs. This learning curve was accelerated by reading meaningful books, going to retreats, seeking spiritual direction, and connecting to global leaders and communities who shared not only Ashrei’s same restlessness, but also its same convictions and hopes.

Through a continuing discernment process, there became a simpler commitment to focus on Jesus and “to teach what he taught in the manner he taught it.”12 Ashrei continues to grow and respond to needs as they arrive, but our vision is increasingly clear.

**The Vision of Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation**

The ministry of Ashrei exists to nurture the integral connection between spiritual formation and community action. Ashrei seeks to ground Christian compassion in Christian contemplative spirituality. Ashrei is a ministry of spiritual formation, desiring to accompany people as they move closer to God and become more Christ-like in character. With the spiritual formation model, Ashrei encourages and facilitates the intentional practice of the spiritual disciplines in daily life, helps plan and hosts contemplative retreats, offers spiritual direction, and encourages mission action as a response to a deepening life with God.

To accomplish this, Ashrei convenes and organizes intentional spiritual formation apprentice-circles in Mexico City. Encouraged by the results thus far, Ashrei hopes to

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inspire similar circles in the twenty Spanish-speaking countries scattered throughout the western hemisphere and even the Iberian peninsula.

The Values of Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation

In 2015, following a discernment process in spiritual direction, I was inducted into the chapter of Tau Chi Alpha (TXA) at Abilene Christian University; a simple society of college students. On and off the college campus, their main goal is to live out the spiritual disciplines taught in the Sermon on the Mount as a way of life. In that induction ceremony my family and I were commissioned to develop similar communities among people and families in Latin America, and the Ashrei ministry adopted the values and Rule of Life of the brothers from TXA. It is with the expectation that these would be specifically tailored to the spiritual landscape for communities in Latin America, designed for family life to include both males and females, and also children.

Founded to support the advancement of becoming more like Jesus in inner character and the quality of that character shaping interactions with others, TXA engages community through the life-stretching challenges of the Sermon on the Mount. The TXA values13 begin with this affirmation:

We want to live our lives by the fearlessness and discipline we see in the life of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.

Discipline: In a world of whininess and entitlement we inculcate the discipline of monks and the courage and toughness of Jesus. We cultivate physical, mental and spiritual toughness for the sake of our mission. We embrace sacrifice and suffering as qualities of Jesus.

Prayer: We believe transformation in the world and in ourselves begins with learning to pray. We embrace silence, solitude and the contemplative disciplines.

Love: We seek to love indiscriminately as Jesus taught us — love for enemies and “the least of these” especially. We embrace the poor, marginalized and unloved and show respect to every human being as one created in God’s image.

Hospitality: always being ready to be a welcoming presence — is our way of life.

Mission: We exist for the sake of the cause for which Christ died — the kingdom of God. We live our lives in the world for the sake of the reconciliation and healing of woundedness all around us — we are ministers of Shalom (peace in every direction). We embrace the call to leave our comfort zone and be in places of darkness.

Community: We believe God’s mission in the world is to create new community, not just change individuals. So, we seek to learn to live with our brothers and sisters and place their needs over our own. We know we cannot live this life alone.

Joy: We believe this should be fun as we seek the coming-of-the-kingdom every day, and that our joy is not determined by our circumstances. We cultivate thankfulness and hope for the future.

Humility: We are constantly vigilant to ruthlessly rooting out all expressions of religious elitism or superiority in ourselves. We know at our best we are “unworthy servants.”

A focused attention on discipline is a foundational value for both TXA and Ashrei, seeking “to not just try, but train.” Learning from TXA, Ashrei seeks to inculcate the prayerful discipline seen in monastic life and the courage and toughness seen in the habits that formed Jesus’s character. By following Christ into family togetherness, homes, schools, gyms, retreats, and deliberate workplace discipleship—physical, mental, and spiritual toughness begins to support the sake of Christ’s mission.

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While always daunted by it, the people of Ashrei do not want to be afraid to suffer personally or to suffer with others, embracing sacrifice and suffering as qualities of Jesus.

This commitment to discipline can find its way into real life most of all through the practice of prayer. Transformation in the world and in one’s self begins with learning to pray, in communication and connection with God. The society of TXA and the ministry friends of Ashrei desire to counter our tendency toward complaining and entitlement by practicing the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and the contemplative disciplines. The result is a more attentive life of listening to God, deepen self-knowledge, and more compassion for others.

In early mission experience, Ashrei’s founders and board of directors had observed that many historic mission endeavors seemed to be born out of arrogance, even anger or an attempt to prove something. They proposed that a self-emptying spirit of altruism as seen in the life of Jesus must drive new mission endeavors. Ashrei knew that it must facilitate a learning process as an organization that helped its community members authentically and affectionately love people. Following the model of Jesus, Ashrei communities seek to love each person with whom they are present—including their enemies and “the least of these.”

Concerning the “least of these,” Ashrei seeks to embrace the poor, marginalized, and most vulnerable of society—respecting every human being as one created in the image of God. In that, Ashrei holds that hospitality as a way of life is one of the shared values that Kingdom citizens are expected to practice, even when it leads beyond one’s comfort zone. Ashrei holds the convictions that we are to exist for the cause for which
Christ died, that life must be lived for the sake of the reconciliation and healing of “a wounded world and that Christ calls us to the building of peace,” without fear of being in places of darkness.

Regardless of the struggle and sacrifice that the Christian life invites us into, Ashrei believes that it should also be fun as we seek the coming of the Kingdom every day. “We are wired for fun,” and joy is not determined by circumstances. The intentional cultivation of joy and hope for the future can be assumed as a style of life.

**Theological Convictions**

The center derives its name from the first word in the Psalms: הָלֶסּ (ashrei). This Hebrew declaration of blessing means “Oh how blessed.” The word can also be translated “truly joyful.” The Psalter is the Bible’s book of profound spirituality and prayer and is embedded with the emotion of God’s people. Some Bible translators consider that the word “ashrei” is most likely the first word out of Jesus’s mouth in the Sermon on the Mount.

To begin the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sequentially repeats the word nine times emphasizing that followers of Christ live as a blessed people. This blessing is not determined by one’s life condition, but by one’s relationship with God and others. As a

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center for spiritual formation, Ashrei seeks to keep the life and teachings of Jesus as the center of all we do. We hold the conviction that life in the Kingdom of heaven is an open invitation to a blessed life lived with God, no matter one’s circumstances of life, whether poor in spirit, or mourning, or in meekness. It is noteworthy that for Jesus, those first beatitudes are not commands; they are blessings. It would be very difficult to live out the Sermon on the Mount if one did not feel the blessing of God.

Ashrei’s logo is a visual theological description of the ministry. The logo comes from the word-picture found in Psalm 1, “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Ps 1:1-3, NIV). In the logo, there are three blue waves. In historical iconography, blue represents heaven and thus symbolizes the trinitarian community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The people of Ashrei value joy within the community of a deeply relational God, the most joyous Being in the universe.


The logo is made in mono-line — bold, confident lines that represent the unity of the community and its union with God. These bold lines represent the conviction that one can learn to experientially know and trust in God as a way of life.

In the logo, one notices the shape of the waves that form the bottom of the tree’s shape, making it seem like the leaves of the tree reach all of the way down to the water. The green foliage is touching the stream, representing the theological conviction that apart from God, we can do nothing, but in God, we can bear much fruit — the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

Finally, one notices that the tree branches extend farther out. The branches extend to the edge of the circle making the foliage of the tree seem fuller, representing the conviction that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves — God’s eternal, unshakable Kingdom.

**Leadership Model for Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation**

Ashrei is led by co-executive directors who are the chief executives and operating officers of the organization. Subject to the direction and under the supervision of the center’s board of directors, the co-directors have general charge of the organization’s affairs. They also convene and set the agenda for all meetings of the board of directors, and on occasion may be assigned additional responsibilities by the board in accord with organizational bylaws.

The board consists of at least four and no more than fifteen directors serving staggered three-year terms. The initial board of the organization was comprised of seven
seats. Each director serves in staggered three-year terms. The board members’ spouses are encouraged to attend and participate in every meeting, and are to be allowed to carry the director’s proxy in the event of absence. The founding board members of Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation were: Michael Koehn, the chief financial officer of Flatiron’s Community Church; Dottie Schultz, director for missionary care, Missions Resource Network; Steve German, dean of students, Lubbock Christian University; Nancy Schroeder, missionary, Guadalajara, Mexico; John Henderson, chief executive officer of Texas Organization of Rural Clinics and Hospitals; Ken Hall, elder, Westport Road Church of Christ; and Gary Moon, author and past executive director of the Renovaré Institute in Christian Spiritual Formation, and executive director of the Martin Institute for Christianity and Culture and the Dallas Willard Center for Christian Spiritual Formation at Westmont College.

**Conclusion**

According to Brian McLaren, almost everyone, “whether nonreligious or religious, seems to agree that we need to discover or rediscover a viable way of life”20 in a fusion between the sacred and the secular. The challenge of this ministry is to help restore a kind of everyday sacredness to the rhythms of life. A spirituality of everyday sacredness would express a substantive alternative to what is currently hindering a with-God life in Mexico City, a spirituality that could hold up in the face of the challenges that life in Mexico City presents. It would be one that could be a corrective to the post-

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conquest, post-colonial, post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom, and possibly post-denominational Mexico City.  

This ministry is based on the conviction that one can lean on the wisdom evident in the life-practices and rhythms of Jesus to withstand the many challenges that are faced in the city. This cohort is aimed at rediscovering what Jesus taught and practiced in order to re-adopt his way of life in the present day. This alternative seeks to bring ancient practices to bear on the emerging world, where one would rediscover her faith as a way of life — shaped and strengthened by the ancient practices seen in the life of Jesus and intentionally lived out in shared practices and healthy relational community. In meeting this challenge, Ashrei seeks to show people in Mexico City a simple and vibrant alternative to the chaos that has presently and historically been accepted.

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21 Ibid., 6.

22 Ibid., iii. McLaren’s articulation of a return to faith as a way of life influenced the title of this doctoral project.

23 Ibid., 6.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a literature review of resources that have given direction to the implementation of this doctoral project. C.S. Lewis believed a good balance should be struck in the reading of classic and contemporary literature. He suggested that readers should lean heavily on older spiritual writings that had stood the test of time, and that contemporary writings should be tested against the great body of Christian thought in history.\textsuperscript{1} Heeding Lewis’ prescription, this literature review considers three classic Christian texts and then looks at three contemporary models to inform the proposals of this project.

It begins by examining three Spanish-written works: \textit{The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross}, \textit{Interior Castle} by St. Teresa of Avila, and the \textit{Spiritual Exercises} of St. Ignatius. Then, three contemporary models are given for living out community. The first of these is \textit{The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor} by Scott Bessenecker. This book takes a look at neo-monastic living in a

\footnote{C.S. Lewis. \textit{Athanasius: On the Incarnation = De Incarnatione Verbi Dei} (Charleston, SC: Desmondo Publications, 2013), 2.}
postmodern context, setting a high bar of personal devotion and missional commitment to the marginalized through the taking of vows in community. A second contemporary model is then considered in *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* by Randy Harris. This author explores practicing the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount as a way of life rather than seeing the teaching as simply great ideas by a great teacher. Finally, in *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church that Transforms*, Jim Wilder explores how brain science and spiritual formation in Christ overlap, and specifically how joy and identity are built through loving relationships.

Highlighting two or three significant themes in each of these works helps set the vision and tone of this spiritual formation project. The combination of these classic texts and contemporary practice models contribute to the discernment of the goals and strategic implementation phases of this project’s development, especially in light of their contributions toward a life of prayer as experienced in the realities of everyday life.

*The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*

John of the Cross was a revered sixteenth-century Carmelite. He served as Teresa of Avila’s spiritual director even though he was many years younger than her. Teresa said John was “a great treasure, a divine, heavenly man who inspires people with fervor on their way to heaven” and called him “the father of my soul.”² Teresa believed John had a special grace for listening and that—were her

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sisters to see him and open their souls to him—they would experience great progress spiritually.

John’s insights concerning the “dark night of the soul” came out of his own experience of spending nine months in solitary confinement in a ten-by-six-foot prison cell. During this time, he was pulled out at least weekly to be beaten in public. In something akin to the *Shawshank Redemption,* John escaped through a small window in the cell next door after managing to pry the door off its hinges.

Thesis

John saw God at work in the suffering soul, believing that God is teaching the soul valuable lessons during trials. John’s thesis insists that the “dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorance and imperfections, habitual natural and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation or mystical theology.” One of the main themes that runs through John’s writings is purgation — the pruning of a soul by stripping it of unneeded attachments and obsessions. John explains that it takes spiritual toughness to follow Christ.

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3 *The Shawshank Redemption,* directed by Frank Darabont (1994; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.


Summary of Main Argument

Believing that the soul needed pruning, John’s works highlight the significance of undergoing interior soul-training, the endurance of suffering, and perseverance in trial. This prompted him to write *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In these, “he wished to describe these sufferings in their most intense form. Everyone could then take comfort in the thought that no matter how severe the purification, it is still the work of God’s gentle hand, clearing away the debris of inordinate affection and making room for the divine light.”⁶ To John, God can do something productive with the pain experienced in human life: “Herein God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in perfection of love without its doing anything.”⁷

Contribution to Topic

John invites the reader to understand that the ultimate goal for the soul is union with God, and he explains darkness and loneliness, dread and purgation, as means to this end. John explains that as a person matures spiritually, he will often experience a shift in internal priorities, and things that seemed so important previously, begin to lose their relevance in light of something more important for eternity.⁸ This becomes an important insight for a Mexico City cohort participant

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⁷ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, vii.iii.

that is experiencing spiritual deepening, who may simultaneously begin to lose interest in spiritual things that normally brought them consolation. According to Harris, in this stripping, priority-shifting phase, “unless we have a teacher like St. John of the Cross, we may think we are losing our faith.”

To paraphrase a primary theme in John’s writing, what God has to do is make one dissatisfied with everything in life, including her spiritual life, so she will reach for the only thing left, which is God.

John is an important voice in the life of this spiritual formation cohort because the participants will have to slog through the hard days and hard nights of being obedient to God in urban life. John is an invaluable teacher of rugged, disciplined spiritual formation. When one is stripped of everything he has depended on to feel good about life, John’s experience counsels: “Okay, now you’re ready.” A relationship with God is so deep that, even if everything else was lost, God would still be enough.

John’s collected works place high value on the practice of contemplative prayer. He teaches that in the silence, one learns to have faith re-oriented to love God alone, regardless of the circumstance. His teachings are highly valuable for soul-formation in this cohort program, as he models a gritty mystic who refuses to let go of God, even when the world is collapsing around him.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 1313.
11 Ibid., 1307.
To summarize, John’s counsel on discipline and spiritual toughness can prepare cohort members to manage and maintain perspective during the difficult stages of spiritual formation. Like Jesus, John was a student of the things he suffered (Heb 5:8). In the cohort participants’ training to become like Christ, they can learn from John and Jesus to can keep your eyes on God, even if or when God does not seem to be there. John’s work can develop a toughness trained by love, even in the dark.

Limitations

Besides the fact that it was written in sixteenth-century Spain, the main limiting factor of this work is that it is of such spiritual intensity that many may flinch even in just considering what it may imply. John’s approach to understanding life with God concentrates so heavily on spiritual doggedness that the faint of heart might not dare to approach it. In order for the outcomes of this cohort to be met, one must be ready to embrace discipline and training as a primary means of spiritual formation. Many might say “no thank you” and carry on their way. If this is the case, this project will be limited in whom it may reach.

The Interior Castle by Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila was a sixteenth-century Carmelite reformer and a contemporary of John of the Cross. While John was very intellectual in his writings, Teresa is very practical about the life of prayer — a mystical pragmatist. Dallas Willard asserted that Teresa’s Interior Castle provided such insightful
instruction on a living relationship with God that one would be pressed to find its comparison; a work on prayer so practical and beautiful, it may not have an equal in literature. He was so influenced by this book that he claims it is the principle spiritual writing that helped him see how much dignity and value the human soul has, what he called the soul’s “vast reality.”

Thesis

Teresa compares the human soul to a castle or heavenly dwelling with many rooms in which “a King so mighty, so wise, and so pure, containing in Himself all good, can delight to rest.” According to Willard, Teresa believed “Nothing can be compared to the great beauty and capabilities of a soul . . . for, as He has told us, He created us in His own image and likeness.” Willard summarizes the rooms of the castle as “ways of living in relation to God.”

Summary of Main Argument

Teresa seeks to frame the life of prayer as a journey into the soul and a growing in “intimate consciousness.” An honesty at the heart of Teresa’s

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14 Ibid., 29.


understanding of prayer facilitates growth in self-awareness and self-knowledge. Teresa insists that no matter how weak a prayer life one may have, the desire to pray can lead into what she refers to as the first room of the castle. This dwelling place, this doorway into prayer, is often characterized by much distraction, and so a growth in self-scrutiny and understanding is vital to the life of prayer.

If the one learning to pray is willing to stick with prayer, pressing a little farther into the “interior castle,” with each room one is drawn into a deeper experience of prayer. The second room is characterized by humility, realizing how often real life does not line up with what one finds in the life of Jesus. Even if there is a deep longing or hunger in the gut, one sees how far they are from the life with God they really want.

Teresa’s third room of prayer emphasizes the aspect of spiritual dryness in prayer, or what John of the Cross called the dark night of the soul or dark night of the spirit. By spending extended time in this humbling place, one may gradually be able to take steps through another door to the fourth dwelling place. This room is marked by what Teresa calls a “gentle drawing inward” or a developing receptivity to God’s internal workings within the soul. There is a sweetness and delight in this room, and it encourages the soul “to be abandoned into the hands of God, forgetting all self-interest and resigning ourselves entirely to his will.”

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17 Teresa, *Interior Castle.*
In describing dwelling places five through seven, Teresa’s writing on union with God is possibly the greatest treatments ever written on the subject. Willard credits these chapters to his understanding of what it is to live a life of prayer. He learned that it meant “to live in communication with God, not just speaking to him, but listening and acting,” and he states, “most of what I know about the phenomenology of God speaking to us, I learned from studying and putting into practice what Teresa says in dwelling place six, chapter three. It is still, I think, the best treatment ever written of what it is like for God to speak to his children.” Teresa writes beautifully of God’s love for his people and the necessity of coming to terms with one’s God-given, godly nature. Teresa wants the person of prayer to know just how significant she is in God’s eyes.

Contribution to Topic

The themes that Teresa traces challenge the pace of an urban life today and demonstrate the many inconsistencies between what people desire and the way they actually live. Teresa’s description of the rooms of prayer are helpful because “there is a reliable order and sequence to growth in the spiritual life. This is built into her model of the castle of the soul. Now, she says in effect, this is the layout, this is what is to be gone through, here is where you start, here are some things to

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19 Ibid, 209.

