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DIVINE DELIGHT AND THE LITTLE WAY: A RENEWAL STRATEGY AT OUR SAVIOR’S CHURCH

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DIVINE DELIGHT AND THE LITTLE WAY: A RENEWAL STRATEGY AT OUR SAVIOR’S CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

Divine Delight and The Little Way: A Renewal Strategy at Our Savior’s Church

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The purpose of this doctoral project is to renew the mission of Our Savior’s Church. This was accomplished through teaching the loving kindness meditation and the little way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. A retreat introduced these two spiritual practices as a way to enhance the congregation’s mission.

Part One details the setting of Our Savior’s Lutheran. After constant pastoral turnover for the past seven years, Our Savior’s lost its energy. Our Savior’s discerned a new mission statement in 2019 as a caring community called by Christ to live and serve in faith. Learning new spiritual practices including the loving kindness meditation and the little way, of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, provided a framework to live into this new mission.

Part Two describes the fruit of contemplation practices with the little way. Delighting in God through prayer and contemplation enables one to embrace others authentically. Experiencing God’s love directly through contemplative practices increases the capacity to extend hospitality. St. Thérèse of Lisieux is an example of this life of discipleship. St. Thérèse saw herself, and all of humanity, as unique souls belonging in God’s garden, all created in the image of God. From this anchoring in her identity as a child of God, St. Thérèse abundantly shared divine love through the little way.

Part Three relays the implications of transforming an environment through the daily implementation of the little way as a spiritual practice. In a retreat setting, active members of Our Savior’s engaged in spiritual practices including St. Thérèse’s model of compassion. After experiencing the little way in this retreat, participants were commissioned to practice this as a spiritual discipline and the loving kindness meditation for forty days. Assessments determined that the little way offered congregational renewal and equipped Our Savior’s members to renew in mission.

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To my husband, Brian Moskalik, for his unwavering support in my call to serve Christ.
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I would like to thank Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minnesota for desiring to renew in purpose and deepen its calling as a caring community. Thank you to my husband, Brian Moskalik, for your patience and constant encouragement during my studies at Fuller Seminary. Thank you to Maggie Olson for editing my work with kindness and precision. Most of all, thank you to my parents and Kristin Belling, for introducing me to The Little Way on my first day of kindergarten.
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PART ONE:

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

I discovered my greatest spiritual teacher on my first day of kindergarten. When I was growing up in a small town in Minnesota, my mother knew my kindergarten class list. She wanted to ensure that her daughter extended kindness to everyone. In a small town where everyone knows each other, it would be easy to glance at the roster and pass judgement on a recognized name alone before even meeting the child on the list. As I peeked into my kindergarten classroom, my mother’s voice echoed in my ears. She told me that there would be a very special girl in my class. Curious, I had no idea what my mother meant by these words. She reassured that I would know the student she referenced and that I should be good and kind to her.

Inside the classroom, girls and boys segregated in the far corners of the room. My eyes noticed one student sitting alone. I approached this classmate with awe as she sat while skillfully dribbling a basketball. This was enough to qualify her as special to me, since I assumed she was the only one of my classmates with this unique skill set. After a moment, I walked up to her and introduced myself. We soon became best friends. My new friend Kristin had expressive eyes. She could swim by the age of three. She was the only child in kindergarten who could already read.

In first grade, Kristin quickly lagged behind the class academically. A revelation occurred on the playground that year when bullies began teasing her. It was then that I realized what made Kristin so special. She has Down syndrome. When this information first registered, my response was a pledge to God that I would always be her friend.
Despite moving away in my high school years, I kept my promise. Years later, Kristin stood up for me as the maid of honor at my wedding.

This unlikely friendship began through the spiritual practice called The Little Way, as articulated by St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Over the last century, scholars have understood this spiritual practice with varied interpretations. From a lens of hospitality, one way to view this discipline entails a four-fold process as articulated by scholar Dr. Richard Beck in his book *Stranger God*. The four steps are: see, stop, honor, and approach. Beginning with an awareness of surroundings, noticing others is the first step toward extending compassion. The subsequent steps are ceasing activity, delighting in the other, and approaching them with sincerity. A kindergarten encounter transformed the trajectory of my life through this compassionate interaction.

**The Little Way**

Human beings often socialize in a way that creates hierarchy. Attractive, intelligent, congenial, and athletic qualities may increase one’s social favor. Outward appearances, class, race, gender, and other socio-economic factors earn either favor or disapproval. It is most common for humanity to associate with others they hold in greater affection. In his book *Stranger God*, Beck recognizes that humans socialize within what he calls “circles of our affection.” Widening one’s network of affinity to expand beyond normative social circles cultivates the practice of the hospitality of God. In Genesis, God extends welcome to all of creation. This continuation of divine embrace is present in Christ’s arms outstretched on the cross. The biblical narrative describes a God of grace.

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who pays attention to those least likely to receive welcome from the world. As an extension of God’s hospitality on earth, The Little Way remains a practice of compassion that includes embracing the unloved and excluded soul. The Little Way welcomes everyone into the fold of God’s love.

The Little Way is a spiritual practice that eliminates interpersonal hierarchy. This compassionate model of social interaction recognizes the core value of every human soul. The Little Way reclaims God’s intention for creation to reaffirm innate worth. This spiritual discipline began as St. Thérèse’s response to the outpouring love of God she felt throughout her life. St. Thérèse desired for everyone to experience this transformative love of God. Her legacy continues to impact the world today. Her life of discipleship, which couples divine delight and The Little Way, serves as a pragmatic example to reenergize Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. The purpose of this doctoral project is to renew the mission of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church through teaching a variety of spiritual practices including The Little Way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in a retreat setting.

Synopsis: The Ministry Challenge

Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minnesota faces a challenge of renewing its purpose. After surviving a seven-year liminal space of chronic pastoral transitions, the congregation lost its esteem and energy. The history of this church included exponential growth followed by significant decline after a dynamic pastor departed in 2012. Losing 40 percent of engaged members in the last seven years places Our Savior’s at a critical juncture. Through extensive member feedback sessions posted on the church’s website, oslcstillwater.org, Our Savior’s discerned their new mission as a
“caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith.”" Living into this new calling is a challenge, as the positive self-image of the congregation has wavered in recent years.

Amidst leadership turnover, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church required renewal to ensure this new mission was actualized. To deeply live into this newfound calling, Our Savior’s needed to experience love and compassion from Christ. The leadership transitions created instability and caused the congregation to question their worth as an organization. On my first Sunday as their new pastor, a member voiced that she hoped I would like them. A member who previously served on the congregational board also shared that an extensive congregational survey in 2017 indicated very low energy and low satisfaction among members.

This congregational instability was directly related to the continual clergy turnover. According to Eugene Peterson, pastors often mistakenly uproot from their callings prematurely. He argues that a committed and longer pastorate provides a flourishing climate for ministry. Peterson stated, “The norm for pastoral work is stability. Twenty, thirty, and forty-year long pastorates should be typical among us (as they once were) and not exceptional. Far too many pastors change parishes out of adolescent boredom, not as a consequence of mature wisdom. When this happens, neither pastors

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nor congregations have access to the conditions that are hospitable to maturity in the faith.”

Despite the chronic pastoral turnover, Our Savior’s does have markers of healthy ministry programs. Dating back to its foundation, Our Savior’s has always been a caring community, known for relational ministry in the St. Croix Valley. Our Savior’s was voted as the congregation with the most outstanding youth ministry program award and the strongest vacation Bible school in the area for the past five years. The younger generations, children and youth, show unwavering enthusiasm for the ministries at Our Savior’s. Reenergizing the adults and living into a strategized future with intentionality is the core challenge at hand.

As the mission statement defines Our Savior’s as a caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith, a retreat anchored in spiritual practices helped achieve this desired renewal and deepened the efficacy of members to extend compassion to others. This retreat served to renew active members through daily implementation of two spiritual practices: the loving kindness meditation and The Little Way. The combination of these two disciplines at once empowered the congregation to live into the newly articulated mission. The dual focus of inner work and outer expression of faith also created a ripple effect of transformation on multiple levels: change in self, an increase in positive congregational esteem, and a greater capacity to serve the wider community.

Meditation practices stirred a divine delight in participants as they experienced God’s love personally through this discipline. In succession, The Little Way as defined

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by St. Thérèse of Lisieux gave participants the opportunity to extend this divine love toward others. Through contemplation and experiencing God’s love members actively shared this divine love with others.

Divine Delight: A Prerequisite to Extending Compassion

Effective care for others stems from experiencing God’s love personally. Divine delight through spiritual practices expands the capacity to serve neighbors. A variety of spiritual practices were taught at this compassion and renewal retreat. The retreat was intentionally held in January. This is a challenging month for Minnesotans. This is also a time of financial stress and New Year’s resolutions. After the hustle of the holiday season and in the cold and dark of winter, this retreat brought congregational renewal. Members showed great enthusiasm at the prospect of a weekend of self-care.

One of the spiritual disciplines introduced at the retreat was Sabbath. In a chaotic and hectic world, it is difficult to slow down and experience the delight of God. Without slowing down to discover divine delight, a bitterness may take root that causes disciples to languish rather than flourish. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman explained the necessity for Sabbath rest. Experiencing God’s delight correlates with producing healthy fruit. Brueggeman states, “It was in the beginning that God blessed the human creatures and said to them, ‘Be fruitful.’ The God who gave the blessing and invited fruitfulness is the Lord of the Sabbath. It requires Sabbath to bear the fruits of God’s kingdom. Those
who refuse Sabbath produce only sour grapes, the grapes of wrath and violence and envy and, finally, death.”

Divine delight is a prerequisite to bearing a flourishing ministry. When a disciple is grounded in daily spiritual practices, this time with God impacts their efficacy in ministry. In the upper room, Jesus tells the twelve that relying on his presence in daily living makes fruitfulness in ministry possible. Without God’s presence, humans cannot accomplish anything. Abiding in Christ’s presence creates lasting fruit. Spiritual practices such as Sabbath produce fruits of joy and love. Experiencing this love of God directly through contemplation stirs an energy to put faith into action.

The new mission statement of Our Savior’s called for serving and living in faith by extending a compassionate presence in the world. With the constant pastoral turnover in the past seven years, Our Savior’s lost its confidence and sense of congregational purpose. It is difficult to be compassionate, to literally suffer with others, when the joy has evaporated and the esteem has wavered. Yet this desire to extend a gracious welcome to others signals a return to the core identity of this congregation.

