

Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

PROMOTING PASTOR SPIRITUAL VITALITY IN THE
CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH THROUGH AN ON-LINE TOOLKIT

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A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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BY

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ABSTRACT

Promoting Pastor Spiritual Vitality in the Christian Reformed Church Through an Online Toolkit

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Spiritually healthy pastors are good for the Church.¹ This seems commonsensical, yet many pastors in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) do not engage in the healthful habits and relationships necessary to grow and sustain their spiritual wellbeing. Pressures from without and within often result in neglecting the very habits and companions promoting their spiritual flourishing.

To encourage the spiritual wellbeing of CRC pastors, this project provides an online spiritual vitality toolkit. This resource includes: Assessments for strengthening self-awareness, a chart for discerning spiritual companions, Christian practices making room for God, guidance for gathering with peers, resources for pastor retreats, tips for creating a rule of life, and a bibliography for deeper exploration. As a result of using the toolkit, clergy will cultivate the lifelong practices and holy friendships necessary for growing in communion and cooperation with God.² With growing commitment to their own spiritual lives, pastors will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

Part one of the project introduces the ministry challenge of healthy spirituality for CRC clergy. It explores three significant ministry contexts in which these pastors live and work and how these affect their spiritual health. Part two provides theological reflection on the spiritual life and its connection to the pastoral vocation. Based on Scripture, Reformed writings, and contemporary sources, it argues the indispensable role of spiritual companions and practices for clergy spiritual health. Part three explains the ministry initiative rising from this reflection and describes its goals, timeline, along with the people and resources needed to carry it out well. Finally, this section assesses the effectiveness of the toolkit.

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¹ This truism is implied in Peter Scazero’s book *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 20.

² According to Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong in their book *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), lifelong practices and holy friendships are fundamental for the well-being of ministry leaders.

To Mark,
my primary soul care provider

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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

To understand the Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit,¹ one benefits from understanding the need and project behind it. In a coordinated effort, leaders from two ministries of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA or CRC), Pastor Church Resources (PCR) and Faith Formation Ministries (FFM), set out to strengthen the spiritual vitality and health of its pastors. They named this endeavor the Spiritual Vitality in Pastors' Project which officially commenced in October of 2015. The stated objectives for the project were to provide pastors with tools, resources and encouragement for assessing and strengthening their personal spiritual formation; to enable pastors to encourage each other and hold each other accountable in matters of spiritual health; to strengthen pastors in spiritual formation so they in turn can strengthen their own congregations; to raise awareness, especially among church leadership, of the importance of investing in their pastor's spiritual well-being; and to help pastors themselves develop lifelong, healthy spiritual habits. The online toolkit grew out of this denominational project and aimed to support these same goals. The activities and spiritual practices of this initial project intentionally shaped this ministry initiative. Pastor feedback, the committee's findings, and personal training in spiritual formation further shaped the toolkit.

Although not a staff member of either of these ministries, it was exciting to hear this happening in the denomination. Hence, I inquired about this project and the

¹ "The Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit," Christian Reformed Church in North America, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.crcna.org/spe/pastors-spiritual-vitality-toolkit>

possibility of involvement. Ever since reading about spiritual hygiene in Cornelius Plantinga's book *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*,² my soul was stirred. In this passage, Plantinga conveys a captivating vision of a spiritually sound and whole person; one whose life, like the tree in Psalm 1, remains "sturdy, fragrant, and fruitful."³ He skillfully illustrates the motives, activities, and goals of such a person. They long for certain things, says Plantinga, for God, for their own wholeness, and for the flourishing of others. Faith and gratitude motivate them, which the Holy Spirit replenishes regularly. They practice certain disciplines in order to serve with freedom and power. Reflecting on God's design and Kingdom purposes, they discover where best to fit in. Moreover, they fix their eyes on the goal of life "to glorify God and enjoy him forever".⁴ This compelling vision prompted further training in spiritual formation and a desire to participate in this spiritual vitality project.

Another reason for personal interest includes the project's target audience, CRC pastors. Being one of them, makes it especially pertinent. The toolkit aims primarily at helping parish pastors, yet even those in specialized ministries, like myself,⁵ can benefit.

² Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 34-38.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ This quote originates in the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 1.

⁵ I was ordained to the sacred ministry of Word and Sacrament in the CRC in May 2006. I served for nearly a decade in a specialized ministry called Soulcare. This ministry sought to enfold, encourage, and equip the spouses of Calvin Seminary students. This happened through weekly gatherings, special speakers, discussion dinners, and an annual retreat. As many of these spouses would assume leadership positions in their church and community, Soulcare aimed to prepare them through spiritual formation and the development of leadership skills. Today, Soulcare promotes spiritual formation by supplying a place, relationships, and resources for developing intimacy with God, so Christlikeness is increased, and faith applied to all of life.

The pastoral vocation calls for regular reflection on what it means to be a faithful shepherd of God's people and how to nurture the spiritual life, first one's own, then the flock's. Furthermore, this profession calls for contemplating the pressures of today's world which challenge a vibrant spiritual life. As well, it calls for pondering the tensions present in the depths of one's soul.

Finally, this project held special interest because I, along with others, sensed a need within the denomination to live more faithfully into the biblical vision and Reformed tradition it professes. The CRC recognizes a well-balanced, mature Christian life integrates head (doctrine), heart (piety) and hands (service). Yet, it continues to have an intellectual bias. By its own admission, emphasizing one area over the others proves problematic. Emphasizing head over heart and hands "can lead to exclusivity and inaction."⁶ Furthermore, highlighting any one of these dimensions "tends toward pride and an uncharitable devaluing of the other two emphases."⁷ CRC pastors possess little training in the spiritual life as a consequence of this intellectual bias. Surprisingly, the CRC possesses a rich tradition of Reformed spirituality. Both pastors and congregants alike would benefit from rediscovering it. This subject will be explored further in other parts of the project.

In the Fall of 2015, the committee invited me to join them in implementing the project. The first order of business was selecting sixteen parish pastors to participate. The committee considered age, gender, ethnicity, geography, and number of years in ministry

⁶ "What It Means to Be Reformed," Christian Reformed Church in North America, 46, accessed November 7, 2018, https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/what_it_means_to_be_reformed.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

since diversity was a high priority. The committee hoped this small group of pastors would reflect the larger denomination. The group of participants chosen, however, were not as diverse in gender or ethnicity as hoped. No female pastors applied and only a few ethnic minority pastors sent in applications for the project. Had the project continued, the diversity challenge would have been carefully addressed.

In addition to diversity, a high priority was placed on motivation for involvement. The committee asked pastors to share why they wished to participate in this project and what they hoped to gain by it. Reviewing these applications, the committee looked for pastors who expressed genuine longing for God, for safe community, or for life-giving spiritual practices. Furthermore, the committee sought out pastors who felt challenged with maintaining spiritual vitality in the thick of ministry. One pastor expressed his longing this way, “I want to fall in love with the presence of Jesus all over again and let my work flow out of that relationship.” A few applicants wrote about longing to connect with other pastors who “get it”, who could help them maintain healthy perspective and focus, who could help them identify blind spots, and who would challenge and encourage them along the way. Some described general feelings of isolation from colleagues, of dryness, and depletion of spiritual vitality. Others recognized the fast pace of contemporary life and ministry took a toll on their introspection and spiritual growth. One explained an inner drive of perfectionism causing his focus to prioritize ministry tasks over people. With an ear to longings and challenges, the committee chose sixteen pastors to participate.

Several foundational beliefs underlie the content of this project. First, healthy spiritual formation begins with self-awareness. Second, it grows and flourishes in rich,

Christian community of varying sizes: one-on-one, small groups, and medium-sized groups. Third, spiritual vitality is gained and sustained through the Holy Spirit and God-given means of grace, meaning intentional and regular spiritual practices. In addition to these beliefs, the committee believed some spiritual practices would benefit parish pastors more than others. Consequently, they prioritized Sabbath keeping, prayer, meditation, spiritual companionship, silence and solitude, along with creating a rule of life. These beliefs and practices significantly shaped the schedule and activities that followed.

From October through December 2015, pastor participants were assigned to a four-person huddle. Each huddle was instructed to meet virtually, introducing themselves to one another and discussing Robert Mulholland's book *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*.⁸ Also, during this three-month period, the pastors received instructions to complete three on-line assessments: The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,⁹ StrengthsFinder,¹⁰ and The 3 Colors of Leadership Empowerment Test.¹¹ Each pastor debriefed with a trained coach regarding the findings.

⁸ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁹ "MBTI Basics," The Meyers and Briggs Foundation, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.myersbriggs.org/home.htm?bhcp=1>

¹⁰ "Learn How the CliftonStrengths Assessment Works," CliftonStrengths, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252137/home.aspx?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Strengths_ECommerce_Brand_Search_US&utm_content=%2Bstrengths%20%2Bfinder&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIv7KirtWK5gIVVJJbCh0sPwn2EAAYASAAEgLGfVD_BwE

¹¹ Christian A. Schwartz, *The Three Colors of Leadership: How Anyone can Learn the Art of Empowering Other People* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2012).

In January of 2016, all sixteen pastors, two denominational staff and I attended a forty-eight-hour retreat at The Haven River Inn in Comfort, Texas. Here, for the first time, pastors experienced face-to-face interaction with members of their huddle groups discussing the Mulholland book and their assessment results. Pastors worshipped at various intervals during the retreat, concluding with the Lord's Supper following their last meal together. They learned about spiritual practices as well as spent one whole afternoon in silence and solitude. The second evening of the retreat was devoted to relaxed fellowship with colleagues over food and drink.

From February to December of the same year, pastors convened virtually in their huddles for support and encouragement. They also met individually with a spiritual director for three sessions (a new experience for most pastors involved). Finally, they filled out surveys for evaluation purposes. The pilot project ended with a second forty-eight-hour retreat in January of 2017 at the same facility in Texas. Its schedule and activities looked like the previous retreat, except the huddles discussed a different book, *Strong and Weak* by Andy Crouch,¹² and the learning sessions centered around creating a rule of life.

Reflection on the project, along with pastor evaluations, revealed some important learnings. First, they affirmed denominational support for pastor spiritual vitality and well-being as critical. They showed the importance of engaging pastors holistically: cognitively (books and discussions), personally (assessments, reflection, and accountability), spiritually (spiritual practices and spiritual direction), and relationally

¹² Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

(small group huddles and medium sized retreats). The committee discovered they may have hindered the spiritual formation process with a “fire hose”¹³ approach, by expecting too many requirements in too short of time. Furthermore, they learned pastors would have benefited from knowing the foundational beliefs undergirding the project and their role in spiritual formation.

The Creation of the Pastor Spiritual Vitality Toolkit

When the sixteen-month Spiritual Vitality in Pastors’ Project ended, it became apparent without additional grant money it was unsustainable. The denomination, lacking outside financial help, simply could not afford to take another sixteen pastors through a similar program. Additionally, the committee realized, even if it was possible, this model was too narrow to meet the needs of over a thousand pastors in the CRC. Consequently, they began brainstorming other possibilities and opportunities to meet the same objectives. One-by-one, the committee eliminated ideas until an online toolkit approach was unanimously agreed upon. Developing a toolkit seemed to have the most potential for reaching the most pastors, to be financially feasible, and to be easily updated when new or better resources became available. Most importantly, the toolkit provided other CRC pastors access to some of the same tools and resources for soul care as those participating in the Spiritual Vitality in Pastors’ Project. Initially, letting go of the original project disappointed everyone involved, but eventually this loss opened a new

¹³ One pastor, in his evaluation, coined the term “fire hose” approach. He was referring to the many requirements of the project due in a short amount of time during an already busy season of the church year for pastors. The assessments, coaching sessions, and travel plans were all to be completed while they were also planning and leading their congregations through Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, and Old Year Services. Time needed for reflection was hindered.

and exciting opportunity. Soon after deciding to create a toolkit, the director of Faith Formation Ministries asked me to be its principal writer.

The Challenge of Clergy Spiritual Vitality

Spiritually healthy pastors are good for the Church.¹⁴ This commonsense belief underlies both the original project and the online toolkit. Yet as leaders from FFM and PCR engaged with pastors throughout the denomination, they found many of them struggling in their spiritual lives. They also found many pastors in the CRC were not engaging in the healthful habits and relationships necessary to grow and sustain their spiritual wellbeing. More than a few factors contributed: pressures from without and within, pressures from the North American culture, their own denomination, along with pressures from their personal lives. Often a combination of these challenges resulted in pastors neglecting good habits and spiritual companions, the very things needed for personal and professional flourishing.

In many aspects, pastors in the CRC are no different than their congregants when it comes to their own spiritual formation and wellbeing. Their spiritual lives are birthed from the same divine source. They grow and thrive through the same God-given means of grace, both corporate and personal. Their spiritual lives are strengthened by the same Holy Spirit and sustained as they abide in Christ and in his body. Pastors engage in the same spiritual struggles, needing the Holy Spirit's help to resist common enemies: the

¹⁴ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 20.

devil, the world, and the flesh.¹⁵ Furthermore, they share the same overall goal in life “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹⁶

In some respects, however, pastors are dissimilar from their parishioners when it comes to spiritual formation and health. Most notably is the fact of a special call from God to faithfully shepherd his people. In the CRC, this call consists of preaching and teaching, administering sacraments, attending to prayer, and fruitfully ordering the life of the church and worship of God. Furthermore, the call includes being an ambassador of Christ and setting an example for the believers “in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”¹⁷ Scripture testifies to God’s harsh dealings with shepherds who abused or neglected their calling (Ez 34)¹⁸ or who were proud and hypocritical (Mt 23). Scripture also affirms God’s tenderness and grace for shepherds who love him and feed his sheep (Jn 21). As corporate spiritual directors for God’s people and exemplars of lives lived in communion and cooperation with God, a pastor’s spiritual health and well-being are of paramount importance. If pastors lack awareness of their own spiritual lives, understanding of Reformed spirituality, and attention to spiritual hygiene, their congregations suffer and most likely follow in their footsteps.

¹⁵ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” LD 52, Q&A 127 (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988).

¹⁶ CRC Publications, *The Heidelberg Catechism Westminster Shorter: The Heidelberg Catechism with Corresponding Questions from the Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1990).

¹⁷ Emily R. Brink, ed. *Psalter Hymnal*, “Ordination/Installation of Ministers of the Word” (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987), 995-997.

¹⁸ All Scripture is taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

Thesis and Overview of the Pastor Spiritual Vitality Toolkit Project

The goal of this doctoral project is to promote the spiritual health of pastors in the CRC through an online spiritual vitality toolkit¹⁹ encouraging them to seek out spiritual companions and find an ongoing rhythm of spiritual practices. Because the toolkit grew out of the Spiritual Vitality in Pastors' Project, its content was significantly shaped by the original committee, the project components, and participant feedback. Based on these factors, the toolkit includes assessment tools for strengthening self-awareness, a chart for discerning spiritual companions, Christian practices making room for God, guidance for gathering with peers, resources for pastor retreats, and tips for creating a rule of life. Furthermore, the toolkit includes illustrations from contemporary Christian art to aid reflection. The committee hoped to include an annotated bibliography at the end of the toolkit, but due to time constraints this matter has not been realized yet. After its initial launch, the toolkit added a pastors' manual for small group spiritual direction as well.

The committee hopes as a result of using the toolkit, CRC clergy will increasingly look like “fine saplings rooted into the bank of a dependable stream.”²⁰ They will cultivate the lifelong practices and holy friendships necessary for growing in communion and cooperation with God.²¹ With growing commitment and faithfulness to their own spiritual formation, pastors will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”²²

¹⁹ “The Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality Toolkit,” Christian Reformed Church in North America, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.crcna.org/spe/pastors-spiritual-vitality-toolkit>

²⁰ Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*, 34.

²¹ See Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, Chapter 3 on holy friendship and Chapter 5 on lifelong learning.

²² Rohrer, *The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry*, 17.

Part one of this project aims to introduce the ministry challenge of sustaining healthy spirituality for CRC clergy and why healthy habits are important. It examines the ministry context in which these Christian Reformed pastors live and work and how this environment affects their spiritual health. There are at least three significant contexts in which they serve: The North American context, the Christian Reformed denomination, and their personal lives. These contexts are examined from the broadest down to the narrowest, from North America to the depths of their own souls.

Part two of the project provides theological reflection from a Reformed perspective on the matter of the spiritual life and its connection to the pastoral vocation. First, it identifies written resources which are critical to thinking theologically about clergy spiritual health. Next, with the use of these resources, this section addresses two foundational questions: where does spiritual life come from and what is needed in order to gain or sustain spiritual vitality and well-being? To answer these questions, this next part looks to Scripture, Reformed writings, as well as contemporary sources inside and outside the Reformed faith tradition.

Following theological reflection, part three explains the ministry initiative arising out of this reflection. It summarizes part two and considers ministry implications. Next, it identifies the preferred outcome of spiritually healthy pastors, followed by a specific plan to support this vision. The plan includes specific goals, a timeline, and all the people and resources needed to carry it out well. Finally, this section of the paper identifies evaluation tools and an assessment of the effectiveness of the toolkit.

CHAPTER 1:
MINISTRY CONTEXT OF CRC CLERGY

According to Professor John Hull of Fuller Theological Seminary, theological thinking begins with a description and analysis of the ministry context for an effective response to ministry challenges.¹ Thus, determining the cultural landscape of CRC clergy and its influence on them is important to understanding how best to support their spiritual lives. CRC clergy function in three distinct and significant contexts: North American culture, denominational culture, and finally personal culture. This chapter defines, illustrates, and analyzes three substantial characteristics of North American culture: individualism, achievement, and the saturation of digital devices. It briefly explains the history, beliefs, and values of the CRC denomination. Finally, it describes the personal lives of pastors, including family life and their interior lives. Each of these contexts affects them spiritually. So, understanding these various contexts is vital.

¹ John R. Hull, “The DMin Model for Theological Reflection” class notes from Fuller Theological Seminary DM711: Exploring the Contours of Ministry, 15.

North American Culture

Some cultural experts suggest individualism is North America's defining characteristic. In a book written especially for international students and visitors, authors Gary Althen and Janet Bennet explain this distinctive feature,

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. They are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their destinies. They are not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collective.²

Other authorities on North American culture believe individualism to be intrinsic to the American mind. The first European settlers, they explain, came to this continent to free themselves of heavy controls, repression, and abuses by the ruling authorities. Consequently, these immigrants made certain things would be different in this new country. They wrote their governing documents securing power in the hands of the people, ensuring no class of people could lord it over others, and guaranteeing certain personal rights could never be taken away.³

This doctrine, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, has four main tenets. It believes all values, rights, and duties originate in the individual. It promotes the interests of individuals as paramount, striving to maintain political and economic independence. It encourages individual initiative, action, and interests. Moreover, it comprises the conduct flowing from these beliefs and values. Independence and self-reliance emanate from this

² Gary Althen and Janet Bennet, *American Ways: A Cultural Guide to The United States*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011), 5.