20 Finley, “Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle - An Experiential Introduction.”
do, and here is what you may expect to happen, and what it means."\textsuperscript{21} Teresa makes the case that the goal of prayer is union with God, and in that life of prayer, we become more loving, like God.

Limitations

The main drawback of the \textit{Interior Castle}, in consideration of this project, is that while it highlights the life of prayer, it is vague on specifics beyond the one spiritual discipline of prayer. Teresa’s writing only broadly addresses the goals of this project. One further limitation is that in Teresa’s mysticism, she describes experiences of spiritual ecstasy. This may feel intimidating to some readers. Still, this is one of the greatest works on prayer ever written, an ally for the person who desires to learn to pray. It forms an integral part of the training material of this program.

\textbf{The Spiritual Exercises by Ignatius of Loyola}

St. Ignatius of Loyola, from Azpeitia, Spain, was a courtier and soldier turned priest and cofounder of the religious order, the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in the sixteenth century. Ignatius was “someone who was vain, even arrogant, and certainly of dubious moral standing.”\textsuperscript{22} but as Ignatius’ story gradually unfolds, “we can see the transformative power of grace in action.”\textsuperscript{23} Ignatius went from being a self-centered and

\textsuperscript{21} Willard, \textit{The Great Omission}, 208.


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., xiv.
conceited man into a man who looked for the well-being of others. Margaret Silf writes, “As Ignatius moved through the early stages of his own pilgrimage, he found himself withdrawing from a lifestyle that had been dominated by isolation, penance, and asceticism to a growing solidarity with other people.”24 Helping souls, or “to help people” became a mantra for Ignatius and the Jesuits. It was a phrase that epitomized all that gave them energy for their ministries and direction within.”25

Concerning his journey of transformation, Ignatius wrote down what he learned so that it might be helpful to others, and his meditations became the Spiritual Exercises. One of the most appealing aspects of the Spiritual Exercises is that they were born out of Ignatius’ own experience of transformation, and they help each person make progress in their life with God. A person making the exercises is encouraged to find God in all things, to deepen in a life of discernment, and to make faith “more personal and more incarnate.”26 The Exercises can help integrate a person’s life of prayer.

**Thesis**

Fundamental to the Spiritual Exercises is that they “presume that one wants to find God within one’s life. The goal of the Exercises is to find that love which will influence one towards serving God better. The thrust of the first twenty annotations of the

24 Ibid., 62.


26 Ibid., 6.
Exercises is towards helping a person find God’s direction in his or her life.”27 In the early reflections of the Spiritual Exercises, the retreatant is guided in what Ignatius calls the “Principle and Foundation,” which “outlines a vision of life and the most basic criteria for making choices. It says that we live well and attain our ultimate purpose by loving just one thing, or rather some One. . . . [For] according to the Foundation, serving God is what makes us happy.”28

Summary of Main Argument

The Spiritual Exercises, while they inherently build self-introspection, ultimately are geared strongly toward mission. In contemplating the life of Jesus, as portrayed in the four Gospels, the Exercises put Jesus at front and center of experience. This draws the exercitant to missional engagement with the world, much like the Good Samaritan recognized a need and acted out of his neighborly heart in service to God. This service, exemplified in Jesus, is a horizontal movement which reaches out to all other men and women, to all creation, to cultures and nations, to Christians and to people of other faiths. For Ignatius, service to God simply meant a service that “helps other people.”29

Dean Brackley states, “Ignatian spirituality engaged the cultures of the world, its learning, arts, and professions. In this engagement with the secular culture of its time,


29 Ibid., 62.
Ignatian spirituality found an even more profound application of its conviction that contemplation and action can fuse into a harmonious act of virtual prayer.”30

Contributions to Topic

One of the most alluring elements of the Jesuits, the religious order founded and directed by Ignatius, is that they are not a cloistered order, but rather are continuously deeply engaged with the affairs of the world. Through a growing knowledge of discernment that the Exercises foster, the retreatant learns to discover his or her vocation in the world and it is strikingly missional in nature. Thomas Landy writes, “The Risen Christ does not exist in some eternal sabbatical, but continues to work through his Spirit — inspiring, challenging, healing, leading.”31 By contemplating the life of Jesus in the Exercises, and then looking inwardly at one’s own life, she can align her life with Christ’s work in the world. At the very core of the Exercises, is a balance of inward and outward movements. One of Ignatius’ key premises in the Spiritual Exercises was to inspire those who make them to become “contemplatives in action.” The Spiritual Exercises is a radically missional retreat book, and it offers much for the cohort learning experience in Mexico City. This missional spirituality “calls us to incarnate our consolations, that is, to take our graces, inspirations, and holy desires to serve God, and transform them into action in everyday life.”32

30 Ibid., 71.


It is not surprising that Pope Francis, a Jesuit, would call the Church a field hospital. The Exercises foster a kind of spirituality “that sees Christ hard at work in the world — bringing justice, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, forgiving sins, and comforting the grieving — and Christ asks us to do the same.”³³ In the Spiritual Exercises meditation, Ignatius asks the retreatant to consider how God conducts himself as one who is working: “Our God is a busy God, and we’re called to get busy, too. Our attitudes must clearly favor engagement rather than retreat from the world, and we call that mission.”³⁴

One of the primary disciplines that is developed within the experience of the spiritual exercises is the prayer of Examen. This specific practice aspect of the exercises, along with engaging the imagination in prayer, will be a significant part of the students’ training experiences.

Limitations

Often the Spanish words found in the Spiritual Exercises are much more rich and powerful than the English translations. They are often easy to mistranslate and consequently the words are easily misunderstood from the original meaning that Ignatius may have intended in their writing. Ignatius also routinely uses military language, which may provoke frustration or exasperation in some retreatants. A thorough reading of Ignatius’ autobiography should precede the making of the Exercises in order for the retreatant to understand the context in which they were compiled. The Spiritual Exercises


³⁴ Ibid., 67.
are very Catholic in flavor. This may potentially scare or paralyze non-Catholics who are not quite as open to learning from diverse Christian traditions.

_The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor by Scott Bessenecker_

The director of mission mobilization for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Scott Bessenecker helps mobilize thousands of students each year for domestic and international mission. He has written a number of books including _How to Inherit the Earth: Submitting Ourselves to a Servant Savior; Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions from the Christian Industrial Complex;_ and _Living Mission: The Vision and Voices of New Friars._

_Thesis_

In this first contemporary resource, _The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor_, the author establishes that “it is one of God’s recurring dreams to raise up servants, intent upon reaching those who have been impoverished materially, spiritually, and emotionally—those people who have been forgotten, abused and rejected.” Bessenecker believes a new movement is emerging that is similar to past monastic movements. He writes, “We are on the front edge of another missional, monastic-like order made up of men and women, many of whom are in their twenties and

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thirties, burning with a passion to serve the destitute in slum communities of the
developing world—not from a position of power but from alongside them.”37

Summary of Main Argument and Contribution to Topic

Illustrating how much these present-day missionary movements have in common
with ancient monastic movements, Bessenecker shows how these communities are
“carried forward in their mission through the agency of solemn vows or commitments
made to God, just as the missionary monastic orders of old. These vows rule their
conduct, their community, their ministry.”38 This is significantly related to the premise of
this doctoral project in that the formation of covenant community around shared common
vows or a “rule of life” is an essential part of this project. Bessenecker writes: “Vows are
practically unheard of in twenty-first century Western society. Marriage vows are about
all we have left, and they’re not holding up too well. Many people are begging someone
to set the bar higher, to call them to uncommon levels of commitment and devotion. In
God’s economy, vows have always been critical.”39

Taking old monastic traditions into consideration, especially the Franciscan order,
but also borrowing from the Augustinian and Jesuit orders, this book voices five
underlying values of this budding movement. First, the movement is incarnational,
seeking not simply to bring the Gospel to the lost or oppressed from the outside, but to

37 Ibid., 16.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
follow the mission model of Jesus by becoming part of the communities of dispossessed they sought to serve. The movement is devotional, “organized around a set of spiritual commitments, or a ‘rule,’ to govern their walk with Jesus, with one another and with the community, into which they had grafted themselves.”

Third, the movement is communal, moving into a community of mostly strangers and living as a family. This often meant the commitment to how resources were shared and distributed within the community depending upon need, the sharing of property and living spaces, like family. Fourth, the movement is missional. The ancient orders went out to the communities where Jesus was not commonly known. And finally, the movement is marginal. Bessenecker writes, “They were on the fringe movement of the mainstream church, and they sought to plant themselves among people who existed on the edges of society. They were born out of a reaction to spiritual flabbiness in the broader church and a tendency to assimilate into a corrupt, power-hungry world.” This brought about a certain kind of company of people, those who were “in the process of pursuing a different kind of spiritual life, they often found company with those who were trapped outside the systems.”

40 Ibid., 20.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 21.
43 Ibid., 22.
44 Ibid.
Limitations

The major limitation of this book is that it is almost exclusively geared towards work in slum communities. It may not speak to those who are not missionaries and who do not live incarnationally in impoverished, marginalized areas. The core values stated in the book could be (mostly) adopted by anyone, anywhere, who may desire to live vows in community, committed to living life in a certain kind of way. Still, the book barely makes room for anything less than the principles being lived out in a context of radical ministry under a vow of poverty.

**Living Jesus: Doing what Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount by Randy Harris**

With a PhD from Syracuse University, Harris trained in spiritual direction from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, and is now a professor and spiritual director at Abilene Christian University. He is the architect of a student organization group called Tau Chi Alpha (TXA) made up of students that live together by a Rule of Life, a covenant in which the students resolve to live their university lives practicing the Sermon on the Mount as they engage life on and off of campus.

Thesis

Harris begins with this claim: “The Sermon on the Mount is full of hard teachings, but at my core I believe Jesus wants us to live out these teachings, however imperfectly. By living these teachings Jesus gives us incredible and abundant life.”\(^{45}\) He approaches this book not like a study, but like a “field guide” for those who want to try

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living the Sermon on the Mount.\textsuperscript{46} Harris is helpful in understanding how someone can have "a deep commitment to the contemplative life but also engage the world with the gospel story."\textsuperscript{47} He sets a vision for learning from the mystical and contemplative traditions but with a view toward also living a missional life. Harris explains, "In my experience, contemplatives didn’t seem very missional and missional people didn’t seem very contemplative,"\textsuperscript{48} and he asks, "What would a community be like that took both of these very seriously?"\textsuperscript{49}

Summary of Main Argument

The theme throughout the book is that a clue is provided at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, that determines how one reads the whole sermon. Harris says the question is this: Can you do this? Can you really live this way?\textsuperscript{50} Jesus says that the wise person is the one who hears his teachings and puts them into practice. The foolish person hears and does not put them into practice. Harris observes, “And this is stunning because at the end of the sermon Jesus places no emphasis on understanding and all the emphasis on doing. The sermon is not a body of material to be cognitively mastered. It is a life to be lived.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 1423.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 139.
Contribution to Topic

Harris’ perspectives on the Sermon on the Mount contribute to this project through the theological framework he constructs. While the ending of the Sermon on the Mount emphasizes the practice or action of the teaching, “Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with blessings, and he blesses the people who are most desperate for them: the poor, the humble, those who are persecuted, those who mourn. Jesus knows that we can’t follow him until we know his blessing,”52 and the first thing Jesus does is offer blessings to the people who are there.

Just as Bessenecker’s book highlighted the incarnational and missional traits of the early monastic communities, Harris also stresses these characteristics by pointing out Jesus’s use of the terms salt and light, noting “Salt and light need to penetrate their environment in order to make a difference in them.”53 In this, Harris remarks that as followers of Jesus, this is not just for ourselves, but “the Sermon on the Mount is a call to Christians to live for the sake of the world.”54

This work also features the covenant component of this doctoral project: what holds the community together are vows and a commitment to live life together in a certain kind of way. Beyond how difficult it would be to live out the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount without feeling the blessing of God, other practical ideas are found in this resource that impact this project. Harris expands upon the six life-practice

52 Ibid., 216.
53 Ibid., 336.
54 Ibid., 356.
examples that Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount in order to live out a “deep inner righteousness: becoming a non-angry, non-lustful, faithful person of integrity who does not retaliate, but loves people who don’t love you back (your enemies).”  

Harris couches spiritual practices in relationship to God and each other, saying, “fasting and prayer have to do with relationship to God and not putting on a show, and . . . the way we judge or not judge others has to do with generosity toward other people.”  

In one of the most relevant contributions of this book toward this project, Harris confesses that he had mostly mentored others “from the neck up.” While churches, Bible classes, and small groups learn and grow spiritually, he notes that “they never quite form covenant. They never get to the place where they sign on to a covenant agreement with one another to live a certain way.”  

This gets to the core of what this project is designed to lead: bringing people together to live a certain way of life in community, as a powerful way of shadowing Jesus into everyday practices that transform character and make a difference in the world.

Limitations

The book is written in an informal tone, rather than as a scholarly view towards understanding the dynamics of living out the Sermon on the Mount. However, it must not be judged as a simple book. It is, in fact, thoughtful, well-developed, and illuminating. One limitation, however, is that the writing context for living out the principles were for a

55 Ibid., 1565.
56 Ibid., 1565.
57 Ibid., 1434.
58 Ibid., 1514.
student’s life on a college campus. Much attention, effort, and cultural adaptation is required to adapt it and find its meaning in the expansiveness of Mexico City.

*Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church that Transforms* by Jim Wilder

Jim Wilder was born to missionary parents in Colombia and is the founder of Life Model Works. He worked with Jane Willard for twenty-five years at Shepherd’s House counseling center. Wilder’s life-work consists mostly in the cultivation of relational leadership through bonding and joyful identity development. He is in the early development of a new discipline he calls neurotheology, the intersection of brain science and spiritual formation.

Thesis

*Renovated* aims at how the brain learns Christlike character. It asks, “Would knowing how the brain learns character revise how we teach ourselves to be Christian?” The book emerged from the *Heart and Soul* conference, an event aimed at bringing brain specialists together with theologians and those who study spiritual formation. Concerning topics of spiritual and emotional maturity, this conference explored whether brain science could help in understanding identity systems in the brain that generate emotional reactions to life — reactions that often lack Christlike character. Dallas Willard and


Wilder wanted to compare how the brain changes character with the methods Christians use for discipleship and spiritual formation.⁶¹

Summary of Main Argument

In regard to the practice of the spiritual disciplines (in this book referred to as strategies), Wilder posits that strategies happen primarily by the conscious mind, which is mostly in the left side of the brain. Relational skills, on the other hand, or that which has to do with identity and character are driven mostly through attachment. As he says, “We are transformed by who we love.”⁶² And this happens mostly in the right side of the brain, the identity side. Wilder contends that if people could put the two together, the strategies and skills needed to develop character plus the relational skills that make up daily interactions, they would experience a more well-rounded character formation, and in this way, experience transformation.

The book considers twelve characteristics that a disciple must develop to build healthy, loving attachment. Wilder also emphasizes three elements needed for full (spiritual) maturity: multigenerational community; interactive (Immanuel) life with God; and relational-brain skills needed to be fully human.⁶³

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⁶¹ Ibid.
⁶² Ibid., 6.
⁶³ Ibid., 109.
The book combines Dallas Willard’s VIM model\textsuperscript{64} for change with the Life Model\textsuperscript{65} that Jim Wilder developed. (See footnotes for brief description of each.) Wilder asserts that this hybrid model of spiritual and relational maturity solidifies the “slow track” of the conscious mind, carried along by the impetus flow from the “fast track” part of the mind powered by attachment love, encouraging both character transformation and spiritual maturity to occur.\textsuperscript{66}

Contributions to Topic

The author summarizes by saying: “Now we have a model for spiritual formation that includes full emotional and relational maturity.”\textsuperscript{67} Without them both, real spiritual maturity will not be reached. Wilder’s book is important to this doctoral project because he and Willard assert that to develop Christlike character, one must rest, deepen in steadfast love, experience joyful friendships, and grow in relational maturity—all of which are intentional aspects of this project. In doing this, “Life is now driven by the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[64] The general pattern of personal transformation, according to Willard is Vision, Intention, and Means. If we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must have and must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means. If this VIM pattern is not put in place properly and held there, Christ simply will not be formed in us. Willard, \textit{Renovation of the Heart}, 85.
\item[65] In the book Wilder recounts: “In the counseling office, we observed that the human will was rarely in charge of much and could be quite ineffective. Spiritual disciplines worked better for some people than others. The active presence of Jesus in the minds of those who loved Him, however, produced dramatic healing and growth—particularly for those who had loving relationships in their lives. We organized what we were learning and called this framework the Life Model. Dallas placed his endorsement on the first published copy of the Life Model, saying it was “the best model I have seen for bringing Christ to the center of counseling and restoring the disintegrating community fabric within Christian communities.” Wilder, \textit{Renovated}, 108.
\item[66] Ibid., 176.
\item[67] Ibid., 178.
\end{footnotes}
most powerful force in the human brain—attachment love—rather than the feeble, overly focused will. We become a new people who are being saved here on earth by the active presence of God.”

Limitations

The exploration of how brain science and spiritual formation overlap is fascinating and, without question, Wilder is treading new territory filled with much promise. The main limitation of this resource is that Wilder is introducing a new discipline, which he is calling “neurotheology,” and more research and development in this field needs to be done. Wilder and Willard’s conversations toward the end of Willard’s life highlight key factors in transformation, and they present a body of work that must be explored further in on-the-ground training in community, a laboratory-type setting, like this spiritual formation cohort in Mexico City.

68 Ibid.
CHAPTER FOUR
THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

This chapter develops a reflective theology that supports the proposed new
ministry initiative. It explores and defines a necessary theology that undergirds spiritual
direction and spiritual formation in Christlike character. After a personal statement of
theological conviction, this chapter looks closely at the Gospel of John, exploring the
themes with word studies, exegesis and interpretation of key passages, and examples that
highlight a theology that grounds spiritual formation in Christ. Particular attention will be
given to incarnational theology, trinitarian theology, and aesthetic theology. This chapter
also explores how my understanding of the Church informs this work by grounding
ecclesiology in normative sources of theology, faith heritage, and insights from the social
sciences. This chapter recognizes the wisdom of other theological sources outside my
tradition, while maintaining a theological dialogue with it so that theology informs
ministry practice.
Personal Theology

A simple definition of theology is what one thinks about God. The theology articulated in this chapter is influenced by Willard, Ignatius, and Francis of Assisi. It is also shaped by premier Latin American theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff and influenced by my personal friends who write theology.¹

But no one can walk too far on someone else’s theological path, living by someone else’s beliefs. Theology is personal. It asks not what does someone else believe, but what do you believe?