With fresh pastoral leadership and a new mission, optimism returned to the congregation. Rather than languishing in sorrow and reciting the past, Our Savior’s now looks to the future with hope. Through the practice of new spiritual disciplines, a transformation occurred that energized members. Scholar Mary Clark Moschella explains that the act of offering compassion leads to a flourishing that produces resiliency and joy. Utilizing imagery of planted seeds, compassion creates new life. Moschella states,

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The practice of compassion opens us out to the spacious joy of recognizing our connection to each other, realizing that we are not alone or limited to our own resources. It is this expansive place of fellowship, made known in community, that can help motivate and sustain commitments to human flourishing. Compassion and calling are seeds of joy that are fed and watered by the abundant love and goodness of God.⁵

Divine delight is a prerequisite to effectively expressing compassion to others. It is vital to hear God’s affirmation through spiritual practices. This also creates a renewed spirit, a greater positive esteem and energy to respond to the needs of one’s environment. Spiritual practices create a resiliency to face life’s challenges. Pastor Mandy Smith found herself feeling more empowered by the Holy Spirit to face the difficulties in life after centering prayer. Smith states, “The only way to begin facing these challenges is to keep seeking tenaciously after God through spiritual disciplines that keep us grounded in the presence of God at the center of our being. Solitude and silence in particular enable us to experience a place of authenticity within and to invite God to meet us there.”⁶

Mounting scientific evidence suggests that the daily practice of spiritual disciplines such as meditation can improve cognition, lower blood pressure, and even expand the neuroplasticity in the brain to rewire thinking patterns. Researchers from the Flourishing in Ministry Initiative also reinforce that, in addition to health benefits, resiliency, and greater compassion toward others, spiritual practices also reinforce a positive self-image. Moving a step further, this creates what Dr. Matt Bloom refers to as self-integrity. Bloom explains,

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Researchers describe the first part of self-integrity, knowing oneself, having a clear and positive identity. Our identity or self-concept is the way we understand and think about who we are and how we fit into the world around us. Our identity includes all of the things we attribute as being essential to who we are as a person. Our talents and skills, our personality, the things we care about and don’t care about, and our passions and interests all are a part of our identity.  

This doctoral project created space for active members of Our Savior’s to rediscover their innate worth as children of God. Through experiencing a delight in the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit, the congregation discovered a revitalization to compassionately reach out to others. In this anchoring through meditation and Sabbath joy, a resiliency stirred, prompting members to put this faith into action.

The Loving Kindness Meditation is a practice designed to increase one’s capacity to bless the self and expand beyond one’s social circles. This begins with envisioning the self and extending blessings of happiness, health, wellbeing, and peace. In concentric circles, these blessings expand from the self to loved ones, acquaintances, difficult people, and all beings. In the article, “Loving-Kindness Meditation for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Pilot Study,” scholars identified that the Loving Kindness Meditation is a helpful practice for both spiritual and secular settings. This article notes,

Loving-kindness meditation is a complementary and alternative medicine approach that facilitates increased positive emotions through meditation exercises designed to develop feelings of kindness and compassion for self and others. Loving-kindness practice has its roots in the Buddhist tradition, but it can also be applied as a nonreligious practice. The phrase loving-kindness derives from the Pali word metta, which can be translated as love or loving kindness, akin to the Greek word agape.  

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Scientific research identifies that with practice, The Loving Kindness Meditation possesses power to increase one’s compassion levels toward self and others. Humans are hard-wired to host automatic thoughts and biases based on cultural developments and the collective thoughts of one’s environments. Through repeating meditative blessings beyond the confines of natural circles of association, compassion is cultivated past previously conceived boundaries. In the article, “Science Looks at Spirituality: Cultivating Loving Kindness: A two-stage model of the effects of meditation on empathy, compassion and altruism,” Kristeller and Johnson state, “There is evidence that empathy may be hardwired into virtually all mammals as a process necessary for caring for the young. However, in contrast to lower mammals, we have much higher developed levels of symbolic knowledge, as expressed in language and complex learning and planning capacities, represented by tremendously complex levels of cortical development.”

Through experiencing the delight of God in meditation, the repetition of expressing loving-kindness to self and others expands the brain capacity to welcome difficult people. Offering total compassion to self and others, with repetition, creates a pathway to spiritual transformation. An article in Clinical Psychology Review reveals the capacity to change oneself and the emotional climate of one’s environment. Salzberg writes,

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The path begins with cultivating appreciation of our oneness with others through generosity, non-harming, right speech, and right action. Then on the foundation of these qualities, we purify our minds through the concentration practices of meditation. As we do, we come to experience wisdom through recognizing the truth, and we become deeply aware of the suffering caused by the separation and of the happiness of knowing our connection with all beings.\textsuperscript{10}

Dr. Helmstetter, PhD, author of \textit{What you say When you Talk to Yourself}, explains that repeating positive thoughts can change the neuroplasticity in the brain. As the neuropathways rewire, the change in thought patterns are automatically received and believed. By fixating on repeated patterns and thoughts, the brain triggers an automated ideation. For example, in the case of The Loving Kindness Meditation, holding the pattern of a mental and emotional embrace of a stranger or difficult person in one’s life can change behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes of social interaction. Helmstetter states that whatever the brain repeats, it accepts: “The brain simply believes what you tell it the most. And what you tell it about you, it will create. It has no choice. Repetition is a convincing argument. Unless the programming we received is erased or replaced with different programming, it will stay with us permanently and affect and direct everything we do for the rest of our lives.”\textsuperscript{11}

The Loving Kindness meditation is a way to encounter God’s love toward self and others. Repeating this blessing as part of a daily spiritual practice empowers


\textsuperscript{11} Shad Helmstetter, PhD. \textit{What to Say When You Talk to Yourself} (New York: Gallery Books, 2017), 12.
individuals to cultivate a will to embrace. As the brain transforms through repetitive patterns, this new rewiring creates a pathway to reduce social divisions upon encountering difficult people. In The Loving Kindness Meditation, the total embrace of a loving God is experienced emotionally and through mental imagery. This was a helpful practice prior to attempting The Little Way as a social experiment. The combination of these two practices stirred members to widen their circles of association and affection toward those beyond normative boundaries.

The Little Way was an ideal spiritual practice that led members to greater confidence and congregational renewal, empowering leaders of the church into a flourishing state to bring the mission statement into a lived reality. The combination of divine delight in contemplative practices and The Little Way renewed Our Savior’s to bring this mission to fruition. St. Thérèse developed this model of compassion out of a hardship that also created a renewal and resiliency in her own life. When practiced with intention, The Little Way offered the capacity to transform Our Savior’s.

The Little Flower and Her Little Way

St. Thérèse of Liseux’s The Little Way provided a powerful key to rebuild and reinvigorate Our Savior’s to experience God’s love and share Christ’s compassion. As an expression of Christian hospitality, The Little Way offered a pragmatic approach to extend kindness without reservations. St. Thérèse’s capacity to extend the love of God to others stemmed from her delight in God. Her life story revealed how this joy in Jesus began and how she developed a strategy to live out her unique call.
A chronology of St. Thérèse’s life is listed on pages 279-288 of *The Story of a Soul*, third ed. translated by John Clarke. Author Kathryn Harrison also extrapolates in detail events of St. Thérèse’s life throughout her entire work titled, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Harrison offers a narrative description surrounding the full twenty-four years of St. Thérèse’s life. This includes background information about her family and events leading up to her call to ministry, as well as her theological insights as she practiced compassion with intention.

Harrison records\(^\text{12}\) that St. Thérèse was born in 1873, to Zélie and Louis Martin. Her devout parents both contemplated entering into professional ministry. When Thérèse was born, her mother’s inability to nurse her led to emotional instability in her infancy. Her mother unknowingly battled breast cancer and died when Thérèse was only four years of age.

In 1886, as she was entering into her teenage years, Thérèse experienced a healing from an illness. Thérèse claimed Mother Mary made an appearance to her during her time of sickness. When her health was restored, her emotional maturity grew. This change prompted a calling in Thérèse to enter into the convent.\(^\text{13}\)

At fifteen years of age, Thérèse traveled to Rome with her father and pleaded with the Pope to grant her an early entrance into the ministry, a year before her eligibility. Her


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 54.
pleading gave the Pope reason to consider this to be God’s calling. With reservation, the Pope made an exception for Thérèse to join the convent early.\(^\text{14}\) Thérèse assumed the environment of a convent would draw her into a deeper relationship with God. However, Thérèse learned that the sisters in her new home came from all levels of spiritual and social maturity. Pecking orders existed among the sisters, and favorites emerged within the convent. She noticed that some women were highly favored, while other sisters struggled socially. This was not the context in which she envisioned herself living out her love for Christ.\(^\text{15}\)

In this unexpected environment, she wrestled with her new vocation. In her manuscript,\(^\text{16}\) St. Thérèse explains that during her studies of 1 Corinthians 12, she questioned her place in the body of Christ. As a cloistered nun, she could not be the feet of Christ. She also found limitations in serving as the voice or hands of Christ as her tradition did not permit her to preach or administer the sacraments. An epiphany emerged when Thérèse was studying 1 Corinthians 13, which details attributes of love. As she read this definition of love, she found her place in Christ’s body. No one had set the intention to incarnate God’s heart in the body of Christ. Thérèse decided she would be God’s heart on earth. The roots of the Little Way are grounded in love. Beck explains, “To practice


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 225.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 193-194.
The Little Way is to follow Thérèse’s example, to be the heart, the affections of the body of Christ. The Little Way is to incarnate love in your day-to-day existence with others.\textsuperscript{17}

With this new insight, her calling was to be the love and heart of God in the body of Christ in her daily context. The Little Way became her vocational response to extend the love and compassion of God intentionally to everyone. In particular, she wanted to ensure that those who felt forgotten, unloved, or unwanted knew that they were held in God’s love just like everyone else. She sought to express this unconditional love of Christ with even the most difficult personalities in the convent.

In 1897, Thérèse died prematurely of tuberculosis\textsuperscript{18}. She was unknown to her contemporaries, and many wondered what could be said at her funeral. In preparation for honoring the deceased, her sisters discovered her three-part manuscript detailing memories of her life and her theological convictions later entitled \textit{The Story of a Soul}, which revealed the inner workings of a saint.\textsuperscript{19} Copies of her writings were read worldwide. On May 17, 1925, Thérèse became a Saint of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1997, she was declared a Doctor of the church, an elite title for a theologian offering significant contributions to understanding God.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{17} Richard Beck, \textit{Stranger God: Meeting Jesus in Disguise} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 159.
\textsuperscript{19} Richard Beck, \textit{Stranger God: Meeting Jesus in Disguise} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 139.
\end{flushright}
The Renewal Retreat

This Little Way may be practiced by anyone in any context. To extend this way of compassion, one must first be grounded in spiritual practices and experience a delight in God. This may be in the form of prayer, meditation, or worship. By personally experiencing this love of God first, one is greater equipped to share this love with others. The Little Way is a unique spiritual practice that focuses on both God and the neighbor simultaneously. Many spiritual practices focus singularly on God replenishing the soul through practices such as prayer and worship. Disciplines such as serving the neighbor provide intentionality of pouring that love of God to others. The Little Way is a unique spiritual discipline because the focus is dual: receiving love from Christ and reaching out to the neighbor.

It was this very simple and complex spiritual discipline that sent me on a lifelong trajectory of compassion when I was five. A kindergarten friendship formed on the foundation of The Little Way impacts my life to this day. When my mother prompted me to seek out the special girl in my class, this calling was a gift from God. Discovering delight in another human with a different story and background changed my life. The Little Way creates a pathway to a deepened relationship with God and each other that transforms lives.

The Little Way holds the capacity to transform those who practice this discipline. St. Thérèse of Lisieux possessed an exemplary level of connectedness to Christ. Spiritual disciplines empower an overflow of divine love from the disciple’s heart to the world. A reclamation of embodying the heart of Christ through the spiritual discipline of The Little
Way brought energy to Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. This renewed Our Savior’s to live out its mission as a caring congregation.