³ Maryanne Kearny Datesman, Joann Crandall and Edward N. Kearny, *American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture*, 4th ed. (White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 32.

doctrine: reliance upon one's own self, one's own judgement, and one's own effort or abilities. Clearly, relative independence and self-reliance are positive qualities. To think and act freely is a God-given gift and inalienable right. In child development, increasing independence from parents signals healthy growth toward maturity. In business, creative and innovative thinking leads to better ways of doing things, problem solving and improving quality of life through new discoveries. In politics, a self-reliant person takes a stand for something good, though unpopular in the polls. Yet, adopting the dominant Western culture of rugged individualism and a "lone ranger" mentality diminishes rather than nurtures a pastor's life, say Jones and Armstrong of *Resurrecting Excellence*.⁴

Certainly, not all CRC pastors feel the pressure of an individualist culture. Some grew up or serve among those in collectivist cultures such as Asian, Hispanic, Latino, or black. These pastors experience different pressures such as conformity and selflessness which puts them at risk as well, but in another way. Most CRC pastors, however, live with an individualistic cultural reality. Unless this fact is acknowledged and intentionally engaged, these pastors are at risk of not living life wholly, finding crucial sustenance, and maturing to the fullness of Christ.

Frederick Buechner observes the life-giving nature of relationships in his book *Wishful Thinking*. "The Holy Spirit has been called 'the Lord of life,' and drawing their power from that source, saints are essentially life-givers. To be with them is to become more alive."⁵ Buechner's observation implies solitary pastors risk losing out on the life-

⁴ Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 62.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 102.

force community brings. Genesis 1 and 2 attest Adam and Eve are more fully alive in relationships, both divine and human. Moreover, their being fully alive glorifies God. The souls of pastors not engaged in healthy relationships inevitably begin to shrink and die.

Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong emphasize the nurturing and sustaining nature of relationships. They write, “Communities of people are crucial to sustaining us through the joys and griefs of life, the triumphs and tragedies, the successes and failures, the fulfilling clarity and the perplexing struggles in discerning and living our vocations faithfully.”⁶ Self-reliant or isolated pastors put their mental health at risk. According to H. B. London and Neil Wiseman in their book *Pastors at Risk*, they are more likely to experience loneliness, stress, burnout, depression, and addictions.⁷ For many of these reasons, Archibald Hart of Fuller Seminary, counsels pastors to build an adequate support system, and preferably with peers where they can turn for nurture, share hurts and burdens, as well as open one’s soul.⁸

David Brooks, cultural commentator for the *New York Times*, explains the need for others in order to mature in character. He writes, “Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside—God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, institutions, and exemplars.”⁹ Brooks’ observation

⁶ Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 60.

⁷ H. B. London, Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk: Help for Pastors, Hope for the Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Victory Books, 1993), 163.

⁸ London and Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk*, 167.

⁹ David Brooks, *Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 12.

suggests without healthy relationships, pastors risk developing the character of Christ and withstanding the evil one. Spiritual blindness and deafness set in without the company of those who help them see God's presence and hear his voice in the world. Self-deception increases without companions providing challenge and accountability.

The individualist North American culture continues to affect many CRC pastors and potentially put them at risk. At the same time, today's pastors shepherd their flocks in a culture that places a high value on achievement. North Americans admire achievers. They respect go-getters, doers, and self-starters. They love the successful: those who accomplish a worthy task through hard work, courage and perseverance, especially when they are up against difficult odds. North Americans like action and they like results. This is what authors Althen and Bennet observe regarding western culture: "[North Americans] tend to believe they should be doing something most of the time. They are usually not content, as people from other countries are, to sit for long periods and talk with other people. They get restless and impatient. If they are not doing something at the moment, they should at least be making plans and arrangements for doing something later."¹⁰

The achievement culture of North America determines the success of a person based on wealth, fame, or rank. By this standard, some of the most successful people in America are Hollywood stars, professional athletes and business entrepreneurs. For the rest of Americans, success may be tied to realizing the American dream of owning a home, sending children to college, or securing a good pension. For others it means

¹⁰ Althen and Bennet, *American Ways*, 22.

earning Olympic medals, academic degrees or favorable political polls. For some success means a few minutes of fame on a reality television show. The Kingdom of God culture, however, determines success differently than wealth, fame, or rank. In the Beatitudes, Jesus commends certain character traits that portray success and well-being: the spiritually poor, those hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the meek and merciful, the persecuted, the mourners, and the peacemakers (Mt 5:3-10). All believers, pastors included, need support to personally embrace and publicly promote these counterculture values.

Because of the achievement culture, it is not surprising some CRC congregations value their pastor in terms of work accomplished as well. Some congregants feel being a pastor is an easy, undemanding vocation, a one hour a week job with a couple of meetings or visits thrown in. These congregants expect their pastors to be active: to run meetings, canvas neighborhoods, teach classes, visit the sick, pray at potlucks, and prepare couples for marriage. These actions give the congregation assurance their pastor is earning her keep. Congregations may see the spiritual disciplines their pastor engages in as less valuable, maybe even frivolous. Pastors especially feel pressure to please when it comes from those who are paying their salary.

Pastors too can measure their own lives and ministry in terms of work accomplished. Activity and busyness can make pastors feel like they are serving God, when in fact, as Howard Rice of *Reformed Spirituality* points out, it may be keeping them at arm's length from him.¹¹ Some pastors evaluate their lives according to a worldly view

¹¹ Howard H. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 23.

of success. Either they become prideful in church status, numbers of congregants, and recognition received, or they envy those who possess these external “success” markers.

For many, ambition and achievement connote negative drives or acts. Yet, Scripture praises industrious labor and warns against sloth (Prv 6:6-11). Jesus’ parable of the talents indicates approval and reward for the steward who doubled his master’s investment and reprimand for the one who played it safe (Mt 25:14-30). The apostle Peter exhorts his readers to strive for the lofty goal of holiness because God is holy (1 Pt 1:16). Whether ambition or achievement is healthy or unhealthy, depends on motives. When done for the glory of God, the love of neighbor, or healthy self-love, achievement promotes good. When done for selfish ambition, prideful recognition or personal reward, it causes harm or discord. In the book *Resurrecting Excellence*, authors Jones and Armstrong encourage readers not to reject ambition and achievement altogether, but rather adopt a Christian view of them. In contrast to a worldly understanding, they promote Kingdom and Gospel shaped ambition as well as aspiration to “a life shaped by and patterned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹²

One last, yet significant characteristic of the North American way of life is its saturation with digital devices, most especially personal and portable ones like phones and laptops. Some liken their revolutionary impact on society to the printing press. No one denies they change the daily lives of most people. Phones are no longer simply a communication device and laptops a means of accessing information. Today with these devices, North Americans buy groceries, conduct business and banking, monitor their

¹² Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 2-3.

health, read books and find recipes, entertain themselves, make and break relationships and document the details of their lives. Some CRC pastors find personal spiritual benefits in this technology through devotional apps, reflective blogs, spiritual resources, as well as time management and blocking software. Others maintain valuable friendships through these means.

Digital devices make many tasks and activities of daily life more convenient. They can enrich pastors' spiritual lives too. However, experts are discovering over-reliance on digital devices hinders human thriving. Over-use can bolster one's workaholic tendencies or offer an escape from dealing with professional or personal deficiencies. It can replace intimate, face-to-face relationships with more superficial ones. It can deliver seductive temptations such as pornography and plagiarism. It can limit physical activity needed for overall health. "Although technological innovation has improved the quality of life in many ways, it has a shadow side," says Matthew Kitchen in the *Wall Street Journal*. "Today always-on is the default work setting for most of us."¹³ In his article, Kitchen cites some studies identifying the effects of too much dependence on technology. The studies conclude over-dependence "causes stress, ruins sleep habits, and inhibits one's ability to be creative and engaged during actual office hours."¹⁴ Kitchen readily admits there is no quick fix, except intentionally setting limits.

CRC pastors live and work in a digital world. This fact will not change. For some, these devices open new ways to connect with God and carry on rich friendships. This is

¹³ Matthew Kitchen, "How to Disconnect From 'Always On' Work Culture," *Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2018.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the hope and goal of the toolkit. For others, these devices have a dominating, addictive effect that puts their souls at risk. In order to use digital devices “to the glory of God”, CRC pastors must learn how to set boundaries, secure accountability, undergo honest assessment and safekeep significant face-to-face relationships.

The Christian Reformed Church

Another significant context influencing CRC pastors is the denomination to which they belong. The CRC traces its roots to the Protestant Reformation and the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands. Its actual establishment, however, is October 7, 1857. On this date, a group from the Reformed Church of America (RCA) officially seceded from the assembly and later became known as the Christian Reformed Church.

The CRC is a small Protestant denomination made up of approximately 230,000 members. It includes over 1,000 churches spread across North America. The denomination is bi-national, with approximately 25 percent of its members hailing from Canada and the other 75 percent from the United States.¹⁵ The CRC was founded in West Michigan by Dutch immigrants. Consequently, many of its members still have Dutch ancestry. In order to better reflect the diverse biblical vision found in the book of Revelation, the denomination is making intentional effort to include other ethnic groups. As a result, the CRC’s demographic is changing. Today, some of its pastors and congregants are Korean, Hispanic, Native American, and African American.

¹⁵ “Welcome,” Christian Reformed Church in North America, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome>.

Many CRC pastors and members belong to the middle-class. Today's experts find this group challenging to define because various disciplines emphasize different characteristics. According to the Brookings Institute, all definitions fall into one or more of three main categories: cash (economic resources), credentials (education and occupation), or culture (mindset and values).¹⁶ Theologian Howard Rice touches briefly on all three categories as he describes middle-class, Reformed Christians. As middle-class people, he observes,

[W]e value control, cherish the intellect, fear our emotions, and emphasize what can be done. We also tend to be relatively well off and therefore somewhat satisfied with our lives.... Middleclass people are busy people and afraid of empty time and idleness.... So too, middle-class people, especially men, have valued the mind and its ability to control and to bring order to situations, and have been suspicious of their own feelings.¹⁷

Taken together, Rice believes these characteristics explain why Reformed Christians often resist spirituality. The values of the spiritual life, he says, oppose many conventional beliefs and behaviors. It requires Christians to let go of control and respect emotions. Moreover, the spiritual life emphasizes the value of being as well as doing. The spiritual life attends to the deep longings of the heart. A satisfied life, he contends, may obscure these longings as well as awareness of the Holy Spirit's activity.

The theology of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition encapsulate the beliefs of the CRC. As such, the denomination affirms three ecumenical creeds: The Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed. Additionally, it confirms three Reformed

¹⁶ Richard V. Reeves, Katherine Guyot, and Eleanor Krause, "Defining the Middle Class: cash, credentials, or culture?," Brookings Institution, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/defining-the-middle-class-cash-credentials-or-culture/>

¹⁷ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 48-49.

confessions: the Belgic Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism and The Canons of Dort. These confessions highlight the overarching themes of God's sovereignty, his covenant and his Kingdom. Although believed subordinate to Scripture, the creeds and confessions retain a strong influence on the denomination. The CRC considers them a significant means of its identity and unity, as well as the standard for Scripture interpretation. In recent history, the CRC supplemented these creeds and confessions with two contemporary confessions: Our World Belongs to God and Confession of Belhar. They deem these important, but not as weighty as the historical ones. Because theological correctness is valued in the CRC, all of those holding special offices of the church, pastors especially, are required to sign a covenant promising to defend and promote the Reformed doctrines faithfully, conforming "preaching, teaching, writing, serving and living to them."¹⁸

The CRC promotes covenant theology and its implied practices. It believes covenant is at the heart of Christian life and growth. It thinks healthy spiritual development and maturity are best nurtured and maintained in community; the community of the Trinity and the community of believers. Therefore, promises to God and one another remain the centerpiece of its liturgical forms such as baptism, profession of faith, and ordination of ministers of the word. God's gifts his people with growth and maturity as they live responsibly and faithfully towards one another and participate in God-given means of grace, especially Word, sacraments and discipline.¹⁹

¹⁸ Peter Borgdorff, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government: 2015 Revision*, "Covenant for Officebearers" (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Reformed Church, 2016), 28-29.

¹⁹ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Canons of Dort," Third/Fourth Points, Art. 17.

As is fitting for a denomination rooted in Calvinism, the CRC devotes itself to a wholistic world-and-life view. The Reformed tradition insists on God’s sovereignty over all spheres of life. It contends life cannot be divided into parts: good and evil, spirit and flesh, sacred and secular, nature and grace. CRC members frequently quote Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch pastor, theologian and politician saying, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”²⁰ In order to teach this grand, all-encompassing world-and-life-view to its children, the CRC developed their own faith-based schools, colleges, and seminary.

Moreover, the Reformed tradition asserts only a wholistic response to God is appropriate, a response that integrates head, heart, and hands. A CRC booklet explains three main emphases within this tradition: doctrinalist (head), pietist (heart) and transformationalist (hands). All three must be engaged for a mature Christian life, flourishing community, and healthy ministry. Believers need a sturdy belief framework based on Scripture and theology, an experiential relationship with God in everyday life, and an active engagement with culture. When one of these approaches dominates, it has a tendency “toward pride and an uncharitable devaluing of the other two emphases.”²¹ Despite this wholistic declaration, head knowledge tends to dominate CRC culture.

²⁰ This quote originally came from Kuyper’s 1880 inaugural lecture at the Free University of Amsterdam.

²¹ “What It Means to Be Reformed,” Christian Reformed Church in North America, 46, accessed November 7, 2018, https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/what_it_means_to_be_reformed.pdf.

The CRC believes its pastors should be biblically, theologically and professionally competent. Because of this, pastors who serve in this denomination must satisfactorily complete a rigorous seminary education emphasizing these three areas. This involves completing a four-year Master of Divinity degree, most often at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS). Only recently, the denomination modified this condition. Most of the required courses include systematic theology, biblical languages, church history, and preaching. Few courses address pastoral care and the spiritual life. This imbalance suggests one of two things: either the CTS faculty assumes their students are spiritually mature, knowing how to care for their own souls or their students learn these skills in practicum experiences outside of seminary. As a result, many CRC pastors lack familiarity with the rich tradition of Reformed spirituality. Furthermore, they lack experiences with the habits and practices necessary for their souls to flourish and persevere throughout the challenges and pressures of ministry. In its recent history, the seminary offers some spiritual formation opportunities to students: a semester course, a January class, and beginning in February 2020, the availability of spiritual directors.

The CRC believes God calls some to be pastors for the building up of his church. This call is confirmed in two ways. Pastors hear an internal call, a personal prompting from God to serve in his Church.²² Additionally, they receive an external call from a church validating the other. The external call is based on biblical requirements specifically named in Scripture or implied including: making a confession of faith, being a member of a CRC church in good standing, possessing the spiritual gifts needed for the

²² Borgdorff, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 25.

task, leading an exemplary life worthy of imitation, and embracing the Reformed tradition.²³ Parish pastors are tasked with the following: to “preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth, train members of the congregation and fellow office bearers, exercise admonition and discipline, see to it that everything is done decently and in order, exercise pastoral care over the congregation, and engage in and promote the work of evangelism and diaconal outreach.”²⁴ It is this specific call, this designation of spiritual leadership that sets the CRC pastor apart from his congregation when it comes to the spiritual life.

By all accounts, the CRC retains high standards and expectations for its pastors. Sometimes these numerous requirements and lofty expectations apply pressure that sabotages a pastor’s first love. By engaging the rich tradition of Christian spiritual practices, pastors may again be drawn into God’s presence of love, life, power, joy, and transformation. Sometimes the responsibilities weigh heavy on pastors. Like Moses in Exodus 18, these pastors would benefit from wise spiritual mentors, like Jethro, who recognize problems, extend encouragement, and offer guidance. They would profit from spiritual practices that encourage communion with and enjoyment of God or help discern whether they are primarily pleasing God or others. Many too would gain from intentional holy friendships with colleagues.

²³ Ibid., 22.

²⁴ Borgdorff, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 56.

Personal Culture

Personal culture significantly influences CRC clergy as well. This comprises both their family life and inner life. Although most CRC pastors are married, some are single, and a small percentage are divorced. Families influence their lives and ministries whether it be their family of origin, their spouse's family, or their own spouse and children. Much like congregations, families also have their own culture: ways of thinking, doing and relating to one another passed down from generation to generation. According to Edwin Friedman in his book *Generation to Generation*, some of these characteristics foster more life-giving habits than others. A pastor, he believes, benefits considerably from prayerful reflection on family life, so unhealthy patterns can be changed, and good ones strengthened.

Pastors' spouses in the CRC are as varied as the pastors themselves: old, middle aged or young; female or male; introvert or extrovert; familiar with the CRC or not; a part of the dominant North American culture or part of a minority one; spiritually mature or young in faith; healthy or sick. Some spouses feel called to a traditional ministry role as a pastor's spouse, while others feel called to their own professional life or work away from the church. Some spouses are ordained and share a co-pastorate with their wife or husband. Some consider the role of pastor's spouse most rewarding, while others find it challenging and frustrating.²⁵ Some spouses feel well supported by their churches and others unfairly scrutinized. Some feel free to contribute as other members, while other

²⁵ A common frustration for some pastor's spouses is the BOGO expectation ("Buy one, get one" or "2-for-1" special"). This means a church expects the spouse to contribute in much the same way as the pastor, yet without pay. Another common challenge is life in a "fishbowl", meaning one's life is open for all to see and often examined with a double standard.

spouses feel unwanted pressure to meet congregational expectations. Whatever their background, personalities or gender; how ever they view the calling; no matter what challenges they face, their lives significantly intersect and impact the pastor’s life and ministry for good or ill. Many spouses provide the best support a pastor has. Many of them offer rich friendship, prayer support, helpful and timely critique. Yet, some spouses add to a pastor’s already weighty load and pressure.

Healthy clergy marriages are important to quality of life, ministry effectiveness and spiritual integrity. Married CRC ministers take two vows before God and his people: vows to feed and care for Christ’s sheep as well as vows to love, cherish and never forsake their spouse. Pastors with children additionally vow to create a home where children come to know, love and serve God. The vows to feed God’s sheep as well as cherish spouse and children often seem to conflict. Consequently, one of two things often happen: either the pastor becomes overwhelmed with obligations and burns out or they prioritize the church over spouse and children destabilizing their marriage and home life. Because of this pressure, the CRC published a booklet called “Marriage and Ministry” to raise awareness of this challenge and encourage greater responsibility on the part of church councils to amend this. The booklet helps councils work with pastor couples to set boundaries, support Sabbath keeping and time off, and encourage meaningful relationships outside of the church.²⁶ For unmarried pastors, developing and sustaining intimate friendships for support, guidance and accountability is crucial.

²⁶ Sustaining Pastoral Excellence in the CRCNA, “Marriage and Ministry,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Sustaining Pastoral Excellence in the CRCNA, 2008).