In this chapter I attempt to answer that question and describe the impact of my beliefs on this ministry. Three theological convictions drew my family and I into this life and continue to sustain us in what we do. These three convictions are what I believe about God in order to do the ministry we are doing. They are what we believe about the nature of God and his character as revealed in Christ.

First, God is a creative and relational Being. He created people to be in community—they were created for belonging. Next, God, who himself lives in trinitarian community, gave a model for living through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This means that God wants to be with his people and is here—they are not alone. Finally, in the life of Jesus and his compassionate love, it can be seen that God created each person with immense worth. Every person is created in God’s image and likeness, which is his kind of goodness and beauty. This means people are created for life with God, and what Christians call “salvation” is that life—a journey in the discovery and recovery of that

¹ Of particular influence have been Edesio Sanchez Cetina, Juan Jose Barreda Toscano, Nora Kviatkovski, Randy Harris, Gary Moon, Trevor Hudson, and Daniel Napier.
characteristic goodness and a life lived in loving union with God, and in harmony with his will.

Accordingly, the theological concepts that lay the groundwork for this ministry is a trinitarian theology (perichoresis—the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit), an incarnational theology (God became flesh, human in Jesus Christ), and an aesthetic theology (through sensory knowledge of beauty, feeling, and imagination). The Gospel of John illustrates these three theological convictions, particularly in the relational quality of divine love it evidences, the way it develops the theme of incarnation, and the beauty and worth of each human being Jesus demonstrates in John’s account.

The Gospel of John supports these three theological convictions, but it also provides a teaching model for ministry. Through John’s narrative style, the quality of Jesus’s attention is clear. His intimate, conversational quality of attention is seen in almost every interaction that John presents, and this quality is at the heart of our ministry here in Mexico City. Jesus dialogues with others and demonstrates keen insight into each soul in every conversation.

According to social scientist David Augsburger, “Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.”2 Douglas Steere, echoes this theme, believing that “to ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”3 Observing Jesus’s mission, Gary Moon calls Jesus the “ultimate spiritual

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At Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation, we seek to build a community established in Jesus’s listening and loving presence, and one that will be a seedbed for the training of spiritual directors and the privileged calling of being a listener.

**Key Words in the Gospel of John**

Key themes in John’s Gospel become evident in his frequent use of certain words. For example, the word “to know” is used 138 times (ginosko, fifty-seven times; and oida, eighty-four times). John uses “world” (kosmos) seventy-eight times. John uses “love” fifty-seven times, describing both agapao or phileo. Agapao can be considered as the kind of love that communicates a condition of complete allegiance to someone, (like hesed love in the Hebrew) and phileo communicates the hospitable and welcoming love of friendship. Other words he notes frequently include “life,” (zoe) used forty-seven times, and “word” (logos), forty-five times.

These words and their repetition intimate strong themes in the Gospel of John. All these terms listed, among others like see, hear, and believe, “might be thought to constitute the “epistemology” of the Fourth Gospel, and can be used in a range of human

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5 “The Greek language of the Bible had eight different words that could be translated, “know” in English. The two most common are ginosko and oida, the term used in John 13:1-3 to describe Jesus’ knowledge. While the two can be more or less synonymous, the distinctions are worthy of attention… Ginosko frequently suggests beginning or making progress in knowing, and can be translated, “came to know.” Ginosko frequently implies an active relationship between the knower and the known. Oida is less personal, but more complete; it expresses the fact that the object has come within the scope of the knower’s perception.” J. Andrew Wood, “Moderating Variables for Servant Leadership Models: A Sub-model Based On Antecedents to Jesus’ Footwashing Demonstration.” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, Volume 7, No. 1, Fall 2017, (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University School of Business & Leadership, 2017), 104.
experience…and can be quite casual…or can revolutionize the self and the world it inhabits.” The words used in the Gospel of John articulate an intimate, loving relational bond between the community of the Trinity and also God with people today — which is the main desired outcome of this ministry project.

**Incarnational Theology**

A definition of incarnational theology is the affirmation that Jesus Christ, being divine, became human: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Tony Jones says, “Incarnational theology emphasizes what many of us believe is the most significant act of God in the history of creation: that God incarnated Godself in the person, Jesus of Nazareth.” In John’s theological prologue (Jn 1:1-18), the Word (logos) was made flesh to show us how to live a life of salvation. In the incarnation, God fulfills his promise to be Emmanuel, God with us.

A foundational theological assumption for this ministry is that it must also be incarnational, reflecting the humility and self-emptying nature of God, who emptied himself and became human. Like John the Baptist, Christians must learn to say, “I am not the Messiah” (Jn 1:22). In essence, John was saying, “I am not God.” John then only describes himself in relation to Jesus, “The one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandal” (Jn 1:27) and “He must become greater. I must become

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less” (Jn 3:30). The incarnation of Christ invites God’s people to release any need they might think they have “to be God.”

To come into the Kingdom life of God, people must come in as children. John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:1, 2).

Louis Martyn suggested that the Gospel of John was like a two-level drama. At the first level, John’s story revolved around Jesus, whom Martyn calls the “child par excellence.” The Johannine narrator presents Jesus as a model for humanity in relationship to God as a Father, a filial metaphor that delineates a father-child relationship of loving affection and constant care. John describes Jesus’s relation to the Father as “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

In the “second level” of the drama in the Johannine narrative, Martyn believes that all people can share in the same child-Father relationship, because, “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (Jn

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The community of John was expected to adopt the Father/God-and-Son/Jesus relationship as their esteemed model in this world.\textsuperscript{10}

Throughout the Gospel of John, one notices another particular theme that differs from the Kingdom of God language in the synoptic Gospels. John uses the language of eternal life to communicate the same idea of living in closeness to the will and life of God. This ultimately can be understood as a new community identity of those who also live in union or in close relationship to God. The Church is this new community which is to be like family, brothers and sisters under the care and affection of a heavenly Father. This new community, as seen in the Gospel of John, would be characterized by deep friendships and loving devotion.

When one observes Jesus calling those early followers into a life of learning with him, it was an invitation to join him in daily life. The embodied hospitality and invitation of warm welcome are qualities of Jesus. In the early calling of his disciples, these followers experienced Jesus’s hospitality: “‘Rabbi, where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’” They came and saw where he was staying and they remained with him that day” (Jn 1:38, 39). After this initial contact with Jesus, his personality and way of life is so attractive and compelling to them, their lives are never the same. The deep familiarity that happened in close contact with Jesus ultimately created a relationship of deep and unwavering commitment despite circumstance.

John’s Gospel presents further evidence of the significance of incarnational theology in chapter four, where he develops the concept of closeness to God and clearly

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
depicts the conversational quality of Jesus’s focused attention when he is with people. The episode presents a Samaritan woman, who is at a well at midday, although it was custom for women to draw water early in the day. Jesus becomes present and available with those who may prefer not to be seen, like this Samaritan woman on the margins and the edge of society. Incarnational theology assumes that one embraces presence and dialogue with the fragile and vulnerable—like Jesus did in this story. With the Samaritan woman he is attentive and enters into profound theological conversation. An incarnational ministry would accept, like Jesus, a theology and stance that lets the marginalized know that there are no people who are outside of the possibilities of a life lived with God. Jesus acknowledges the woman’s enormous worth, and consequently everyone else’s as well.

This passage has particular relevance to Latin American culture, known for its culture of machismo. Here, Jesus models treating women with respect, showing his followers how to engage the world. It also encourages the engagement in dialogue with those not like oneself, and the reciprocity of becoming more relationally and situationally interdependent with others. Jesus asks a favor of the Samaritan woman—showing vulnerability and solidarity with the woman, “Will you give me a drink?” (Jn 4:7).

In dialogue with the Samaritan woman, Jesus teaches her that God is everywhere: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21). Consequently, because of that, worship hubs like Jerusalem (the sacred center of the Israelites) and Mount Gerizim (the sacred
mountain of the Samaritans), do not matter in the same way because the incarnate God is accessible everywhere, available in present time.

Another part of the incarnational aspect modeled by Jesus is his service-oriented love: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples” (Jn 13:34, 35). Jesus spoke this after he had washed his disciples’ feet.

Regarding this incarnational embodiment of service to others, the text reads:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (Jn 13:12-17).

You are “blessed if you do them”—blessed by an embodied life of service. This entails the theological concept of kenosis, self-emptying love. In humility, Jesus simply does what needs to be done. Jesus, even as Lord and Teacher, embraces being a slave. He serves others by serving from the inside-out—from the place of a knowledge of his identity. Harris and Taylor observe,

When you know who you are and where you are going, you don’t have to prove anything to anybody. Jesus has such a deep sense of his identity with God that caring for people around him is the natural extension of his identity. He wraps a towel around his waist and washes our nasty feet . . . our service must flow out of who we are and Jesus says if we obey this command to serve one another, the world sees a community of love and knows we are Christ’s disciples.11

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The incarnation of Christ even had a place in the post-resurrection narratives presented by John. In hoping to build peace in his disciples, Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (Jn 21:27). Jesus, the “ultimate” spiritual director, accompanies his friends with patience, even when doubts may be present in their relationship to him.

His being with his community can help guide the community through whatever problems that community might face. Claudio Oliver observes, “We are encouraged to deal with any problem relationally, because God has done so, because this has proved to be effective and real in history, and because we are not left alone. We have God, dwelling within us, among us, and most of all, present with us . . . through the others we encounter in the endeavor. I think this is a fair enough reason to risk the relational proposal of Jesus.”

In summary, several themes from the Gospel of John provide a theological foundation for this ministry project. They include that God became embodied presence to the world. The nature of his self-emptying love is evident in his solidarity with those in need. In this, Christians believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the most frequent promise in the Bible: God with us. Therefore, his new community, like the God it is modeled after, is called to be an incarnational community that embodies God’s purposes for the world. This happens by treating all people with respect—through conversations that bring freedom, and a spirit of solidarity that builds support.

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13 Ibid., 20.
Trinitarian Theology

Trinitarian theology can be defined as the Christian belief that God is in existence as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are understood to be unified as one because they share a single divine nature. That is to say, God is relational in nature, a community.

John refers more often to the trinitarian nature of God and to the Holy Spirit than any of the synoptic Gospels do. Jesus as a son, was seen by God, accepted and recognized by his Father as “beloved,” just as John the Baptist testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him” (Jn 1:32). This experience of belovedness, the comfortable tenderness of mutual friendship, is one John knew personally: “One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him” (Jn 13:23). Henri Nouwen observes, “John, the ‘beloved disciple’ knew Jesus’s sufferings intimately and no doubt himself experienced many conflicts about the faith. His Gospel encourages believers to be diligently attentive and hang on tightly to Jesus.”

As such, this quality of belovedness is central to the formation of a theology within this ministry initiative—particularly in consideration of the ministry challenge presented. Rather than the self-rejection and self-loathing so many presently deal with, the opportunity to be known as a beloved child of God stands as the pivotal marker of this entire project in Mexico City. As Nouwen writes, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of

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the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved’. Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”

One notices in the phrases “close to the father’s heart” (Jn 1:18) and “like a dove and remained on him” (Jn 1:32), evidence of the Trinity, but also a description of the character of kind-heartedness of approach. It is witnessed in the way Jesus treats people that he has a surplus of warmth, and his demeanor is kind and personal. What is being presented in this project is the idea that an interactive life in relation to God is available to all. And this is about a life from above; a with-God life. It is an invitation to experience the kindness and warmth of God.

Considering a practical theology for growth in the spiritual life, an appropriate place to start is understanding salvation as a life from above with the Trinity. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Faith cannot be removed from real life. John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30, 31). The Greek word for believing in John 20:31 is pisteuo; which could be translated to “continue to believe.”

Grammatically, many words in English have both a noun and verb form, but not all do. This is the case in the use of the word “to believe” found in this verse. As Harris and Taylor point out, “The noun ‘faith’ has no corresponding verb form. Instead, what we

15 Ibid., 25.
say for the verb ‘faith’ is, ‘I believe’ . . . in the Greek, the noun and the verb form of ‘faith’ are essentially the same. Faith, therefore, can be more than something you have. More accurately, faith is something you do.”17 Harris continues, “The best way we can translate this into literal English is that we ‘faith Jesus’ . . . ‘I believe’ could be translated, ‘I faith.’”18 John does not once use the noun form of faith in his Gospel. He does, however, use the verb form of faith ninety-eight times. As John tells the stories and reveals Jesus’s identity images, his desire is to build faith, not merely as something to possess, but as a way of living faith in real life. In a similar way, salvation is not merely something one has; it is a way one lives.

Willard is helpful as he engages Christians in a radical rethinking of the Christian idea of salvation. In this, he describes salvation as not merely the forgiveness of sins, but “a new order of life.”19 Only in this correction of how one understands salvation “can God’s grace in salvation be returned to the concrete, embodied existence of our human personalities walking with Jesus in his easy yoke.”20 He continues, “The pages of the Gospels amply show, Christ’s transcendent life in the present Kingdom of heaven is what drew the disciples together around Jesus prior to his death. And then resurrection and post-resurrection events proved that life to be indestructible.”21 In considering all of this,

17 Harris and Taylor, Daring Faith, 17.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 33.
21 Ibid., 35.
Dallas Willard says, “it becomes understandable why the simple and wholly adequate word for salvation in the New Testament is ‘life.’”

The Gospel of John is a Gospel of “spirituality.” This new ministry must embrace the terminology of “spirituality” and share with the world this helpful term that attempts to bridge heaven and earth—that which is from above with that which is below. The trinitarian terminology in John’s Gospel is “born of the spirit.” In John 3, in a conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus talks about a birth from above. Jesus dialogues with Nicodemus about receiving “life” from above.

About the theological theme that salvation is a life, Willard claims, “John 3:16 is about life now . . . God so loved the world that he gave His Son to that world that those who put their confidence in him would not lead a miserable failing existence. But have eternal life which is the kind of life God has.” Later, toward the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). For this reason, “it makes sense out of the fact that the only time Jesus defines eternal life, he describes it as entering into a deep, intimate, and transforming friendship with members of the Trinity.”

The questions of who one is and what one is in the world for are vital to a grounded theology for this ministry of spiritual formation. In the words of Willard,

22 Ibid., 37.


“Without an understanding of our nature and purpose, we cannot have a proper understanding of our redemption . . . we are somewhere between the dust heap and the heavens.”  

He continues, “The sober truth is that we are made of dust, even if we do aspire to the heavens.”  

A healthy understanding of one’s reality and her possibility is significant for a theology of spiritual formation. A biblical perspective on humanity reveals “an indication of our greatness, for all our dustiness, is found precisely in the fact that God pays attention to us, meets us, and gives us work to do.”  

God made people in his image, and invites people to rule the earth with God, to participate in his creative purposes on earth. A theological understanding of this is central to this ministry as we understand all people as image bearers of God, worthy of profound respect, and filled with inherent dignity. Willard contends that an understanding of the nature and value of a human being is a vital concept in understanding salvation as a life and a practical theology for formation—“in creating human beings in his likeness so that we could govern in his manner, God gave us a measure of independent power . . . to be his co-workers. The locus or depository of this necessary power is the human body. This explains, in theological terms, why we have a body at all. That body is our primary area of power, freedom, and—therefore—responsibility.”  

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25 Ibid., 46.

26 Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines, 47.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 53.
In this theology for ministry, understanding the components of the human person as one who is made in God’s image, is important in framing a theology for formation. Willard explains that there are several components that make up a human being, and Christian spiritual formation is aimed at the transformation of each of these. For Willard, there are six “basic and inseparable aspects of a human person: thought (images, concepts, judgments), feeling (sensation, emotion), choice (will, decision, character), body (action), social context (relations to God and others), and soul (the factor that integrates all the dimensions to form one life).”

The relational implications of this understanding of theology for ministry is paramount to the practice of this ministry project. The Gospel of John is the Gospel of Relationship. It is through relationship with Jesus that one comes into this salvation, this kind of life: “I am the Way” (Jn 14:6). Jose Soteras writes,

To talk about theology is to talk about relationship. Looking at the Gospel, one meets Jesus of Nazareth, who is constantly relating to his peers. From the standpoint of relationship and encounter he speaks about us making discoveries about God in relationship, whom he calls, Abba. In that relational language, he

29 Moon and Benner, *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, 17.

30 Important for the theological framework of this ministry, Willard explains what is understood by “knowledge” in the biblical sense and its correlation to experiential relationship: “To ‘know’ in the scriptures never means what we call knowledge today. Knowledge today is more or less knowing the right answers whether you believe them or not. That’s true in the university. It’s true in the church. Knowledge, biblically, is interactive relationship. It is always that way. Therefore, salvation is: interactive relationship with the covenant-making God. It’s a real thing. It’s something you know by experience. And when we know that, then we can instead of just sort of being parked on the highway of life with our hood up waiting for the heavenly AAA to take us out. We’re going on down the road of life. And everything we’re doing, we’re doing an interactive relationship with Jesus…with the Spirit and the word and all the instrumentalities of the kingdom of God. We have life in the kingdom of God. That is salvation.” Dallas Willard, “Mental Health and Personal Holiness,” speech delivered at the Convention for Christian Counselors, 2003, www.silentwaters.org/sermons/6-mental-health-and-personal-holiness, accessed March 10, 2020.

introduces us to the path of relationship to God as a loving Father. It is a term that invites loving intimacy and affectivity. Jesus throughout the Gospel invites us to deep relationship, to a new style and a way of relating to God.\(^{32}\)

Jesus describes this new way of relating in John 15, where he repeats the term “remain” or “abide” eleven times in eleven verses. Further, in this abiding relationship, Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants . . . but I have called you friends., because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15). Jesus gathered a group of friends, traveled with them, and maintained close relationships in work and play. Relating to many people, he shared in the life of friendship. He ate in their homes, interacted in synagogue life, engaged in meaningful and intimate dialogue, often in deep and intense conversations. Scripture informs that people were constantly looking for Jesus, and Jesus is observed approaching others. When he taught, his teachings were constantly referenced to real life situations and stories.

One must then look at reality, the world, and life through a relational lens. If I have learned anything from Jesus, it is that we must “read” God in light of reality and relationship. So as this project explores a theology grounded in the reality of the ministry challenge, that exploration will be approached through the framework of relationship with God, ourselves, and the people around us. For the purposes of this project and its theology approach, the relational aspects of trinitarian theology present the bulk of this work.

A good example is found in John 10. The one who walks with God in trinitarian fellowship is invited to live in conversational friendship with God. John writes, “The

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gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out . . . the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (Jn 10:3, 4). Jesus calls himself the gate and the good shepherd.