On January 10-11, 2020, Our Savior’s hosted a leadership renewal retreat to introduce staff, board, and active members to contemplative spiritual practices and The Little Way. The retreat schedule included yoga, worship, prayer, the loving-kindness meditation, refreshments, a presentation of the obstacles to hospitality, case study conversations on the Little Way, and Holy Communion. After this retreat, participants were asked to practice the loving-kindness meditation and The Little Way on a daily basis for forty consecutive days. The plethora of spiritual practices introduced at this retreat served as additional resources to renew these members in their faith.

After forty days, surveys and interviews were used to assess whether these individuals developed greater compassion toward self and others beyond their normative social circles. Participants shared how the daily implementation of The Little Way had impacted their lives since the retreat. On March 15, 2020, Our Savior’s transitioned to virtual worship due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in further caring initiatives to offer compassion within the congregation and local community.

Starting in 2013, Our Savior’s experienced decline in membership and energy with six pastoral transitions. As a caring congregation, Our Savior’s holds great capacity to extend compassion beyond its doors. The seven years of pastoral transitions, staff turnovers, and membership decline impacted the congregation’s positive self-image and dissipated energy levels. Contemplative spiritual practices and The Little Way of
Thérèse of Lisieux taught at the renewal retreat successfully served as a vehicle to bring Our Savior's new mission into fruition.
CHAPTER 1: MINISTRY CONTEXT

Stillwater flourishes as a vibrant tourist city. Thousands of guests from the Twin Cities metro visit Stillwater regularly to enjoy eateries, quaint shops, and the St. Croix River. It is within this community, known for its hospitality industry, that Our Savior’s active members were commissioned to live out The Little Way.

The draw to this community’s scenic landscape also attracted early settlers. According to the Washington County Historical Society, Stillwater initiated in 1848 when six-hundred lumbermen discovered this landscape as a location for industry. In 1854, Stillwater was incorporated as the first city in Minnesota. Located on the St. Croix River, Stillwater’s scenic beauty attracted the first settlers who sought to create the logging industry and sawmills: “Stillwater had all of the ingredients for a lumbering town: river connections to the northern Minnesota and Wisconsin pine lands, still waters for assembling rafts, and water power.”¹ As railroads arrived in 1870, the community began to see an influx of wealth and a population boom to thirteen-thousand residents.

¹ Washington County Historical Society, Stillwater, Minnesota 2020, www.wchsmn.org/stillwater/
In 2020, Stillwater is still a thriving tourist city. Antique shops, restaurants, and a charming downtown reside alongside the riverfront. Historic mansions serve as bed and breakfasts, creating an ideal location for a quick getaway. In 2010, Stillwater’s chamber of commerce completed an economic development strategy. This was a requirement based upon the Metropolitan Land Planning Act, whereas all cities, townships, and counties must prepare a comprehensive plan every ten years. In Stillwater, this included an expansion of free parking for visitors, beautifying parks, and remodeling the historic downtown restaurants and shops to include over one hundred locally-owned businesses.

Stillwater’s residents are primarily middle to upper class. This relaxing river town holds a special appeal to residents who want an escape from the hectic metro life of the Twin Cities. The state park and scenic landscape of the St. Croix River is a draw for those who enjoy bike trails, river boats, and fishing. Over half of residents commute into the Twin Cities metro area for work. The main employers within Stillwater include health care, manufacturing, and retail. Stillwater’s demographics comprise of a total population of 19,232. The average age is 40.4. Median property value is set at $225,900. There is a poverty rate of 5.6 percent and homeownership includes 78.7 percent of the population.\(^2\)

Stillwater includes the historic downtown by the riverfront with mostly privately-owned small businesses, as well as a newer shopping development on the western edge of the community with large chain stores such as Walmart and Target. There is a busy thoroughfare connecting the historical part of town and the newer development. Our

\(^2\) COVID-19 in Numbers Data USA: www.datausa.io/profile/geo/stillwater-mn
Savior’s Lutheran is located on this thoroughfare in the middle of town. The immediate neighborhood surrounding Our Savior’s includes modest homes built in the 1960s. Roughly 65 percent of Our Savior’s members live within ten miles of the church building. An upper middle class neighborhood located two miles away from the congregation includes city bike trails, natural parks, and a golf course.

While Stillwater residents primarily consist of middle to upper middle class citizens, there is also a growing number of homeless youth. With the spread of the global pandemic of 2020, economic strain is on the rise in this community. The local ministerial serves as advocates to alleviate hunger and address poverty through various developing initiatives. This includes a homeless drop-in center and a growing number of small food pantries.

Historical Overview of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church

Stemming from relational roots, Our Savior’s initiated as a caring community. A core identifiable marker of Our Savior’s was an emphasis on strengthening relationships, since the church existed as a community without a designated location for thirty-eight years before constructing a building. In essence, the focus was on people and extending a welcome to others. Our Savior’s Lutheran Church began with occasional worship gatherings in homes starting in 1858, four years after Stillwater was established as the first city of Minnesota. The Rev. Laurentius Larsen officiated for these gatherings prior to the Civil War. Later, in 1872, a Norwegian Lutheran pastor, Rev. H.G. Stub, formalized this gathered community by creating a constitution and bylaws.
In its early years, Our Savior’s fluctuated between called pastors and pulpit supply from area churches due to a clergy shortage. In 1885, the congregation officially adopted the synod’s constitution and changed the name of this worshipping community from Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran to Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. In 1890, Our Savior’s and the Norwegian congregations in the neighboring communities of Hudson, Wisconsin and Bayport, Minnesota became a multi-point parish under the leadership of their pastor, Rev. Meggang. Unfortunately, Rev. Meggang was serving all three congregations at once when he passed away one year later, creating a pastoral vacancy for these churches.

During this liminal space at Our Savior’s, women took on a leadership role. In January of 1891, the Our Savior’s Ladies Aid Society formed. The mission of this women’s group was two-fold: fundraising and supporting missionary endeavors. The women of Our Savior’s voiced opinions openly and held the right to vote in larger congregational decisions, nearly thirty years before women won the right to vote in American governmental elections. The women of the congregation inspired a global focus in the 1800s, and this emphasis continues in 2020. Today, Our Savior’s has mission partners in Guatemala, Tanzania, and Jamaica.

After a thorough search, the congregation called Rev. N.L. Blomholm to serve as the pastor of Our Savior’s in 1892. Under Blomholm’s leadership, Our Savior’s broke ground in 1896 for their first church building. Previously, Our Savior’s had used spaces at Trinity Lutheran, St. Paul Lutheran, and Ascension Episcopal Churches, all located in Stillwater. The women of Our Savior’s raised enough money to purchase a parcel of land
on Sixth Street in Stillwater for $3,000. On May 10, 1896, the cornerstone for Our Savior’s was laid by Rev. Blomholm. Dedicated members gave of their energy and skills to lay the foundation of the building by hand.

Pastor Oscar Thompson held the longest pastorate in Our Savior’s history, serving from 1923 to 1946. However, the church safe was stolen in 1992, along with the offerings and historical records inside. As a result, there are gaps in the Our Savior’s timeline on record of what happened during Thompson’s twenty-three years of service.

In 1956, Our Savior’s called a new lead pastor, S.O. Hilde. Despite remodeling the sanctuary just one year prior, the congregation made a bold move on August 18, 1957, by purchasing land on Olive Street, its present-day location, to make room for an influx of new members. Our Savior’s celebrated its eighty-fifth anniversary that same year. The original wing of the present building was completed in 1961. For the next forty years, Our Savior’s remained a small congregation, offering faithful and stable ministry.

Season of Growth: 1999-2013

After one-hundred and forty-one years of steady ministry, Our Savior’s entered a golden era beginning in 1999. The trifecta of location, leadership, and struggling neighboring congregations provided an opportunity to expand. Over the course of nine years, Our Savior’s Senior Pastor Steve Molin grew the congregation from seven hundred to fifteen hundred members. A building expansion tripled the footprint of the campus in 2003. Our Savior’s grew from a solo pastor congregation to needing two associate pastors, an expanded lay staff, and administrative staff.
Raised outside of the church, Molin experienced a conversion to Jesus through Young Life Ministries. As one who grew up without a Christian background, Molin was sensitive to those who did not yet know Christ, and the story of his spiritual journey was compelling to them. One of Molin’s strategies was utilizing the church sign on Olive Street to communicate poignant and humorous messages. Thousands of people drive past this sign daily on their way to work in the metro area. People began noticing this subtle evangelism through Molin’s sign ministry. Reports indicated that people even traveled hundreds of miles to see what the sign had to say to passing vehicles. This methodology of outreach took little time yet attracted a strong following. From a marketing perspective, it was an effective way to brand Our Savior’s.

Some of the growth at Our Savior’s during this time came from the other two ELCA churches in town: Trinity and St. Paul. These two churches were experiencing leadership crises, and many of their members transitioned to Our Savior’s. While newcomers from other congregations were drawn to Molin’s missional outreach, many unchurched people also started attending, creating a huge boom in membership and a new era for Our Savior’s.

Our Savior’s had many draws. An expanded building with a charismatic and evangelistic leader held great appeal for Our Savior’s new members. A choice of contemporary and traditional Lutheran worship provided novelty and stability for younger and older generations. The addition of screens and use of visuals in worship enriched the service. By the end of Molin’s first decade at Our Savior’s, the church was welcoming up to eighty new members at its bi-annual new member classes.
Outside variables soon impacted this constant growth. In 2009, the ELCA took an affirming stance on same-sex marriage and openly gay clergy. This decision initiated the first major membership decline Our Savior’s experienced in ten years. Disagreeing with the direction of the wider church, many members left over this dividing line. The contemporary worship service also began to experience an identity crisis as it could no longer attract new faces. Meanwhile, the other ELCA churches in Stillwater were once again experiencing stable leadership. Members that had transferred to Our Savior’s filtered back to their former congregations.

In 2011, the economic slump meant layoffs for many church members. Giving plummeted, as did attendance. Trusting that God completed the ministry he was called to do at Our Savior’s, after fourteen years of service, Molin left this call in 2013 to lead another church as an interim pastor.

Season of Loss 2013-2017

During the next eighteen months, Our Savior’s was in a quandary. As the transition period stretched on, the call committee felt increasing pressure to make a decision. In hindsight, it seems the efficacy of the call process may have been impacted by this feeling of urgency. The new lead pastor, Dale Stiles, had no experience in leading a fifteen hundred-member congregation alongside two associate pastors.

Within a year, Stiles made a major leadership decision that dramatically changed the Sunday morning experience. With support from the church board and staff, Stiles discerned to eliminate the middle worship hour. Instead of having three worship
experiences on a Sunday morning, only two would now be offered, allowing for a full hour of both adult education and children’s ministries in between.

Stiles hoped that families who used to attend the middle service at 9:15 a.m. would alter their habits and participate in a full hour of education followed by a full hour of worship. This hope was not realized. Eliminating the worship option at 9:15 a.m. resulted in a mass exodus from Our Savior’s. The transition was too much in light of all of the larger changes that occurred prior to Stiles’ arrival: slow economy, stronger worship and leadership at other churches in the area, and the direction of the ELCA as a denomination all led members to leave.