The health of a pastor's own soul is of utmost importance to abundant living and faithfully fulfilling the pastoral vocation. Because of sin, like all human beings, pastors experience opposing spiritual powers deep within. An ancient saying illustrates these two interior forces, "The heart is but a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and there are also lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. But there too is God, the angels, the life and the Kingdom, the light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace—all things are there."²⁷ Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, calls the soul sick because of its two conflicting wills. Stamped with God's image, he says, the higher will longs for the good, the excellent, the beautiful. Yet, cursed by sin, the lower will prefers temporal pleasures and weighs down the higher will so it cannot rise entirely to the truth and the good for which it was made.²⁸ Because of these competing forces, pastors, like their parishioners, wrestle with the good they want to do and the evil they keep doing (Rom 7). They struggle with the false self that seeks identity and fulfillment outside the radius of God's will and their true self hidden in the love and mercy of God.²⁹ They grapple with their Adam I nature that chases after external success and their Adam II nature that pursues inner moral excellencies such as "charity, love and redemption."³⁰

²⁷ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1996), 125.

²⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner, (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1963), VIII, 9, 177.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1986), 28-29.

³⁰ For more on these two opposing natures and the tension they create, refer to David Brooks' Introduction to *The Road to Character*, xi-xii.

Consequently, the soul needs spiritual strengthening exercises, appropriate armor (Gal 6), and comrades to overcome the forces of darkness and walk steadily in the Spirit.

Pastors wrestle with opposing forces within like everyone else. But, they also confront temptations peculiar to their profession. Henry Nouwen, Catholic priest and theologian reflects on some of these. He does so by way of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness and his call to Peter to feed his sheep. Nouwen perceives the current ministry context as success oriented, competitive and one that strives for upward mobility. He believes the three seductive temptations Jesus experienced in the desert are the same one's leaders face today: to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful. Nouwen thinks the Christian faith calls ministry leaders to the opposite: irrelevance, servant leadership, and powerlessness.³¹ This set of values goes against human nature. Overcoming them requires a special set of practices. Nouwen believes contemplative prayer (to truly know the heart of God), confession and seeking forgiveness (to be full members of the community), and theological reflection (to think with the mind of Christ) express the main ingredients of effective ministry.³²

As with Nouwen, Eugene Peterson believes pastors face temptations unique to their calling. In his book *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, he explores the nature of the pastoral vocation through the Jonah narrative. He concludes the nature of this work and its highest priority is that of spiritual director. For pastors, enticement comes in the form

³¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1989), 30,53 and 75.

³² See Nouwen's book *In the Name of Jesus*, 38,69, and 86 to better understand these practices.

of being the ever-popular program managers or messiahs.³³ Program managers, he explains, organize, recruit, arrange and motivate. Messiahs, on the other hand, comfort, help and heal. Both make for honorable and rewarding work, but neither are central to the pastoral vocation. He observes North American culture supporting managers and messiahs, but not spiritual directors. To him, being a spiritual director means “Paying attention to God, calling attention to God, being attentive to God in a person or circumstances, or situation. A prerequisite is standing back, doing nothing. It opens a quiet eye of adoration. It releases the energetic wonder of faith. It notices the Invisibilities in and beneath and around the Visibilities. It listens for the Silences between the spoken Sounds.”³⁴ Peterson perceives pastoral work as fundamentally a creative work of the Holy Spirit. It means helping people out of the mess of their sins to lives well-ordered in peace and righteousness. When a pastor’s priorities shift from the most important responsibility, they and their congregations lose out.

CRC pastors live and work in several significant ministry contexts, each of them having a unique impact on them. They live in North America where self-reliance and achievement are highly valued, and where digital devices are omnipresent. They serve in the Christian Reformed Church denomination which highly values Scripture, theological correctness, and a wholistic world-and-life view. In general, the denomination undervalues personal spiritual experience and practices as well as familiarity with its rich Reformed spiritual tradition. Moreover, each pastor has a unique family culture. Each has

³³ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 178-182.

³⁴ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 181.

their own struggles within as well as peculiar temptations to the pastoral calling.

Understanding these various ministry contexts and their influence on pastors is necessary for shaping a relevant toolkit to support their spiritual vitality.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW OF VITAL RESOURCES

To reflect theologically on the doctoral project's thesis, this chapter explores seven significant literary sources addressing the spiritual life, health, and formation of clergy. Each source falls into one of three categories. Each category examines a classic text as well as one or two contemporary resources. The first three sources prove indispensable for thinking theologically about the spiritual life in the Reformed Tradition: *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life* by John Calvin, *The Spiritual Life* by Evelyn Underhill and *Reformed Spirituality* by Howard Rice. The next two sources illustrate the distinct responsibilities and challenges of the pastoral life: *The Reformed Pastor* by Richard Baxter and *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* by Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong. The third and last category of literary sources highlights spiritual practices in the mature Christian life: *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. This second chapter aims to identify the thesis and main argument of each source, then explain its contribution to and limitations regarding the pastor spiritual vitality toolkit.

The Spiritual Life

John Calvin's voice matters to many CRC pastors and the denomination they serve. Calvin's system of thought set forth in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* has been an indispensable resource and treasure.¹ This remains so because the CRC self-identifies as Calvinist. Therefore, the thesis of the *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, a portion of the *Institutes*, requires careful consideration. Calvin begins with this claim, "The law of God contains in itself the dynamic of the new life by which his image is fully restored in us."² Calvin argues Scripture is the Rule of Christian Life. As such, Scripture reveals one key principal by which Christians should live, "Be holy because I am holy." It points to Christ as the way to holiness and its perfect example. Moreover, Scripture makes known God's countless blessings forming the foundation of a code of conduct.

In the next section, Calvin reiterates his thesis. The "Divine Law contains a fitting and well-ordered plan for the regulation of our life." As Teacher, the law exhorts Christians to be living sacrifices. This means transformation by the renewing of the mind in order to do everything with a view to God's glory. Calvin concludes self-denial as the means to these ends. Self-denial includes sobriety, righteousness, and godliness. It seeks God's glory and the profit of others. It leads to calmness and patience in all circumstances. In Scripture, says Calvin, Christ also calls disciples to cross-bearing. This

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), ix.

² John Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 11th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1992), 11.

proves even more difficult than self-denial. Christ, God's firstborn, was not treated indulgently, so neither are his children. According to Calvin, cross bearing holds a "stream of benefits,"³ teaching humility and obedience, producing hope and discipline, and leading to repentance and submission.

Next, Calvin argues Scripture points to heaven as the goal of life. Yet, the human heart seeks its happiness on this earth. Consequently, he exhorts believers to meditate on heaven which is incomparably better than earth. For Calvin, because death precedes a glorious, heavenly body, it should not be feared. Death precedes the Kingdom of peace where God wipes away tears, adorns his people with robes of joy and crowns of victory, and entertains them with infinite delights.

In the final section of the *Golden Booklet*, Calvin addresses the present life and how it should be lived. Christians tend toward two extremes, he claims, licentiousness or abstinence. Yet, the mature Christian life should be lived in moderation. Lastly, in all things, one should be faithful to God's calling in life.

Calvin makes several vital contributions to the toolkit. First, he asserts Scripture as essential for Christlike renewal and maturity. Second, he insists Christ is the way and perfect example of holiness. Therefore, the toolkit must point pastors toward Scripture and Christ. Third, the gospel cannot be grasped by reason alone. It can only be understood, he claims, when it possesses the whole soul by means of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he contends "our religion will be unprofitable, if it does not change our

³ Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 49.

heart, pervade our manners and transform us into new creatures.”⁴ This affirms pastors should pursue a wholistic spirituality (i.e. head, heart, and hands) to be mature. A fourth significant contribution is Calvin’s clear distrust of human nature. He maintains “a world of vices”⁵ is hidden in the soul. Thus, “nothing is more difficult than to forsake all carnal thoughts, to subdue and renounce our false appetites, and to devote ourselves to God and our brethren, and to live the life of angels in a world of corruption.”⁶ This suggests pastors urgently need others to help fight against this nature. The toolkit should encourage pastors to find trustworthy spiritual companions.

This resource serves the toolkit by providing the foundation of the spiritual life. The *Golden Booklet* proposes rhythms and practices such as meditation, imitation, accountability, and a rule for life. It does not, however, give guidance how to do these things. Calvin assumes his audience is schooled in these. Furthermore, it does not identify the kinds of relationships needed in the soul’s struggle against the powerful sin nature.

A second resource especially valued in this ministry project is *The Spiritual Life* by Evelyn Underhill. This resource originated outside the Reformed tradition and remains mostly unfamiliar to many in the CRC, likely due to her Anglo-Catholic roots and writings in mysticism. The book compiles four radio broadcasts she delivered in the early twentieth century on prayer. In them, Underhill defines the spiritual life, addresses common questions related to it, then recommends various spiritual resources for

⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵ Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 24.

⁶ Ibid., 26.

additional reading. “The spiritual life,” she contends, “is simply a life in which all we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His will.”⁷ She claims this life is available to ordinary people and compatible with the common life. She believes spirituality is often misunderstood to mean something only for the spiritually elite or cultivating one’s personal interior life. She considers spiritual reality too grand for limited minds, yet the greatest reality and true place where life is lived.⁸

Next, she argues human beings are essentially spiritual as well as natural beings. Therefore, to live life fully as humans, they must live an amphibious life, corresponding both to the visible environment and the invisible one. Most of human life, she contends, is condensed into three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do. Living this way causes unending restlessness. In contrast, the verb to BE is the essence of the spiritual life.

Based on a seventeenth century teacher, Cardinal de Berulle, Underhill espouses three core ingredients to developing the spiritual life: adoration, communion and co-operation. She describes the practice of adoration as “awestruck delight in the splendour and beauty of God, the action of God and Being of God.”⁹ She explains prayer as one’s whole life toward God. To her, it means “the humble correspondence of the human spirit with the Sum of all Perfection, the Fountain of Life.”¹⁰ The final core ingredient for developing the spiritual life is cooperation with God. Humans are agents of the Creative

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 3rd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1955), 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

Spirit sent to do God's will in the needy world. It involves "an eager willingness, she says, "to take our small place in the vast operations of His Spirit, instead of trying to run a pokey little business on our own."¹¹ Though costly, cooperation with the Spirit's action results in tranquility, gentleness and strength. In the last portion of the book, Underhill addresses legitimate difficulties and questions regarding the spiritual life as well as recommends important books on the subject.

Underhill's book contributes in several significant ways to the toolkit. First, she skillfully merges the role of head, heart, and hands in the spiritual life. This holistic understanding connects well with one of the project's goals to help the CRC live more faithfully into what she professes. Second, Underhill provides clear definitions for the spiritual life, though by her own admission imperfect ones. One reason the CRC resists spirituality is its ambiguity. In this regard, Underhill gives both a compelling definition of the spiritual life and an explanation of three essential ways for developing it. Her writing inspires and corresponds well with a Reformed view but may be limited to recommended reading in the toolkit.

A third significant, contemporary source to aid theological thinking about the spiritual life is the book *Reformed Spirituality* by Howard L. Rice. The late Rice, a member of the Reformed tradition, served as chaplain and Professor of Ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary in the latter twentieth century. Rice claims the Reformed tradition contains a very rich spiritual heritage to share, although remaining mostly

¹¹ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 79.

unfamiliar to or undervalued by many of its members.¹² In the introduction Rice argues a healthy, Reformed spirituality exists. Yet, a “deeply embedded denominational resistance” keeps it suppressed. Without it, Reformed Christians are impoverished and weakened in their Christian lives. Rice believes recovering the tradition would edify the whole Church, not only Reformed Christians.¹³ He concludes the introduction by identifying influential Reformed sources from the sixteenth century through the twentieth.

In chapter one, Rice argues if Christians believe God is love, then they must also believe God continually seeks relationship with human beings. God connects in various ways with his people depending on temperament and life situation: through conversion, ecstatic experiences, visions and voices, intuition, transcendence and incarnation.¹⁴ Though experiences vary widely from Christian to Christian, he maintains, healthy encounters share some common characteristics.

In chapter two, Rice identifies both problems and possibilities in the Reformed tradition. First, he defines spirituality, then the more traditional concept of piety as “the pattern by which we shape our lives before God in grateful obedience to what God has done for us.”¹⁵ Next, he explains five embedded causes of Reformed resistance to spirituality: class bias, rejection of works righteousness, rejection of individualism, rejection of sentimentality and suspicion of otherworldliness. Rice believes recovering

¹² Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 10.

¹³ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

Calvin's essential qualities of authentic Reformed piety (righteousness, frugality, and holiness) will curb this resistance.

Having identified problems and possibilities in chapters three through six, Rice instructs his readers in four traditional and personal means of grace: prayer, the use of Scripture, spiritual guidance, and discipleship in the world. In the final chapter, Rice reminds his readers the Christian life is not exempt from hardship. The cross remains its central metaphor. Because of the ongoing struggle, public means of grace are also necessary: worship, sacraments, fellowship, giving, and Sabbath keeping. Exercising both public and private means of grace combine for a truly Reformed spirituality.

In his book, Rice elaborates on reasons why Reformed spirituality has been and continues to be resisted. This proves one of his most important contributions to the toolkit project. This resistance suggests at least two things. First, the pastors, for whom the toolkit is aimed, may be unfamiliar with their own spiritual tradition and its implied practices. Therefore, step-by-step guidance will be necessary, especially for private practices. Secondly, the toolkit may not be received enthusiastically by some pastors or the institutions training them; therefore, efforts to change the CRC culture will be needed. Another significant contribution of the book is the step-by-step guidance Rice gives for devotional reading in the Reformed tradition. This excellent guide could be used in the toolkit. At least one more contribution needs mentioning. Rice summarizes an authentic Reformed piety characterized by balance: balance of corporate and private, experience and thought, joyful acceptance of God's good creation and responsible stewardship,

desire for inner relationship with God as well as outer service to others. This summary could help pastors achieve balance when creating their personal rule of life.

Rice's book makes many great contributions yet is somewhat limited as concerns instruction in group guidance. The toolkit committee believes peer groups have the potential for reaching the largest number of pastors. Furthermore, peer groups could provide the strength, encouragement, accountability and spiritual nurture many pastors long for. Rice identifies characteristics of group guidance but does not give step-by-step training for it.

The Pastoral Life

The second category of primary sources highlights the importance of clergy spiritual wellbeing and its nature, challenges, and priorities. Richard Baxter, a seventeenth century Puritan pastor, wrote *The Reformed Pastor* in order to awaken his ministerial colleagues to the duties of their vocation. In this classic work, he asks, "How can we more effectually further a reformation...than by endeavoring the reforming of the leaders of the Church?"¹⁶ In his treatise, Baxter argues the minister's first duty is oversight of himself and secondly, oversight and feeding of the flock. He reasons this from the Apostle Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."¹⁷

¹⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1956), 15-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

In chapter one, Baxter sets forth the nature and motives of personal oversight. A pastor should “take heed” to certain things: first, the work of grace be thoroughly wrought in his own soul, lest he perish; second, he preaches to himself before preaching to the people since his spiritual life correlates with theirs; third, his example does not contradict his doctrine, lest he become a stumbling block; and fourth, he continually grows in holy skills, lest he become unfit for the vocation. Next, Baxter identifies numerous reasons for pastors to be on guard. Take heed, he warns, because pastors share the same need for salvation as everyone else. They share the same depraved nature as well and the enemy targets them specially. They cannot sin without many eyes observing. Greater learning makes their sins worse. They meet with greater temptations given the weightiness of ministry. They bear more responsibility for God’s honor. Finally, the success of a pastor’s labors depends on making God their chief end and doing all for his honor.

Only after explaining what it means to “take heed” of oneself, does Baxter expound on what it means to “take heed” of the flock. It means, he writes, laboring for the conversion of the unconverted, giving advice to inquirers, studying to build up those already converted, carefully overseeing families, diligently visiting the sick, faithfully admonishing offenders and carefully exercising church discipline. Not only the nature of the oversight is imperative, but also the way it is carried out. Pastors should do their tasks, he urges, with prudence and order. Additionally, he emphasizes how pastors must stress only the most important and necessary Christian truths with plainness and simplicity. Baxter also encourages such attributes like humility, eagerness and zeal,

tender love for the people, and reverence. He believes ministry ought to be done with expectations of success, with dependence on Christ, and in unity with other ministers. Lastly, he reminds ministers of the motives driving this work and its manner of delivery: their relationship to the flock as overseers, the Holy Spirit, the dignity of the Church, the price of Christ's blood. Baxter concludes the treatise with a call to his "dear brethren" to confess their pride for not giving themselves wholeheartedly to the work and for undervaluing the unity of the Church.

One of the strengths of Baxter's treatise is it is written by a pastor for pastors. He knows firsthand the privilege and weightiness of the calling as well as its temptations and challenges. The priority of oversight of oneself first seems especially wise and fitting for pastors of any generation. Many pastors, including some CRC pastors, are slaves to the tyranny of the urgent and fail to attend to themselves except when great problems surface. Baxter's treatise verifies the need and urgency of the toolkit to support and guide CRC pastors regarding their spiritual well-being. It is limited by not providing a guide per se in prayer, meditation, or overcoming sin.

A second source warranting special attention for clergy spiritual well-being is *Resurrecting Excellence* by Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong. These two authors aim to shape faithful Christian ministers by inviting them to embrace a theology of excellence. The world, according to Jones and Armstrong, often measures excellence by competition and achievement. They, however, argue the Christian understanding of excellence differs significantly. Christian excellence means having a Kingdom shaped

ambition for the gospel as well as “being resurrected by and to the excellence in Christ”¹⁸ Christian excellence measures success by “fidelity to the crucified and risen Christ.”¹⁹ Jones and Armstrong believe the book of Philippians best characterizes this theology of excellence: patterning thinking, feeling and acting after Christ; developing together as community, not simply individuals; and conforming ministry to Christ’s pattern of dying and rising. In chapter two, the authors suggest resurrecting excellence in ministry means faithfully working in the crucial intersections of life such as strength and weakness, community and solitude, church and world, etc. Resurrecting excellence in discipleship means developing holy friendships with God and members of the Christian community. Holy friendships are crucial, they say, for shaping faithful discipleship as well as addressing clergy loneliness and isolation.

After describing what resurrecting excellence means in general terms through ministry and discipleship, the authors now turn to their primary focus, the pastoral vocation. Jones and Armstrong argue resurrecting excellence means adopting a three-dimensional vision for the pastoral vocation based on calling, profession and office. Resurrecting clergy excellence means implementing the strengths of each model: attentiveness in the spiritual life; wise, deep, practical preaching and teaching; along with faithful administration. Next, they argue resurrecting excellence means something more than developing a “learned” clergy. Instead they advocate for a “learning” clergy nurturing spiritual formation over a lifetime, a pastoral and ecclesial imagination as well

¹⁸ Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

as the art of improvisational leadership. The authors conclude by identifying what they believe are treasures needed to sustain a ministry of excellence. In addition to holy friendships, these treasures consist of formative resources (Scripture, theology and Christian practices), imaginative (the arts), institutional (organizations supporting clergy mental, physical and spiritual health) and economic (appropriate financial and material compensation).