These are just two of seven identity phrases of Jesus identifying himself as a sign in this world. The other five signs are these: I am the light of the world, (8:12; 9:5); I am the bread of life, (Jn 6:35); I am the vine, (Jn 15:1, 5); I am the way, truth, and life, (Jn 14:6); and I am the resurrection and life, (Jn 11:25).

In chapter 16, in reference to the indwelling life of God in the life of the disciple, espousing the life with the Triune God, Jesus promises to send the Advocate to be with his friends (Jn 16:7).

Jesus also teaches about joy in the life of the believer in relation to the Trinity. God is a loving, strong family that is glad to be together. Made in the divine image, people are also created to play, rest, and do hard work that they enjoy, just as that hard work’s primary objective is to take care of people and all that God has created. The teamwork of the Trinity is attractive; the Father, Son, and Spirit delighted in being together, and this begins to describe the glory that Jesus knew before the world began. Jesus said, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:23). In a trinitarian theology, all know the same quality of love that God the Father and God the Spirit have for Jesus.

This sense of being loved and seated in well-being is found in Christ’s inner self, and his relationship with the Father and the Spirit is full of joy. In The Divine
Conspiracy, Willard writes, “We should, to begin with, think that God leads a very interesting life, and that he is full of joy. Undoubtedly, he is the most joyous being in the universe. The abundance of his love and generosity is inseparable from his infinite joy. All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness.” 33 It is this trinitarian joy and beauty that Jesus invites us to have in full: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15.11).

Michael Reeves makes the case for the Trinity being “the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others. The Trinity is the cockpit of all Christian thinking. . . . God is a sharing God, a God who loves to include. His love is not for keeping, but for spreading.” 34 In John 17, Jesus offers a prayer about unity in fellowship with the Trinity. This prayer points to the amazing unity and deep relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit—and consequently the relationship that Christ’s followers are invited into. What Christians seek in spiritual formation is connection to God and that their wills correspond with God’s. All are given the opportunity to live in union with God and are learning to be one with the Trinity. As Gary Moon writes, “The Trinity is the most powerful metaphor in the universe for how a Christian is to live: creatively, compassionately, and in community—united in purpose, separate as individuals, aflame


with the energy of divine love. God exists as we are to exist, in harmonious union with him.”

**Aesthetical Theology**

Swiss theologian Hans Von Balthasar describes theological aesthetics as beauty, and especially the beauty of God’s love. He writes of the significance of the three transcendentals which people need in their lives: truth, beauty, and goodness. Von Balthasar calls Jesus the Christ-form, describing him as “the archetype of all forms that embodies and expresses perfectly and against which all created forms are to be measured and to find their ultimate telos.” The Gospel of John also illustrates this theology well.

In John 2:1-11 at the wedding in Cana, Jesus, through the request of his mother, changed water into wine. This is the first “sign” that John chooses to include in his Gospel. In total, John mentions seven “signs” and uses this term to indicate something even beyond the gift of the miracle in itself. A “sign” points to something deeper or greater concerning God’s glory, character, or identity. This sign theology has the capacity to change one’s thoughts and positions of understanding about God and his life with us.

The theological themes in this narrative certainly embrace elements of celebration and sufficiency, and it shows the tenderness of the relationship between Mary and Jesus. Moon observes, “John, the mystic, is the only gospel writer to cover this breaking story.

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Jesus asks for six earthen vessels containing twenty to thirty gallons of water each. A gallon of water weighs in at about eight pounds. The filled earthen vessels at Cana weighed between 160-240 pounds. That describes a lot of people I know.”

He explains, “With wedding images in the background, Jesus kicks off his public ministry by radically changing the contents of earthen vessels. Spirit is added, and plain water becomes extraordinary wine. Transformation. Jesus’s first miracle foreshadows all that will follow. It’s about radical changes to the contents of earthen vessels.”

In John 9, one reads of the episode of the man born blind, what some consider as the most pivotal story in the Gospel of John, the center of John’s book. In a narrative about physical suffering, even in which family is brought in and is involved with ensuing conflict, Jesus makes mud, puts it on the man’s eyes, and tells him to “go wash in the pool of Siloam” (Jn 9:7). Artists work with mud—wet clay to create sculptures and works of art. Here Jesus creatively involves the earth to play a part in the healing of this man’s blindness. He involves art in helping the man see. In one’s image of God, in one’s understanding of human suffering and family conflict, in how one interprets or frames their own story, this narrative illustrates the importance of what readers see. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the story is the center of John’s Gospel. Art, beauty, and creativity help the world see, understand, and interpret reality.

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37 Moon, *Falling for God*, 20.

38 Ibid., 21.

39 Harris and Taylor, *Daring Faith*, 92.
In John 11, one reads the account of Lazarus’ resurrection. In this scene, the longest and most thorough story of John’s healing narratives, Jesus is seen as the source of new life. But first John describes the deep emotion expressed, as he proclaims that Jesus wept (Jn 11:35). This compassionate sentiment was provoked by Jesus’s deep friendship with Lazarus and the sense of loss that Jesus encountered with Martha and Mary and the others who were grieving. What this implies for a ministry focused on deep relationship is that people must allow themselves to recognize and connect with their emotions. As a community learns to name affections and the losses, it will also create deep friendship and spiritual care through mutual vulnerability.

This scene from Jesus’s life also shows the beauty and clarity of Martha’s declaration of Jesus’s identity. To compare it with the Gospel of Matthew, Martha’s recognition of who Jesus is closely mirrors Peter’s declaration: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (Jn 11:27).

In John 12, Jesus was at a dinner that Martha had prepared for him. As Martha served, Lazarus was one at the table with Jesus. Mary then anoints Jesus’s feet with costly perfume, and the fragrance of the perfume filled the house. Here is manifested the response to what Mary saw and experienced in relation to Jesus—she performs a beautiful act. Here between Mary and Jesus is seen a mutual, reciprocal giving and receiving of honor and affection.

While Judas Iscariot objected to the waste, Jesus defended Mary and welcomed her extravagant gesture as a beautiful act, receiving it like a gift for his burial. In a
community that seeks to grow in truth, beauty, and goodness, mutual appreciation and exercises in gratitude must be community principles that are frequently conveyed.

Also, in chapter twelve there were Greeks who sought Jesus out. In this discussion, Jesus teaches about the nature of life and a posture of leadership that is willing to die to self: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:24, 25). Jesus speaks of reality and the truth of things as they are. As Willard observes, “Anything with life in it can flourish if it abandons itself to what lies beyond it, eventually to be lost as a separate being, though continuing to live on in relation to others . . . human life cannot flourish as God intended it to . . . if we see ourselves as ‘on our own’—and especially if we struggle to preserve ourselves that way.”40 Life is power to relate and to assimilate. Like the grain of wheat takes in water and the energy of heat, it extends to find further nourishment in the surrounding soil. Then it can reproduce itself and grow. The same holds true in the reality of spiritual growth and is vital for a life of spiritual formation.

In chapter nineteen, Jesus models the kenosis of self-emptying love, showing that the cross must be embraced as a way of life. Von Balthasar writes, “In the face of the Cross, love is sobered to its very marrow before God’s agape, which clothes itself in the language of the body; and, in the face of this intoxicating language of flesh and blood that

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gives itself by being poured out, love is lifted above itself and elevated into the eternal, in order there, as creaturely eros, to be the tent and dwelling-place of the divine love.”


43 Moon, *Apprenticeship with Jesus*, 32.
While Christian spiritual formation could be broken into a number of different categories, ancient categories have traditionally focused on three main areas of intentional formation. Moon explains that the historical model of transformation includes: purgation (releasing one’s hold on the world), illumination (a growing realization of the power and presence of God), and union (a growing experiential understanding of the mystery of “Christ-in-me”).44

Through the lens of Scripture themes from John’s Gospel, the purgative way could be characterized by the role of John the Baptist. This area focuses on self-examination, understanding the self, learning to deal with the things internal that are opposed to the Kingdom of God. Like the image of God as a careful gardener of souls (Jn 15:1), Christians learn to work with God to be pruned, perhaps cutting away pride, anger, lust, or greed.

Through the lens of Scripture themes from John’s Gospel, the illuminative way could be realized through the life and teachings of Jesus. This dimension focuses on enlightenment. Like a plant that turns toward the sun and receives the light to grow, so people actively receive God’s truth and light and character into their lives. If purgation is like the removing of clouds so the sun can shine through, the illuminative way exposes one’s soul to God’s light so she can flourish like a tree, humming with photosynthesis. People grow robust with life and bountiful with fruit.45

44 Moon, Falling for God, 5.

Through the lens of Scripture themes from John’s Gospel, the unitive way could be characterized by the post-resurrection narratives of John or by observing the life of the Church. Disciples live in union with God, and like Jesus, are learning to be one with the Trinity. Moon observes, “The Trinity is the most powerful metaphor in the universe for how a Christian is to live: creatively, compassionately, and in community—united in purpose, separate as individuals, aflame with the energy of divine love. God exists as we are to exist, in harmonious union with him.”

It must be asked, can we envision a life of closeness and union with God like this, where our motivations, our passions, our attentions, our words, and our actions align with God’s character and purposes?

**From the Social Sciences**

Angela Lee Duckworth, a psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has conducted eleven years of groundbreaking studies which she writes about in her book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Duckworth claims that the secret to lasting change and accomplishment is not talent but grit, which she defines as “passion and sustained persistence applied toward long-term achievement, with no particular concern for rewards or recognition along the way.”

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46 Moon, *Falling for God*, 196.

“combines resilience, ambition, and self-control in the pursuit of goals that take months, years, or even decades.”\textsuperscript{48}

As she has probed what makes people improve—whether business-people, artists, athletes, journalists, academics, doctors, graduate students, or lawyers—her research has drawn her to conclude that the attribute that empowers people to work hard and endure in their long-term passions is grit. According to Duckworth, grit is less about talent, than about the ability to stick with long-term goals.

To summarize her findings, gritty people have a capability to maintain their steadfastness and motivation over prolonged stretches, even if they have to under-go delays or deal with obstacles. She explains that when it comes to improvement, growth, or success in any field, “they all had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hard working. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way, what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had direction.”\textsuperscript{49}

**Conclusion**

The findings of this social scientist support the reality of what is needed for transformation in Christ. The vision and practice of discipleship to Christ entails not only grace, but grit. In fact, the word “discipleship” and the word “discipline” are the same word. After making the choice, “Yes, I want to follow Jesus,” the question becomes,


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 19.
“What disciplines will help me remain faithful to that choice?” 50 The Bible writes that there are certain practices like solitude, prayer, fasting, and celebration, that people can undertake, in cooperation with grace, to raise the level of their lives toward godliness. 51 Discipleship is an encounter with grace and its response is one of discipline, willingness to do what is needed to bring oneself and to be brought by God into cooperation with God’s working. This is spiritual formation. Such worthy aims require both passion and persistence. Chris Hall says it well:

Spiritual formation is the slowest of all human movements . . . things cannot be hurried if deep healing and extensive transformation is to occur. The wisest, time-tested pattern for change seems to be slow assimilation; we allow a truth to stew in our mind and heart, to percolate in our brain and body, refusing to sprint toward change. In spiritual formation, God offers us a marathon much more often than a one-hundred-yard dash. 52

John’s last story in chapter twenty-one tells of the restoration of Peter in relation to his Lord and his calling. Communities must learn the beautiful way of restoring friendships and healing broken relationships. An aesthetic community will help put each other back together after spiritual failure is experienced, even enormous spiritual failure like that of Simon Peter. The narrative flows with two dynamics, an encounter with grace and a call to the reality of discipleship or spiritual toughness. Jesus builds reconciliation with Peter through grace and a renewed calling, and then tells Peter hard news, “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go


wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me’” (Jn 21:18, 19). Jesus challenges Peter with what his discipleship will require of him. He tells Peter that it will be hard, and thus begins to prepare Peter’s heart for following him. It will be discipleship that takes grit. We need a theology that supports both grace and grit. One could say that Peter had grit. After a colossal spiritual failure, Peter experienced the gracious re-instatement into relationship and the purpose of Jesus, and he had the grit to stay the course in his life of formation.  

This chapter has covered my personal theological convictions that ground action steps into the working of this new ministry initiative. In light of an invitation into trinitarian friendship, inclusive to all, and in view of God’s incarnational life, full of beauty and goodness, a life lived in union with God can be envisioned, even on a street-level existence in the hectic and overcrowded Mexico City.

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53 God made our souls with a quality in which they long for adventure, a challenge, a purpose, a fight. It takes passion and effort to survive, something I observe with friends, men and women in Mexico. When men in Mexico are challenged, they like it; they step into it, and smile. When they are challenged to take responsibility for their lives, they start to enjoy their lives more. The same is true in our observation of women’s soul work, when women are challenged to forgive, for example, they like it, forgiveness comes to them as challenging, and at the same time, like a relief, and their eyes light up.
PART THREE

PRACTICE
CHAPTER FIVE
MINISTRY OUTCOMES AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Combining the theological conclusions from the previous chapter and merging them with a viable model as seen in the life of Jesus, this chapter overviews the new ministry initiative in view of Christ’s modeling of a healthy, vibrant life. This chapter then addresses the implications of this model for ministry based in light of challenges presented in Mexico City, and outlines the desired outcomes and components of ministry strategy. Finally, this chapter gives a timeline for implementation and a description of the target population for the experience.

In summary, Christ is the model of healthy spirituality, and the incarnation of Jesus is the model for humanity of how to relate to God and the world. In writing about Christ, Frank Lake writes, “He, and he alone, is what human beings are meant to be. If we want to know how our humanity is meant to work, which means the only way it will work, we must look more closely at Christ. The Scripture sets him forth clearly as the norm, the model. He is the Way.”¹ Latin American theologian, Leonardo Boff calls Jesus

a man of extraordinary balance and common sense. Jesus has concrete wisdom for life, and an ability to see and place things in their proper place. He was able to maintain this poise and stability due to the equilibrium of both his inner and outer life.

**Christ the Model: The Inner and Outer Dynamics of Jesus**

In the 1950s, British psychiatrist Frank Lake was assigned the task to help missionaries in India who had become fatigued and burned out in their missionary and humanitarian work. The Gospels indicate that Jesus is seen tired and weary at times, but never contemptuous, cynical, or bitter about life and what he is called to live—that is, never “burned out.” Seeking theological guidance, Lake turned to Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, who directed Lake to a sustained study of John’s Gospel and the dynamics of the inner life of Jesus. This advice was primarily based on Emile Mersch’s theological assertion which he called “the whole Christ.” In essence, throughout the Gospel of John, Mersch claims that, “We are put in contact with the very interior of Jesus, with his life, with his ‘ego.’”

Upon this premise, Lake developed a model that analyzes the relational dynamics and sacred balance found in Jesus’s life. In Lake’s words, “Jesus is the model for the well-functioning human person in relation to the source person who for him was his Father, God the Father. We have abstracted a theoretical model from his life, drawing

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3 Lake and Maret, *Mutual Caring*, 92.

attention to its twofold dynamic, that is to say, concerned with the flow of power, where it comes from and where it goes to, a division of input and output.”

In Lake’s persistent study on the interior life of Jesus, he noticed that Jesus had a continual awareness of his Father’s presence and of his loving dependence on him. Lake noticed a pattern in the life of Jesus, a lively and energetic dynamic of a life on the move with God, and discerned that Jesus had an extraordinary sense of balance in his life. Jesus’s own words in the Gospel of John describe this sense of presence and dependence on God. Seven times Jesus speaks of doing what he sees the Father do or saying what he hears the Father saying. Fourteen times one observes Jesus describing the negative or limited counterpart. In analyzing Jesus’s relation and interaction to God as Father and then moving toward people in obedience to the Father, Lake labeled this pattern the “dynamic quadrilateral in the life of Christ”. Later, Trevor Hudson and Jerry Haas helpfully labeled this dynamic, “The Cycle of Grace.”

Figure 1: The Cycle of Grace

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5 Ibid., 109.
Lake saw this analysis as the origin and development of healthy human personality structure and healthy, dynamic interactions with others. The model has four phases: acceptance, sustenance, significance, and fruitfulness. Acceptance is the first facet of the Cycle of Grace. For Jesus, it was the starting point for life lived in relation to God, himself, and people. This first aspect, this starting point encompasses Jesus’s clear sense of identity and his own belovedness. Hudson writes:

His public mission began only after he gained assurance in his baptism that his heavenly parent delighted in him unconditionally. Furthermore, throughout each stage of his life and ministry, he needed a freshly confirmed knowledge of his own identity as Beloved of God. This inward assurance of being beloved by God set Jesus free to be his own person, to pour himself out in extravagant self-giving.⁶

When the voice from heaven spoke to declare who Jesus was, it first simply announced his identity: “This is my beloved Son . . .” the Father’s voice then affirmed with feeling, warmth, tenderness, and joy “in whom I am well-pleased” (Lk 3:22). Lake believes that in this sustaining and enveloping relationship, all of Jesus’s needs are met. John again shows the theme of Jesus’s acceptance as the beloved of God and of the sustenance of provision in that steady relationship. These two aspects of the “input” phase are obviously noticeable in John’s account of the inner experience of Jesus. In this place of deep abiding, Christ is given the whole life of the Father, through the Holy Spirit who is given to him “without measure” (Jn 3:34).⁷


⁷ Lake and Maret, Mutual Caring, 95.
As Jesus withdraws from his commitment with the world, in order to engage in prayer and abiding in the Father, one notices the quality of Jesus’s inner life. He then moves back out again, and one sees the evidence of the quality of his outer life, energetically approaching the tasks that are before him as he sees the needs of the people and of the community of disciples he is training. This is the back-and-forth dynamic in the life of Jesus—prayer and people, people and prayer.

Especially in the Gospel of John, it is quite noticeable that before he actively engages with people, it is important to Jesus to say who he is, that he has come from God to be life to the world. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus teaches mostly through images from nature, parables and stories; however, in the Gospel of John, Jesus steadily announces his status through metaphors and images.

After acceptance, the second facet of the cycle is sustenance. Hudson writes, “When Christ withdraws from his self-giving service to the people around him, it is to move into the place of prayer. He moves away to some place where he will not be interrupted. There he knows he has constant access to the Father.” There is, as part of this input phase, a filling out or thickening in the model, of sustenance, expressed by an affirmation such as “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart” (Jn 1:18). This verse reveals an image that insinuates “an intimate supplying of every need,” and expresses the sustained well-being in Jesus’s life, a reservoir of joy. For Jesus, from this reservoir of joy in trinitarian relationship, Jesus has constant reception and interaction with grace. Hudson observes how this dynamic stresses the absolute necessity for

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8 Ibid.
ongoing sustenance with God. As he says, “I found it eye-opening to note the many ways in which Jesus was renewed regularly in body, mind, and spirit. Grace flowed into his life through many different means.”