Ongoing personnel turnover deepened the congregation’s deflating morale. Shortly after Pastor Stiles’ arrival, the other two pastors took new calls. Pastor Linda Friesen was called as the lead pastor at a church in a neighboring suburb, and Pastor Dawn Alitz found a new leadership opportunity serving on the staff of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Within three years, Our Savior’s lost 40 percent of its engaged membership. The rapid growth that blossomed under Pastor Molin evaporated as most of the first-time churchgoers found new church communities or ceased church activity altogether. Many of the transplants from the other ELCA churches in town migrated back to their former congregations as their leadership landscape stabilized. Our Savior’s hired a consulting firm for help, and the firm determined that Stiles was not a good fit for the congregation. Stiles left abruptly without a new call, and the congregation continued to struggle in this liminal space.
Season of Discernment: 2018-2019

Over the next fifteen months, Our Savior’s underwent a deep congregational assessment. The mission statement developed under Molin’s leadership reflected his personal passion for evangelism. Our Savior’s needed to identify a new mission that reflected its current context. In 2018, Our Savior’s began to assess their identity and leadership needs. The decision was made to reexamine and update the mission statement. A transition team was formed during this new interim period. Extensive surveys were distributed and thorough research was conducted to learn how members define Our Savior’s today. The survey asked respondents what first drew them to Our Savior’s and what kept them coming back, as well as questions about favorite church events, values, growth areas, the congregation’s sense of calling, and their hopes for the future.

After surveying one-hundred members, the transition team used the insights gleaned from the data to develop the first draft of a new vision, mission, and values. The team presented this information to the congregation at a listening session on October 21, 2018. After prayerful deliberation, the congregation finalized a new mission statement, vision, and values.

**Mission:** Our Savior’s Lutheran Church is a caring community, called by Christ to serve and life in faith.

**Vision:** We will be energized, engaged, and equipped to demonstrate God’s love to all.

**Values:** Include four areas of ministry:
1. Supporting children, youth, family, senior, and intergenerational ministries
2. Providing meaningful worship and spiritual growth
3. Welcoming all people into our faith community and nurturing caring relationships.
4. Reaching out to share God’s gifts with those in need in our community and the world.³

To live out this newfound sense of calling of a caring community, Our Savior’s invested in training two leaders as facilitators of Stephen Ministry⁴, an accompaniment ministry organization founded in 1975. This was an intentional move to specifically ensure that members of Our Savior’s who were experiencing extreme suffering, whether emotional, physical, or spiritual, would have access to a trained and caring lay minister. Currently, Our Savior’s has two trained facilitators that offer training sessions bi-monthly to eighteen caregivers. Stephen ministers are committed to connecting with their care receiver weekly.

The youth of Our Savior’s have consistently experienced profound inspiration through their mission trips. They too desired to intentionally live out their faith as a caring community by participating in service opportunities on a monthly basis. They created a grassroots, teen-led ministry called Mission Activate that leads hands-on service projects in the metro area. Past projects include donating toiletries and food to area shelters and advocating for those without voice.

In addition to these two focus areas, Our Savior’s members built a strong foundation of lay leadership to support the business side of church management. Pastor Stiles readily admitted lacking business knowledge or staff managerial expertise. The board of Our Savior’s discerned the need to secure leadership in human resources,


⁴ Stephen Ministry: www.stephenministry.org
finance, and property management to ensure that a short tenured pastorate could be avoided in the future. A greater sense of ownership in church laity leadership provided necessary stability in this interim time, further building on the church’s new mission to be a caring community.

On July 22, 2019, Our Savior’s called me as their new lead pastor by unanimous vote. My call at Our Savior’s began on September 9, 2019. During the interview process, the call committee shared the new mission, vision, and values. I took their words and inserted them into a visual: the American sign-language symbol for love. To create the love sign, the thumb, index finger, and pinky fingers are extended, while the middle and ring fingers are folded into the palm. The pointer finger extends upward, recognizing love comes from God. The thumb points toward the signer, representing the need for the church to relate with compassion toward each other in age-appropriate ministries that welcome everyone. Finally, the pinky extends slightly away from the signer, pointing Our Savior’s in an outward direction. These directions symbolize the many ways in which God’s love flows.

This visual took the vision, mission, and values to a heightened level of diagnostic understanding. In this symbol, the pointer finger indicates that the congregation first receives love from Christ in worship and prayer. Inwardly, the thumb reveals the need for the church to relate in small groups and faith formation. Finally, the pinky points Our Savior’s in an outward direction to extend grace and hospitality to those in the wider community and throughout the world.
Figure 1. Our Savior’s Church Mission, Vision and Values and Theme Song
I also wrote a congregational theme song that united our voices in this mission to demonstrate God’s love to all. While this visual and song were reenergizing to the congregation, the fatigue of pastoral transitions, membership departures, and staff layoffs had taken their toll. The congregation recognized the need for personal renewal and affirmation. In order to live into the newfound calling of a caring community, the congregation worked to rebuild itself through self-care and ongoing affirmation of worth. Just as a broken arm cannot easily embrace another, so this body of Christ needed healing before it could effectively reach out to the world.

To demonstrate God’s love to all, the members first needed to experience this love of Christ personally. This is where the compassion and renewal retreat offered inspiration from the spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. This strengthened active members in their faith and capacity to embrace others beyond the church walls. Spending time in the presence of God and learning a pragmatic approach to The Little Way provided a great pathway to live into a new era of compassion at Our Savior’s.

Our Savior’s Today: September 2019-2020

After seven years of transition, Our Savior’s stabilized, with committed members investing their time and talents to keep the organizational structure running. The once fifteen hundred-member congregation is now diminished by almost half to seven hundred members. The average weekly worship attendance is three hundred people total at three worship services combined. Sunday mornings include an early traditional service held in the smaller sanctuary that seats one hundred occupants. This worshipping population is largely retired and offers strong financial investment in the ministries of the church. The
style of this worship service includes traditional Lutheran liturgy, clergy vestments, and hymns accompanied on the organ. Attendance is consistent at one hundred worshippers for this traditional service.

Two contemporary worship services are held in the larger community life center. This worshipping experience attracts young families and first-time visitors. While the space seats up to four hundred people, a typical experience on either a Sunday or a Wednesday draws one hundred worshippers. The spaciousness of the room can feel uninviting when it is not even at half of its occupancy capacity.

Although the church numbers stabilized and members reported feeling prepared to accept new leadership, the board and staff discerned that a current analysis of strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats, or SWOT analysis, would be beneficial to prepare for future ministry initiatives. A total of fifteen staff serve at Our Savior’s, including part-time musicians and a vacant parish nurse position. Only six are full-time employees: lead pastor, youth minister, children’s minister, worship minister, church administrator, and building manager. These core six staff members and six board members were surveyed and responded to questions on how Our Savior’s lives into the new mission, vision, and values. This included a prompt to list strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to Our Savior’s ministries.

Themes emerged quickly between both the board and staff in this SWOT analysis. All participants agreed that the greatest strength of Our Savior’s is the relational approach to ministries and authenticity in every program. In particular, the youth remain highly engaged and often serve as leaders. For example, the middle school confirmation classes
are taught primarily by the senior high youth. Teens also initiate most service opportunities through the teen ministry program, Mission Activate.

Despite a strong relational ministry, hospitality and follow-through with visitors was a serious concern. Our Savior’s attracts many first-time worshippers at the large community life center. However, ushers remain difficult to recruit. Another weakness is the fact that adults with school-aged children do not actively participate in church life. While members aged twenty-five to fifty-five enrolled their children in the strong children’s and youth programs, this demographic barely participated in church life otherwise. Parents are largely uninvolved in all aspects of the ministries at Our Savior’s ranging from worship attendance to small groups or volunteering. Another consequence of low adult engagement is a lack of financial investment in the church.

Opportunities exist to start a small group initiative during this time of global pandemic. Worship is now held online and through a drive-up parking lot service utilizing a radio transmitter. There is a growing desire reported from members for relational ministries. A small group is highlighted as an opportunity that can shift from online to in person when members may safely gather again. This will begin in the 2020-2021 school year. Connect groups will serve in building on Our Savior’s relational and authentic strength, while also fueling the faith of adults. The largest threat to the congregation right now is the uncertainty of the global COVID-19 pandemic. If worship is held virtually or in person during the next school year, connect groups will play a crucial role in continuing to strengthen the relational bonds of members.
One of the goals of the SWOT analysis was to discern a new ministry initiative that would increase membership engagement and greater financial generosity. Our Savior’s is currently working with a financial consultant called Stewardship for All Seasons to work toward this goal. All of this is grounded in our new mission to be a caring community.

The new mission, vision, and values offer a great opportunity to see how God will empower this church to demonstrate God’s love to all. The Little Way offered an opportunity to rebuild morale, increase enthusiasm, and reclaim the natural inclinations of this congregation to love others. The retreat created space to connect with God through spiritual practices, learn about the psychology behind divisions in this world, and practice authentic outreach. Practicing The Little Way as a spiritual discipline via a forty-day experiment resulted in an initial reinvigoration of the church.

This posture of warm welcome had been lost in recent years. By reinforcing the congregation’s calling to experience and share the love of God to neighbors, The Little Way also empowered Our Savior’s to make a conscious choice of welcoming newcomers. The timing of this retreat was impeccable, as the neighborhood will drastically change in the next year.

Our Savior’s is getting new neighbors over the next fifteen months. A radio station adjacent to Our Savior’s went out of business in 2012, and for the past eight years, Ecumen, a Lutheran Senior Living company, had slowly purchased land from the radio station and from Our Savior’s to build a new facility next door to the church. As a result, the congregation in good financial standing with $310,000 in liquid assets, with half this
sum from the sale of a portion of the land to Ecumen. In the fall of 2020, Ecumen plans to break ground and build a new senior living co-op that will open the fall of 2021. This new facility, under the brand name Zvago, will have capacity for forty-eight units.

This opportunity for outreach to new neighbors may inspire Our Savior’s to live into the new mission. The foundation for a natural partnership is already in place. There is a Planned Unit Development, or PUD, agreement in place for future shared green space and parking between Our Savior’s and the Zvago facility. Ecumen has a history of building campuses near churches, and these congregations often experience a renewal with new neighbors participating in worship.

This groundbreaking of the senior living co-op creates another outreach opportunity. Lake Area Discovery Center, or LADC, is a nursery and preschool that rents space at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. Our Savior’s is required to have a playground to maintain a partnership with LADC, but the current playground is rotting and unsalvageable. When the senior living campus breaks ground, the playground will be torn down and a new playground will be built. The new playground, which will be visible from the road, may attract the attention of young families. An investment in these community partnerships with Zvago Senior Living Co-op and LADC holds possibilities for an exciting future at Our Savior’s. In order to make this outreach successful, the church first needed a sense of renewal surrounding the new mission.