This source is critical to the toolkit in several ways. First, the authors set the pastoral vocation in the context of the discipleship vocation. Discipleship, they say, means learning to desire and love God truly and faithfully. This involves cultivating habits and dispositions until they become second nature. This supports the necessity of the spiritual practices for pastors. Next, the authors make an important distinction between a learned clergy (especially characteristic of Protestant denominations, including the CRC) and a learning clergy. By this they mean,

learning is a lifelong vocation: one that begins with learning to feel and think and act as disciples of Jesus Christ, that continues through formal educative formation to become a pastor, and then continues with learning throughout the pastoral ministry as one preaches, celebrates the sacraments, leads and equips others to learn and grow in their own vocations as disciples. Our image depends on the recognition that “learning” involves the shaping of our hearts as well as our minds and hands and feet, the cultivation of a way of life that is affective, cognitive, disciplined, and integrally connected to action.²⁰

This affirms the need for ongoing and wholistic clergy spiritual formation. Finally, the book emphasizes the crucial role of holy friendships for conforming to the image of Christ as well as carrying out a ministry of excellence. Holy friendships also address

²⁰ Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 112-113.

challenges of clergy isolation and loneliness. This emphasis on holy friendships gives shape and priority to the toolkit.

Spiritual Practices

The third category of primary sources explores the role of Christian community and spiritual practices for clergy spiritual well-being. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic work, *Life Together*, addresses both. In Chapter One Bonhoeffer argues that Christian community differs from all other kinds of community because it is a Divine reality ordained by God, gathered and sustained in and through Jesus Christ, and governed by Spirit and Word. This means, according to Bonhoeffer, "A Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ...that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ...that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity."²¹

Next, Bonhoeffer explains what common life looks like under the Word. In the morning, the community gathers for devotions including Scripture reading, hymn singing and praying together. After first sharing in this eternal bread, the community then shares earthly bread. Through this table fellowship, the community acknowledges God as giver of all gifts as well as the gift itself. After eating together, work commences and fills most of the day. Work is punctuated by a noonday meal which serves for fellowship and rest. When work ceases, the community gathers around an evening meal. The day closes with worship.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1954), 21.

Having shown life together, he now argues the corresponding need for a day alone. Both are necessary in a mature Christian life and each benefits the other. Alone time should be marked by silence and solitude. Its purpose serves for “waiting for God’s Word and coming from God’s Word with a blessing.”²² The solitary day involves practices of meditation, prayer and intercession. When a pastor meditates on Scripture, he does not ask “how he is going to preach or teach on this text, but what it is saying quite directly to him.”²³ When he prays, he asks for “clarification of [the] day, for preservation from sin, for growth in sanctification, for faithfulness and strength for our work.” When he intercedes, an indispensable responsibility, he brings “definite persons and definite difficulties and therefore definite petitions”²⁴ into the presence of God under the cross to receive mercy.

In addition to time alone and time together, Bonhoeffer explains life together under the Word requires certain responsibilities toward one another. The first two ministries guard against destructive attitudes of greatness: the ministry of holding one’s tongue and ministry of meekness. The next five ministries aim to promote authentic love within the community: listening, active helpfulness, bearing one another’s burdens, proclaiming the Word, and authority through faithful service. Bonhoeffer concludes the book by identifying the great benefits resulting from confessing sin to a brother or sister

²² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

and proclaiming the Lord's Supper as the supreme illustration of union with God and one another.

Bonhoeffer believed seminarians needed first-hand experience living in Christian community shaped by the Word. He considered this key to Church renewal. Bonhoeffer's seminary community might possibly be replicated during seminary years, but not for CRC pastors serving individual churches in North America. This limits its usefulness especially as regards his day with others. However, many of his theological insights prove foundational for the toolkit such as: pastors need intentional community and they need time alone to hear God's Word addressed personally to them.

A final vital source for this ministry project is Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. It differs from the other five resources in content and purpose. The first five propose a thesis about the spiritual or pastoral life, then defend it with arguments. These resources answer the questions "what" and "why" regarding the spiritual life. In contrast, Calhoun's book answers the question "how." In the introduction, she reveals her thesis. Spiritual disciplines, she contends, exist to open people to God. People desire to experience God's loving presence, especially during troubled times. Amid their busy, tired, hurting lives, Jesus makes an offer. He invites them to walk and work with him, to learn the unforced rhythms of grace and to live freely and lightly. Desiring to experience God, she argues, evidence the divine already at work within. As his ministry shows, Jesus helped people clarify their deepest desires by asking, "What do you want me to do for you?" Then, he presses them to consider the responsibility which accompanies wellness. Furthermore, Jesus gave them something to

do. Following his example, the Church connected desire and discipline as well. Christians in each age, found ways to open their lives to God despite challenges in their context. By keeping company with Jesus, transformation comes about.

Having made her case for connecting desire and discipline, Calhoun divides sixty-three Christian practices into seven distinct categories. These categories coincide with the anacronym WORSHIP: Worship, Open Myself to God, Relinquish the False Self, Share My Life with Others, Hear God’s Word, Incarnate the Love of Christ, and Pray.²⁵ For Calhoun, worship is the goal of spiritual disciplines. “In worship,” she says, “we live into the reality that the first and best thing in life is nothing less than a transforming relationship with the God who made us.”²⁶ Calhoun created a chart for each of these sixty-three practices. The charts name the desire behind the practice. They offer a brief definition of the discipline. Next, they pinpoint several Scripture verses encouraging or illustrating the practice. Then, they identify what the practice consists of and finally, what fruit one gains through it. Additionally, Calhoun proposes reflection questions, exercises and supplementary resources for each practice. She includes ten appendices to help practitioners make a spiritual health plan, use the handbook in congregations or small groups, and understand seasons of transformation and growth.

For purposes of the toolkit, Calhoun’s handbook is the most practical resource identified in this chapter. For pastors unacquainted with spiritual practices, the step-by-step guidance is crucial. Particularly useful, Calhoun includes the five spiritual practices

²⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

the committee deems vital for pastors: Silence and Solitude, Meditation, Sabbath Keeping, Prayer, and Rule for Life. Additionally, the handbook identifies exercises fitting for a culture saturated with digital devices. She recommends slowing, unplugging and centering prayer for those living within a fast-paced, always on, hectic lifestyle. As well, Calhoun explains how to follow desire to a discipline, along with encouraging experimentation and promoting community. All these further the goals behind the toolkit. The book may have one drawback. The fact that it identifies and explains sixty-three practices, may seem overwhelming to some pastors. Calhoun does, however, give clear guidance how to choose a practice that connects with one's desire.

CHAPTER 3:
THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

The Reformed tradition views the spiritual life through the panoramic lens of creation, fall and new creation. Scripture begins with the original creation account. It reveals life's origins and the climax of God's creative work. It describes humankind's glorious identity, purpose and destiny. But then, the story takes a terrible turn. Genesis 3 explains the tragic and deadly consequences of Adam and Eve's fall into sin and its effect on all humanity. Most of the Bible, though, recounts God's unfolding plan of redemption through Jesus Christ and his strategy of making all things new through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This chapter begins with creational themes such creatureliness and personhood, image of God, the relational soul and meaning of Sabbath. It continues with the Fall and its enormous cost for humanity, including the nature of sin, total depravity and inability, as well as lifelong enemies of humankind. Finally, it explores the new creation, describing the roles of the Holy Spirit, the Word, the Church and God-given means of grace. For a deeper understanding of the spiritual life, this chapter draws from Scripture, Reformed theology and broader Christian thought.

Creation and Origin of Life

Several foundational truths pertaining to the spiritual life stand out in the creation account. First, God creates and sustains human life. Second, God fashions humans in his own image. Third, God forms a human companion. Lastly, God establishes Sabbath rest. The first two chapters of Genesis testify to the foundational truth God creates life. “The Lord God fashioned the human, hummus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature.”¹ This significant verse suggests at least two things. First, God’s breath stimulates vitality and animation in humans. Second, God’s breath breathed into humans, in contrast to all other living things, implies his intention for special, intimate relationship.

Additionally, these first chapters of Genesis reveal God not only as creator, but benevolent sustainer of life as well. In the beginning, God designed and planted the perfect garden for Adam and Eve’s home. In and through the garden, God provided for their every need and longing. It contained safety, beauty, freedom, nourishment, and fulfilling work. There too Adam and Eve experienced harmonious relations with each other and communion with God. The garden represents life as God intended it to be. It depicts joyful, abundant life.

Other places in Scripture echo this profound truth of God’s benevolent sustenance of humankind. The Psalmist sings exuberantly,

¹ This Hebrew translation by Robert Alter in *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses*, vol. 1 uses the generic term “human” over the NIV word choice “man”. In this instance, the word human is more accurate and not automatically suggesting maleness.

How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures... These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth (Ps 104:24, 27-30).

Correspondingly, the New Testament affirms this truth of God as sustainer. When Paul witnesses to the Athenians, he proclaims God as the one who “gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25) and as the one “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

These passages emphasize complete human dependence on God for life. Yet, other passages in Scripture seem to suggest the opposite. They highlight human choice and a kind of independence from God. Already in the garden, Adam and Eve are presented with a choice, obeying God’s command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or not obeying (Gn 2:15). Reformed theologian Anthony Hoekema explains this paradox in his book *Created in God’s Image*. He argues God’s design of humankind includes both their creatureliness (dependence) and their personhood (independence). As creatures, they absolutely depend on God for life. Yet, as persons they have relative independence, making choices and living with their consequences. To illustrate, he explains, “To be a creature means I cannot move a finger or utter a word apart from God; to be a person means that when my fingers are moved, I move them, and that when words are uttered by my lips, I utter them. To be creatures means that God is the potter and we are the clay...to be persons means that we are the ones who fashion our

lives by our own decisions.”² Furthermore, Hoekema believes the Reformed tradition emphasizes human creatureliness over personhood. Yet, he thinks the truths together best express God’s unique creation of human beings. This belief takes on special significance in connection with sanctification. Human beings are completely dependent on God for new life and transformation, yet they must also choose to work out their salvation (Phil 2:12) and train to be godly (1 Tm 4:7).

The first chapter of Genesis reveals a second foundational truth. Triune God creates humans in his image. No other living creature received this honored status, the endowed excellencies, or the noble calling given to human beings. As the Psalmist meditates on this distinctiveness, he exclaims with wonder and praise, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet” (Ps 8:4-6).

Scripture points to Jesus Christ as the perfect image of God. God was pleased “to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Col 1:19). All his fullness, according to Calvin, means his entire self which includes his righteousness, goodness, wisdom, and power. Jesus portrays God to the world and shows humanity what it means to be authentically human and perfectly good. Human beings are predestined, declares the Catholic Catechism, “to reproduce the image of God’s Son made man...so that Christ shall be the

² Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 6.

firstborn of a multitude of brothers and sisters.”³ As God, Jesus is the way to holiness. As a human being, he is the perfect example and most worthy of imitation.⁴

Throughout history, Christian theologians and philosophers debated over what the image of God means. They asked themselves what particularly distinguishes humans from all other creatures. Augustine believed it to be a God-shaped vacuum in the soul, producing restlessness till finding rest in God alone. Aquinas thought the image of God most conspicuous in human intellect. Calvin held that God’s image comprised true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Dutch theologian Berkhouwer concluded the image of God in humans was their inescapable relatedness to God and others. CRC philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff understands the image of God as the unique human responsibility of obedient action to God which no other living being holds.

The Reformed confessions incorporate many of these views regarding the image of God. Together, they recognize image of God as something humans possess and something they do. It includes a special relationship with God and a unique destiny. The Canons of Dordt explain God’s image in terms of humankind’s original nature. Originally, he was “furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy.”⁵ The Heidelberg Catechism

³ United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. promulgated by Pope John Paul II (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), 96.

⁴ Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 14-15.

⁵CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Canons of Dort,” Third/Fourth Points, Art. 1.

expands this concept to include human purpose, relationship and destiny. “God created them good and in his own image, that is in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might truly know God their creator, love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory.”⁶ The Westminster, with profound simplicity, points to God’s ultimate and unique purpose of humankind as glorifying him and enjoying him forever.

A third foundational truth is God’s purposeful formation of human companionship for sustenance and pleasure. God did not create humans as solitary beings declares the Catholic Catechism.⁷ In Genesis 2, God pronounces, “It is not good for the human to be alone. I shall make him a sustainer beside him.”⁸ The Hebrew word *ezer* is often translated as helpmate or helper. Bible translator, Robert Alter, however, believes that concept too weak and auxiliary. Instead he chooses the word sustainer to connote active intervention on behalf of someone. His word choice results from the Hebrew *ezer* mainly used in military contexts elsewhere in Scripture. Additionally, when Adam saw Eve for the first time, he exclaimed with joyful delight, “Finally! Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.”⁹ Like Adam, Eve was a soulful being, making a perfect soulmate and partner.

⁶ Ibid., “The Heidelberg Catechism,” LD 3, Q&A 6.

⁷ US Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 96.

⁸ See commentary notes on this verse in Robert Alter’s *The Hebrew Bible*, 14.

⁹ This translation comes from Peterson’s *The Message*.

From now on the couple would reflect God's image together, having received God's loving benediction and honored commission as the world's caretaker's and rulers. Adam and Eve formed the first human communion and partnership. They delighted in the others sameness, yet with complementary differences. They shared the gifts of God in the garden as well as responsibility for each other and the world God made. Carolyn Custis James calls this partnership the Blessed Alliance and describes God's purpose for it in her book *Lost Women of the Bible*,

God was preparing to launch the most ambitious enterprise imaginable. The potential for overload, burnout, discouragement, and unbelief was enormous, worse considering the fierce opposition the Enemy was about to mount. Adam couldn't fight these battles alone. So God created the *ezer* as the man's staunchest ally in the life of faith and in fulfilling the Cultural Mandate. Together they exercised dominion and labored to advance God's Kingdom in their own hearts and on earth.¹⁰

A fourth foundational truth introduced in the creation account is God's establishment of Sabbath. God creates the earth and everything in it in six days. God proclaims the seventh day a day of rest. Commentators agree this does not mean that God was tired. Next, God blesses the Sabbath and sets it apart as holy. This shows God differentiating not only human creatures, but time as well. The Sabbath represents holy or eternal time. It signifies a ceasing of creative work and delight in the fruits of labor.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, renowned Jewish theologian and author of *The Sabbath*, argues Sabbath demonstrates the divine goal and conclusion of life. It not only represents the climax of each week, but more importantly, the climax of living:

¹⁰ Carolyn Custis James, *Lost Women of the Bible: Finding Strength and Significance through their Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005), 36.

humankind at home with the divine and approaching the divine likeness. The Sabbath completes the other six days and foreshadows paradise. As such, its nature is *menuha*. Heschel points to the opening verses of Psalm 23 as capturing the meaning of this concept best: “tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose.”¹¹ Elsewhere Heschel explains *menuha* as harmony, joy and delight. For the Jew, Sabbath observance is not a day off for the sake of working more efficiently the other six days. More significantly, Sabbath illustrates the glorious and noble identity, purpose and destiny of humankind.

Two confessions explain a Reformed view of Sabbath. The Heidelberg Catechism, more familiar to CRC pastors, teaches that God’s will for Sabbath highlights two things: first, a joyful day of rest with regular worship and second, rest from sin and openness to the Spirit which reflects the eternal Sabbath.¹² The Westminster’s teaching highlights the rhythm, one whole day in seven, and the designated purpose for public and private worship. According to this confession, Sabbath breaking involves omission of these responsibilities and commission of sinful or unnecessary thoughts, words, work and recreation.¹³

Scripture shows the grand design and joyful purpose of Sabbath often getting lost, either by going one’s own way (Is 58:13) or by setting burdensome restrictions (Mk 2:27). Some contemporary theologians call God’s people back to this foundational

¹¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 23.

¹² CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” LD 38, Q&A 103.

¹³ CRC Publications, *The Heidelberg Catechism Westminster Shorter*, “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” Q&A 60-61.

practice. In her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn recaptures a more wholistic meaning as God intended. She summarizes Sabbath keeping as the weekly, intentional habit of ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting. Practicing Sabbath, she explains, means ceasing not only from ordinary work, but ceasing from demeaning cultural values as well. It involves resting every aspect of the soul: spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social. It includes trusting God's sovereignty and embracing Kingdom values. Finally, it implies feasting on things that bring joy and remembrance of the Christian's eschatological hope. "When the Sabbath is finally fulfilled," she concludes, "our divisions and weaknesses will *cease* forever. We will *rest* eternally in God's grace and love. We will *embrace* his Kingdom and sovereignty ultimately and perfectly. We will *feast* unceasingly in his presence."¹⁴ From personal experience, Dawn shares Sabbath fruit including renewed energy, refreshment, healing and wholeness. Additionally, it supplies new grace to face problems, a renewed sense of God's presence, time for reflective and creative thinking, and play.

Like an old testament prophet, the late Eugene Peterson passionately calls pastors back to Sabbath keeping. He believes this practice essential to their main responsibility of keeping themselves and the community attentive to God. Without this trained attentiveness, he contends, neither grows healthy, whole and mature. He thinks the single act of keeping a Sabbath does more for pastors in this regard than anything else. Yet many pastors, he points out, "flaunt...workaholic sabbath-breaking as evidence of

¹⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 211.

extraordinary piety.”¹⁵ He learned this from personal experience. As a remedy, Peterson advocates recovering the deep, creational rhythms of grace: evening and morning, work and rest. The first rhythm reminds pastors that grace is first and primary. “Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated.”¹⁶ The second rhythm of work and rest regularly calls pastors to quit work in order to contemplate God’s work, to stop talking in order to hear the still small voice of God. According to Peterson, praying and playing are the two practices that best reinforce these rhythms of grace. Together, he says, these practices “reverse the deadening effects of sin-determined lives. They are life-enhancing, not life-diminishing. They infuse vitalities, counteracting fatigue. They renew us, they do not wear us out. Playing and praying counter boredom, reduce anxieties, push, pull, direct, prod us into the fullness of our humanity.”¹⁷

The Fall and Origin of Sin and Death

Soon after God completed his “very good” creation, human persons fell into sin. Genesis 3 tells the tragic story of sin’s origin and its catastrophic consequences. The adjective fallen is loaded with meaning. According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, fallen has several main emphases. First, it indicates having come down. Second, it implies a lost status or moral reputation. Third, it means being captured or overthrown, ruined or

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, “Confessions of a Sabbath Breaker,” *Christianity Today* (Sept. 2, 1988).

¹⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 48.

¹⁷ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 54-55.

destroyed. Finally, it suggests being dead. Each of these meanings correlates with Scripture's account. Adam and Eve's disobedience results in the poisoning and corruption of human nature, coming under the strong influence of the evil one, along with physical and spiritual death. In other words, the fall undoes God's very good creation. The fully alive human dies. The distinctive image of God becomes distorted. Fellowship deteriorates. The joyful Sabbath grows burdensome.