Hudson then notes, “Like Jesus, I needed to find those ways that would best open my life and ministry to the nourishing grace of God and then build these practices into my life. This dimension of sustenance in the Cycle of Grace also encouraged me to build my personal spiritual practices around those activities that nourish and bring joy to my life.”

The third and fourth phases in the Cycle of Grace are preceded by two questions: Who am I called to be? What I am called to do? As Hudson explains, “The model shows that Jesus ministered through the significance of who he was and the fruitfulness of what he did. However, it also illustrates that being always precedes doing, an important sequence.” By way of explanation, the third phase of the dynamic cycle is significance. According to Hudson, “Jesus is able to stand among the people of the world because of his total position as the beloved of God. Jesus was a ‘Sign’ of God’s love, care, and friendships. Jesus embodied God’s friendship with people, God’s love for people—to feel Jesus’s friendship was to feel the friendship of God. All are called to find their own unique way of being in this world, to live life as a ‘Sign.”

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

The “I am” statements found in John illustrate this well. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world . . . I am the bread of life . . . I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Harris observes, “Jesus has such a deep sense of his identity with God that caring for people around him is the natural extension of that identity.”  

Even though Jesus has immense power and authority, he never forces himself onto anyone, but there is a surplus of warmth and attraction to him. Lake observes, “Ordinary folk gather around him. Those who have deep needs, sorrows, weariness, humiliating weakness, or who suffer from social scorn because of their past lives, find him immediately at their side, drawing them into a loving fellowship . . . with a caring community along with others like themselves, with Jesus at the heart of that community.”

The fourth phase of the dynamic cycle in the life of Christ, Lake calls, achievement, although Trevor Hudson prefers the term, fruitfulness. Lake notes that what is impressive about the life dynamic of Jesus is not simply its extensiveness, but its astounding concentration: “All that he needed to show of the Father’s nature, how he loved and to whom he could fully show that love, could be compressed into three years of ministry and recorded for us in a few stories out of many that could have been told.” As John’s Gospel says, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which

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are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30, 31).17

Implications for the Ministry Challenge

Informed by these theological conclusions, the preferred future of this new ministry initiative is an implementation of the sacred balance modeled by the life of Jesus. The stress and strain of urban life that drains individuals and families of their vitality must be met by the model seen in the life of Jesus. This approach provides a counter and remedy to the distressed human condition experienced by residents of Mexico City. To take seriously the need for human transformation, we must simplify and embody realistic methods of personal, family, and community change. As Willard observes, “Ordinary individuals who make up the human race today can become, through the grace of Christ, a love-filled, effective, and powerful community.”18 This is the key to the vision of this project: “We can become like Christ in character and in power, and thus realize our highest ideals of well-being and well-doing . . . by doing one thing—by following Jesus in the overall style of life he chose for himself . . . by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging the whole of our lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.”19

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17 See Appendix 1 for scriptural insights into the dynamic cycle in Jesus’s life found in the Gospel of John.


19 Ibid.
Life for residents in Mexico City can counter the pervasive chaos and disordered lives, by adopting the patterns and balance Jesus chose to live in himself. This balance was available to him, even as a busy and much-needed man, and it is available today as well. The present and preferred future of this ministry project are based on that conviction.

**Learning to Live in the Cycle of Grace in Mexico City**

The purpose of this project is to create a more Christ-like, caring, joyful people who are consequently able to withstand the inevitable suffering that comes with city life and, for that matter, life in general. The objectives of the project must promote spiritual growth in maturity and self-discipline. Using the Cycle of Grace, spiritual maturity will be promoted, helping to produce grit and perseverance. Upon reflection on the model of how Jesus chose to live his life, the mission of this ministry is to train apprentices of Jesus by attracting them to the trinitarian life of the Kingdom of God and obedience to the teaching of Jesus. The project will aim to help them experience the cycle of grace in their own lives.

The initiative began by identifying a group of those in the region of Mexico City who showed a deep hunger to move forward spiritually, who showed a strong desire for a deeper experience of the reality of God and a more thorough integration of their faith in their everyday life within this complex city. This training program features a community experience (even a diverse community experience) of practicing the presence of God in a stressful and busy world.
Overview

This program combines key spiritual formation concepts seen in Scripture and Christian history with life-shaping spiritual practices shared in community. It is designed to help the cohort community live more fully in union with God, and to do so within the reality of everyday life. This design underlies the hope that spiritual growth toward character change and spiritual maturity increases throughout the process, even within the context of urban life in Latin America, with all the challenges and obstacles and suffering that may be present.

The missional impulse of the program is the belief that the gift each one gives to the world is the kind of person she becomes.20 By extension, when one deepens with God and her life is being shaped more in the likeness and love of the inner character she sees in Christ, she can make a difference in the world. In other words, if she looks at Jesus long enough, she will begin to see the world through His eyes.

Over the course of two years, cohort participants are guided through readings of classic and contemporary books and articles on spiritual formation with a well-balanced vision for Christlikeness. They share in alternating spiritual disciplines (life-practices) and assimilate their experience through writing and dialogue. Cohort participants participate in ongoing spiritual direction and meet for retreat twice per year in a two-year journey that features an ecumenical faculty drawn from around the world.

This pioneer cohort for spiritual formation is a fusion of multiple programs in Christian spiritual formation, especially the Renovaré Institute for Christian Spiritual

Formation and Fuller Theological Seminary’s doctoral program in Spiritual Direction. It is aided by collaboration with Life Model Works and the TXA fellowship of Abilene Christian University.

This initiative also embraces historical Christian spirituality and approaches to spiritual formation, and it partners with several organizations and friends to build a program that is contextualized for big city life in Latin America. This project is designed with a commitment to improving the experience of urban life through Jesus’s Gospel of the Kingdom, the practice of the spiritual disciplines, and cultivating a posture of teacher-student apprenticeship to Jesus for everyday life in Mexico City.

**Mexico City Pioneer Cohort Themes and Guiding Premises**

Guiding premises and spiritual formation themes that guide the cohort learning process include: First, attention to the life and person of Christ—developing an interactive life with Christ and trinitarian community; Second, the premise that a commitment to a grounded and substantial theology for life with God is our fundamental content; and Third, a commitment to ecumenical dialogue and with that, a range of international presence and influence.

The cohort will hold a balanced view of how God has worked through Christian history, particularly through the six streams of Christian spirituality. Finally, the learning process will teach and model that the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life are means of grace for training in the spiritual life; they aid in sharing experiences with God through interactive friendship with him. The cohort will also be encouraged to embrace the grace found in discipleship (the ancient spiritual formation theme of *ascesis*, the entering into
strict training) with a primary focus on a growing life of prayer and contemplation. The cohort community will be trained to develop grit and perseverance in their pursuit of Christlikeness.

Finally, the cohort will engage in the practical development of high-joy environments that aid in transformation and the building of loving bonds. Joyful relationships will be a crucial marker that the cohort is living out its design. The search for the common good will be a major theme that runs throughout the spiritual journey this cohort takes together.

Components of the Ministry Strategy — Desired Outcomes

Each learning objective, each reading and practice, is designed to train the cohort in spiritual formation by learning to put into practice what Jesus taught. The ministry offers a systematic way to articulate and develop critical competencies through engagement with spiritual classics and contemporary teachings of spiritual formation. The experience design lends itself to cohort participants being able to teach others, both in conversational contexts and more structured teaching settings. Significant ideas from Willard, the early church fathers and mothers, and Christian texts from the mystics are included in the program strategy.

Next, in order to incorporate a well-balanced diet of Christian spirituality from the historical streams, cohort participants will be exposed to the contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical, and incarnational streams. This aims at helping the cohort participant be exposed to the many ways in which God has worked through his
people historically and should help support the contextual application that the participant seeks to embody in their unique daily lives, circumstances, and opportunities.

A third component requires cohort participants to take notes, journal about their experiences, and occasionally write articles on spiritual formation that can be shared or published among networks of like-minded practitioners. Each student will be tasked with designing an initiative to pass on to others what they have learned and experienced and write a project articulating how they will share with others what they have learned.

There may be some who have a charism for listening or are drawn to developing the art of contemplative listening, so in the second year of study, each student will be expected to make the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, either in individual spiritual direction or in a group. To those who are drawn to it, a third-year experience will be developed to explore and practice this discipline of spiritual direction. In this I envision an ecumenical initiative that supports training in the ministry of those who accompany others through listening. The hope is that this facet of training could quietly serve a resurgent movement of practicing the spiritual discipline of divine guidance in Latin America.

Finally, in a desire to train street-level practitioners who practice the presence of God in everyday life, this initiative will create a dispersed religious order (third order) of a spread-out community who live by a common rule of life. This order is a group of friends, living in covenant, who are committed to a life of monastic-like discipline in prayer, specifically rallying around the practices taught in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, while working with God to serve the world around them.
A contextual caveat in the implementation of this project assumes that Mexico City and Latin American cities like it often leave city residents with little margin for the requirements that a training program like this entails. Family, workplace, and civic responsibilities can potentially overcrowd training in spiritual formation. Taking this into consideration, not everyone that may feel drawn to participate in this cohort can meet all of its requirements. As an alternative, for those willing to engage in the shared spiritual practices and follow along on the retreats, the cohort will happily welcome these friends to be auditors with the cohort and share in the learning experience.

**Timeline for Implementation**

The range of this doctoral project only describes and analyzes the first nine months of the cohort experience, but the planned timeline for the cohort is two years in duration. A third year of training will be offered for those who are drawn to the practice of contemplative spiritual direction.

The cohort’s initial convening retreat was in May 2019 with a kick-start retreat that initiated the vision-sharing aspect of the cohort. The shared reading schedule commenced at that point, as well as the shared monthly spiritual discipline practices. The cohort met again in September 2019. (See the “Teaching Themes and Leadership Team” section for further details of those gatherings.) The cohort is scheduled to meet again at the end of May 2020, and in September 2020. Those who will be attracted to continue meeting as a cohort with a more focused teaching and training in the practice of spiritual direction and contemplative listening will be encouraged to continue into another year of training. As one of the focused outcomes of this initiative is the creation of a dispersed
religious order, an invitation will be extended to live in covenant by a shared rule of life. It is expected that this cohort will desire to continue to meet for retreats and learning spaces in the years to come.

The Target Population — The Mexico City Pioneer Cohort

The ideal candidates are those who identify themselves with a deep hunger to move forward in their spiritual maturity, and to deepen in their life with God and their God-given purpose in the world. The ideal candidate will yearn for a greater experience of the reality of God and the Kingdom life and desire to experience a more complete integration of his faith in everyday life. This project desires to convene a diverse group of people from wide-ranging socio-economic backgrounds, and the initial learning cohort also has a good balance between men and women of differing age groups. For example, some are business professionals, and one shines shoes for a living; some are pastors and missionaries, and age groups span young adults to retirees. A couple from the cohort work in community development; professions also include an accountant, a school teacher, an artist, three restaurant owners, and two counselors. The cohort represents a wide range of educational backgrounds, including some who did not finish elementary school and a few who have earned master’s degrees. In addition, this initial cohort represents various faith traditions, ranging from Evangelical to Catholic, from emerging church to community church backgrounds. One couple holds to native indigenous practice, while deeply seeking Jesus. Openness and respectfulness are evidenced in the cohort.
It is interesting to note that the majority of the cohort participants have done deep level soul work through previous retreats aimed at general confession or emotional healing. This previous experience lends itself to a head start on self-knowledge and the experience of honest, vulnerable community. Most are very good friends and share genuine esteem for each other.

The platform of influence among cohort participants is equally diverse. Some work with marginalized communities, and others work with youth in churches—from evangelical youth groups to Catholic catechism programs. Others have network and congregational influence, while many serve together in overlapping ministries. Without exception, each cohort participant has deep influence in family relationships and among their neighbors, and each has a platform to pass on what they learn to others in diverse settings where a good example of Christlike character is profoundly needed.

Coming from the central valley region of Mexico City and Tenancingo, the cohort also brings together participants from as far east as Cancun, Mexico, to as far north as Saltillo, Coahuila, near the United States border. The target population is self-selecting, so the majority are deeply determined people who have vast experience with God, but long to go deeper in their understanding and practice of Kingdom life. Still, there are a number in this cohort who are in the beginning phases of getting to know Christ. The strength they all share in common is their hunger for experiencing God deeply as individuals and in community.
Shared Monthly Readings on the Journey

Over this two-year journey, each participant will be required to read twenty-four books; one book per month read in sequence as a cohort, alternating between classic and contemporary texts in spiritual formation. For example, the required readings from the first semester were: *Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard, *Testament of Devotion* by Thomas Kelly, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzaro, *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, *Devotional Classics* by Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, *Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You* by Jim Wilder, and *The Prayer of Examen* by Jim Manney.

Shared Monthly Practices

The cohort community will share a monthly spiritual practice which is to be lived out as everyday sacredness in daily life. Over the first nine months of the cohort’s experience, these have included: practices in gratitude; living into and praying Psalm 23 multiple times per day; practicing the discipline of rest and sabbath; praying the daily office (fixed-hour prayer); and practicing relational joy through smiling and the sharing of spoken appreciation. An additional monthly practice included establishing emotional states of joy through thirty days of focusing on gratitude memories for five minutes a day. Other practices have included: daily meditations through the season of Advent; praying
the prayer of *Examen* daily; and practicing a “rolling” fast.\(^{21}\) For another month, we practiced the Immanuel Journaling process of conversational prayer with God.\(^{22}\)

All of these practices are designed to engage the cohort in experiencing the rhythms of grace that Jesus experienced, finding sustenance in relation to God, and growing in the awareness of our acceptance before him. These practices are the heartbeat of this entire project initiative. The majority of our learning focus is on the shared life-practices, believing that the practices are valuable for a deepening life with God toward lasting transformation. Spiritual disciplines themselves do not constitute a life with God, but they are the means of grace in the life of the Christian as they support our awareness of and connection to God.

**Retreat Component of the Pioneer Cohort**

The cohort participates in two annual retreats. The objective of these retreats is three-fold. First, they are designed to create deeply meaningful relationships within the cohort. The retreat purposes are aimed at creating an environment for authenticity and belonging through intentional connection. A second objective is to foster learning that aids toward a well-thought-out theology for spiritual formation and its practice. The retreats are spaces for reflection and the cultivation of a vision for a life with God.

\(^{21}\) A rolling fast is a period of abstinence from certain things that varies each day. For example, one day may involve fasting from food, other days might include fasting from social media, sarcasm, entertainment, worry or some other facet of life.

\(^{22}\) See Appendix 2 for examples of a more detailed description of the shared monthly practices (Spanish content.)
Finally, through dialogue and shared experiences, the retreats are strategically designed to promote the disciplines of the spiritual life.

Retreat Location and Financial Considerations

The socio-economic demographics of those who are a part of the pioneer cohort have been a consideration in the design and implementation of this project. The retreat setting is Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation, located in the Iztapalapa borough of Mexico City. With the desire to keep costs down, meeting at Ashrei’s retreat center allows for expenditures to be kept to a minimum since Ashrei has thirty beds to comfortably host its guests. It also has a library and a large meeting room, but most prefer to enjoy Ashrei’s beautiful outdoor patio which is lush with green grass, jacaranda trees with their purple blooming flowers and colorful Mexican bugambilia flowers. Amenities of the retreat center include a basketball court, hot tub, prayer labyrinth, grilling area for celebrations, and a silent retreat room used for individuals that come for private contemplative retreats and spiritual direction. Across the street from Ashrei retreat center is the protected ecological reserve of the Ejidos de Zochimilco y San Gregorio Atlapulco. This reserve has a spacious five-kilometer walking trail that adjoins a lake, and offers picturesque vistas of the mountains that surround Mexico City. The ecological reserve is currently being renovated to become a space even more enjoyable for families, runners, walkers, and dog lovers. It is common to see people exercising there, enjoying a picnic in the grass areas, flying kites or drones, and riding horses.

The pioneer cohort participants are not charged for lodging at Ashrei retreat center, but they share expenses for catered food. The cohort members are required to
purchase their books, but many participants find used books to reduce costs. For those who cannot afford the purchase of books, Ashrei has a library containing numerous copies of the required books which cohort participants can check out and return for future cohort use when finished. To show its gratitude to our teaching guests, the cohort takes up a collection at each retreat to honor visiting teachers with a simple honorarium. As an organization, Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation depends upon the generosity of its partners to help absorb the costs of paying for the visiting professors’ travel expenses. This project assumes that future cohorts could spring up across Latin America and thus desires to set a precedent to keeping expenses to a minimum.

Retreat Design - Levels of Dialogue and Sharing

As a point of reference for the entire cohort experience, we believe in the power of story and relationship to influence our experience of community and belonging with one another. The theme of spiritual friendship and relational joy influences our interactions and the design of the retreat experience. We aim to share our stories through three levels of dialogue: self, other, and collective, which includes family and community. Our experience teaches us that self-work and relationship-work culminates into authentic community and a mutual sense of joyful belonging.

Since most of our participants feel the crowdedness, hurry, and noise of the urban context, the cohort retreat design intentionally promotes the idea of a spiritual journey of friendship that moves from a culture of anxiety to a practice of neighborliness through listening. This entails a journey toward the common good, a sense of solidarity and
belonging, and even our vision to ultimately become a dispersed religious order bound by covenantal neighborliness.23

The first practice that we engage as we meet for retreat has as its intent to create reconnection with other members of the cohort. Learning this practice from the Renovaré Institute, it is called, “Laying the Altar.” After everyone has settled into the retreat center, each cohort participant brings with them an object that represents in some way how they have been connecting with God. This object might represent their answer to the question: Where has God been in my recent experience? or What has God been like in my recent experience?

While in other settings, an altar is where the person might “lay down” something they desire to get rid of, the altar exercise we practice is of a different nature. The object the cohort participant brings is a gentle reminder of how God is present with that person, though it is not necessarily religious in nature. Each person presents their object and briefly explains what she or he brought and lays it on a table. These objects remain there throughout the duration of the retreat as a reminder of our spiritual journeys and perhaps to pray for each other.

After a break and a shared meal, we reconvene for an introductory exercise around the practice of gratitude. We also share in the practice of the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist) each evening of the retreat. The sharing of the sacred meal allows us in community to fix our eyes on Jesus and remind one another of the One who unites us. The cohort is encouraged to practice the prayer of Examen as it retires for the night.

Scattered multiple times throughout the retreat, using a guided tool called “SASHET Check-in” (pronounced sa·shei),\(^\text{24}\) participants are encouraged to identify and share about their emotions. The resulting self-awareness and self-disclosure encourage and deepens relationships in the group.