The Little Way retreat targeted active members of Our Savior’s and empowered the congregation to enter into a new era of excitement, potential, and flourishing. Through the renewal found in grounding each day with intentional contemplative
practices, and then actively extending hospitality to others in daily life through The Little Way, members discovered a deepened enthusiasm and efficacy to live into the newly articulated mission statement. A continued focus on The Little Way as a long-term strategic initiative helped the congregation reclaim an identity as a caring community and prepare for an exciting future.
PART TWO:

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Our Savior’s mission statement centers on extending compassion to members, the community, and the wider world. St. Thérèse of Lisieux discovered her calling to embody Christ’s heart on earth. The Little Way offered insights into pragmatically living out Our Savior’s mission. As a broken body of Christ, Our Savior’s struggled in recent years to extend welcome and compassion to others. Members left in droves following the departure of a well-loved pastor. Our Savior’s recognized the need for inner healing of the church body before it could engage in effective outreach again. In this literature review, the hospitality of God is identified as a core concept to study. From a theological, historical, and pragmatic lens, various authors share key ideas in constructing a framework for effective reinvigoration of the Our Savior’s congregation.

Christians worship a God of hospitality and welcome. God’s nature is to embrace all of creation. As humanity is created in this image of God, a calling emerged for Our Savior’s to embody this central quality of God’s embracing nature. This congregation intentionally increased its capacity for welcome to the surrounding world. A prerequisite to creating a culture of hospitality involves incorporating intentionality in spiritual
practices. St. Thérèse of Lisieux committed to spiritual practices that empowered her to love her sisters in the convent who were socially marginalized.

Literature in this review supports the themes of the hospitality of God, the pragmatic approach to deepen spiritually through contemplation practices, and the call of the church to extend compassion. This is a simplified articulation of Our Savior’s mission: Up, In, and Out. Up, a Christian experiences an embracing relationship with God. In, a disciple is deeply formed through spiritual practices. Out, the overflow of this love from God is poured into service for the neighbor.

_Trinity and the Kingdom_ by Jurgen Moltmann

Our Savior’s extends hospitality and welcome to the wider community, which mirrors the very nature of a welcoming triune God. Throughout church history, theologians have grappled with understanding the divine nature of the trinity. Heresies and debates prompted the need for creeds to be articulated. These confessions of faith provided guidance and theological explanations of divine mysteries. Moltmann provides a comprehensive and analytical articulation of the nature of the trinity, from which a theme emerges in relation to this doctoral project: the nature of the trinity to produce an overflow of welcome and love.

Deep experiential knowledge of God through spiritual practices creates a wellspring of desire to share divine love. As God generously brings all of existence into being, the nature of God is to extend love from the trinity to the created ordered world. Humanity at its best is intended to be a reflection of this embracing God. The more a disciple basks in this love of God, the Holy Spirit transforms the human soul to be an
extension of divine grace in the world. First, one must search for an explanation of God’s nature.

God’s essence is dynamic and relational. Father, Son, and Spirit interact with one another with purity and selfless love. In God’s perfection, this love cannot be contained, but must be poured out into the created world. It was the divine voice of love that spoke creation into existence. As each person of the Trinity loves perfectly within the God-head to the God-head, this creativity also produced life beyond this triune union. Moltmann explains, “The process of creating the world is then identified with the inner-trinitarian life of God, and vice versa: the world process is the eternal life of God himself.”¹ Social Trinitarian doctrine conceptualizes the imagery of an endless circle dance, or an inclusive triune God, beckoning all of creation to join in this union. Humanity is commissioned to be created co-creators in this dance and in designing a spacious place of grace for others.

As humans are created in the image of God, there is by definition an inherent nature to offer inclusion beyond oneself. Humanity is highly relational. A distinguishing marker between humanity and other creatures is this understanding of being a uniquely created co-creator, made in the image of God.

While God perfectly loves within the Trinity itself, God also expands this love to include all of creation. In God’s perfection, this love extends into creative forces of designing the world as it is known. It is also in the carefully constructed humans that God longs for divine love to be known. Moltmann identifies,

This movement in God is made possible and determined by the fact that in the depth of that life emerges the divine mystery, the inner suffering thirst of the Godhead, its inner longing for its ‘Other’, which for God is capable of being the object of the highest most boundless love. In this heart God has this passionate longing, not just for any random ‘Other’ but for ‘his’ Other—that is, for the one who is the ‘Other’ for him himself. And that is man, his ‘image.’

As God perfectly loves within the triune head, this longing to extend welcome and compassion to creation follows. God spoke all of existence into being, claiming a goodness in the natural order. Humanity, as created to reflect God on earth, holds a special role in the divine heart. Jesus instructed in the upper room that the disciples should abide in God. Abide is also translated as dwelling or tabernacle and brings the imagery of allowing God to reside deeply within one’s soul.

The fulcrum between divine delight and extending compassion is a dynamic point at which The Little Way is authentically lived out. Moltmann articulates that a theology of action must be grounded in steep spiritual disciplines. Without the spiritual discipline, the gesture is merely a response given not out of faith but obligation. Moltmann explains, “Faith lives in meditation and prayer as well as in practice. Without the vita contemplative, the vita activa becomes debased into activism, falling victim to the pragmatism of the modern meritocratic society which judges by performance.” Spiritual practices lay the groundwork through which inner and outer transformation is attainable.

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2 Ibid., 45.
3 Ibid., 7.
The triune God extends hospitality and embrace beyond humanity and toward all of existence. As an expression of compassion toward all that was made, God desires communion within the trinity, towards humanity, and to the entire created order. This desire of the divine to enjoy fellowship also holds salvific power. “The triunity is open in such a way that the whole creation can be united with it and can be one within it. The union of the divine Trinity is open for the uniting of the whole creation with itself and in itself. So the unity of the Trinity is not merely a theological term; at heart it is a soteriological one as well.”

Moltmann focuses on the breadth of the Holy Trinity’s nature, but does not provide a greater coverage of the depth of the relational nature of God toward humanity. He does explore the relational nature of the Godhead and how the Father, Son, and Spirit remain interconnected. However, the emphasis to welcome humanity remains core in constructing a theology around hospitality. A stronger theological case that God is deeply relational and extends gracious embrace to humanity is found in the next source by Miroslav Volf. It is in this divine welcome that a healing and wholeness becomes possible. This is the very embrace St. Thérèse of Lisieux desired to model as an expression of God’s heart on earth in the body of Christ. This embracing God transforms humanity and also brought a renewal to Our Savior’s members.

*Exclusion and Embrace* by Miroslav Volf

Our Savior’s articulated a new mission to intentionally embody a caring community that is willing to extend hospitality and grace to others. This work by Volf

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4 Ibid., 96.
covers a strong theological background on what a healing embrace from Christ can do to offer renewal and transformation. With outstretched arms on the cross, Jesus demonstrated what embracing the world looks like. In the cross, Christ is both victim and victor. The sufferings and sins of this earth are represented in this ultimate sacrifice. Jesus uttered words of forgiveness from the cross. When humanity is not in a state of compassion but of revenge, this infliction of perpetual pain upon one’s enemies is difficult to cease. Faced with a tough question on what it means to forgive a perpetrator, Volf wrestles with an experiential healing embrace from God that includes one’s enemies.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux noticed that many sisters in the convent held negative feelings toward each other. She also wrestled with what embracing everyone without exception entails. In a similar way, Volf articulates that increasing one’s capacity for gracious embrace is rooted in the demonstration that Jesus gave on the cross. Volf argues, “The goal of the cross is the dwelling of human beings ‘in the Spirit,’ ‘in Christ,’ and ‘in God.’ Forgiveness is therefore not the culmination of Christ’s relation to the offending other; it is a passage leading to embrace. The arms of the crucified are open—a sign of a space in God’s self and an invitation for the ‘enemy’ to come in.”

Modeling Jesus’ outward embrace of the cross is no easy task. The natural inclination is to exclude and reside in an echo-chamber reinforcing a narrative. Instead,


by setting aside what appear to be irreconcilable differences, one discovers that the posture of the cross is the pathway to mending and healing transgressions. Volf explains, “Much of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ is summed up in this injunction, ‘Let us embrace each other.’”7

This embrace is best demonstrated by God’s ultimate act of hospitality: the welcoming arms of Jesus on the cross. Truly, the cross itself is a symbol of embracing the other without reservation. This is the difficult work of reconciliation. All of humanity falls short and needs this redemptive work found solely in the cross. Volf explains, “On the cross God made space in God’s very self for others, godless others, and opened arms to invite them in. The practice of ‘double vision,’ I want to argue here, is the epistemological side of faith in the crucified.”8

Creating space for another is easier when the outreach includes individuals and groups that fall within the range of one’s affinity. Stretching beyond the parameters of what is comfortable is a challenge that may convict a Christ follower to reconsider where boundary lines are drawn. Since God discovered delight in everything created, and humanity is made in this divine image, the incarnate God in Jesus reveals compassion even to Judas, who would betray him by offering him the bread of communion. Christ also pleads on the cross that forgiveness be granted to his perpetrators. Humanity falls prey to its sinful nature by rejecting this act of gracious love.

7 Ibid., 132.
8 Ibid., 214.
Even when this willful embrace of all of humanity on the cross is rejected, the arms of God remain open wide to all who would receive this love. The parable of the prodigal son articulates an identifiable narrative. Both those within and outside the church often misunderstand the gracious will of God. Volf says, “On the cross God renews the covenant by making space for humanity in God’s self. The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God does not want to be a God without the other—humanity—and suffers humanity’s violence in order to embrace it.”

It is a powerful epiphany that in the cross, Jesus knowingly extends undeserved forgiveness. Humanity could easily remark that it is easier to embrace those who are pleasant and receptive. To offer this extension of hospitality and grace even to one’s enemies is a radical expression of divine love. Volf expands that the cross is a place of gracious space for the other. Volf states, “The goal of the cross is the dwelling of human beings ‘in the Spirit,’ ‘in Christ,’ and ‘in God.’ Forgiveness is therefore not the culmination of Christ’s relation to the offending other; it is a passage leading to embrace. The arms of the crucified are open—a sign of a space in God’s self and an invitation for the ‘enemy’ to come in.”

The hospitality of God is all inclusive in welcoming existence. God also does not force creation to accept this embrace. A demand for humanity to extend this love in return would not be the will of a gracious God. Just as grace requires no merit of worth, the recipients of this love may or may not choose to embrace the divine in return.

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9 Ibid., 154.
10 Ibid., 127.
Disciples that do receive this loving embrace of Christ on the cross experience a healing balm. The dysfunctional church as a broken body of Christ cannot stretch arms out to reach the world surrounding it. Creating a culture of embrace requires discipleship and lingering in the healing arms of God. The result of this experiential knowledge of the forgiving love of God is an increased capacity to reflect Christ’s compassion to the world. Volf continues by unpacking the imagery of the cross as an ultimate embrace,

Open arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other. To stretch the arms toward the other, the self must at the same time withdraw from itself; pull itself back, so to speak, away from the limits of its own boundaries; the self that is ‘full of itself’ can neither receive the other nor make a genuine movement toward the other.\(^\text{11}\)

The cross itself is an embrace. Christ crucified reveals the heart of God to offer hospitality and welcome to all of creation. Created in this divine image, the church more effectively reflects this loving nature of God upon the transformational movement of being held in this gracious embrace. A church that expands the boundaries of hospitality and affections of its circles of association demonstrates the embodied presence of Jesus today on earth.