Stories validating the fall abound in both the Old Testament and the New. An angry Cain murders his brother Abel (Gn 4). Impatient Israel grumbles against Moses over lack of food and water (Nm 21). High priest Eli fails to discipline his wicked sons (1 Sm 2). Lustful King David ravishes Bathsheba and schemes her husband's death (2 Sm 11). Greedy King Ahab and Queen Jezebel plant false accusers against Naboth, stone him, and seize his vineyard (1 Kgs 21). The notorious Judas Iscariot embezzles money earmarked for the poor and betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Jn 12; Mt 26). Pretending generosity, Ananias and Saphira, lie to the Holy Spirit regarding their gift to the church (Acts 5). And on it goes. The sin stories of the Bible build anticipation and increase longing for the Redeemer and his new creation.

Sin stories in the Bible abound, so do sin metaphors and images. The Bible depicts sin as a human defect or disability. Sin is frequently described as blind eyes, deaf ears, and calloused hearts. God tells Isaiah to give Israel this message, "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Is

6:9,10). Some Biblical authors speak of sin as having a stiff neck or a stony heart. In other places sin is likened to an illness or terminal disease. Jesus himself tells the Pharisees that he came for the sake of the (sin) sick, not the healthy.

Another significant image for sin is slavery or imprisonment. The apostle Paul explains sin as an undesirable, controlling disposition; one that he constantly struggles against. He explains to the Christians in Rome, “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do” (Rom 7:14b,15). He develops this imagery further explaining, “I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Rom 7:14b,15, 23).

The Bible explains sin not only as a defective condition and state of slavery, but also as destructive vices and actions. The Bible catalogues a number of these. The teacher of Proverbs lists things God hates: “haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers” (Prv 6:17-19). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul, sends a warning list of obvious vices and evil actions for the Galatian church to avoid: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal 5:19-21a). Additionally, the Bible depicts sin as lawlessness, transgression, and rebellion against God, his will and his mission.

Sin, according to Scripture, spans the whole of humankind. Numerous passages echo this truth. The apostle Paul consolidates some of these in his letter to the Romans. Referencing some Old Testament passages, he writes of this human predicament and the complete inability of human beings to come alive and become new creations on their own. “There is no one righteous, not even one,” he concludes, “There is no one who understands, and no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Rom 3:10-12). Sin’s nature is such that it spirals downward, leading to more and greater sin. Sin’s consequence is death. It leads to spiritual and eternal death immediately and physical death eventually.

The Bible identifies three main enemies that wage war against human beings: Satan, the world and the human being’s own flesh. Some attack from without, others within. Scripture warns of Satan, demons and cosmic powers that oppose God and his mission in the world (Eph 6:11,12). Various passages identify Satan as the prince of demons, the accuser, the father of lies, the dragon, a murderer, and the tempter and instigator of sin. Scripture pictures him like a lion on the prowl for his prey. “The devils and evil spirits are so corrupt,” says the Belgic Confession, “that they are enemies of God and everything good. They lie in wait for the church and every member of it like thieves with all their power, to destroy and spoil everything by their deceptions.”¹⁸ Fighting against these enemies takes special spiritual precautions and weapons. The apostle Paul uses the imagery of body armor to strengthen the Ephesian church against them. He

¹⁸ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “Belgic Confession,” Art. 12.

exhorts the church to buckle the belt of truth, secure the breastplate of righteousness, lace up gospel footwear, take up the shield of faith, put on the helmet of salvation, and arm themselves with the Word, Spirit and prayer. This divine military gear is vital to withstanding enemy attacks. Because of these enemies, spiritual conflict is inevitable. Human resources and willpower alone cannot withstand these assaults.

The Reformed tradition sums up Scriptures teaching on sin in three significant theological concepts: original sin, total depravity and total inability. The Heidelberg Catechism explains original sin as the reckless disobedience of humanity's first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. The effect of this first sin poisoned not only them, but all their descendants, corrupting them from conception on. Human misery resulted.¹⁹ The Westminster Catechism, written a century later, gives additional details regarding original sin. It was Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit by their own free will. Consequently, they "fell from the estate wherein they were created".²⁰ Not only them, but "all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression". By entering in this estate, mankind's position, condition, and situation changed. Immediately, he lost communion with God, coming under his wrath and curse, the miseries of life, as well as inevitable death and eternal hell.

¹⁹ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Heidelberg Catechism," LD 3, Q&A 7.

²⁰ CRC Publications, *The Heidelberg Catechism Westminster Shorter*, "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," Q&A 13.

By entering this estate, human nature became totally depraved. Human beings lost their original holiness as image bearers of God. The Canons of Dordt explains this all-encompassing loss and what replaced it.

Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness of heart and will; and finally, impurity in all his emotions.²¹

Total depravity does not mean human beings are as bad as they could be, says theologian Louis Berkhoff, but it does mean that sin corrupts every part of human nature.²²

This depravity manifested itself in total inability,²³ says Berkhoff. Everything humans do is defective because it is neither prompted by God's love or with regard for his will. Moreover, they now lack the capacity, means, and power to change their position, condition, and circumstances.²⁴ The Canons of Dort describe this desperate and hopeless situation, "All people are conceived in sin and born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of

²¹ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Canons of Dort," Third/Fourth Points, Art. 1.

²² Louis Berkhoff, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 76.

²³ Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 226.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.”²⁵

The New Creation and Abundant Life

Nevertheless, the over-arching message of Scripture is God’s magnificent redemption plan. It spans from before the creation of the world to its consummation shown in the book of Revelation, all things made new. The Bible shows the plan to be so brilliant and wise that the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms stand amazed (Eph 3:10). It indicates the plan as so comprehensive that only total renovation and re-creation will suffice: the dead made alive, sinners made righteous, and the whole universe ablaze with the glory of God. The plan is so inclusive that only complete unity will suffice, bringing together what has been estranged: heaven and earth, God and humankind, and human beings with one another.

The CRC believes that this process of becoming new, this spiritual transformation is primarily the work of God. It is “God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”²⁶ Both Scripture and Reformed confessions confirm this truth. The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, speaking for God, says “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws”

²⁵CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Canons of Dort,” Third/Fourth Points, Art. 3.

²⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 153.

(Ez 36:26,27). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explains this truth to a divisive Corinthian church. He wants the church members to recognize the secondary role of human leaders when it comes to growth. He writes, “What after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe-as the Lord assigned each to his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So, neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor 3:5-7). The Canons of Dordt affirms this as well where it states, “And this is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in Scriptures, which God works in us without our help.”²⁷

Reformed Christians recognize the spiritual life and transformation as both miracle and mystery. As such they cannot be fully comprehended. No one knows precisely how the dead are made alive, how the blind made to see, the deaf made to hear and the lame to walk. The sovereign Spirit works when and how he pleases in the hearts of humankind. The gospel of John reveals this truth in Jesus’ late-night conversation with Nicodemus. He explains, “The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). Because of this often quiet, interior, invisible and supernatural activity of God, all spiritual formation evokes humility and wonder. Eugene Peterson makes this point as well in one of his books on spiritual theology. “There is a lot going on in us and this world” he says, “far exceeding what we are capable of taking in. In dealing with

²⁷ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Canons of Dort,” Third/Fourth Points, Art. 12.

God, we are dealing in mystery, in what we do not know, what we cannot control or deal with on our terms.”²⁸

The Bible makes it clear that God’s chief agent of new life and transformation is the Holy Spirit. Jesus declares the Spirit’s ability to produce life when he says, “The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). Elsewhere, the apostle Paul explains the Spirit’s transformational role, “And we, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17,18). The Bible reveals God’s mission through the Holy Spirit. He reverses the effects of the Fall and restores God’s original image, purposes and destiny in humankind. His mission involves three main parts: First, he convicts people of sin and its consequences (Jn 16:8-11). Second, he convinces people of righteousness in Christ alone. Third, he fans the flames of longing in the soul and transforms people incrementally into Christ’s glorious image through God-given means.

The Holy Spirit’s transforming work begins with bad news. He confronts people with and convicts them of their sinful human condition and their complete inability to change it. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul explains this sinful state of all humanity. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10). Then Paul makes it perfectly clear that the consequence of this condition is death (Rom 6:23). Furthermore, the Spirit convinces human beings of their inability to change this nature, inclination or death sentence on their own.

²⁸ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 46.

Following the bad news, the Holy Spirit proclaims the good news of God's great salvation. Motivated by love, God delivers people from sin and its consequences through his Son. Few verses of Scripture express this great and profound truth more beautifully than Jesus' promise made first to Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). God's deliverance comes in the form of Spirit rebirth into the Kingdom of God. "I tell you the truth," says Jesus, "no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). This new birth and life come about through an awareness of and sorrow for sin, repentance, and faith. The Holy Spirit not only proclaims this good news but enables people to receive it as such and be born anew. The Canons of Dort illuminate this amazing conversion truth where it says, the regenerating Spirit "penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will making the dead will alive, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds."²⁹

More good news follows. Once born anew, the Holy Spirit sets out to transform people into Christ's glorious likeness. Christian tradition calls this process sanctification. The apostle Paul refers to it in a letter to Corinthian Christians. He writes, "we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with

²⁹ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Canons of Dort," Third/Fourth Points, Art. 11.

ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). The Westminster Confession explains this process as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”³⁰

Dr. Richard Peace of Fuller Seminary summarizes the Holy Spirit’s key role in this sanctification process. He says “people cannot change unless they first see a need to change; unless they take responsibility for their sin; unless they confess sin and receive Christ’s forgiveness; unless they seek out change agents, unless they place themselves in relationships of accountability and receive God’s means of grace.”³¹ All of these transforming steps leading to change involve promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit serves God’s mission as inner Teacher. He directs the curriculum of transformation. He reveals Jesus who shows “how a righteous child of God lives”.³² He instructs with the Word of Truth, leading people to know God and have life in Jesus Christ.³³ He teaches strengthening exercises and spiritual hygiene practices. Furthermore, he opens disciples’ eyes, minds and hearts, and unstops their ears.

Although human beings may not be able to comprehend the transformational process completely, God has not left them without guidance. In his goodness and

³⁰ CRC Publications, *The Heidelberg Catechism Westminster Shorter*, “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” Q&A 35.

³¹ Notes from CF 705: Spiritual Formation and Discipleship in a Postmodern World, Richard Peace, October 2011.

³² Brink, *Psalter Hymnal*, “Our World Belongs to God,” 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

wisdom, he chose various means to renew and mature his chosen ones. These means are primarily the Word of God, God's new people, and spiritual rhythms and practices.

One of the most important God-appointed means for spiritual transformation is the Holy Bible. This is so because the Bible is God's story, told in God's way, for God's purposes. Through the Bible, God chooses to make himself known to his people, to come near them and to shape them for his praise and glory. The Bible begins, continues, and ends with God as the main character and primary actor in this story. The Bible explains its own unique and divine origins. "Men spoke from God," wrote the apostle Peter, "as they were carried along in the Holy Spirit" (2 Pt 1:21). The Bible accomplishes God's purposes. Isaiah illustrates this reality by means of a nature metaphor, "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:10,11).

Reformed confessions highlight God's purposes for the Word. The Canons of Dort call God's Word "the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul."³⁴ Additionally, they explain God's use of the Word for the perseverance of the saints. "And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises."³⁵ Because the Bible is God's

³⁴ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Canons of Dort," Third/Fourth Points, Art. 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Fifth Point, Art. 14.

story, told in God’s way, for God’s purposes this book is holy. This means it stands head and shoulders above all other books for the purposes of spiritual transformation. And it means the Bible carries more weight and authority for this purpose than any other writing.

The Bible pictures itself most often as “word” or “Word of God.”³⁶ This image suggests several things. It suggests that the Bible is God speaking. Through speech God creates, communicates, and communes with his world. By his Word, God created humanity. In the “Word”, God communicates his person, his will and his ways. In the Word, God reveals himself most clearly through his Son, the “Word” made flesh. Yet, the Bible is not simply a book for gaining information about God, it is especially a book for nurturing relationship with him. Through the Bible the living God comes near and communes with his people. Also, by his Word, God re-creates humanity into the likeness and wholeness of his Son. Then, shaped by his Word, he sends recreated people forth as “words” or letters to the world.³⁷

The Bible as God’s creating, communing word has unique power to shape human beings from the inside out. Fascinated by how the Bible works in people, Richard Peace explains its multifaceted shaping power. “First, the Bible forms our worldview. Second, the Bible helps us express our emotions so we can develop into more whole people than

³⁶ Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, gen. eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 90.

³⁷ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2000), 34-35.

we would be otherwise. Third, the Bible shapes our behavior by giving us abundant examples of outcomes---good, bad, indifferent---so that we learn to distinguish between behavior that brings light and behavior that brings darkness. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, the Bible tells us that love is the core of life. God is love. We are loved. We are to love.”³⁸

A second God-appointed means and significant strategy for transformation is the holy community or new people of God. Individualism and independence are the North American way, but community and interdependence are God’s way. God grows believers to maturity through relationships. “We don’t mature on our own,” writes Eugene Peterson. “Maturity, especially if it has to be to the ‘measure of the full stature of Christ,’ can be accomplished only in relationship with others.”³⁹ It is God’s magnificent plan from before time, to create “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pt 2:4).

The Old Testament most often speaks of the church as God’s people. When God called Moses to confront Pharaoh, he promised, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God (Ex 6:7). Again, at Sinai, God pledged to Israel, “I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people” (Lv 26:12). In other passages, Israel is depicted as God’s assembly. On special occasions, God summoned Israel to gather in his presence. Moses reminds the Israelites of one such time when he addressed them saying,

³⁸ Richard Peace, *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God Through Scripture* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 7.

³⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 232.

“Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when you said to me, ‘Assemble the people before me to hear my words so they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land’” (Dt 4:10). At times, Israel is pictured as God’s dwelling place. The Lord instructed Moses to build a sanctuary where he would dwell in the center of the Israelite camp (Ex 25:9). Moreover, Israel is revealed as God’s chosen people, “called by God into special relationship.”⁴⁰ Moses reminds Israel that the Lord chose them out of all the nations of the earth to be his treasured possession. He graciously set his affection on them, not because of their desirability, but because of his love (Dt 7:6-8).

The New Testament, particularly the first four chapters of Ephesians, reveals the nature of church as God’s new people. Chapter 1 details God’s new people lavished with blessings in Christ. These include being chosen for holiness, adopted as children, redeemed and forgiven, and bearers of his mysterious will. Chapter 2 shows God’s new people, who were once dead in their sins, now alive in Christ; who were formerly separated, now reconciled through the cross and built together to become God’s dwelling. In chapter 3, Paul prays for God’s new people to be firmly rooted in their identity as Christ’s beloved. Chapter 4 explains who and what unites them to be God’s new people. No longer united by Jewish heritage, the Church is the new community of those united to Christ by God’s grace.

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery says the Bible’s uses nearly one hundred different images and statements when it speaks of the Church.⁴¹ The most common image

⁴⁰ Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 431.

⁴¹ Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 147.

is the Church as *ecclesia*, meaning not simply a gathering or assembling together, but a gathering in God's presence.⁴² Some images show the continuity of Church with Old Testament Israel. Like the prophets, the apostle John perceives the Church as God's vineyard, whose vitality, wellbeing and fruitfulness depend on union and fellowship with Christ (John 15:1-17). In Galatians, Paul calls Christians the new Israel, not because they observe the law, but because they have faith in God, like Abraham (Gal. 3). In another place, Paul declares the Christians God's temple, where his presence dwells through his Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17). Peter identifies the Christians in Asia Minor as God's chosen people, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1Pt 2:9).

Other images of Church illustrate its present or future identity. Paul calls the Church the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). This picture suggests the interdependence of the members as well as their dependence on Christ, the head (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18-19). As well, Paul sees the Church as God's household or family, who act toward one another according to the bond of love in Christ. This becomes evident in New Testament codes of behavior between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, etc. Jesus surprises the crowd when his family comes looking for him, he declares anyone who does God's will his mother or brother or sister (Mt 3:35). The Epistles often use family language to address Christians, calling them brothers and sisters or children of God. Finally, the Church is pictured as the bride of Christ. As Christ's betrothed, she

⁴² Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 30.

prepares herself by loving Christ, keeping pure, anticipating the joyful wedding feast and perfect union with her beloved. The CRC's contemporary testimony echoes this lovely picture of God's new people, "She is the Bride of Christ, his chosen partner, loved by Jesus and loving him, delighting in his presence, seeking him in prayer, silent before the mystery of his love."⁴³

John Calvin uses maternal imagery for the church. He suggests human beings need the church as children need their mother. He believes God provides the church primarily for human weakness, nurture and guidance. In book four of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes, "The church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith...so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother."⁴⁴

Scripture and Reformed tradition testify God gifts his people with spiritual companions to accompany and support them on the faith journey. These sacred companions fill a God-given desire for connection and intimacy. They nurture the new creation, the new self in Christ. They provide safety so honest sharing occurs and masks can be removed. They offer space to explore the soul's depths and uncover godly longings. They call one another to truth and point out blind spots. They care holistically

⁴³ Brink, *Psalter Hymnal*, "Our World Belongs to God," 38.

⁴⁴ Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.1.

for the soul, since each aspect (intellectual, physical, emotional, and social) is related to the others.⁴⁵

A third God-appointed means of grace are spiritual rhythms and practices for the sake of spiritual health and formation. Just as humans need physical hygiene to develop to maturity, sustain health and prevent disease, they also need spiritual hygiene to develop into the full stature of Christ, to cultivate friendship with God, and to strengthen the soul against vices and enemies. The exercises themselves have no power to do these things. Yet, they help believers keep company with Jesus and connect them to the living God who develops, strengthens, and transforms them. These regular rhythms and exercises, though not mandatory, are considered the way of wisdom and blessing.

Pastor Eugene Peterson captured the lifegiving invitation (not obligation) of Jesus in *The Message*. “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a rest. Walk with me and work with me---watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Mt 11:28-30).

Spiritual disciplines take intentionality, effort and perseverance. At times, Scripture uses athletic imagery to illustrate this point. In a letter to young, pastor Timothy, the seasoned Paul urges him to train for godliness. This kind of training, he explains, benefits both the present life and the one to come (1 Tm 4:7,8). In another

⁴⁵ Many of the ideas presented in this paragraph come from David Benner’s book *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

letter, Paul exhorts the Corinthian Church to train rigorously, run purposely, and run to win (1 Cor 9:24-27). By this he means intentional discipline is essential for serving Christ and battling sin. To the Hebrews he encourages throwing off “everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:1,2). Paul envisions a long-distance race which requires perseverance and concentration on the goal, which is Jesus. God condemns human attempts to earn favor or extra credit through these exercises, but heartily supports efforts to imitate Jesus and become like him.