Two additional elements of our community formation are the cultivation of the discipline of contemplative prayer, practiced at the start of each morning before breakfast, and engaging the spiritual discipline of celebration. Our table fellowship is a deeply significant part of our retreat design. We intentionally remind one another of the importance of our meal-sharing—the joy and gratitude that is produced by each conversational setting. On the eve of the last day of each retreat, we have a celebration, when we grill tacos or some other special Mexican dish, play great music, and sing and dance together. Laughter can be heard throughout the patio and rooms, smiles seen and delight is shared with joy, sincerity, and gladness.\(^\text{25}\) In a recent cohort survey, when asked about what could improve the retreat experience, several participants responded, “more dance nights.”

Teaching Themes and Leadership Team

Meeting for three-day retreats twice per year, the retreats are designed with an ecumenical faculty drawn from around the world. The model of leadership employed is

\(^{24}\) We discovered this tool from our friends at the Crucible Project. For more on the Crucible Project, see www.thecrucibleproject.org.

\(^{25}\) A member of the spiritual formation of the cohort, Omar Vargas, is an artist. Omar is capturing cohort core teachings, cohort moments, and shared experiences, and chronicling those through water color paintings. These will be shared as gifts for members of the cohort, or hung at Ashrei Center for Spiritual Formation, as a visible expression of our community experience.
highly interactive and dynamic. The cohort learning themes are presented with a balanced blend of voices from Latin America and from beyond its borders. Faculty that has participated in the content teaching include: Daniel Napier, Nora Kviatkovski, Jim and Kitty Wilder, and Michel and Claudia Hendricks. Future retreats are being organized with Fausto Liriano, Edesio Sanchez Cetina, Juan José Barreda Toscano, Gary Moon, and Trevor Hudson.

For an overview of content teaching and themes of spiritual transformation, topics that were shared in the cohort’s first session were taught by Daniel Napier, a missionary who works with Muslims in refugee camps in Thesaloniki, Greece. Also, in the first retreat gathering, Nora Kviatkovski, an Argentinian nun with the congregation of Religious Jesus and Mary, taught foundational aspects of Ignatian spirituality.

To further detail the content of those teachings and the themes that the project advocates, the cohort explored a “bird’s eye view” of transformation, how Jesus’s explanation of lasting personal change actually happens. The cohort looked at Jesus’s account of the structure of the self in change from Jesus’s teaching on the greatest commandments. Napier developed the theme of how the human heart interacts with the Word of the Kingdom from the parable of the soils—looking at that which either hinders or accelerates growth. Teachings also illuminated the ideas that enable and impede transformation and explored a handful of parables that clarify what goes into co-working with God. The cohort studied “soul shaping,” how the Kingdom disciplines contribute to lasting transformation by better understanding Jesus’s explanation of how the spiritual disciplines work and why his followers need them. We explored the core practices of
fasting, prayer, giving, service, and solitude, but also highlighted the less-often noticed disciplines which include time-bounded experiments with intentional vulnerability. In keeping with the relational theme of the cohort’s implementation design, the cohort explored Kingdom relationships, learning to be Jesus’s student in everyday social groups.

With Kviatkovski, who holds a Master’s Degree in Ignatian Spirituality from the University of Madrid, the cohort saw an overview of the main foundations of Ignatian spirituality. She gave a synopsis of Ignatius’ autobiography and detailed the key factors from his life that led to the writing of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The cohort learned how Ignatian spirituality is a very practical approach to relating to God and growing spiritually. She presented the themes that characterize Ignatian spirituality as so pragmatic, such as: finding God in all things; affectively sensing and enjoying God’s love as grace—emotion and imagination are significant in our encounters with God; and becoming contemplatives in action, and how all things are given to us as an act of friendship with God. In addition, Kviatkovski outlined the role of discernment as central to the life of God’s friends, and the Ignatian objective of finding freedom through relationship to God.

In a subsequent retreat, the cohort learning design built upon the themes that introduced the cohort to primary focus areas and theology of Christian spiritual formation. Emphasis was placed on the relational aspects of Kingdom living, and highlighted the significance of joy-filled experiences. With Jim and Kitty Wilder, and Michel and Claudia Hendricks, the cohort explored how God renews our minds and how spiritual formation and brain science overlap. The cohort had teaching sessions on the
importance of joy and gratitude in human transformation with experiential components as part of those teaching sessions. The group learned about living in constant communion with God and practiced Immanuel Journaling, developed by Life Model Works.26 Teaching sessions included the importance of the biblical perspective of hesed-love and the importance of creating loving bonds with God and others. Finally, the cohort explored the crucial practice of loving one’s enemies in the life of spiritual formation.

**Conclusion**

This Mexico City pioneer cohort in spiritual formation seeks to introduce a self-selecting group of spiritually hungry Mexico City residents to a with-God life, embracing the rhythms and cycle of grace that Jesus lived in. The project consists of building intentional community through joyful relationships and listening postures that invite belonging and solidarity. Through rhythms of retreat as well as shared readings and shared practices for daily life, the community will have an increased ability to experience God’s presence in awareness of the sacredness in everyday life. In this, the cohort can expect to progress in spiritual growth and deepen in the quality of character that is seen in Jesus’s life and the lives of his people.

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CHAPTER SIX
EVALUATION

This chapter evaluates and summarizes the effectiveness of the project after nine months of implementation. It reports on the results and observations made by the project participants during a three-part survey that was conducted at the nine-month mark of the learning cohort experience. Part one poses general questions about the design of the spiritual formation cohort experience, and part two evaluates each part of the program’s three-part design of didactic material, life-practices, and bi-annual retreats. Part three assesses general experiences and insights, and invites questions about the future.¹

Data was compiled by Andrea Candia and Erin Henderson, who are members of the pioneer cohort. The particular methodology of this qualitative procedure came by analyzing the data given by the members of the cohort. Andrea Candia and Erin Henderson helped me explore and categorize the data by searching for key words and common themes found in the answers to the questions. We concluded that collective

¹ See Appendix 3 for the survey questionnaire.
themes, common experiences, and some similar outcomes emerged from the data given.² Besides the data from the survey, which attempts to measure the rhythm of the experience from accessible or overwhelming, the survey also sought to gather personal insights from the cohort participants in light of their individual and community experience of God and their perspectives on their spiritual growth.

This chapter reveals the overall data while also seeking to be a learning tool, gaining knowledge from people’s experiences in the learning process. In any graph that illustrates the data, when Spanish words are used, a bilingual translation is provided. The survey was anonymous, and all of the information was kept confidential, and each participant in the survey signed a consent letter that allows for the reporting of outcomes for the purpose of this doctoral project. In any reporting of the results, names and other specifics that might reveal a person’s identity are withdrawn or altered.

Report on Results

Part one explores four general questions about the spiritual formation cohort experience. First, it asks, “How much do you think you’ve grown in your life and relationship to God since beginning the cohort learning experience?”

² Our findings indicated and described a commonality from the cohort responses in four areas or dimensions: One, Inspiration (Motivational actions, dreams, realities); Two, Recognition (God accepts me as I am); Three, Transformation (Living in the process of spiritual growth); and Four, Desire for continuity (Intention and yearning for more). Assimilation from Andrea Candia and Erin Henderson, personal interview, Mexico City, Mexico, March 7, 2020.
Table 1. Spiritual Growth

Participants were asked to qualify their perception of personal spiritual growth and relationship with God as stuck, somewhat stuck, somewhat developing, developing, or flourishing. No one responded that they were stuck, but 76.47 percent reported that they are experiencing development in their life and relationship with God since beginning the cohort experience. A little over 17 percent reported a life of flourishing with God since beginning the cohort experience, and 5.88 percent said they have experienced somewhat of an increase in their relationship to God.

Second, the survey asks the participant to consider their soul work and spiritual growth in other contexts (family life, men’s and women’s retreats, other small groups, church life), and it asks them to rate the degree to which the cohort complements those other areas. Answers were given on a scale of one to five, with one being the lowest and five being the highest.
The survey shows that 76.47 percent gave a rating of five that the cohort complements the other areas of their life where they are being spiritually formed, and 23.53 percent indicated a four-star rating. This indicates that the cohort learning experience serves more as a positive counterpart and less as a competition to other contexts where spiritual development is being shaped.

Third, the survey asks, “Considering the demands of urban lifestyle and your multiple life-responsibilities, how would you rate the cohort’s designed workload expectations and your ability to meet those expectations?” The possible multiple-choice answers that were given included: expectations are perfect, expectations are too high, expectations are a little high, expectations are somewhat too low, or expectations are too low.
Participants responded with only three of the five options, with 58.82 percent indicating that the cohort requirements and learning expectations were perfect. Another 35.29 percent disclosed that the expectations were somewhat too high when done among their other life responsibilities and workloads. The remaining 6 percent showed that cohort expectations were too demanding amid life’s competing duties and time constraints.

The survey’s fourth question enquires about how the participant would rate the cohort’s learning balance between academic/intellectual rigor and experiential practice? Again a one-to-five star rating was given for possible answers with one as the lowest and five as the highest.

Overall, the cohort gave a 4.4 star rating out of 5 in measuring the balance of intellectual challenge and the experiential components of the cohort learning process. This shows that the majority perceive that this community endeavor strikes a healthy balance between academic objectivity and subjective practice. This aspect of the project
was difficult to balance due to the learning styles and educational diversity of the cohort community.

**Readings and Practices**

The second part of the survey focuses on the evaluation of the cohort’s three-part design. More specifically, the project explores how to best nurture spiritual growth and incorporate life-practices in the busyness and chaotic environment of life, particularly in an urban Latin American setting. With that in mind, the design of the cohort learning experience focuses on three elements: shared monthly readings, shared monthly practices, and bi-annual retreats.

The first question in this section probes the learning community’s engagement with the monthly readings. It asks, “Has reading one book per month been an acceptable rhythm of reading for you?” The possible answers were Yes, No, or Other.

Table 4. Reading Requirements

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>64.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In response, 64.71 percent indicated that the pace of reading one book per month was an acceptable rhythm and 17.65 percent specified that it was too strenuous. Another 17.65 percent indicated “other” and used the comment box to indicate several factors that...
made the reading speed difficult. Some noted that it was difficult to catch up if they fell behind in the readings. Others suggested that, as the reading difficulty level of the books varied, so did their ability to adhere to the proposed cohort reading schedule.

The overall purpose of this initiative is to support the pioneer cohort for deepening spiritual formation, in hope of developing a spirituality for everyday life. It is designed to provide a more conscious experience of God in their complicated everyday lives, and in this way increase the likelihood of greater peace, joy, and internal freedom.

The survey shows that the participants found the shared monthly life-practices to be very beneficial. In the survey, they were asked to rank from one to five stars their experience with each monthly practice, and these were the average ratings: the practice of gratitude—4.9; Psalm 23—4.8; rest and sabbath—4.7; fixed hour prayer (praying the daily office)—4.4; memories of gratitude—4.7; appreciation and the things that make us smile—4.7; Advent meditation with a daily practice—4.3; the prayer of Examen—4.6; and the practice of the rolling fast—4.7.

**General Experiences and Insights of the Participants**

The final portion of the survey posed the question, “How would you describe your overall experience of engaging in this spiritual formation experience?” With an open comment box for open answers, it then asked: “Have you had any meaningful experiences, new insights, or spiritual advances during or as a result of this cohort experience that you would be willing to share?” Finally, it asked, “When it comes to spiritual formation and life with God, what are you most interested in learning more about in the future? What would be most helpful to you in your walk with God?”
A review of the key words that overlap and connect in their responses shows strong internal motivations within the experience for the cohort participants. Key words included learning, challenged, connection, intentionality, understanding, restoration of faith, inclusivity, more human, and enriching. Overall, those common threads demonstrate that the learning experience is making possible change that the participants desire to experience in their lives. The words “process” and “new habits” are repeated with frequency among the participants’ answers.

The answers also showed real vulnerability. For example, one participant shared, “I was intimidated at the beginning, but experienced a lot of encouragement as well. Over the months of intentionality, I understand better how my soul work is on the development path.” One participant described it this way, “I sense that I have a broader and deeper understanding of human spirituality in conjunction with human development now. I see how the two are connected.” Another remarked, “I think that I had not even clearly understood my participation in this program, then, little by little everything began to flow and flourish. It really has been an extraordinary experience.”

Referring to a more focused recognition of God’s accompaniment in the routines of daily life, one participant described the overall experience like this: “wonderful and extremely necessary.” Another participant wrote, “I have loved growing in my friendship with God and growing in community with others,” and “the experience has been nurturing for my soul and is guiding me to the true source of life for my life.”

Two other themes that emerged in the feedback were a recognition of the compassion of God and the discovery of an accessible spirituality for daily life. One
participant commented, “Overall, I have a clearer vision of the Kingdom of God. Our experiences have shown that we can find abundant life and live in closer union with God, and once that sense of abundance is discovered, it is impossible to see life and God in the same way as before.”

Referring to the spiritual formation process, another participant described something similar: “I am hungry for more techniques to learn to be aware of the Divine Presence, and I want us to share more of our own stories and experiences of what is possible in our relationships with God.” Several indicated that they especially enjoyed the monthly practices lived out in daily life. Reflecting on this, one observed, “The monthly challenges lived out every day help me to live with more awareness of God and ‘keep me online with God,’ accountable in my personal relationship to him.”

The impact of habits, spiritual exercises, and the intentional process for formation is evident in their answers. As one participant describes it, “The new personal practices, new challenges, and the retaking up of ancient practices have helped me in the daily maintenance of my relationship with God and also others in a healthy way. I sense a restoration of deep joy in me. The way I’m walking is in a definite direction now.”

One described their learning process like this:

For me, the experience has been the “how” of spiritual formation. I grew up in the Catholic church, and honestly that experience didn’t fuel my curiosity. What I saw there was just a monologue that didn’t generate a bonded, learning feedback loop that made sense to me. More than anything, it marginalized me as they spoke of goodness and God’s generosity without producing any transformation in those who were listening. Today I can say with conviction that life with God is a wonderful adventure—full with learning and personal transformation. The kingdom is a wonderful challenge—full of generosity.
The survey results show that the majority of cohort participants experienced an increased awareness of God’s presence in their daily activities. For example, one participant shared, “I can now bring God into my normal routines, and I feel more conscious of my relationship with God. This experience offers me consistency in my life with God. I better understand that God is there, that he listens to me, that he sees me, that he understands me, that he challenges me, and that he loves me.”

Another commented about the mutual motivation that the collective brings to each other, evident in more Christ-like character, even in family experiences: “I find it personally motivating to see others seeking and yearning for the constant, beautiful, bright, and compassionate presence of our eternal God. Experiencing this journey together with my wife—to see her searching is also a great blessing that enriches and feeds my own deep desires and longings in relation to God.” Another participant shared something similar,

This experience is helping to restore my relationship with my wife. We have been challenged to take better care of our relationship to our daughters. We are attentive to taking care of our thoughts, taking better care of our people that rely on our care, even God’s flock. It has given me so much and has awakened my consciousness, restored my faith, desire, obedience, my journey-with and relationship to God.

On the process of intentional practice, another participant said, “It is so motivating that each new learning and every practice that we do is so practical, possible, and at the same time, challenging, and that others are willing to do them together with me.”

An increased desire for God was a commonality for a number of participants, “When I talk to my soul, it says: I need to learn. I want to pray, and I want to be in the
Presence of God. My learning and soul work are my responsibilities—these depend on me. I can live contemplating God, knowing that I am forgiven and that my soul needs Christ. In prayer, I can communicate my traumas to him, and he can heal me.”

One participant shared the following about personal self-discovery:

Were I to summarize my experience of the community of formation, I would say that it has been very significant. I see the kingdom not as a place but as a verb—where God is at work, every day. And we can be attentive to join God as he exercises his power. I am learning to be very attentive and participatory in the kingdom now, in so many ways. And I tell God in my prayers, “Look at me, this is what I am . . . unless you help me be more.”

Another said, “It’s like I’m walking around with this prayer in my heart, a prayer that is continually accompanying me, ‘Act your will upon me, God. . . . I open my life to you. Guide my thoughts, even where I dare not allow them to go, but take me where you dare, Lord, and I will go there with you.’”

One participant said, “As a result of this experience, I can confidently say that I am living more in tune with grace, and it is those moments, I know it’s God. I am knowing God in relationship. I feel him. This is grace.”

**Growth Reveals Increased Levels of Peace and Joy**

One focus of the program is greater levels of peace, joy, and internal freedom, even in the midst of the strain of urban chaos. The participants indicated having better tools for dealing with their daily frustrations. One participant wrote, “I feel growth in my obedience, humility, and tolerance.” Another said,

The practice of gratitude is now part of my lifestyle. I am now more intentional about moments of joy. Especially in my relationship with my Heavenly Father and with my family. I am so challenged, and I’m learning so much—I’m still surprised at the explanation of the brain in regards to spiritual renewal. I’m
amazed at our Creator. He is leading us into how to deal with frustration, anxiety, weaknesses, etc.

Another commented about the impact of intentional spiritual practice when he or she said, “I have found all our practices to be very timely for my life. They are helping me experience the grace of God, and consequently, show grace to others.”

Perceived growth in Christlike character is a common idea among the responses. For example, one participant shared, “I love the idea of getting to know Jesus so much that I might start to act like him in any of the contexts of my life. I recognize that this requires discipline, and it has not been easy. Sometimes I get discouraged, but I find myself more quickly recovering joy back as I grow and mature in my intentional spiritual formation.” As another example,

I would describe this as one of the greatest experiences I have ever had as a Christian. The shared readings are excellent and profound; the learning has changed my perspective on how to relate to God. I recognize the changes that I need to make, in order to be my true self and the version of me that God intended. With his help and the support of my friends, I’m going to go for those changes. As a result, I am growing in peace and internal freedom.

Survey results show a new vision and experience of the church. As one participant wrote:

I believe that the most significant experience has been my change of vision in how I see the church. This learning has led me to experience a more “human church,” one that is closer to God, drawn to him, rather than to leaders. I see clearly now, and understand that walking with God is not about external obligations, but about internal transformations.

Another participant shared that having a proposed cohort reading schedule has been helpful for the discipline of study. “This experience has allowed me to organize times for readings and bring intentional practices into my daily world. At the beginning
the discipline felt more difficult, but now I see it all as my time with and for God. I carry my notes with me, and re-read them throughout the day.”