Based upon the demonstrative love of Jesus in welcoming the unwanted, St. Thérèse of Lisieux drew inspiration in her daily context to do likewise. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, he welcomed sinners such as prostitutes and tax collectors. He welcomed children and spoke with women who were shunned from their communities. Jesus reached out to cleanse the lepers, a bold move, since this ritual act would make him unclean. On the cross, he also ushered in eternal life to the penitent thief on the cross,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 144.
reassuring him that paradise awaited that day. The church’s calling is to express this radical love and hospitality of the crucified Jesus. When this happens, it is the intersection of transformation and congregational renewal.

While the first source by Moltmann covered in depth and breadth the nature of the Trinity, Volf makes clear the power of healing transformation from the cross. This is a sacrificial movement of the holy embracing humanity without reservations. Yet a limitation in this theological reflection is the concern of boundaries. While there is no limitation for God to embrace humanity, mortals must consider safety and hold certain parameters.

While Jesus embraces enemies fully on the cross, a congregation like Our Savior’s found this difficult to practice. While God holds the capacity to heal and transform through the cross, humans also must place limitations and safety measures in situations where life is potentially endangered. This argument was pragmatically discussed at the retreat. Boundaries and safety measures are also an act of love and caring for the well-being of others.

_The Story of a Soul_ by St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Our Savior’s found the teachings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux on approaching hospitality insightful yet challenging. In studying this text, the congregation was encouraged to expand the confines of normative social circles. While Volf recognizes that in Christ, humanity is completely embraced, including enemies, St. Thérèse offers a pragmatic approach that still challenges one to embody the heart of Christ.
Our Savior’s discovered that approaching difficult social scenarios with compassion is easier when relying on spiritual practices that inspired outward action of love. Cultivating the will to embrace the lonely, difficult, and forgotten souls is most effective when one begins with the assurance of divine love. St. Thérèse of Lisieux referred to herself as The Little Flower. This name stemmed from a profound understanding that she was created in the Imago Dei, the Image of God. This quiet confidence, released of all egotistical motivation, gave her the capacity to delight in every soul she encountered.

On September 30, 1897, Thérèse died after a battle with tuberculosis. She was twenty-four years of age.12 Although she had every appearance as a kind person, none of her sisters knew the depth of her thinking, her love for God, and how she lived out her sense of calling. As a cloistered Carmelite nun in the city of Lisieux, Thérèse never traveled the world. During her lifetime, most people missed her contributions of thought and service. Quiet, carefree, and happy with a simple life, she was largely unnoticed by her contemporaries.13

St. Thérèse’s legacy lived on and shaped an expression of Christianity. St. Thérèse’s radical approach to God’s all-encompassing love for creation inspired a new call to hospitality for churches and Christians worldwide. Identifying with the fragility and simplicity of life, she referred to herself as The Little Flower.14 St. Thérèse


discovered a way that she could bloom in everyday life. Her understanding of loving the neighbor in front of her through The Little Way is a model pathway for discipleship.

When St. Thérèse joined the convent at the young age of fifteen, she was disillusioned when she realized that the sisters held pecking orders and favorites, and that some were treated with disdain. She was shocked by this discovery, as she truly believed everyone would be fully devoted to Christ in this holy environment. Instead, she realized that humanity is sinful and broken in all contexts.

In her manuscript, St. Thérèse discovers her calling. She found 1 Corinthians 12 limiting. She was not permitted to administer the Holy Supper or to preach, so she felt that she could not be the hands or voice of Christ. As a cloistered nun, she had no means of traveling to spread the gospel, so she could not be the feet of Jesus. 1 Corinthians 13 gave her clarity. She would be the heart of Christ. This revelation filled her with immense joy and purpose. St. Thérèse writes,

I finally had rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them all. Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most notable of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE, I understood it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES… IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love… my vocation, at last I have found it… MY VOCATION IS LOVE!”

15 Ibid., 192-194.
16 Ibid., 194.
St. Thérèse’s writing made it clear that she held an incredibly deep connection to Christ. St. Thérèse’s confidence in herself and in God’s love for her proved weighty. This love of God is accessible to anyone at any time. Once souls experience this love, there is a pragmatic methodology of sharing this love with others in one’s daily life.

Innately, humans create pecking orders. Exclusion occurs constantly for a plethora of reasons: age, race, gender, class, education level, religion, intelligence, hygiene, behavior, and more. Boundaries of time, scarcity of resources, disgust, and even hatred toward enemies become obstacles to embracing the neighbor in our forefront. St. Thérèse offers a simple yet profound methodology to embrace everyone called The Little Way. This approach is accessible for all ages, personality types, and backgrounds.17

St. Thérèse of Lisieux exemplified joy and freedom. Assured of faith, she elevates this mindset as a way to approach the divine. God is a loving parent. One must not fear but rather approach God humbly.18 Through her simplistic and refreshing lens, St. Thérèse of Lisieux revitalized the church’s call to hospitality. She describes life as a luscious garden, where variety beautifies the scenery, and each soul, whether gorgeous like a rose or simple like a daisy, belongs in God’s garden of life.


Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose or the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all the flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with the little wildflowers. And so it is with the world of souls, Jesus’ garden.19

St. Thérèse experienced a reassurance of God’s love. She knew she belonged because of her experiential knowledge of God. St. Thérèse longed for everyone to experience this divine delight as she discerned that many felt outcast, unloved, and forgotten. Putting her faith into practice, St. Thérèse managed to love even the most difficult personalities in the convent. For example, St. Thérèse states,

There is in the Community a Sister who has the faculty of displeasing me in everything, in her ways, her words, her character, everything seems very disagreeable to me. And still she is a holy religious who must be very pleasing to God. One day at recreation she asked in almost these words: ‘Would you tell me, Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus, what attracts you so much toward me; every time you look at me, I see you smile?’ Ah! What attracted me was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul; Jesus who makes sweet what is most bitter.20

Through a simple smile, St. Thérèse softened the exterior of this sister she found challenging in every regard. The simple gesture of a kind face piqued the curiosity of this sister as she received this small act of love. In St. Thérèse’s eyes, Christ was hidden within this sister, which made her pleasing and a beautiful soul. Other sisters did not notice St. Thérèse’s Little Way.

The challenge of The Little Way is that, at first glance, it appears too simplistic to resolve the world’s problems. Some scholars find St. Thérèse of Lisieux difficult to take

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19 Ibid., 14.
20 Ibid., 222-223.
seriously because she writes so expressively, often in all capital letters. Another challenge of The Little Way is that this calling to be the heart of God in the body of Christ is open to many interpretations, which makes it challenging to discern a way forward. The Little Way may be interpreted as a way of becoming small and hidden.\textsuperscript{21} It can also be identified as a methodology to ensure that Christ experienced love from a devoted disciple.\textsuperscript{22} For this doctoral project, The Little Way is interpreted as a gesture of hospitality to others. This sacrificial approach to allowing God’s love to infuse every facet of one’s life can only be made possible through a richer relationship with God.

Aside from analyzing the theological insights of The Little Way, another challenge of this doctrine is the paradox of accessibly living this out in daily life, while also finding it difficult to accomplish. A pathway to make this a successful venture is through a deepened discipleship. While St. Thérèse does not go into detail about how she attained this rich relationship with Jesus, she does state that the only book that nourished her spiritual appetite in the last years of her life was the Bible.\textsuperscript{23}

For Our Savior’s members to learn this Little Way, it seemed necessary to spend time experiencing a variety of spiritual practices, such as worship, prayer, silence, meditation, and others. This empowered members to experience God’s love and give this love freely to others. St. Thérèse’s fiery relationship with Christ stems from her understanding that she is deeply loved. This baffled even her biological sisters, who

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 220.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 77, 144.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 179.
couldn’t understand her theological ideas. In merely recognizing the absolute need for God, Jesus gives disciples direct access to divine love. St. Thérèse called this the elevator to Jesus.24 A pure love is poured into souls through an acknowledgement of needs. The Little Way is also paradoxically not miniscule as it encompasses every facet of existence.25

_Making Room_ by Christine D. Pohl

From a historical lens, both Stillwater and Our Savior’s are known for a welcoming presence. Just as early settlers drawn to Stillwater for its resources and natural beauty, the scenic landscape of the St. Croix River continues to attract tourists today. Our Savior’s also carried a relational dynamic in its inception. To build upon this welcoming and caring community, a historical understanding of hospitality throughout Christianity is helpful.

The word hospitality conjures up images of tea and crumpets at a nice banquet celebrated between a host and guests. However, the concept of Christian hospitality is historically much more complex than drinking coffee in a church basement. The simple, literal visual of hospitality as time spent enjoying conversation and friendship is a limiting post-modern depiction. Biblical hospitality is an enlarged vision of embodying the embrace of God by welcoming others.

24 Ibid., 207-208.

Ancient Israel prioritized in its narrative tradition the shared value of welcoming the foreigner. After living in exile during the region’s prophetic historical years, the people of ancient Israel shared a common cultural practice of extending grace to strangers. Pohl writes, “For the people of ancient Israel, understanding themselves as strangers and sojourners, with responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers in their midst, was part of what it meant to be the people of God.”

This can be seen as early as Genesis eighteen, when Abraham welcomed three unknown visitors who gave him a word of blessing and promised future fertility and ancestors.

In the New Testament, Jesus hosts the Last Supper and offers his own body and blood, redefining the Passover into a transformed meal of the Eucharist. As host, Jesus even extends table grace to Judas, who dipped bread into the same bowl. All throughout his life, even during the final moments on the cross, Jesus continually welcomed sinners. This compassion to reach out to the broken was imbedded in Christ’s own birth narrative. His expecting parents experienced continual rejection and a lack of hospitality as they searched for a place to stay in Bethlehem. Jesus identifies with the experience as a stranger in a foreign land. When Christ was an infant, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled from King Herod and found refuge in Egypt. Pohl interprets,

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In his life on earth, Jesus experienced the vulnerability of the homeless infant, the child refugee, the adult with no place to lay his head, the despised convict. This intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians. Jesus welcomes and needs welcome; Jesus requires that followers depend on and provide hospitality. The practice of Christian hospitality is always located within the larger picture of Jesus’ sacrificial welcome to all who welcome him.27

During his life on earth, Jesus knew what it meant to be rejected by, welcomed by, and welcoming of others. The cross represents humanity’s rejection of a suffering servant. Mere days before the crucifixion, Jesus was treated as a messianic hopeful, riding on a donkey, warmly embraced by the faithful attending Passover. Most of Jesus’ ministry centered around extending hospitality to the stranger, the outcast, the unloved, the leper. The very individuals and people groups that Jesus welcomed were ostracized and distrusted by the Pharisees. This history repeats itself in the post-modern era: “Today some of the most complex political and ethical tensions center around recognizing or treating people as equals.”28

This welcoming nature of Jesus drew the attention of Gentiles, Samaritans, and those in society that often felt mistreated, excluded, and judged. As an expression of the hospitality of God, the ministry of Jesus was radical for its day. This is translatable to the current era of history as racial injustice, gender inequality, and other mistreatments of another contradict the natural inclinations of Christ to embrace. Pohl writes, “Hospitality resists boundaries that endanger persons by denying their humanness. It saves others from the invisibility that comes from social abandonment. Sometimes, by the very acting

27 Ibid., 17.
28 Ibid., 61.
out of welcome, a vision for a whole society is offered, a small evidence that transformed relations are possible.”