Spiritual disciplines follow certain patterns for holy living: taking off and putting on, dying and rising, saying no to some things and yes to others. Through a garment metaphor, Paul tells the Colossians to take off the dirty old clothes of sexual immorality, impurity, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language and then, to put on the new clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12). The Heidelberg Catechism teaches genuine conversion involves the essential pattern of dying and rising. Dying to the old self “is to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run from it.”⁴⁶ In contrast, rising to new life “is wholehearted joy in God through Christ and delight to do every kind of good as God want us to.”⁴⁷ Titus explains how God’s grace teaches believers to say no to “ungodliness and worldly passions,” and

⁴⁶ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” LD 33, Q&A 89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, LD 33, Q&A 90.

yes to living “self-controlled, upright, godly lives” (Ti 2:11-14) while waiting for Christ’s return.

The curriculum for Christlikeness is not only for children, as some adults suppose. This curriculum is designed for life-long learning. Students never reach one hundred percent perfection this side of heaven. Students should expect growth and development, increasing mastery of certain things and ever-increasing maturity. Yet, seasoned Christians would have them know that one never gets beyond the beginner stage as a “child follower of Jesus.”⁴⁸ In fact, impatient with this truth in the twenty-first century, some try to short-circuit the learning process. Yet, the curriculum cannot be shortened to one’s liking. James Houston, retired professor of spiritual formation at Regent College, spoke to this point when he wrote, “In our techno-driven society we tend to fix things quickly. But, the very nature of integrity is that we have a speed that is appropriate to what we are doing. The speed of gaining information is very fast, but the speed of godliness is very slow. So we lose integrity when we use the wrong mindset or wrong speed at which we are operating.”⁴⁹

The curriculum for Christlikeness includes both classic spiritual practices and contemporary ones designed to address current challenges to spiritual health and formation. Classic disciplines have been practiced by saints throughout Christian history. Richard Foster explains them as central to experiential Christianity. Often practitioners divide them into two categories: disciplines of abstinence and disciplines of engagement.

⁴⁸ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 191.

⁴⁹ Notes from GM720: Spirituality and Ministry, Dallas Willard and Keith Matthews.

Spiritually healthy people employ both. Disciplines of abstinence free people from spiritually hurtful entanglements, especially overdependence on human interaction and work.”¹ Silence, solitude, secrecy, fasting, frugality, chastity, and sacrifice fall into this category. The disciplines of engagement, on-the-other-hand, re-connect people with the Kingdom of the heavens. These include disciplines of worship, prayer, study, celebration, service, fellowship, confession, and submission. Others categorize spiritual practices differently. For example, Richard Foster promotes three groups of disciplines inward, outward and corporate. Adele Calhoun in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* divides them according to the acronym WORSHIP. More important than classification, though, is engaging more weighty disciplines, ones that address the longings of the heart, and ones that suit the season of life and circumstances one is in.²

Scripture teaches that it takes intentionality and effort to become godly: “Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tm 4:8). It takes intentionality and effort to wholeheartedly serve the Lord and battle against sin:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it a slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified (1 Cor 9:24-27).

¹ Ibid.

² See Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Appendix 10 “Seasons, Stages and Ages of Transformation,” 283-289.

It takes commitment and support to prioritize values that diverge with worldly values: “But seek first his Kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:33). Some Reformed Christians remain suspect of spiritual disciplines for fear they diminish the centrality of grace and promote works righteousness.³ Yet, the theology of personhood supports human responsibility and effort in sanctification. A distinction between effort and earning may prove helpful here. The first is an action, whereas the second is a flawed attitude explains the late Dallas Willard. He writes, “Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort. And it is well-directed, decisive, and sustained effort that is the key to the keys of the Kingdom and to the life of restful power in ministry and life that those keys open to us.”⁴

The Reformed lens of Creation, Fall and New Creation gives focus to significant concepts guiding the ministry project. Creation declares God’s glorious purpose and destiny for his image bearers: abundant life, creatureliness and personhood, lifegiving relationships, and Sabbath time. These imply the value of relationships, human participation and responsibility in development, and the import of lifegiving rhythms. The Fall affirms humanities’ separation from the source of life, the deformity of the soul, and ongoing warfare with formidable enemies. These suggest the necessity of vigilance, mature companions and spiritual disciplines. The new creation announces God’s magnificent promise to make all things new, through the death and resurrection of Christ, followed by the Holy Spirit’s indwelling and direction. Furthermore, God ordains the

³ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 49-51.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 34.

Word, Christian community and spiritual practices to promote his purposes. Shaped on this biblical and theological groundwork, the following section describes the toolkit's form and content. As well, it identifies the people and resources needed to promote and sustain the project. Finally, it evaluates the original product and determines next steps.

PART THREE

PRACTICE

CHAPTER 4:
MINISTRY OUTCOMES FOR CLERGY TOOLKIT

The pastors' spiritual vitality toolkit emphasizes three simple, yet profound theological truths. First, Triune God is the Lord of life. He creates human life. He grows and sustains it. He brings it to his divinely appointed ends. He creates human beings uniquely "in his image" for special relationship and purpose. He creates them with true righteousness and holiness.

The second significant, theological truth is that human beings sinned. Sin caused estrangement from God, the fountain of life, and poisoned human nature from conception on. The Reformed faith calls this condition total depravity. This means human beings will not or cannot return to God to transform their distorted nature.¹ Only rebirth by the Spirit of God makes return and reform possible. Even with rebirth and union with Christ, overcoming sin continues to be an ongoing struggle for God's children. Becoming Christlike remains a fundamental goal and lifelong quest. Pastors are no exception.

¹ CRC Publications, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, "The Canons of Dort," Third/Fourth Points, Art. 3.

One final theological truth guides the content of the toolkit. God provides the means of grace for relationship and renewal. He appointed the Holy Spirit as life giver and chief agent of the new creation. Additionally, he chose his Church to nurture spiritual vitality within its members. He ordained life-giving patterns and practices through which he draws near, reveals himself, and develops Christlikeness in his children. In its creeds and confessions, the Reformed tradition highlights three primary means of grace: Word, sacraments, and discipline.²

Format, Goals and Target Population of New Ministry Initiative

Firmly based on these three theological truths, committee members of FFM and PCR aimed to produce a new denominational resource to support the spiritual flourishing of its pastors. Some might question the wisdom of an online resource when personal technological devices can undermine the very goals it seeks to promote. Yet, both Reformed theology and denominational experience counter this concern. Reformed theology exhorts believers to use God's gifts with moderation and accountability.³ Denominational experience, as well, showed toolkits to be an effective and sustainable means of sharing resources. The CRC successfully created toolkits such as Building Blocks of Faith, Faith Storytelling, and the Intergenerational Church. For these reasons, the on-line toolkit format seemed a good fit for supporting pastor spiritual vitality too.

The main components of this new ministry resource comprise a compelling vision, self-awareness tools, and vital spiritual practices. Moreover, it points pastors to spiritual

² *Ibid.*, Third/Fourth Points, Art. 17.

³ Calvin, *Golden Booklet*, Chapter 5.

companions, to instructions for creating a rule of life and to additional resources.

Through it, committee members envisioned a practical way to achieve their goals: to provide pastors with tools, resources, and encouragement for assessing and strengthening their spiritual formation; to enable pastors to encourage each other and hold each other accountable in matters of spiritual health; to strengthen pastors so they can in turn strengthen their own congregations, and finally, to affect change in CRC culture toward a lifestyle of pastor soul care.

The pastors targeted for the toolkit serve as parish pastors in the CRC. This target group represents the largest portion of the CRC's ordained clergy. According to PCR, this group numbers a little over a thousand. Other pastors serve as evangelists, teachers of theology, home and foreign missionaries, or pastors in specialized ministries. These pastors may well benefit from the toolkit but are not the primary focus. A closer look at parish pastors in the CRC reveals a great deal of diversity. Age, gender, ethnicity, temperament, personal experience, and number of years in ministry are just some of the ways they differ from one another. Their congregations display diversity as well in such things as age, make-up, geography, and size. Nevertheless, the nature and responsibilities of the parish pastor's calling, along with similar challenges from North American culture, the denomination, and personal lives unite them. The toolkit aims to support the spiritual health and well-being of this varied, yet cohesive group of pastors.

Strategies of the New Ministry Initiative

Creating the pastor spiritual vitality toolkit comprised several practical strategies. These include applying theological reflection, learning to write for the web, consulting with denominational experts, collecting and discerning resources, soliciting pastor testimonies, shaping the actual toolkit, selecting artwork, and evaluating the final product. Each of these is detailed further in this chapter, except the toolkit evaluation. This strategy follows in chapter five.

The first and most important strategy involved the application of theological reflection in the clergy context. Since Triune God is the source, developer and sustainer of spiritual vitality, the toolkit continually points pastors to spending time with God. Furthermore, it encourages relationships of safety and accountability to support pastors in choosing the one thing needed (Lk 10:42). Because of total depravity, the toolkit recommends assessments as a way for the Spirit of truth to speak into their lives and work reformation. Because of sin's deceptiveness and tenaciousness, the toolkit encourages pastors to seek out companions for accountability, truth telling and support. Since God provides means of grace to renew his image within, the toolkit emphasizes four core practices. In a fast and noisy world, silence and solitude make room to hear God's voice, confront the false self, and regain perspective. In a twenty-four-seven culture, Sabbath-keeping provides opportunity to play and pray, trust God's sovereignty, and embrace Kingdom values. In a world filled with distractions, meditating on Gods'

Word helps pastors focus on and personalize Scripture. In an ever more secular world, prayers of all kinds help pastors communicate and commune with the living God.

The second strategy comprised learning to write for the world wide web. Web writing requires a different form of writing. Hielema recommended Sandy Swartzentruber, Resource Development Manager for FFM, as mentor in this regard. Swartzentruber wrote several of the previous denominational toolkits. She pointed the author to resources such as “Best Practices for Web Writing” from the University of Maryland.¹ She instructed the author to aim for brevity, conciseness, and lively language. Generally, this meant writing sentences of twelve or less words and paragraphs with no more than five sentences. Moreover, it involved choosing active verbs over passive ones whenever possible. Swartzentruber also stressed the emphasis on visual simplicity for web writing. Consequently, it benefits from bulleted information, lists, and links more than most other kinds of writing.

Another strategy for the toolkit included consulting and partnering with denominational specialists, beginning with those serving on the committee. As mentioned previously, Swartzentruber mentored the author in web writing. She also set the toolkit’s timetable, sending periodic reminders of deadlines. She worked directly with design production to put the finished product online. Pastor Samantha DeJong McCarron, Vocational Ministry Assessment Coordinator for the CRC, assisted the author with recommendations for and information regarding self-awareness tools. Recently, she

¹ “Best Practices for Web Writing,” University of Maryland, Baltimore, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.umaryland.edu/cpa/toolbox/website-manual/prepare/web-writing/>

wrote and narrated a short video introducing the toolkit to CRC pastors. Syd Hielema, pastor and Team Leader for FFM, wrote step-by-step guidance for starting, sustaining and ending a pastor peer group. Furthermore, he pointed the author back to the toolkit's original purpose with some frequency. Lis Van Harten, Co-Director of PCR, lent her expertise regarding denominational grants available for pastor peer groups and retreats. Pastor Norm Thomsma, Director of Pastor Church Relations,² informed the author of common clergy challenges. Additionally, he assisted with ideas for introductory paragraphs and peer group check-up questions. Other denominational specialists offered expertise as well. The author met with founders and directors of Deeper Journey, a two-year retreat series aiming to strengthen the spiritual lives of ministry leaders in the CRC. She also connected with two CRC coaches, trying to understand their work and goals when creating the Spiritual Companions Chart.

A fourth strategy comprised the gathering and discerning of resources. Spiritual formation resources span centuries and prove legion. For this reason, the committee recommended choosing three to five quality resources for each spiritual practice or category. To help select resources, the author considered four questions: Is this a recommendation from a committee member in their area of expertise? Is it relevant to the parish pastor's calling, context and challenges? Does this resource connect pastors with their rich Reformed heritage? Has this resource benefited the author personally through coursework at Fuller Seminary? These filters explain the substantial use of denominational articles, sermons, blogs, and testimonies used in the toolkit. They also

² The CRC ministry of Pastor Church Relations was absorbed into a new ministry called PCR. Refer to notes in the Introduction for further details.

account for many selections connected with coursework at Fuller Seminary or the Reformed faith tradition. This process of discernment continued throughout the writing of the toolkit.

The toolkit features pastor testimonies and stories. These were intentionally solicited as part of the strategy to personalize, inspire and make it relevant. The testimonies convey personal experience and the life-giving effect that spiritual practices or companions had on their lives. Through these stories, the committee hoped pastors would not only recognize themselves in them but would inspire experimentation with various practices and soul friendships. Many of these testimonies came from pastors who participated in the CRC Pastor Spiritual Vitality Project which the toolkit grew out of. Others were featured in the Banner, the official CRC monthly magazine. A few stories were added from pastors known to committee members. Boxes highlight most of the stories to draw attention to them, while links lead to stories that are longer.

A strategy unique to this toolkit involved using Christian art as a tool for spiritual formation. Previous toolkits relied on illustrations taken from stock photos. These toolkits look very attractive and professional. Yet, the author believed that contemporary Christian art might better enhance the stated goals. Through art, the author hoped to elicit contemplation, evoke emotion, and communicate truths in a fresh way.³ Through it, she wished to provide a corrective, however small, to the denominational emphasis on head knowledge. Visual art played an important role in the Christian life throughout history. It

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 4.

served specially to educate a largely illiterate society. Moreover, it facilitated both personal and corporate piety. Stained glass windows communicated Biblical stories from Genesis through Revelation, icons opened windows into the Divine realm, and paintings expressed profound theological concepts. Today images are once again in vogue, not only in society, but in the church as well. Pastors use them to communicate, inspire, grab attention, and stir the imaginations of their congregants. When used appropriately, they help persons not only hear the word, but see it too. This makes one more reason to employ art in the toolkit. In determining which art to use, the author sought the assistance of Eyekons,⁴ an online marketplace for contemporary Christian artists. Eyekons helped with the selection of art to awaken the pastor's spiritual imagination.

The most obvious strategy, the actual creation of the toolkit, comprised the core of the project. It began with identification of the main tabs. The tabs provide vital structure and support like a human skeleton. This structure enables movement between topics. It also allows for multiple entry points, so pastors benefit from individual topics as well as using the whole toolkit. The structure allows pastors to build combinations of practices that suit their soul care needs, situations, and personal styles. More than this, the tabs reveal theological convictions and project goals. They purposely reproduce the main elements of the original project, promote significant social categories, and encourage on-going formation. Seven different tabs form the skeleton of the toolkit.

⁴ Eyekons, Grand Rapids, Michigan, accessed August 2, 2019 <https://www.eyekons.com/>

Start Here
Strengthening Self-Awareness
Making Room for God
Meeting with a Spiritual Companion
Gathering with a Peer Group
Retreating with Other Pastors
Finding an Ongoing Rhythm

Figure 1: Tabs of the Pastor’s Spiritual Vitality Toolkit

The tabs replicate the main convictions and components of the original pastor spiritual vitality project. As with the project, the first tab invites pastors on a journey of discovery⁵ and concludes with a compelling vision of spiritual vitality. The second tab commends self-discovery as a means to know God better and as a catalyst for growth and maturity.⁶ The third tab recognizes God as the source and power of life, encouraging intentional and regular meeting with him through solitude, prayer, meditation and Sabbath keeping.⁷ The fourth through sixth tabs emphasize the conviction that spiritual vitality thrives best in supportive relationships.⁸ To conclude the toolkit, the last tab helps

⁵The participants of the Pastor Spiritual Vitality Project read *Invitation to a Journey* by M. Robert Mulholland Jr.

⁶ The original project required pastors to complete three assessments: The Three Colors of Leadership, Clifton StrengthsFinder, Meyer-Briggs. Each of the assessments was followed up by a meeting with a trained specialist to process the results.

⁷ At each of the two retreats, pastors were given a four to five-hour block of time for solitude.

⁸ Pastors were required to meet four times with a spiritual director between retreats. They also participated in an assigned, four-person huddle for discussions of books and assessments, as well as for support, accountability, and prayer.

pastors create a rule of life, integrating spiritual practices and rhythms into their everyday lives. All the tabs, except “Start”, intentionally use present perfect verbs. These verbs reflect the ongoing nature of spiritual formation, such as strengthening, making, and meeting.

Specific Toolkit Content

The “Start” tab welcomes and introduces the toolkit. Some website manuals discourage welcoming people to the site. They consider it wasted space.⁹ However, the FFM toolkit template includes this feature. Consistency in format, an opening prayer, and a compelling vision of spiritual health trumped some web guidelines. The tab opens with a prayer for pastors by Dallas Willard. The prayer reflects the hopes and desires of the committee behind the toolkit that each pastor “would have a rich life of joy and power, abundant in supernatural results, with a constant, clear vision of never-ending life in God’s world...and of the everlasting significance of their work day by day.”¹⁰ Next, the tab specifies the target population and purpose of this new tool. Following this, bullet points summarize what pastors find in the toolkit: assessment tools, a spiritual companion’s chart, essential Christian rhythms and practices, pastor stories, guidelines for creating a rule of life, and additional resources. The second half of the introduction highlights the three foundational convictions essential to spiritual life and health: the river of life, relationships and rhythms. According to Dallas Willard, a vision of life in God’s

⁹ “Best Practices for Web Writing, University of Maryland, Baltimore, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.umaryland.edu/cpa/toolbox/website-manual/>

¹⁰ Class notes from GM720: Spirituality and Ministry,” Dallas Willard and Keith Matthews.

Kingdom, is the starting place of spiritual formation.¹¹ For this reason, the tab concludes with a compelling vision of spiritual hygiene selected from a book by Cornelius Plantinga, highly respected CRC theologian and former CTS president.

The second tab, “Strengthening Self-Awareness”, reflects a basic Reformed principal that knowing one’s self and knowing God are interrelated. John Calvin, foremost developer of Reformed theology says, “the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.”¹² David Benner, a contemporary voice for Christian spirituality, believes awareness functions as the doorway to the transcendent. Furthermore, Benner sees awareness as foundational for becoming one’s true self in God.¹³ Therefore, this second tab describes four respected assessments: The Birkman Method Personality Assessment,¹⁴ StrengthsFinder Profile,¹⁵ Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,¹⁶ and the Enneagram.¹⁷ Following the descriptions, the tab explains how to take each test. Though many of these tests can be taken privately online,

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 86.

¹² *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1.1.1.

¹³ David G. Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2011), xii, 107.

¹⁴ “The Birkman Method: One Assessment,” accessed May 29, 2020, <https://birkman.com/the-birkman-method/>.

¹⁵ See link to StrengthsFinder Profile on page 6.

¹⁶ See link to Myers-Briggs Type Indicator on page 6.