**Vocation and Calling to Service**

A common theme that emerged from the cohort survey was the renewed vision of serving God and loving their neighbors. For example, “This excellent experience has not only helped to keep the Presence of God before me, but it has also reaffirmed my vocation.” One participant summarized the idea of vocation this way, which serves as a good “before and after picture.” It reveals deep transformation:

I am biblically illiterate, far from understanding the Bible and how it was written. Religions maintain that we are all very different, which raises questions and restlessness for me. At some points in my growing up, I interpreted God as being distant, and even overly harsh with those who do not obey his precepts. But now, with my view of a good God restored, I would like to be able to serve. I realize that I often bury my talents, and I even have my doubts about them, but now I am increasingly convinced that I can do a lot in God’s kingdom.

Another participant shared about vocation this way, “This experience has allowed dreams to awaken in me, dreams that God had placed in my heart. For personal fears and external voices, I had dimmed those dreams, and perhaps I had forgotten them. Thanks to the habits of discipline, those dreams are being rediscovered in me, and I want mature formation in every area of my life.”

Among this learning community there is a longing for loving God and neighbor more genuinely, more naturally, almost effortlessly, like Jesus. As we put them simply into daily practice, we are de-mystifying the spiritual disciplines. Like this participant shared: “I want to grow in such a way as to have an innate ability to seek the presence of God all the time, and in turn, experience love for others that would move me to action for
their good. I have seen that it doesn’t take supernatural effort to grow in awareness of
God’s presence and activity in your life.”

One participant commented on vocation and calling by saying, “This experience
has changed my vision about God’s relationship with his children. I understand God more
relationally. Spiritual growth is so valuable for our becoming who we were meant to be.
And now I know better how to put into practice what pleases God and makes our world
better.” In regards to the kind of people we are becoming, one participant said this: “Each
one of us can uniquely become the kind of person that God expects. We can surrender to
him, and live in his divine vision, rather than our limited personal one.”

**Future Suggestions for the Cohort**

In the final part of the survey, three questions were posed. The first asked, “When
it comes to spiritual formation and life with God, what are you most interested in learning
more about in the future? What would be most helpful to you in your walk with God?”

The survey then probed participants’ interest in making commitments to live in
covenant together, “In the future, can you imagine living in some kind of ongoing
covenant community with this cohort?” There was a 100 percent positive response. The
survey results show that they want long-term community and connection. A few made
comments about the possibility, “Yes, I’d love for this to become a covenant community!
Being connected to each other has allowed us to feel joy and the presence of God.
There’s something freeing about that, and this experience has taught us that the spiritual
life can be pursued without a titanic effort, it’s more about our attention.” Another said,
“Absolutely! In fact I am praying, and would love to pursue a doctorate in spiritual practices.”

One participant responded, “I can’t wait to commit to a rule of life with such a beautiful group of people.” And finally, another commented, “I’d love to do ongoing work as a covenant community. I want to generate radical change in the lives of Christians and non-Christians. A dream in my life has been built during this process. I would like to continue increasing ways of contributing to the cohort and beyond.”

Finally, the survey aimed to improve the cohort learning experience by asking, “Do you have any recommendations for ways this program could be enhanced?” Overall, the answers indicated that participants would like more interaction between retreats by videoconference, webinars, or some other creative group interaction. One suggested, “We should make short videos on the topics of the monthly readings to better strengthen our understanding, and give suggestions about how we could practice what we see in the books.”

One participant suggested that maintaining discipline might be helped by having a person or smaller team in the group with whom each one is accountable. Another helpful suggestion was to share brief, personal book summaries with each other or the leaders each time a book is completed. Some suggested having retreats more often and regular meetings with a mentor or spiritual companion.

Though one person wanted mandatory monthly retreats, another said they would be helped by making all materials available online and easily accessible at all times, steadily updated for cohort members, particularly audio files of the retreat teaching
sessions, or videos, books, exercises, and any worksheets the cohort has used. One requested an overview, saying, “I would love to see a complete map of what we are going to read, practice, comment, do, throughout the entirety of the project.”

**Conclusion**

In assessing the “success” and degree of application to the ministry context, based on the survey results, it is apparent there is much improvement to be made. Overall, however, it appears that the cohort learning process is supportive for intentional spiritual formation. The survey indicates that cohort participants are experiencing grace and emotional healing directly in relation to God. They are experiencing quality time with God and finding that the life-practices are ways of creating connection to God as a means of grace and growth. There is good accountability and mutual commitment to one another, which can be further improved in terms of general communication between retreat gatherings. The objectives of this project are being achieved; the cohort is growing closer to God, and a more conscious relationship with God is being built in the participants’ daily lives. Authenticity is a common thread and a significant factor in the perceived successes of this project. Ultimately, we can conclude that there is a greater commitment to God and a deep commitment to the formation of their character and how they live in the world.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Outcomes and Insights Gained

In this survey of cohort participants, the words “love” and “enriching” occurred more often than any other words, for a total of twenty-seven times. The word “joy” occurred seventeen times, and the word “connection” is frequently repeated. The cohort is falling in love with God and enjoying their relationship with him. This echoes the observation of Pedro Arrupe:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.¹

The survey also repeated these words frequently: learn, challenge, motivated, intentionality, and discipline. This indicates that the cohort is being stretched and challenged in important areas in their spiritual formation, as they learn to authentically “stand on their own two feet” in terms of their own spirituality. Participants reported a heightened awareness of God in daily life, a reliance upon one another for mutual encouragement and support, increasing levels of joy, and a sense of belonging. They obviously love being a part of community, and they share a mutual respect that is evidenced in openness and sincerity. They are maturing in both independence and interdependence. The cohort reports increasing levels of tolerance, compassion, and generosity, and lessening levels of anxiety, stress, and anger.

Implications and Plans for the Future of the Ministry

Noteworthy from the survey responses is the connection between knowledge and understanding, as participants describe a growing connection and closeness to God. Input from the cohort shows a strengthening spiritual identity, encouraged by living in community and friendship, sharing disciplines and readings, retreat times, and then reporting on what was learned. This can help us objectively verify that the process of spiritual formation works to change lives. The data from the survey is a simple beginning of discovery, showing that this community is discovering a viable way of living, and that their experiences are in actuality, a transformation. Their growth, individually and in community, reveals that the road ahead is a hopeful one. We must begin to share more stories of transformation, shared learning, and best practices.

With God, we must take responsibility for our future. No one else will do this for us. Implications of this shared future that we must discern with God are not limited to, but include the following: We must live in covenantal community. As city dwellers living in Latin America, if we do not commit to certain ways of living life together, then the culture we live in will swallow us, like Mexico City’s hurry, noise, and crowds do. We must intentionally disrupt the patterns of chaos in our lives that create strain, anxiety, and the distressed human condition that was described in the introduction to this project. This must be done in tangible and gritty ways.

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2 I am indebted to Randy Harris for the articulation and many of the design components of this cohort program living in covenantal community. Harris designed and implemented the TXA Monk Warrior community at Abilene Christian University. For more information, see: https://monkwarriors.wordpress.com/about/.
Further, the primary setback in our Christian communities is that we do not often make commitments to each other. We have not agreed to live by certain values and then hold each other graciously accountable to the sustaining life-practices that we agree to. I am suggesting that we commit to live by a chosen rule of life together, one that adopts the rhythms of grace of input and output (prayer and people) that we see in the life of Jesus.

This ministry is based on the conviction and hope that we live with greater discipline as a counter action to what big city life does to our spirits, that we live together by a covenantal rule of life—one that with discipline and love binds us to God and each other. I am suggesting that we adopt, to the best of our ability, the sustaining pattern of life and the rhythm and cycle of grace that we see in Jesus as presented in this project.

The spiritual disciplines help us attend to God, so we must adopt everyday practices that help us listen to God. A good place to start would be a contemplative discipline of prayer. We recommend that as a covenant community, we experience silence for fifteen minutes a day to be a prayerful countermeasure against the hurry and noisy chaos of Mexico City. We also commit to meditation on Scripture, routinely practicing the art of lectio divina and Gospel contemplation using biblical imagination. We must prayerfully and reflectively re-read Scripture with particular attention to let God work on us, read us, through our interactions of listening to him through Scripture. One of the cohort members, an ex-prostitute and recovering drug addict, is practicing lectio divina with her elderly neighbors. The initiative she is taking to attend not only an elderly population, but to attend to it with her attention fixed on God, is deeply inspiring.
One suggestion is that the group experience Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, as a way to learn more about spiritual discernment. The components of Ignatian spirituality complement an everyday spirituality that this cohort seeks to discover and embody. Ignatius’ balanced perspective of contemplation and action uniquely fits the spirituality style of this cohort. Having completed the first part of this ministry project, the members of this cohort are primed for silent retreats and the accompaniment of a spiritual director or group spiritual direction. The experience of spiritual direction should spur the cohort participants’ own efforts to grow in the ministry of listening. Because listening is at the heart of the Christian life, as previously mentioned in this writing, the words of Douglas Steere bear repeating: “To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

In the future, this cohort needs to engage the premises of liberation theology so that it might serve and be served in relational interaction with its poorer neighbors. Over time, this initiative could morph into small circles or bands, serving like social justice teams for goodness in some of the densely needy populations of Mexico City and cities like it in Latin America. That is to say, the spiritual formation cohort could serve as a group to help recruit friends to become teams for social justice in our communities, to help meet the needs of the urban poor by planting urban gardens or other creative initiatives. With a compass like this, such a group would have the freedom and clarity to

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begin moving in initiatives that make a difference in our neighborhoods and larger community contexts.

This kind of action could abandon any worry about results because the results would take care of themselves. The results would be deep personal authenticity and identity in lives that would make an impact on those around. The productivity of such individuals in covenant communities would not be based on frantic activity and hurry, but by service characterized by a deep sense of acceptance and sustained by gracious interaction with God.

Particularly if following the model of a dispersed religious order, we would be able to serve our neighbors with joy and love, rather than being driven by obligation or duty, because of this foundational trust that our lives are with a faithful and steadfast God. Such individuals would simply be living with authenticity, as those who know they are deeply loved by God. To live this way, valuing the disciplines and rhythm that Jesus modeled, would make an enormous difference in the lives of our neighbors near and far.

**Implications of this Project for the Larger Christian Community**

What has been learned and experienced by this pioneer group can aid and encourage the formation of like-minded groups eager to grow in their spirituality and in action-oriented love. One of the members of this learning cohort is currently contextually adapting the cohort’s life-practices and sharing them with one of Mexico’s municipal mayors. The mayor is not a believer quite yet and has her doubts about God and religion, but she is fascinated with the life-practices of gratitude, contemplation, service in secret, practices in inclusivity and welcome, growing in self-knowledge, and authentically
relating to others. In turn, this mayor is having her entire cabinet practice the shared exercises in community and in daily life-rhythms, and she is asking for more. Overall, the life and influence of this cohort is dynamic.

This project began by asking a core question: “Can Jesus’s Kingdom life of unhurried peace and power take root in a chaotic, vibrant, and delirious city?” This project has been created to guide a spiritually hungry group of Mexico City residents into an everyday spirituality in the city. Because of Mexico City’s chaotic nature, this group is like “abundant-life underdogs,” susceptible to the distressed human condition of anxiety, fear, and desperation. This project concludes that if this spiritual formation experiment can work in a city like this, then possibly it could work anywhere. The evidence shows that a lot is happening within this learning community, even beyond the frame of this pioneer learning circle. In terms of developing a spirituality for the city, this cohort experience has a lot to offer Christians across urban settings in Latin America.

This letter, recently addressed to the pioneer cohort from one of its members, summarizes the power of shared community and the relational commitments that help move us closer to God’s will and unify us in his purposes:

A letter to the pioneer cohort 2019-2020, this beautiful community who has shown me the love of God in the most loving and simple of ways.

Dear Ashrei pioneer cohort,

In describing my experience of spiritual training in community with you, I initially thought it was a simple, but beautiful project by my friends James and Erin. I was wrong, it was God exercising his presence and power in a wonderful group of people full of faith and love for God. I thought that I would be the one who carried out the tasks properly, but again, it was God, who through the exercises and spiritual readings, opened the door to countless reflections, points of view, and many answers. He took my will lovingly.
I thought that in a courteous and polite way, I would participate in the retreats, but I had in mind to not involve myself much beyond that. How little did I know what was to come. I had no idea what was about to happen. Once we started, I began to feel deep longings for walking with God. My deepest attention moved to listening and learning from all these good people found in this learning community who were testifying of their love for God in indescribable ways.

And so, nine months has passed, there have been several moments, some easier than others, some moments of greater awareness of God’s presence than others, some moments with more doubts and frustrations than others, but here is what is happening within our experience: God is slowly melting and dissolving away our own wills; he is making them malleable. In all of these moments, he is becoming our will, that which we desire. I only ask as St. Augustine does... more perseverance in Him.

With deep gratitude to God and this community of spiritual friends,
Leonor Rojas Arellano

Conclusion

This one person’s experience stands as evidence to the strength and concrete possibilities within this ministry model—with the model of Jesus, the loving care of our heavenly Father, and the sustaining presence of God’s Spirit.
Phases in the Cycle of Grace from *Mutual Caring* by Frank Lake

Phase I: Acceptance

Of Christ the Son by His Father; the voice of God from heaven, “this is my beloved Son” (Jn 3:17; 17:5).

Jesus knows he has constant access. “I know you always hear me.” (Jn 11:42)

John records, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and remain on him.” (Jn 1:32)

Phase II: Sustenance

Christ abides in the Father.

His well-being derives from this: “the only-begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father.” (Jn 1:18)

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” (Jn 15:9)

The Father shows the Son “everything that He is himself doing.” (Jn 5:20)

Christ is given the Holy Spirit and his gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, glory, all without measure. (Jn 3:34)

“I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” (Jn 14:11)

“I and the Father are one.” (Jn 10:30)

Phase III: Status

“I am from above.” (Jn 8:23)

“I am the son of God.” (Jn 10:36)

“I am not alone.” (Jn 8:16-18; 29)

He is sent by God on God’s work. (Jn 7:18, 28-29, 33; 6:38)

“I am the light of the world.” (Jn 3:19; 8:12; 9:5)

“I am the living bread come down from heaven.” (Jn 6:51)

“I am the water of life.” (Jn 7:37)

“Full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14)

The Father is glorified in the Son. (Jn 14:13)

Jesus commands people to leave all, take up your cross, and follow me. (Jn 1:43; 12)

Phase IV: Achievement

“The Son can do nothing of himself but what he sees the Father do.” (Jn 5:19, 30, 35; 8:29; 10:36-37)

“He can speak nothing of himself but what he hears from the Father.” (Jn 8:26, 28, 38)

“The words that I speak they are spirit, they are life.” (Jn 6:63; 8:51)

“They are everlasting life to believers.” (Jn 5:24, 40; 14:6)

He is the bread of life, of eternal life, for all who believe on, and eating, partake of him. (Jn 6:48-58, 33-35)
To be the light of the world, so that those who follow Him do not walk in darkness (Jn 8:12; 9:5)
To finish the work of redemption God gave him to do (Jn 4:34; 16:5; 17:4; 19:30)
“I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.” (Jn 9:4)
APPENDIX 2

EXAMPLES OF SHARED MONTHLY PRACTICES

Tema: Entendiendo a la persona

Año1 Práctica mensual de junio: Practicando la Gratitud

Antes pensaba que la gratitud era una respuesta espontánea a los dones recibidos, pero ahora me he dado cuenta de que también puede vivirse como una disciplina: es el esfuerzo explícito por reconocer que todo lo que soy y tengo me ha sido dado como don de amor, don que tengo que celebrar con alegría.

La gratuidad como disciplina implica una elección consciente. Puedo elegir ser agradecido aún incluso cuando mis emociones y sentimientos están impregnados de dolor y resentimiento. Es sorprendente la cantidad de veces que puedo optar por la gratitud en vez de por la queja y el lamento. Puedo elegir ser agradecido cuando me critican, aunque mi corazón responda con amargura. Puedo optar por hablar de la bondad y la belleza, aunque mi ojo interno siga buscando a alguien para acusarle de algo feo. Puedo elegir escuchar las voces que perdonan y mirar los rostros que sonrían, aun cuando siga oyendo voces de venganza y vea muecas de odio.

Siempre se puede elegir entre el resentimiento y la gratuidad porque Dios ha aparecido en mi oscuridad, me ha animado a venir a casa, y me ha dicho en un tono lleno de afecto: “Tú estás siempre conmigo, y todo lo mío es tuyo.” (Lucas 15.31)


Ejercicio de entrenamiento del alma: toma 7 minutos cada día del mes y escriba todas las cosas por las cuales te sientes gratitud.

Para ayudarte comenzar: una lista continua de gratitud: la presencia de Dios conmigo, un café en las mañanas, las siestas que refrescan, los colores, los sueños (de día o de noche), la risa, la sabiduría de los demás, mi perro moviendo la cola feliz de verme. la música, el helado, la curiosidad, el olor de la lluvia, amigos de toda la vida, conversaciones enriquecedoras, científicos que descubren cosas asombrosas, personas talentosas que son humildes, segundas oportunidades, cómo mi mente se abre a nuevos entendimientos cuando viajo, padres que aman a sus hijos, los mentores, los abrazos de un niño, calcetines limpios, la maravilla del sistema inmunológico, la oración, el chocolate, el silenciamiento de falsos rumores, libros, etc, ...
Filipenses 4. 4-9. En el retiro, Abel leyó: Alégrense siempre en el Señor. Insisto: ¡Alégrense! 5 Que su amabilidad sea evidente a todos. El Señor está cerca. 6 No se inquieten por nada; más bien, en toda ocasión, con oración y ruego, presenten sus peticiones a Dios y denle gracias. 7 Y la paz de Dios, que sobrepasa todo entendimiento, cuidará sus corazones y sus pensamientos en Cristo Jesús. Por último, hermanos, consideren bien todo lo verdadero, todo lo respetable, todo lo justo, todo lo puro, todo lo amable, todo lo digno de admiración, en fin, todo lo que sea excelente o mereza elogio. 9 Pongan en práctica lo que han aprendido...y el Dios de paz estará con ustedes.

**Tema:** Entendiendo a la persona

**Año1 Práctica mensual de julio:** Salmo 23 recargado

**Propósito:**

El Salmo 23 nos ofrece una imagen de la vida en el Reino de Dios. Este salmo de confianza muestra una frase de *La Divina Conspiración*, "el mundo es un lugar perfectamente seguro donde estar." Viviendo en estas verdades nos ayuda con la restauración y transformación del alma, lo cual necesita ser reconocido y cuidado (*Renueva tu corazón*, p. 208, 212).

**Ejercicio:**

Vive este pasaje y llévalo contigo a todas partes memorizándolo. # 4 y # 5 son lo que estamos buscando con la práctica.

1. Elige la versión que quieres memorizar. Siente la libertad de sacar tus palabras favoritas de diferentes versiones.

2. Imprímalo, quizás en letras grandes, y llévelo contigo. Miralo mientras estás esperando en una fila o tal vez en una caminata.