Christ’s salvific embrace on the cross is the ultimate act of welcome. God’s motive for extending this grace is out of an unconditional love and a desire for the redemption of all creation. Daily, Jesus extended hospitality as he fed the hungry crowds, healed the sick, and gave hope that the kingdom of God was near. The constituents of this kingdom include the entire fallen human race—created in the image of God. This grace is offensive, radical, and challenging to disciples. Pohl states, “Every human being was created by God for eternity and redeemed by Christ. Therefore, every person was due fundamental respect regardless of her or his condition or position or lifestyle.”

Jesus truly welcomes all at the meal and at the cross, and his followers in the Christian church are challenged to do likewise. True Christian hospitality expands the boundaries drawn by exclusion. Because all of humanity is created in God’s image, authentic love requires an embrace of the entire human race. Churches often create barriers and boundaries to this radical hospitality. To love God is to love those created in the image of God. When this calling is embraced, this can be the transformational place where the church effectively reaches the world. Pohl identifies, “Hospitality begins at the gate, in the doorway, on the bridges between public and private space. Finding and creating threshold places is important for contemporary expressions of hospitality.”

29 Ibid., 64.
30 Ibid., 67.
31 Ibid., 95.
As Pohl stated that hospitality is discovered at the intersection between public spaces and places of privacy, a new paradigm of Christian hospitality is on the horizon that Pohl had no way to predict. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, churches were required to proclaim the message of the Gospel through greater use of technology, innovation, creativity, and accessibility. For example, the worship services for Our Savior’s are now found on the internet, local television, radio, and phone dial-in service. All of these technologies are publicly available yet privately accessed through personal devices. Worshippers view services from all over the globe and at convenient times for the participant.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, twenty-five miles away from Stillwater. Civil unrest spread quickly in response. Our Savior’s provided relief efforts in the Twin Cities for neighborhoods destroyed by fires. For the church to be effective in caring initiatives, it is vital to leave the building and follow the call of Jesus to love the world.

As Our Savior’s identifies a newfound calling to be a caring community, this definition of Christian hospitality as articulated by Pohl serves as an inspirational challenge. Biblically, theologically, and historically, the church has always been called to welcome others. This is demonstrative divine love that offers a transformational healing to a hurting world.

*Flourish* by Catherine Hart Weber, PhD

To effectively reach the world with compassion, Our Savior’s needed to spend time experiencing refreshment from God. One avenue for this was practicing the art of
meditation. The retreat taught concrete spiritual practices to help members achieve delight in the divine. Humanity was designed to flourish in God’s Garden of Eden. Humankind has longed to return to the divine intimacy of Eden ever since the biblical fall from perfection. St. Thérèse discovered a way to satiate this thirst. Weber reminds that this is the authentic way of life. “We were created for Eden; for a life of beauty and harmony with God, as our truest most authentic selves, in the good company of others, and His magnificent creation.”

St. Thérèse confidently claimed her identity as a loved child of God. If souls were flowers, every type of plant belongs in God’s garden.33 Experiencing God’s love personally empowers Christians to share divine love with others. Tending to this flower, one’s own soul in God’s garden, requires devoted discipleship.

St. Thérèse placed a major emphasis on regular spiritual discipline, as did the retreat hosted at Our Savior’s. Weber writes about the psychological benefits of meditation that can be observed and measured in a laboratory setting, which adds a layer of scientific credibility to what St. Thérèse finds so imperative for a rich spiritual life. During the retreat and the forty-day follow-up experiment, Our Savior’s members directly felt the impact of daily meditation and spiritual practices that positively changed the brain and capacity for hospitality.


Daily spiritual practices possess the power to transform the brain and create a calmer and healthier outlook on life. After meditation, neurons in the brain are positively impacted. This empowers a disciple to enter into one’s daily contexts with a larger capacity for handling stress and extending hospitality to others. Weber identifies: “Our brains can change and we can transform our minds because of something called ‘neural plasticity.’ The brain’s neurons are flexible and can change. Research in psychological science and relation shows that people of faith are not only happier and healthier, but they recover better from traumas.”34

Meditation creates space for God to bring a healing balm. In experiencing this loving presence of the Holy Spirit, a sustained peace may linger. The daily discipline of spiritual practices such as meditation create a lasting disposition. Weber reveals,

The antidote to worry lies in a vibrant, flourishing faith. Our brains are hardwired for God and sacred practices. Modern living doesn’t naturally take us down the path of tranquility and peace, and neither do most of our faith practices. That is where Spirit filled Christ centered contemplative spirituality is essential for us to learn the fine art of living in peace and tranquility. Prayer and meditation transform the state of your mind and rewire your brain through the power of the malleability of neuroplasticity. Scientists are becoming more convinced of the benefits of religion and spirituality.35

Prayer and meditation may take a variety of forms. Listening in silence, centering on a word from scripture, or paying attention to one’s breath are a few examples. Fixating on scripture through lectio divina or visio divina may also draw inspiration. The examen prayer, a reflection at the end of the day, brings insight into where Christ’s presence was

34 Ibid., 127-128.
known or could be present in the future. By engaging in contemplative prayerful practices regularly, Weber says, “you build up your psychological immunity, which benefits you beyond the time of prayer.”\textsuperscript{36}

Just as an athlete gets physically stronger and faster with habitual practice, so it is with spiritual practices. The health benefits include improved blood circulation and lowered anxiety, which can offset the negative impacts of a hurried and worried lifestyle. One of the lingering effects of spiritual practices is the resiliency that a relaxation and delight in God carries into daily living. Weber explains the neurological benefits,

Neuroscientists have shown that regular contemplative prayer and meditation contribute to changes in brain chemistry, allowing the brain to be more peaceful. Biology and spirituality work powerfully together. Earlier I mentioned the study done with nuns during times of meditation and prayer and the ongoing effect it had afterwards when they went about their normal daily routines. The front left side of the brain (clarity and happiness) lit up; the back part of the brain (emotional, fear, reptilian brain) was subdued. Many studies like this show that while in prayer and deep meditation, the flexible, transforming capacity of your brain is able to let go of negative thinking and the need to control, clearing your mind to simply relax and go with the flow. Meditation is the primary natural treatment for reducing fear, worry, and anxiety.\textsuperscript{37}

This study explains the impact that meditation and spiritual practices has on the brain. St. Thérèse of Lisieux also experienced this genuine delight in God through daily spiritual practices. The study Weber describes revealed the lingering positive impact that meditation and prayer had for a convent. Similarly, St. Thérèse approached daily living with a growing capacity to create gracious space for others. In her own writings, St. Thérèse confessed that the only book she read during the last few years of her life was the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 197.
She discovered the joy and delight of daily time spent receiving the love of the triune God and the practice of giving that divine love to those around her.

While Weber explains the science behind what happens to the brain during meditation and the positive impact physiologically, she offers no instruction on how to meditate. Weber also shares that humans are designed to flourish but does not go into greater detail on how to achieve this greater depth of spiritual discipleship. Our Savior’s members found instructions on meditation helpful, which Weber does not provide. Still Weber offers great research in identifying the markers of a resilient life and the scientific impact of meditation.

*The Critical Journey* By Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich

As Our Savior’s members began exploring new spiritual practices such as The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way, retreat participants recognized a notable inner shift. Participants experienced stress reduction, a feeling of re-centering, and improved focus on a typical day. Encountering this hospitality of God’s love, an inner spiritual embrace was developing as disciples responded to God’s affirmations. Meditation, as highlighted in Weber’s work, is one of many pathways to experience inner change.

In the work by Hagberg and Guelich, this journey of deepening spiritual formation is much like a cyclical spiral that one goes through various stages, repeatedly throughout a lifetime. As disciples navigate through this spiral, with every curvature, the

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journey is deepened. Several theologians throughout church history describe this pathway. St. Teresa of Ávila describes a similar journey in her classic work *The Interior Castle*. In the book *The Critical Journey*, Hagberg and Guelich offer thorough analysis of what each stage of the spiritual journey detailed in *The Interior Castle* entails. Instead of a castle imagery as used by St. Teresa of Ávila, Hagberg and Guelich offer a cyclical illustration for the stages of faith formation in this diagram:

Figure 2. The Stages of The Critical Journey

Analysis of this diagram suggests that saints in the past such as St. Thérèse of Lisieux managed to break through this wall. As discipleship begins with innocent curiosity leading to a strong commitment, eventually, a wall will emerge. This is a crisis of the faith. St. John of the Cross referred to this as the dark night of the soul. His contemporary St. Teresa of Ávila speaks of a chrysalis effect in which deep spiritual

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transformation is likened to a cocoon. While many Christians may avoid the painful breakthrough beyond the wall and into later stages, it seemed that Our Savior’s as an organization experienced a traumatic encounter with a metaphorical wall during the recent seven-year liminal space. Instead of breaking through, the congregation reverted to a previous stage.

To empower Our Savior’s members to individually and collectively push beyond this time of crisis, a reconnection with God was imperative. Hagberg and Guelich recognize that the only way past the wall is a deepening of spiritual practices. Even in the midst of the pain of the wall, this stage opens disciples to begin the journey outward of demonstrating the faith in action. Hagberg and Guelich explain the journey this way,

Our goals are intimacy with God and deep healing for all. We begin to show outward signs of our intimacy with God while we are in the Wall, and now these signs are evident to more people: calm; sense of humor; willingness to confront issues without anger; joy; ability to see our shadows (and laugh); willingness to embrace and heal addictions; compassion; love, and boundaries.

As disciples are pushed past this wall, the capacity to express Christ’s love becomes a tangible marker. Acts of service initiated out of an overflow of a rich relationship with God are evident. It may be argued that this is the level of spiritual formation that St. Thérèse of Lisieux embraced rich spiritual practices, pushed past the wall of crisis in her own life, and embodied the heart of Christ on earth to every soul she encountered. Hagberg and Guelich write that this is a stage of expressing the love of God.

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41 Ibid., 209.
in daily life, “Our work and our ministry at this stage is love; our ministry of love heals people; and healed people heal others.”

*The Critical Journey* contributes significantly in this doctoral project. The diagram illustrates the spiritual formation journey, clarifying the stages of development that occur in a spiral dynamic and deepen with every engagement of each stage. A disciple may revert backwards and may also move through deeper stages once again. As research indicates that meditation has a direct impact on mind and spirit, this is where Weber and Laird reveal the scientific evidence and historical validity to this practice.

*Into the Silent Land* by Martin Laird

Since meditation was a new practice for many members of Our Savior’s, this book helped to reassure a historical validity of this practice. Laird goes into great detail of explaining what happens to the soul during meditation, as well as how one may begin utilizing meditation as a new daily practice. Because meditation and contemplation are key to rebuilding resiliency in daily living, the hope was that introducing this new spiritual practice would revitalize Our Savior’s members.

Meditation and centering prayer are rich resources that help improve one’s connection to Christ. Laird offers biblical and historical evidence that God meets humanity in stillness. The prophet Elijah discovered at Mt. Horeb that the first language of God is pure silence. Silent meditation maps out a course to discovering and delighting in a richer relationship with God. Laird traces historical validity,

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42 Ibid., 212.
Followers of the Christian path have been singing this song of silence for centuries. In his Confessions St. Augustine goes so far as to say that the discovery of the various levels of silence is what it means to ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord’ (Matthew 25:1). St. John Climacus says, ‘The friend of silence comes close to God.’ Meister Eckert says, ‘The noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let god work and speak within.’ John of the Cross says, ‘The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word he always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.’