¹⁷ “The Enneagram Institute,” accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/>.

the toolkit consistently recommends consultation with a trained specialist or spiritual director. These persons help interpret the results and personalize application.

The third tab, “Making Room for God,” opens with Jesus’ loving invitation to rest and learn from him the unforced rhythms of grace (Mt 11:28).¹⁸ Pastors know that spending time with God is indispensable for their spiritual vitality. Yet, making time continues to be a struggle. This tab acknowledges the challenges of a hurried culture, as well as the pressure to attend to immediate needs over long-term, Kingdom values. It highlights four fundamental spiritual practices, two of abstinence and two of engagement: silence and solitude, Sabbath keeping, meditating on God’s Word and world, and prayer. Each of these practices is considered classic, meaning tried and true for Christians over centuries. At the same time, each was chosen intentionally for parish pastors to flourish despite contemporary challenges: making time for God in a hurried culture, meeting with spiritual companions in an individualistic culture and assessing personal weaknesses in a culture emphasizing achievement.

Divine blessings shower pastors who persevere in these four spiritual practices. Choosing to be alone and quiet, according to Dallas Willard, enables the pastor to focus on God, find clarity of purpose and perspective, break free from human pressure, and interrupt the power of hurry.¹⁹ Practicing Sabbath as Heschel, Dawn and Peterson describe, gives pastors a foretaste of God’s shalom and renews vitality for their life and ministry. Meditating on God’s Word and world, the two books of God’s revelation,

¹⁸ The terminology “unforced rhythms of grace” comes from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*.

¹⁹ Notes from GM720: Spirituality and Ministry, Dallas Willard and Keith Matthews.

invites a personal word from him for the day. Bonhoeffer notes that pastors tend to read and study Scripture for the sake of preaching and teaching.²⁰ Yet, meditation on Word and world invites them into a personal encounter with God which proves life changing and sustaining. Meditation teaches pastors to “consider the lilies” and thereby build trust in God’s extravagant love and faithful provision. Lastly, the graceful practice of prayer, communication and communion, draws them ever more deeply into friendship and partnership with God, also growth in Christlikeness.

The next three tabs, “Meeting with a Spiritual Companion”, “Gathering with a Peer Group”, and “Retreating with other Pastors”, reflect the need for pastors to seek out others for support, accountability and transformation. Pastor soul care occurs in five different social contexts: solitude, one-on-one relationships, small groups of three to seven persons, medium size groups of eight to thirty, and large groups of thirty or more. This toolkit focuses on the first four social contexts since they provide more personal and continuative support.

The fourth tab, “Meeting with a Spiritual Companion”, highlights one-on-one relationships. It differentiates between various kinds of professional, one-on-one relationships: a coach, a regional-pastor mentor, a spiritual director, and a psychotherapist. Often questions arise as to the difference between these specialists. For this reason, the tab contains a chart to assist pastors in discerning who might be most helpful to them. The chart answers common questions regarding the focus of each profession, the needs it addresses, the overall goal of the relationship, the substance of a

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 32.

meeting, and possible resources used. This tab acknowledges some overlap exists between these spiritual companions. It also notes that each professional promises confidentiality, essential for honest sharing and risk taking.

The fifth tab encourages pastors to participate in a peer group with colleagues. Gathering with a peer group ties directly to the project's goal of pastors encouraging and holding each other accountable in matters of spiritual health and well-being. PCR discovered this to be one of the best ways for pastors to give and receive support, as well as find a safe place to grow. Feelings of loneliness, disequilibrium or discouragement affect most pastors at some time in their ministry. PCR learned that peer groups can sometimes prevent or reduce these feelings, otherwise, provide help when they do surface. Syd Hielema of FFM identified marks of healthy peer groups. Many of these overlap with Gareth Icenogle's *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*. Moreover, Hielema wrote step-by-step guidance to launch, maintain and end a peer group. Specific questions guide the first gathering as well as periodical check-ups to ensure the group gets the most from the experience. PCR encourages pastors to design peer learning groups that meet their needs. The tab provides a link to the PCR page to apply for denominational grants if needed. The tab names several small group resources and provides some examples of small group covenants too. Covenant theology plays an important role for Reformed Christians, yet generally not in small group gatherings.

Recently, a handbook on forming small group spiritual direction with pastors²¹ was added to this tab.

“Retreating with other Pastors”, the sixth tab, is another significant way to support spiritual health. This tab mainly features the Deeper Journey retreat series.²² Inspired by Ruth Haley Barton and the Transforming Center, several CRC pastors designed a cycle of retreats (8 retreats over 2 years) for ministry leaders in the denomination. Each retreat highlights a classic spiritual practice or rhythm. The retreats intentionally balance time in small groups and large, time alone with God and time in community, time learning about spiritual disciplines and time practicing them, time in worship and time fellowshiping. As testimonies reveal, the retreats help many pastors intentionally care for their souls and in some cases saved them from complete burnout.

Behind the retreat series is Doug Kampstra’s story. Tending to everyone else’s needs, he overlooked the attention his own soul required. Kampstra felt the weight of ministry responsibilities and nearly burned out before finally taking a friend’s advice to read and engage a book by Ruth Haley Barton. When he learned the life-changing practice of reading for transformation, not simply information, his soul began to come alive again.²³ New perspective, energy and joy returned to his ministry. This discovery along with training at the Transforming Center spawned the Deeper Journey series.

²¹ Jeff Sajdak, Dean of Students at CTS, wrote this handbook for the toolkit. It is based on his DMin Thesis Project from Bethel Seminary of St. Paul, Minnesota which engaged Iowa pastors in small group Spiritual Direction.

²² “Home,” Deeper Journey, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://www.deeperjourney.org/>

²³ “Retreating With other Pastors,” CRCNA Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality Toolkit, accessed September 12, 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bws8uwzQKXdAV0VqWG1ucEICTVU/view>.

The seventh and last tab, “Finding an Ongoing Rhythm”, concludes the toolkit. According to Dallas Willard, an intentional Christlike curriculum is necessary for spiritual growth. Often a rule of life is likened to a trellis, that provides necessary support for plant growth and its fruit. However, a different metaphor dominates this tab. Influenced by Peterson’s phrase in *The Message* “the unforced rhythms of grace,” this tab emphasizes rhythm. It provides guidance for writing a life rule based on longings, shaped by spiritual needs and life season, and accompanied by soul companions. This tab ends with a Bibliography featuring resources for further exploration. The committee hoped for an annotated bibliography to complete the toolkit. This, however, became unfeasible with the October deadline.

Timeline for Implementation

At a meeting in March 2017, the CRC’s Pastor’s Spiritual Vitality Project officially ended. At this same meeting, the team leader for FFM proposed a practical, online toolkit to help meet the spiritual needs and challenges of CRC pastors. The committee supported the proposal unanimously. Furthermore, they set October 2017 as the completion date. This date ensured PCR could introduce and promote the toolkit at a November conference with regional pastors and leaders. At the following meeting, the committee approved Muller as principle writer to insure consistency of voice throughout the toolkit. This ministry initiative unfolded according to this timeline.

In the spring of 2017, the toolkit process began with a proposal by Syd Hielema. In March he invited Muller to serve as principal compiler and author of the toolkit, subject to committee approval. Meanwhile, Muller met with Sandy Swartzentruber,

FFM's Resource Coordinator, to discuss toolkit development. In April, PCR and FFM representatives met to affirm Muller as principal author and determine general toolkit structure and organization.

In the summer of 2017, Muller identified the main tabs for the toolkit, subject to committee approval. She also began gathering resources. In July, Muller received authorization of the main tabs, conferred with Eyekons regarding contemporary Christian Art, continued collecting resources, and met with denominational representatives concerning areas of expertise. The following month, Muller wrote introductory paragraphs, created a Spiritual Companion's Chart, sought special permissions, solicited pastor testimonies, and selected artwork.

As the project neared its deadline in September, Muller sent the toolkit to the advisory committee for evaluation. Based on their feedback, she made final edits. Then, Swartzentruber sent the final edited copy of the toolkit to CRC graphic designers. They posted the Pastor Spiritual Vitality Toolkit online in mid-October. The implementation of the toolkit took nearly eight months to complete from the initial proposal to its posting online. Following the posting, the author pursued feedback from several committee members, as well as toolkit presenters and users. The next chapter features evaluation based on known responses to the toolkit.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF CLERGY TOOLKIT

Chapter 4 summarized theological conclusions, described the target population, provided an overview of content, and explained the timeline. The final step of the Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit involves implementation and evaluation. The first part of this chapter focuses on what is needed to carry out the project. It answers questions such as: Who provides leadership and training for the toolkit? In what way will these leaders be trained? What resources are needed for training CRC pastors to use the toolkit effectively? The second part of the chapter concentrates attention on the toolkit's evaluation. It identifies some challenges to assessing this online resource. Next, it seeks to evaluate the value and impact of the toolkit and whether goals and expectations have been realized. Finally, it considers aspects of the toolkit that may need to be changed in order to better serve CRC pastors. This "formative evaluation"¹ includes findings from the original Pastor Spiritual Vitality Project, analysis from metrics, feedback from the toolkit's advisory committee, as well as CRC parish pastors and leaders.

¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinny *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988). Formative evaluation is carried out for the purpose of receiving feedback and improving new or existing programs.

Toolkit Implementation

Implementation of the online toolkit requires two denominational agencies, several key leaders, and both material and technological resources. The two CRC denominational ministries responsible for the toolkit and its training are FFM and PCR. Although their missions differ slightly, they both intentionally invest in pastor spiritual wellbeing. On the one hand, FFM “encourages and equips local CR ministry leaders in their calling to shape lifelong faith formation in their context so that all generations have an intentional resilient faith.”² On the other hand, PCR “supports congregations and their leaders in times of transition and discernment by providing consultation and resources that foster personal and communal health.”³ Together these ministries raise awareness of the toolkit, introduce its main components, and encourage its use. They update the toolkit as needed with new or better resources. They solicit and evaluate feedback from CRC pastors in order to improve usability and content. Moreover, they work to increase accessibility of the toolkit, first to CRC parish pastors and leaders, then those outside the denomination.

One of the key persons providing leadership and training for the toolkit is Dr. Syd Hielema, former team leader for FFM.⁴ Hielema not only invested in the initial Pastor

² “About,” CRCNA Faith Formation Ministries, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://www.crcna.org/FaithFormation/about>

³ “What We Do,” Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, CRCNA Pastor Church Resources, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://www.crcna.org/pcr/about-pastor-church-resources>

⁴ Rev. Chris Schoon replaced Dr. Syd Hielema as team leader for FFM beginning June 1, 2019. Hielema transitioned to a part-time position engaged with “The Connections Project”, a new CRC endeavor to help congregations explore and connect with resources.

Spiritual Vitality Project but also proposed the toolkit idea and provided the necessary oversight as it was written. Currently in a part time role, Hielema leads most of the toolkit training himself. He introduced the toolkit for the first time to regional pastors of the CRC at a fall conference in 2017. Several months later, in April of 2018, he arranged a video conference for his entire team with Muller who walked the group through the tabs of the toolkit, explaining both content and the intention behind it. Hielema addressed the faculty and staff of CTS, as well as numerous pastor gatherings around the US and Canada. Recently, he proposed creating a six-minute training video to promote the toolkit. He envisions the video being sent to classes in the denomination as well as Christian retreat centers and seminaries around North America. Ordinarily, Hielema introduces the toolkit to pastors by helping them meditate on Scripture. One of his favorite passages to use is Psalm 23. He reads a portion, asks reflective questions, then allows time for personal meditation. He finds truth in Bonhoeffer's assessment that pastors know how to study scripture but often need intentionality and assistance to apply it personally.

Lis Van Harten and the PCR ministry play a key role in implementation too. They spearheaded the initial Pastor Spiritual Vitality Project with a grant from the Lilly Foundation. They set the goals and managed each detail of the original project. During and following the project, the Lilly grant required analysis and summaries of the findings. Van Harten collected the findings which shaped the toolkit significantly. Van Harten learned about ten percent of CRC pastors are Korean and five percent are Spanish. Consequently, when the toolkit became available online, she worked with translators to

translate the toolkit into both Korean and Spanish. In the Spring of 2019, she arranged for Muller to meet with the PCR staff and acquaint them with spiritual direction, one aspect of the toolkit.⁵

The resources used in the toolkit training sessions are relatively few, cost effective, and common. They include the online toolkit along with its companion piece, “The User’s Guide to the Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality Toolkit.” This promotional piece is available in hard copy as well as online.⁶ Additionally, basic technology is utilized for training. Leaders make use of power point so they can walk trainees through the toolkit section-by-section and highlight various features of it. They employ SKYPE or ZOOM in order to train staff simultaneously in many different locations across North America. These programs, along with a laptop, projector, screen and remote combine to help leaders promote the toolkit. The physical space needed for training varies widely. Leaders use conference rooms, offices, churches, etc. Larger spaces require a sound system and microphone as well. When the training video becomes available, it may accompany the brochures sent to CRC classes. It may also be sent to seminaries and retreat centers around North America to provide an introduction to the toolkit.

One of the main resources used to introduce the toolkit is the companion piece noted above. The cover of the guide highlights the title and web address of the actual toolkit. The inside cover displays a fitting prayer for pastors written by the late Dallas

⁵ During the initial Pastor Spiritual Vitality project, PCR discovered the CRC pastors involved were unacquainted with this kind of spiritual companion. They also found their ministry staff unfamiliar as well.

⁶ “Pastors’ Spiritual Vitality User’s Guide,” CRCNA Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, accessed July 24, 2019, https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/pastors_spiritual_vitality_users_guide_-_oct.17.pdf

Willard. Opposite the prayer, the next pages outline the resources found in the toolkit. The brochure includes an inspirational piece written by Cornelius Plantinga on spiritual hygiene. The back cover presents “10 Ways to Become a Healthier Pastor”. The leadership of FFM and PCR discovered that many pastors assumed the brochure was the actual toolkit. For this reason, they intend to compose a brief letter to be included in each brochure, directing pastors to the website.

Toolkit Evaluation

The second part of this chapter focuses on evaluation of the toolkit. First, it identifies a few challenges in evaluating an online resource such as this. Above all, it hopes to determine the impact the toolkit is having on CRC pastors and whether the expectations of FFM and PCR are being realized. Has the toolkit given CRC parish pastors access to many of the same tools and resources for soul care as those who participated in the project? By engaging the toolkit, are these pastors cultivating relationships and practices that support their spiritual well-being? Are pastors strengthening their congregations as they are being strengthened spiritually? Has the toolkit contributed to a shift in CRC culture toward soul care as a way of life, not simply a one-time event? Is the toolkit reaching the intended audience? Has it been financially prudent? Can the toolkit be easily updated with new or improved information and resources? Taken together, what aspects of the toolkit need changing or redesign in order to accomplish these goals?

Evaluating the impact of the toolkit has been challenging. First, there is no single assessment tool that can supply satisfactory answers to all these questions. Therefore, a

variety of methods have been employed such as findings from field testing, direct observations, questionnaires, metric analysis, feedback from the advisory council, and testimonies from pastors and other leaders.⁷ Second, there is no instrument that reveals the souls of these pastors and the Spirit's work within. The committee too acknowledged that spiritual formation is organic, complex and can be elusive to orchestrate and measure. Scripture describes the Holy Spirit's work as interior, invisible and mysterious (Jn 3:5-8). Furthermore, it reveals the human heart, the wellspring of life, as easily deceived (Jer 17:9). Pastor testimony and observations are the closest means available for this kind of information. Third, because the toolkit is posted to a public site with no special password required, neither the identity of users can be known, nor to what end they used the toolkit.

Ordinarily, field testing takes place following the completion of a project and preceding its formal introduction to the target audience. In this case, however, the field test preceded the toolkit creation. The CRC's Pastor Spiritual Vitality Project served this purpose. It provided opportunity to test the theological underpinnings of the toolkit, its content, and the spiritual practices it regarded as vital. The project enabled the leaders to observe pastors directly over a sixteen-month period. Furthermore, it required periodic feedback from the pastors in the form of questionnaires. The questionnaires revolved around three main subjects: relationships, content, and spiritual practices. From these findings, the leadership made recommendations for the toolkit, especially the

⁷ Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley and McKinny, *Studying Congregations*, Chapter 7.

relationships and practices needed for developing and sustaining spiritually healthy pastors.

The main goal of the project was to strengthen the spiritual vitality of each participant. For this reason, the final survey asked this open-ended question: As you review in your mind all the project activities of the last fifteen months, where have you found the richest blessings (in individual activities or in the ways they were combined in your life) in terms of meeting that goal? Almost unanimously, pastors named the social aspect of the project as key. They deeply appreciated connecting with other pastors for encouragement, accountability, perspective, and honest sharing. They expressed gratitude for colleagues who understand the joys and challenges of the pastoral calling firsthand. They valued the shared journey which reminded them they were not alone. They acknowledged the gift of face-to-face relationships needed for trust to develop. These social connections occurred in one-on-one conversations with leadership, coaches and spiritual directors. They transpired in four-person huddle groups. They also took place with the whole group of sixteen pastors. One pastor described the vital impact of relationships on his spiritual life in this way, “The richest blessings have come in the second gathering in Texas, sharing together and knowing each other better. And our cohort meetings as well. They have been fun and we have gotten to know each other deeper and in ways we never would have. My spiritual walk is fuller and deeper because of my interactions with these people.” Because of the relational aspect of the soul and feedback from these pastors, the toolkit intentionally designed the tabs around social categories: individual, one-on-one, small group, and medium size groups.

Yet, not all relational feedback was this positive. Some huddle groups disappointed the pastors. At the beginning of the project, the committee assigned each pastor to a four-person huddle. These groups met virtually between retreats every six weeks and face-to-face at the two retreats to discuss books and assessments, support one another and provide accountability. One group struggled with faulty, and consequently, frustrating technology. Others were dissatisfied with group dynamics: one member talking too much, another not being vulnerable, and other members with varying degrees of commitment. In previous projects, Van Harten of PCR found more success with pastors forming their own groups and goals. Gareth Icenogle in his important book on small group ministry, argues that the common things that ordinarily draw a group together are not true covenant community.⁸ At the same time, he argues that peak communication, the deepest sharing only happens when people feel surrounded by others who are compassionate, merciful and gracious.⁹ For the committee, a safe place to share amongst trusted colleagues or spiritual companions outweighed Icenogle's argument regarding covenant community. To support pastors forming their own groups, Hielema created a guide for the toolkit in how to begin, sustain, evaluate, and end small groups. Additionally, the toolkit promotes PCR's Peer Mentoring grants which encourage pastors to form their own groups and goals.