3. Toma un tiempo enfocado para memorizarlo, lo cual no será difícil porque lo has escuchado mucho. Repáselo mentalmente mientras conduces tu auto.

4. Ora el salmo a Dios, especialmente cuando te sientas incómodo. Por ejemplo: Oh Señor, realmente quiero confiar en ti como mi pastor que cuida de mi bienestar. Ayúdame a creer hoy que tengo todo lo que necesito. Es posible que desees orarlo por otra persona. Por ejemplo: ayude a los cristianos que sufren en el mundo a tener un sentido de ti como su pastor, su...etc... Por favor, proporcione a cada uno de ellos hoy todo lo que necesiten, incluso cuando parezca imposible.

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5. Interactuar con la oración. Si deseas, escribe en un diario las imágenes que le sean más útiles o quizás las que le asusten un poco.

**Imágenes de Salmo 23:**

- Dios como Protector, Proveedor, Médico, Sanador, Terapeuta, Buen Padre que disciplina de manera justa, Salvador, Acompañante, Gerente Encantado. Inventar más así. (v. 1)
- Recuéstese despreocupado, ya que puedes estar en medio de un rico pasto porque tienes todo lo que necesitas. Caminando junto al agua, pero no lo engulles porque tienes todo lo que necesitas. (v. 2)
- Tu alma restaurada en lugar de quebrada de alguna manera. (Tal vez: tu mente restaurada en lugar de quebrada de cualquier manera; tus sentimientos restaurados en lugar de quebrantados de cualquier manera, y así sucesivamente con la voluntad, el cuerpo y el contexto social). (V. 3)
- Tú siguiendo a Jesús por un camino y sabiendo que él es bueno y tiene sentido. (v. 3b)
- Tú caminando por un valle oscuro pero Dios es tu compañero. Eres consciente de que Dios te guía, usando las circunstancias, las Escrituras, y las personas para protegerte (como vara) y rescatearte (como bastón). (v. 4)
- Estás sentado con una persona difícil, pero sabiendo que tienes todo lo que necesitas, tu copa rebosando. (v. 5)
- Estás alegre y contento de que Cristo habita en ti y que estás "en Cristo" (v. 6)

Si deseas, imagínate a ti mismo creyendo esto en una situación en la que a menudo tienes miedo: una entrevista de trabajo, leyendo informes o meciendo a un niño enfermo. Disfrutando salir de las etapas en las que tu alma está en alerta, confiando que el mundo es un lugar perfectamente seguro, porque Dios está contigo.

Terminando el mes de julio, en nuestra conversación en el chat de WhatsApp, la pregunta será: ¿Qué imagen o frase del Salmo 23 se ha quedado más contigo? ¿Cómo lo has estado usando?

Hemos incluido este ejercicio con el tema "Entendiendo a la persona" para ayudarte a encontrar el descanso y la satisfacción del alma al reflexionar sobre el Salmo 23.

Imágenes tomadas de *Confianza en Dios Para Todo* por Jan Johnson.

**Tema:** Entendiendo a la persona

**Año 1 Práctica mensual de agosto:** el descanso

**Propósito:** El desafío para las próximas tres semanas se basa en el valor de disciplina. El descanso intencional requiere un alto grado de disciplina.

**El desafío:** El desafío tiene tres partes:
1) Dormir: duerme al menos siete horas cada noche. Acuéstete antes de las 10 p.m. Al menos una noche y, si tus horarios de trabajo y clases lo permiten, duerma al menos una mañana hasta que ya no puedas dormir y te sientes completamente descansado.

2) Sábado: dedica un día entero al descanso sabático. No trabajes en este día. En cambio, descance en Dios y pase tiempo en su presencia. Salga al aire libre, salga a caminar y reemplace tus actividades habituales de descanso como escape con algo de ritmo más lento.

3) “A medida que avanzas”: evalúe el efecto que el descanso tiene en tu capacidad de estar atento y comprometido con el mundo que te rodea. Aproveche estas oportunidades para estar completamente presente y trate nuestras interacciones cotidianas con la misma actitud que tratamos nuestro descanso.

**Tema**: Entendiendo la oración

**Año1 Práctica mensual de septiembre**: El Oficio Divino

**ACERCA DEL OFICIO DIVINO**

La liturgia de las horas es la forma más antigua de disciplina espiritual cristiana y tiene sus raíces en el judaísmo del que surgió el cristianismo. Cuando el salmista dice: "Siete veces al día te alabo," se refiere al oficio divino tal como existía en el antiguo judaísmo. No sabemos las horas que fueron designadas en el tiempo del salmista para esas oraciones. Al final de la era, sin embargo, los devotos habían llegado a puntuar su día de trabajo con oraciones sobre un régimen que seguía el flujo de la vida comercial romana. Las campanas comenzaron el día de trabajo a las seis de la mañana, sonaron a las nueve de la mañana (*terce* o tercera hora), la comida del mediodía y la siesta o pausa a las doce (*sexta* o sexta hora), el reinicio del comercio a las tres (*nóna*, o novena hora), y el cierre del negocio a las seis.


Con la adición de oraciones vespertinas y oraciones tempranas al levantarse, la estructura de la liturgia de las horas se estableció de una forma muy cercana a la que los cristianos todavía usan hoy en día.

La liturgia de las horas también se conoce comúnmente como "los oficios divinos" o "la oración de hora-fija", y desde el tiempo de la Reforma hasta hace muy poco se celebró casi exclusivamente como parte de los cristianos ortodoxos, católicos y anglicanos. Sin embargo, con las reconfiguraciones y realineamientos dentro del cristianismo durante los
últimos años del siglo XX, hubo un impulso cada vez mayor por parte de muchos cristianos de cada división sectaria de la fe para regresar a la liturgia o al trabajo de ser Iglesia en la tierra y así practicar nuestra tarea de orar. Como el servicio que era más completamente el servicio del pueblo en el cristianismo del primer siglo, la observancia del oficio divino comenzó a surgir una vez más como la disciplina muy deseada para muchos cristianos.

-Phyllis Tickle

Tema: Entendiendo a la persona

Año1 Práctica mensual de octubre: 5 Minutos de Gratitud

Nuestros cerebros tienen un estado emocional predeterminado: el estado en el que reside cuando otras emociones no lo abruman temporalmente. En los primeros 18 meses de vida, el estado emocional predeterminado en nuestros cerebros, que debería ser alegría, se establece en una de las 6 emociones desagradables que el cerebro reconoce: tristeza, miedo, ira, vergüenza, asco (repulsión) y desesperación desesperada. Esta no fue una elección que hiciste. Se estableció de acuerdo con lo que sucedía en tu vida durante tu infancia.

Aquí está la buena noticia: podemos restablecer nuestro estado emocional predeterminado a la alegría. Esto sucede en nuestros cerebros como respuesta a la exposición repetida a un estado de gratitud. La gratitud es la vía de acceso para aumentar la alegría en nuestras vidas. El ejercicio de alegría de 30 días es una disciplina espiritual que beneficiará a todos los cristianos. Fue creado por el Dr. Jim Wilder como una forma de restablecer el estado predeterminado del cerebro. El Dr. Wilder es un psicólogo y teólogo que incorpora la ciencia del cerebro al discipulado cristiano. Así es como funciona:

Recuerdos de gratitud

- Piensa en un recuerdo en tu vida por el que estés agradecido. Puede ser grande (el nacimiento de un niño) o pequeño (una hermosa puesta de sol). No importa, siempre y cuando sientas gratitud cuando lo piensas.
- Dele un título de 2-3 palabras (Dan y Dave, jilguero brillante, fútbol con globos)
- En un lugar tranquilo, regrese a este recuerdo y revívalo por un minuto, como si estuviera en él.
- Pedir:
  - ¿Qué sentiste en tu cuerpo? - tal vez "paz" o "ligereza" (no importa lo que sientas mientras sientas algo en tu cuerpo)
  - ¿Qué podría estar comunicándote Dios a través de la memoria y la paz que sientes? Ejemplo: Dios está conmigo y le gusta compartir su belleza conmigo.
Fase 1
1. Comience a compilar una lista de recuerdos de gratitud como se describe en la Fase 1. Cada recuerdo tiene 2 características: 1) Sientes gratitud en tu cuerpo y 2) Sientes una conexión con Dios en la memoria. Finalmente, quieres una lista de al menos 10 recuerdos de gratitud.
2. Una vez al día, pasa 5 minutos residiendo en gratitud usando tu lista de recuerdos agradecidos. Es sobre todo no verbal. Estás sintiendo una conexión con Dios en tu cuerpo mientras revives recuerdos de gratitud.

Nota: Pasar 5 minutos reviviendo recuerdos sin distraerte es difícil si nunca antes lo has hecho. Te tomará un tiempo poder sostener los 5 minutos completos sin “soñar despierto” ni salir en tangentes. Date gracia. Es posible que estés ejercitando un músculo en tu corazón que no se ha usado mucho. Usa tu lista de recuerdos durante los 5 minutos. Algunos días, un solo recuerdo lo sostendrá durante los 5 minutos. Más comúnmente, necesitarás 3-5 recuerdos para completar los 5 minutos. Cuando la gratitud de un recuerdo comienza a desvanecerse, vaya a otro en la lista.

Una vez que puedas mantener constantemente un estado sólido de gratitud de 5 minutos, estarás listo para comenzar el Ejercicio de Alegría de 30 días.

Fase 2 - El ejercicio de alegría de 30 días
1. Pase 5 minutos de gratitud 3 veces al día. Hazlo a primera hora de la mañana, a mediodía, y lo último que haces por la noche antes de acostarte. Haz esto por 30 días. La consistencia es la clave.
2. En algún momento durante los 30 días, tu cerebro responderá a esta exposición repetida a la gratitud. Restaurará tu estado emocional predeterminado a la alegría. Probablemente te sentirás diferente cuando te despiertes, y notarás cuando “salgas de la alegría” al vivir tu vida. No sentir alegría te hará sentir anormal. Querrás volver a la alegría lo más pronto posible.

Tema: El Gozo Relacional

Año1 Práctica mensual de noviembre: la sonrisa

Propósito: El desafío para las próximas cuatro semanas se basa en el valor del gozo relacional.

La alegría se transmite con contacto visual, sonrisas, expresiones faciales cálidas, lenguaje acogedor. Para nuestro cerebro, alegría significa "Alguien está contento de estar conmigo". Las sonrisas crean vínculos que pueden ayudarnos a sincronizar nuestros apegos.

El desafío: El desafío tiene dos partes.
**Ejercicio Parte 1:** Sonríe: piensa en un momento alegre cuando alguien se alegró de estar contigo. Dado que la alegría debe ser compartida, piense en alguien con quien le gustaría compartir tu momento alegre. Escriba un recordatorio para compartir el momento con ellos e intente comunicarte con ellos en persona lo antes posible para compartir la alegría.

**Ejercicio Parte 2:** ahora envíe un correo electrónico o mensaje de texto de agradecimiento a la persona con quien te alegrabas de estar. (ejemplo: "Realmente aprecio haber pasado la tarde juntos la semana pasada...buen día").

Practique la práctica de la sonrisa y la recepción alegre una vez al día y envíe un mensaje de texto de agradecimiento a alguien al menos una vez por semana.

Adaptado del libro *The Joy Workbook: Vocational Discernment in Today's Culture* por el Dr. James Wilder y la Dra. Christiana Lynch

**Tema:** Celebrando la encarnación

**Año 1 Práctica mensual de diciembre:** Pausas para el Adviento

La palabra adviento significa "venir" o "llegada", es una temporada en la que anticipamos el nacimiento de Jesús, la vida encarnada de Dios.

Como cohorte, haremos un ejercicio de adviento escrito por Trevor Hudson, *Pausas para el Adviento*. Hemos elegido una escritura y una práctica mensual de Trevor para familiarizar a la cohorte con Trevor, ya que él estará con nosotros en un próximo retiro de cohorte.

En este libro simple pero rico en texturas, Trevor ha elegido una palabra para cada día de adviento, una reflexión para acompañarla y una práctica diaria simple.

Esta será la tarea para aquellos que están haciendo la cohorte para el programa de certificación.

Esperamos que disfruten cada día de oración y ponga la reflexión en acción, porque si aprendemos algo del adviento, es que Dios es un Dios de acción en cercanía / proximidad con todos.
**Tema:** Entendiendo la oración

**Año1 Práctica mensual de enero:** la oración del Examen

La oración DIARIA del “Examen”. Un método de oración para profundizar en tu amistad con Dios y aprender de Dios de las experiencias ordinarias de la vida. Hazlo en familia si es posible.

1. **Ora por LUZ.** Puesto que no estamos soñando despiertos o simplemente recordando el pasado, sino más bien estamos en busca de alguna idea de cómo el Espíritu de Dios nos está guiando, y sólo tiene sentido que oremos por iluminación. El objetivo no es simplemente la memoria, sino la comprensión agraciada. “Señor, ayúdame a entender este ruido, esta confusión zumbido, esta actividad frenética”

2. **Revisa el día con GRATITUD.** Toma en cuenta la diferencia que este es que mirar de inmediato por tus pecados. A nadie le gusta “hincar” en el banco de memoria para descubrir la pequeña, la debilidad, la falta de generosidad. Pero todo el mundo le gusta considerar regalos hermosos, y eso es precisamente lo que las últimas veinticuatro horas contienen - regalos de la existencia, el trabajo, las relaciones, los alimentos, los desafíos. La gratitud es la base de toda nuestra relación con Dios. Así que aplique lo que te ayude a caminar por el día desde el momento que despertaste. “Camina” por de las últimas 24 horas, de hora a hora, de lugar a lugar, de una tarea a otra, de una persona a otra, dando gracias al Señor por todos los regalos que te encuentres.

3. **Revisa las EMOCIONES** (los sentimientos) que afloran en la repetición del día. Nuestros sentimientos, positivos y negativos, dolorosos y agradables, son señales claras de donde fue la acción durante el día. Simplemente presta atención a todos y cada uno de esos sen-timientos que afloren, ya que,...toda la gama: la alegría, el aburrimiento, el miedo, la anticipación, el pesar, la incertidumbre, la compasión, el asco, la gratitud, el orgullo- lo, la duda, la confianza, la admiración, la timidez - lo que estaba allí. Algunos de nosotros podemos ser reacios a centrarse en los sentimientos en esta edad contemporánea sobre- psico-analizado, pero creo que estos sentimientos son el índice más vivaz de lo que está sucediendo en nuestras vidas.

4. **Elige uno de esas emociones (positivas o negativas)** y orar de este ENFOQUE. Es decir, elija a la sensación recordada que más te llamó la atención. La sensación es una señal de que algo importante estaba pasando. Ahora simplemente expresa de manera espontánea la oración que surge a medida que atiende a la fuente de la sensación - la alabanza, la petición, la contrición, y pide ayuda o la sanación, lo que sea.

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Una mnemónica para recordar los cinco puntos: LG3E. Luz Gratitud Emociones Enfoque Expectativas
APPENDIX 3

COHORT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Note: This survey is anonymous.

Part One: General questions about the three-part experience

1. How much do you think you’ve grown in your life and relationship to God since beginning the cohort learning experience?

   Stuck—Somewhat stuck—Somewhat developing—Developing—Flourishing abundantly

2. Considering your soul work and spiritual growth in other contexts (family life, men’s and women’s retreats, other small groups, church life, etc.), how would you rate the degree to which the cohort complements those other areas?

   Answer: 1-2-3-4-5 (1 lowest, 5 highest)

3. Considering the demands of urban lifestyle and your multiple life-responsibilities, how would you rate the cohort’s designed workload expectations and your ability to meet those expectations?

   Multiple choice answer:
   a. Expectations are just right
   b. Expectations are too high
   c. Expectations are somewhat too high
   d. Expectations are somewhat too low
   e. Expectations are too low

4. How would you rate the cohort’s learning balance between academic/intellectual rigor and experiential practice?

   Answer: 1-5 Stars (1 lowest, 5 highest)

Part Two: Evaluating the program’s three-part design

Note: This project explores how to best nurture spiritual growth and incorporate life-practices in the busyness and chaotic environment of life, particularly in an urban Latin American setting. With that in mind, the design of the cohort learning experience focuses on three elements: shared monthly readings, shared monthly practices, and bi-annual retreats.
Monthly Readings

5. Has reading one book per month been an acceptable rhythm of reading for you? (answer: yes or no or other)

6. Please evaluate the effectiveness of the following readings with 1 being unhelpful and 5 being very helpful.

   a. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzaro (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   b. *Testament of Devotion* by Thomas Kelly (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   c. *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   d. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* by Dallas Willard (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   e. *Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You* by Jim Wilder (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   f. *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola’s Examen* by Jim Manney (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   g. *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   h. *The Ragamuffin Gospel* by Brennan Manning Lorenzo (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box

Shared Monthly Life-Practices

7. Please evaluate the effectiveness of these shared monthly practices with 1 being unhelpful and 5 being very helpful.

   a. Gratitude (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   b. Psalm 23 recharged (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   c. Rest (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   d. Fixed hour prayer (the divine office) (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   e. Five-minute gratitude exercise (daily around memories) (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   f. The things that make you smile (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   g. Advent reading and simple daily practice (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   h. The prayer of Examen (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box
   i. Rolling fast (1 unhelpful, 5 very helpful) + comment box

Bi-annual retreats

8. How would you rate the overall teaching content of the cohort retreats? (1-5)
9. How would you rate the overall dynamic of interaction with other members of the cohort? (1-5)
10. How would you rate your satisfaction with meeting twice per year as a cohort? More, less
11. How would you rate our cohort community experience as a loving and high joy environment? (1-5)
Part Three: General experiences, insights, and questions about the future

12. How would you describe your overall experience of engaging in this spiritual formation experience?

   Answer: Open comment box

13. Have you had any meaningful experiences, new insights, or spiritual advances during or as a result of this cohort experience that you would be willing to share? You may want to look back over your notes or journal to find some key learnings.

   Answer: Open comment box

14. When it comes to spiritual formation and life with God, what are you most interested in learning more about in the future? What would be most helpful to you in your walk with God?

   Answer: Open comment box

15. In the future, can you imagine living in some kind of ongoing covenant community with this cohort? (i.e., to continue learning with the cohort through designed retreats, readings or book club, sharing practices, or living a more specific “rule of life” together?)

   Answer: Open comment box

16. Do you have any recommendations for ways this program could be enhanced?

   Answer: Open comment box

While this survey is completely anonymous, I give permission for the data that is compiled to be used and published in James Henderson’s doctoral project writing.

   Answer: Yes / No
BIBLIOGRAPHY