⁸ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

Even though pastors identified the social aspect as key, many also acknowledged the importance of intentional space for silence and solitude. One pastor believed this to be the best part of the retreats. He recognized his need for quiet and rest to process, reflect and integrate learning. Yet, a single pastor, who spends ample time alone, expressed his longing for connection during the afternoon of solitude. Robert Mulholland in his book *Invitation to a Journey* argues ‘a one size fits all’ prescription for spirituality is unrealistic and disregards the uniqueness of human persons.¹⁰ Created with unique gifts, individuals resonate with different spiritual practices depending on their wiring. At the same time, they require customized exercises for growth into Christlikeness and wholeness.¹¹ For this reason, the advisory committee believed the toolkit should allow for a variety of practices and combinations of practices that suit differing personality styles, seasons of life, circumstances, and income levels.

The content of the project included two books on spiritual formation, three personality assessments with follow-up sessions by a trained coach, four meetings with a spiritual director, a four-person cohort and two forty-eight-hour retreats. Feedback on content mainly revolved around two things, too much and too little. For many pastors the content requirements were simply too ambitious and overwhelming. One pastor aptly referred to the content as the firehose approach to spiritual vitality. The sixteen pastors were so busy meeting requirements during an already demanding Christmas season, some missed out on the intent of the project, attentiveness to and rich reflection on their

¹⁰ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 13.

¹¹ These points are found in Part II of Mulholland’s book *Invitation to a Journey*.

spiritual lives. This finding led the committee to set intentional limits for content and resources in the toolkit. Additionally, it reinforced their belief that less may be more when it comes to the spiritual life and formation.

As well, some pastors felt they knew too little of the reasoning behind each part of the program and what role it played in spiritual vitality. For example, though the assessments with follow-up coaching were appreciated by many, some questioned how personality assessments fit into a spiritual formation curriculum. The committee mistakenly assumed pastors understood the importance of personal awareness for their spiritual health. Some pastors wished for more “how to” guidance in spiritual practices. Given this feedback, the toolkit intentionally incorporates introductory paragraphs to provide the basic purpose and fruit of each practice. As well, it contains step-by step guidance for several practices such as meeting with a small group and developing spiritual direction with colleagues. It replaced one leadership inventory with the Enneagram, an ancient personality assessment specifically used for spiritual formation. The Enneagram helps people figure out who they are, what motivates them, and what spiritual ruts they may get stuck in. Moreover, it facilitates a path to wholeness. Enneagram wisdom can lead to greater compassion for others and deeper intimacy with God. Additionally, the toolkit features several guidebooks in the concluding resource section such as Adele Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* and Marjorie Thompson’s *Soul Feast*. These provide explanations and the step-by-step guidance pastors may be looking for.

Another method used for toolkit evaluation is metric analytics. FFM currently employs a part-time woman, Paola Fuentes-Gleghorn, for this purpose. According to Fuentes-Gleghorn, metrics help measure some very practical information regarding the toolkit. They reveal the number of different users. Sometimes, they supply general information about viewers such as their geographic location or their gender. Unfortunately, because this toolkit is open to the public without a login, the metrics do not disclose who the users are or if the toolkit is reaching the target audience.

Additionally, the analytics show whether the viewers spent ample time on the website or if they left it quickly. They show the links and downloads that get the most attention from users. This information revealed what viewers were most interested in exploring. Fuentes-Gleghorn explained that from August 2018 through June 2019, 945 different viewers used this toolkit. These viewers spent an average of four minutes and forty-four seconds on the site. Fuentes-Gleghorn believed most viewers had enough time to engage with the resource meaningfully. The content receiving the most attention was: three assessments (Enneagram, Birkman and Myers-Briggs), four books (Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, Barton's *Sacred Rhythms*, Job and Shawchuck's *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, and Machia's *Crafting a Rule of Life*), along with the Deeper Journey website. This information seems encouraging, yet it does not reveal what impact these assessments, books, and retreats had on its users.

Observations from the advisory committee and feedback from CRC pastors and leaders are additional methods used for evaluating the toolkit. Hielema of FFM reports every audience he works with resonates with the toolkit's materials on a very deep level.

He senses a hunger for the kinds of encouragement, wisdom, introspection, practices and challenges the toolkit offers. He makes four significant reflections regarding the pastor's soul and the CRC. Each carries implication for the toolkit. First, he says the CRC needs a shift from soul care events to soul care as a way of life. Many CRC pastors participate in one-time events such as prayer retreats, book studies, conferences, or sabbaticals. These provide temporary respite, he believes, but do not shape and sustain the soul as on-going, contemplative practices could do. Second, self-awareness is key for spiritual leaders. The toolkit addresses this need in several ways: through inventories processed with a coach, meetings with a spiritual director, and peer mentoring groups. Still, some pastors consider these practices suspect as too psychological or not Reformed enough. Others may not engage because they lack financial means or do not know how to find trained persons. Third, mutual (pastor to pastor) support is increasing. This means of soul care proves to be simplest and least expensive. Many CRC pastors belong to such a group. PCR supports them through grants. Finally, practices that encourage a soul care lifestyle are increasing. Hielema sees prayer and meditation practices, once foreign to the CRC, becoming more popular such as lectio divina, praying the hours, and the examen. Additionally, he notices pastors listening to the voices of Barbara Brown Taylor, Ruth Haley Barton and Tish Harrison Warren whose worldviews resonate with a Reformed one. Hielema thinks the toolkit would benefit by showing this development in the CRC and by continuing to provide simple, clear guidance.

Other members of the advisory committee contributed observations too. Sandy Swartzentruber of FFM regards the latest toolkit, "Family Faith Formation Toolkit," the

best. Each time FFM creates a new online toolkit, she says, improvements are made. Swartzentruber especially likes the visual simplicity of the topical resource list with fewer words and more links. She believes people engaging the toolkit already know its importance and simply desire good resources. This seems somewhat contradictory to Hielema's belief that pastors need and desire more explanation and guidance in this area. It may be possible, however, to accomplish both through design changes. Rev. Samantha Dejong McCarron, who administers the Birkman to pastors in the denomination, thought she noticed an increase in requests for her work when the toolkit made its debut online. Since that time, however, she is uncertain whether pastors discover the Birkman assessment from the toolkit, Calvin Seminary, the denomination's website, or elsewhere.

Hielema solicited feedback from pastors and other Christian leaders who attended workshops based on the toolkit. Many resonated with the need for Sabbath rest, but their motives varied. One youth leader, Gweneth Zylstra, felt convicted to prioritize rest in order to emphasize God's work, not hers. She writes, "rest FIRST (daily, weekly, quarterly, annually, every seven years, etc.) as a spiritual discipline... When we are leaders who REST, we declare to our followers, 'This is God's work, not mine. He will establish the works of our hands while we sabbath in his enoughness.'"¹² A pastor from British Columbia, Jenna Fabiano, observes "it is only out of a posture of dependence, that we can truly care for our souls." For her, this is the reminder Sabbath brings. Another pastor, Al Postma, notices a correlation between Sabbath rest or lack of it and his

¹² Capitalization of the words along with vocabulary choice are Zylstra's.

responses to colleagues at work.¹³ He explains, “the less rested I am, the more reactive I become. Keeping Sabbath practices provides me the space to process my own ideas, thoughts, frustrations, etc. in a way that isn’t disruptive or destructive to collaborative/relational space. I bring a more refined, centered, and grounded vision to my work this way.” Sabbath reflection helped Ted Harris, a Christian School principal, understand his strength in weakness. Strength comes, he says, from giving situations over to God. Yet, he wondered why he finds weakness in himself and others so distasteful. He feels a need to reckon with this discrepancy. These responses affirm Sabbath keeping as a vital practice for today’s clergy as well as an important part of the toolkit.

Lastly, revisiting the original goals of the toolkit seems fitting to determine the effectiveness of this ministry initiative. The most important goals deal with accessibility, support, sharing the learning, and culture change. The toolkit aimed to give all CRC pastors access to many of the same tools and resources for soul care as those pastors who participated in the original project. This has materialized. The online toolkit provides assessment tools, information on spiritual companions, guidance for vital spiritual practices, advice on forming small groups, information on retreats, and resources for writing a rule of life. In some instances, the toolkit offers more resources: a chart for spiritual companions, a handbook for small group spiritual direction and inspirational pastor testimonies. What the toolkit does not supply is a specific soul care curriculum, signed covenant, or appointed accountability groups which pastors of the original project received. These factors often play a crucial role in spiritual wellbeing. Furthermore, the

¹³ Rev. Al Postma served on the toolkit advisory team. Presently, he directs classis renewal in the denomination.

toolkit hoped to encourage CRC pastors to cultivate the relationships and practices that support their spiritual formation and well-being. Metrics and feedback from some introductory workshops hint this may be happening. Yet additional measures are needed to better understand its impact. One possibility is making use of pastor luncheons and denominational questionnaires. Also, it was hoped pastors being strengthened spiritually by using the toolkit, would in turn strengthen their congregations. The field test suggests this is happening to some extent. Blessed by the CliftonStrengths assessment, two pastors shared plans to use this with their council members. Another pastor planned to speak with his council concerning pressures he feels in ministry interfering with healthy spiritual habits. He explains, “The project is meeting expectations in helping me set spiritual goals for my personal walk with Christ. And it is also meeting my expectations by being willing to engage my church council in the healthy practices a pastor should be participating in regularly but in my current setting is squeezed out quickly by demands from the church.” One more important goal is for the toolkit to contribute to a shift in CRC culture toward a soul care lifestyle rather than intermittent soul care events. Hielema sees the shift in the denomination beginning. He believes many factors contribute to this. He considers the toolkit’s presence on the denomination’s website to be one of them. The amount of influence on CRC culture change though is presently unknown.

The final two goals of the toolkit deal with cost effectiveness and revision ease. These are simpler to measure. Has the toolkit been financially prudent for these two denominational ministries? Clearly, the answer to this is yes. The budgeted cost of the

original project was \$50,000. This enabled sixteen pastors to participate, less than two percent of the CRC's parish pastors. A Lilly grant provided half the cost, the other half came from FFM and PCR, along with a contribution from the pastors' churches or classes. The toolkit, in fact, was created and promoted with money left over from this project. Moreover, one donor contributed the cost of the Christian art. Thus, the only expenses incurred have been promotional: printed brochures, translation, and training workshops. Hence, cost effective aptly describes the toolkit. A final toolkit goal was for FFM or PCR to make updates or revisions easily. Generally, this is so. The CRC has its own I.T. Department which makes changes rather easy to make. The toolkit follows a standard template, so all revisions must be made within these parameters. The biggest challenge to updating the toolkit centers around translation. Whenever changes are made in the English version, Korean and Spanish translators get involved, which means additional costs.

In summary, two CRC ministries are needed to implement the toolkit. PCR and FFM supervised its development and presently take responsibility for its promotion, training, and updating. The resources used for training are minimal, including the online toolkit along with the user's guide. The ministries sensed a need to develop an introductory video for training. This resource takes on even more significance when the toolkit is shared with the broader Christian community. The Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Project provided the necessary field testing. It affirmed the theological underpinnings: the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit, spiritual companions, as well as intentional, regular spiritual practices. It confirmed both the need and desire for practical guidance. It

demonstrated the importance of intentionality, accountability, customization of practices, and balancing solitude with rich relationships. Hielema sees beginning signs of a shift in CRC culture. Practical guidance, which the toolkit aims to provide, supports this change.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Spiritually healthy pastors are good for the church. This commonsense, fundamental belief underlies the ministry initiative which created the online Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit. The toolkit project developed from a previous CRC initiative to promote and sustain the spiritual well-being of its pastors. As denominational leaders engaged with pastors, they discovered many of them struggling to live the abundant life Christ promises. They learned pastors felt numerous pressures from without and within. From without, they experience the pull of North American culture which values independence and worldly success. Some feel distracted and tempted by its ever-present digital devices. Others sense pressure from their congregations to mainly engage in activities with visible results. Some pastors struggle with the conflicting needs of church and family. Furthermore, many experienced a world saturated with technology distraction and temptations. From within, pastors battle temptations by the evil one, as well as contend with natural weaknesses and vices. Faithfulness to the pastoral calling and attending to their spiritual life takes intentionality, effort and vigilance.

As the leader goes, so go the people. This represents another belief that forms the foundation of the project. The spiritual life and health of a pastor is linked to the spiritual life and health of their congregation. Many of Israel's kings and priests illustrate this truth. By failing to shepherd God's people appropriately, they often fell away. Some pastors realize the connection of their congregations' spiritual health with their own, but not all. To help pastors, FFM and PCR partnered with the Lilly Foundation to promote the spiritual welfare of sixteen CRC parish pastors. These pastors underwent several

assessments, followed up by sessions with trained coaches for strengthening their self-awareness. They read and discussed books on spiritual formation in small groups. They participated in a couple retreats, one at the beginning of the project and one at the end. At the retreats, pastors engaged in key spiritual practices: Sabbath, contemplative worship, silence and solitude, prayer, meditation, fellowship, and designing a rule of life.

Findings from this project shaped the toolkit. The committee found above all pastors valued the relationships built during this time. They appreciated people with whom they could share freely and honestly, people who understand the pastoral profession and the challenges that accompany it. They enjoyed meeting new friends. They appreciated the trained professionals who aided insight into their personalities and their souls. From this feedback affirming the relational aspect of the soul, the toolkit purposely took shape around social categories: solitary, one-on-one, small groups, and medium sized groups.

Less is more when it comes to the spiritual life. From evaluations, the committee learned the ambitious requirements of the project overwhelmed many pastors involved. The “firehose” approach undermined the unhurried space needed for meeting with God and reflecting on their lives. Because of this reaction, the toolkit intentionally limited resources within each of its tabs.

Realizing the unsustainability of the original ministry initiative, the committee brainstormed ways to get spiritual resources in the hands of CRC pastors. FFM used an online toolkit format effectively in the past and recommended this format for parish

pastors as well. Thus, the writing and designing of the Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit began.

Several literary resources provided important insight for this ministry initiative, both classic and contemporary. Each of the classic contributors served as pastors themselves. John Calvin, still a crucial voice in the CRC, points readers to Scripture as the rule for life and Christ the way of holiness. He insists on holistic spirituality and warns of all the vices in the soul. Richard Baxter recognizes the significant link between pastor and congregants. He exhorts pastors to prioritize the oversight of their own souls before feeding the flock. Dietrich Bonhoeffer maintains the need for both intentional Christian community and intentional solitude. He identifies responsibilities Christians owe one another in life together such as listening, bearing each other's burdens, and speaking the Word into their lives.

Contemporary resources also shape the toolkit. Evelyn Underhill contributes a valuable definition of the spiritual life and three essential ingredients for developing it: adoration, communion, and cooperation. Howard Rice uncovers the rich, Reformed tradition of spirituality and explains reasons for resistance to it. Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong advocate Kingdom shaped ambition and the pursuit of excellence based on fidelity to Christ rather than shaped by the worldly culture. They pair the discipleship vocation with the pastoral one and encourage holy friendships as well as life-long learning. Adele Calhoun contributes an exceedingly practical handbook with step-by-step guidance for numerous spiritual practices.

Scripture and Reformed theology reveal significant truths about spiritual life and vitality. Creation testifies to humanity's total dependence on God for life as well as their relative independence and responsibility for spiritual health and growth. It reveals God's image stamped on human beings and their unique capacity to commune with God and others. It shows the establishment of Sabbath for human flourishing and foreshadowing the glorious life to come. The Fall exposes the undoing of God's very good creation. Communion between God and his creatures was broken as well as fellowship with one another. The whole of human nature became corrupt and vices replaced natural virtues in the soul. Enemies pursued without and within. God did not, however, allow this undoing to be the last word. Before the beginning of time Triune God planned to make all things new. Jesus, the perfect image of God, paved the way with his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The Holy Spirit, God's chief agent of sanctification, works continuously to transform his people through God-appointed means until their complete glorification when Christ returns.

The toolkit committee gained crucial insights from the pilot project, vital literary sources, and Reformed theology, and pastors themselves. Each component of the toolkit was designed with intention and purpose. To help CRC pastors keep company with Jesus and flourish spiritually they especially needed and desired spiritual companions and holy friendships. These relationships help a pastor fulfill the God-given desire for connection. They also aid in battling temptations, sharing and listening, speaking truth to one another, gaining perspective, and pursuing holy ambition and the excellencies of Christ. The

committee also realized some pastors need assistance discerning what kind of spiritual companion best fit their situation.

Also, to help pastors live and minister with spiritual vitality, they needed instruction and resources on vital spiritual practices. The toolkit features several of these: a return to Sabbath rhythms; regular, unhurried time alone with God; meditation on Scripture for a personal word from God; and prayer that keeps them consciously in God's loving presence. The toolkit facilitates customization of practices, resonating with a pastor's personal longings and vices. Additionally, it enables further exploration with a closing resource list.

Next steps for the toolkit include creating an annotated bibliography, continuing translation work, finishing an instructive video, hosting informational lunches, and editing resources. From the beginning, the committee planned to provide an annotated bibliography. For pastors unfamiliar with the rich tradition of Reformed spirituality, summary notes would improve their ability to discern resources that best fit their personal or group needs. Soon after the toolkit became available, Hielema proposed an introductory video to accompany the brochures. The video, featuring Rev. Samantha Dejong McCarron, walks pastors through the main features of the toolkit.

Another proposal to stimulate interest in the toolkit involves hosting lunches for local pastors in the Grand Rapids area. Grand Rapids, Michigan remains a hub for the CRC denomination. PCR and Muller plan to bring together local or visiting pastors to share a meal and watch the video. They envision a conversation following the video, to

discuss content, relevance to the ministry context, and gain further perception of pastor needs.

As noted earlier, spiritually healthy pastors are good for the church. This truth speaks for all Christian denominations, not only the CRC. Pastor spiritual vitality and well-being is a timeless issue. In August of 2019, Hielema of FFM and Van Harten of PCR met with Muller to discuss the future of the toolkit for the broader Christian community. The threesome proposed two initiatives. First, they proposed sending the toolkit brochures to every Christian seminary around North America. Second, they suggested sending them to Christian Retreat Centers around the US and Canada. Sharing the toolkit seemed easy since it exists on a public site. The group wondered whether the introductory video could accompany the mailings as well. This detail depends on cost.

At first glance, sharing the toolkit seemed easy. However, a few challenges arose as the possibility was discussed. First, there are things denominational leaders can do for CRC pastors that they are unable to do for other pastors. For example, PCR could not handle outside requests for pastor assessments, nor could they provide grant money for those outside the denomination. The group decided some explanatory notes (regarding exceptions) would need to be added. Furthermore, if sharing the toolkit becomes a reality, other modifications may be necessary. For example, the toolkit would need some outside eyes to evaluate it. Additionally, the toolkit might benefit from pastor testimonies outside the Reformed tradition.

The toolkit opens with a prayer for pastors by the late Dallas Willard. The prayer represents the genuine hope behind this ministry initiative, hope for CRC pastors (and

colleagues) to experience a rich spiritual life of joy and power; to enjoy bushels of supernatural fruit; to perceive the reality of eternal life in the present; and to daily grasp the significance of their work. If the toolkit contributes toward these ends, not only pastors, but their congregations and denomination, will be blessed as well.

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