Before people acknowledged the historical validity of silence, this spiritual practice provoked suspicion. Scholars wondered what happened in the silence. While many saints found silence to be a fruitful place for meeting God, skeptics wondered whether this silence created a vulnerable space for evil influences. Questions were raised about what kind of inspiration fills a mind that has been quieted and whether this inspiration is indeed of the Holy Spirit. The practice of quieting the mind, listening to the breath, and focusing on one word still remains foreign to many Christians.

Laird brings clarity by consulting trusted voices of the past who endorse the silent prayer. The concept of prayer is more about listening than conveying every request to God. Most individuals do not naturally possess a wellspring of spiritual depth like St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Thus, it is necessary to develop one’s spiritual connection with Jesus through silent prayer. It is in this stillness and silence that God speaks.

Elijah, referred to as the greatest prophet in all of Israel’s history, experienced a whirlwind of ministry activity in just a few short chapters of the Bible from 1 Kings 17-19. God invited Elijah to a healing rest and a deepened insight. The healing divine presence is found in pure silence. While Sabbath-keeping helps one slow down and

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delight in God, lingering in this stillness of the loving presence of Christ beyond the Sabbath transforms the disciple. Laird explains,

Most of us live much of our lives caught in the whirlwind of the stories going on in our heads. Contemplation is the way out of the great self-centered psychodrama, when interior silence is discovered compassion flows. If we deepen our inner silence, our compassion for others is deepened. We cannot pass through our doorways of silence without becoming part of God’s embrace of all humanity in its suffering and joy.44

Contemplative prayer also confronts one with the reality of brokenness. Suffering and wounds break open one’s heart, deepening the need for Jesus and healing. It is within this meditation that one also discovers the true self and God’s nature of love. As this divine grace is bestowed upon the disciple, inner transformation takes place. This also impacts how one interacts with the world. Laird states,

We learn a compassion for others that replaces judging self-loathing, and the compulsion to find someone to blame. We learn a reverent joy before our wounds that replaces the condemnation of and comparison of ourselves with others that used to fuel our anxiety. We learn that the consummation of self-esteem is self-forgetful abandonment to the Silence of God that gives birth to loving service of all who struggle.45

Laird also compares union and deepening one’s relationship with God to going through many doorways. St. Teresa of Ávila echoes these notions similarly in her classic masterpiece, The Interior Castle. The soul is vast and spacious. God’s infinite presence and time in prayer, contemplation, and meditation holds great possibilities for deep spiritual transformation. This also rejuvenates a disciple, discovering endless layers of knowing God and being with God. Laird illustrates, “The doorways we begin to pass

44 Ibid., 115.
through are doorways into our own awareness, our own inner depths where we meet in this luminous darkness the gracious God who is already shining out of our own eyes, ‘closer to me than I am to myself.’”

After experiencing the loving presence of God in effective prayer, the spiritual, psychological, and emotional healing properties of prayer empower one to look at another with a new lens. Laird writes, “Silence is living, dynamic, and liberating. The practice of silence nourishes vigilance, self-knowledge, letting go, and the compassionate embrace of all whom we would otherwise be quick to condemn.”

Laird provides historical context and biblical insights into the importance of meditation and shares how this spiritual discipline can bring calm to a hurried lifestyle. Laird provides guidance on how to meditate and how this practice impacts a deepening of soul formation. While contemplative prayer holds transformative properties for active practitioners, many disciples struggle to find the time for a meditation practice. The Little Way also holds a dual focus of simultaneously experiencing the presence of God and sharing this joyous relationship outwardly. The insights from Laird reveal the pathway to foster a deepened relationship with God and accomplish a greater union. It is time well spent to experience a powerful healing. To slow down and then listen to the voice of love is the reassurance all of humanity craves. This also a powerful exercise for Our Savior’s members to delight in God. It is then out of the overflow of divine joy that members offered compassion to others, thus living deeply into the congregation’s mission.

46 Ibid., 69.

CHAPTER 3

THE HOSPITALITY OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

The mission of Our Savior’s is to be a caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith. The sign language symbol for love illustrates a theological understanding how the flow of God’s love transformed Our Savior’s and reenergized the congregation. This visual also illustrates the theological understanding that God fully embraces humanity. As humanity learns to embrace and love God in return, this dynamic union compels members to give this love to others.

Before Our Savior’s could begin to embody this mission, the congregation needed healing. There was a dynamic of rejection that was at play due to the high clergy turnover. As God embraced Our Savior’s in the dynamism of spiritual practices, this healing reignited Our Savior’s to live into its authentic identity as a caring community.

God embraces creation. The hospitality of God is evidenced through a Trinitarian, Christological, biblical, and Eucharistic analysis. As humanity is created in the image of God, the church is likewise called to reflect God’s embrace to the world. Effective outreach requires a deepened discipleship in experiencing God’s love. For St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the result of this dynamic relationship with God took shape as The Little Way.
Delighting in God through a deepening of spiritual practices empowered Our Savior’s to live into its mission as a caring community. The spiritual progression of up, in, and out applies in this theological analysis.

**Trinitarian Embrace**

One way for Our Savior’s members to heal from the past was to experience the loving embrace of the divine. The image of God as embracing also reaffirmed the congregation’s identity and esteem. God loves the entirety of creation. Speaking life into existence, this triune God offered affirmation by claiming humanity’s inherent goodness. In Genesis, the Holy Spirit hovered over the depths, the Father uttered life into being, and the Son participated in this origin of life. John’s Gospel identifies in the prologue that Christ was present in the formation of the earth.

Within the Trinity is a dynamic, relational union. The Father pours out infinite love for the Son. The Son relies on the work of the Holy Spirit to ignite faith in a believer. This triune God fully participates in creation and continues to create new life today. Moltmann explains, “Creation is actually a product of the Father’s love and is ascribed to the whole Trinity. If the Father creates the world in his love for the Son, then he also creates the world through him. In his eternal Son he sees the world.”¹ In this creative process, God assures humanity of its innate worth. In the Garden of Eden, a rich communion was initiated between the holy and the human. Since the fall, humanity craved paradise.

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As humanity is created in this image of God, a closer examination of the relational nature of the Trinity is warranted. As one God in three persons, the Trinity is dynamic. Orthodox Christianity emphasizes a social Trinitarian understanding of a divine circle dance in which all of creation is beckoned to join in step. The kinetic energy produced in this creative, ever-expanding circle is God’s constant, holy invitation to abundant living. This is an act of gracious hospitality as God makes space for all of creation to participate in the dance. It is out of a genuine love for all that God expands the circle. Moltmann writes,

God loves the world with the very same love which he himself is in eternity. God affirms the world with the energy of his self-affirmation. Because he not only loves but is himself love, he has to be understood as the triune God. If God is love he is at once the lover, the beloved, and the love itself. Love is the goodness that communicates itself from all eternity. The theology of love is a theology of the Shekinah, a theology of the Holy Spirit.²

The hospitality of the Trinity is made clear in welcoming creation. With spoken word, God invites all of life into existence. This is a voluntary act that requires the divine to create space for newness of life. It is out of love that God is a host inviting new life into fruition. “In his creative love God is united with creation, which is his Other, giving it space, time and liberty in his own infinite life.”³

This loving and embracing God extends welcome to all of creation. This includes even those in opposition to receiving welcome. The Trinity recognizes that in the sinful fall of humanity, reconciliation becomes the trajectory of the scriptures leading to the

² Ibid, 57.

³ Ibid., 114.
cross of Christ. Jesus’ great commission raises a call to the church to proclaim the good news of salvation to the world. God’s redemptive work commissions the church to invite the world into this sacred dance. This restores broken relations between God and humanity. Moltmann writes,

It is a fellowship with God, and beyond that a fellowship in God. But that presupposes that the triunity is open in such a way that the whole creation can be united with it and can be one within it. The union of the divine Trinity is open for the uniting of the whole creation with itself and in itself. So the unity of the Trinity is not merely a theological term; at heart it is a soteriological one as well.⁴

Christological Hospitality

As St. Thérèse desired to incarnate Christ’s love on earth, Our Savior’s holds this same calling. While humans embrace imperfectly, Jesus offers a healing transformation from the cross. Salvation requires the loving embrace of God. The arms of Jesus on the cross is a soteriological movement that holds the posture of opening up arms wide to the undeserved. This gracious gesture of welcome in the face of hostility reveals the true nature of Christ. As Jesus welcomed sinners daily, this culmination on the cross shows the ultimate act of reconciliation and restoration of relationship. Volf boldly states, “When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross.”⁵

In this gesture of Christ’s embrace, suffering occurs. As a selfless act, the sacrificial movement of the cross is an ultimate form of gracious welcome. On the cross, Jesus uttered words of forgiveness to anyone who lived unconscious of this divine love.

⁴ Ibid., 96.
The penitent thief experienced welcome when Jesus declared that paradise awaited later that day. The very gesture of the cross is an embrace, transforming both the wounded and the perpetrator. Moltmann explains, “This fundamental idea of the whole Anglican theology of God’s suffering: the cross of Golgotha has revealed the eternal heart of the Trinity.”

In the incarnation, God also suffers through the humility of becoming small, the original Little Way, in order to express authentic welcome. Divine love found in the incarnation and the crucifixion reveals the expanse to which God is willing to extend hospitality. This radical expression of love includes humility, suffering, and even death, all experiences God is willing to endure. Moltmann recognizes, “The God who is love, and who loves every one of his creatures with a love that is infinite, is bound to experience sorrow and loss at the death of every one of the beings he created.”

The cross is also a juncture of transformation. Taking on humanity’s shame, frailties, and imperfections, a new creation emerges from the reconciliation of the cross. Jesus’ embrace of sinful humanity from the cross reveals the efforts that God will undertake to restore and renew relationships. The crucifixion was God’s way of welcoming a fallen humanity into a healing embrace. Wells and Owen recognize this grace extended. “When it comes to human beings, God views no person as an enemy but rather as a beloved child, God’s own creation, made to be in relationship with God.

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7 Ibid., 39.
People can make themselves enemies of God (James 4:4), but God never makes enemies out of people.”

It was in the pondering of a God that embraces even one’s enemies that led St. Thérèse of Lisieux to discern what it would entail to embody the heart of Christ on earth. To love without exception, and function as if no enemies existed, is easier to do when one is grounded in the right theological foundation. In creation, it is clear that God embraces all of existence. It is easier to emulate God’s love of all creation when one knows where that love comes from and why it matters. Launching from a theological premise of original affirmation in Genesis one prompts a deepened discipleship grounded in grace. This sanctification process is steeped in divine delight.

While Christ stretched arms to embrace a broken world, it is difficult for members of Our Savior’s to offer this same intensity of welcome. The healing embrace of Christ also tends to the wounds of rejection from high clergy turnover in recent years. In experiencing this embrace and then sharing this love intentionally with others, Our Savior’s discovered a renewal to live into the new congregational mission.

Biblical Hospitality

The hospitality of God is a theological concept woven throughout all of scripture. Beginning with the creation narrative, a welcoming Triune God is made evident. This theological underpinning of God’s gracious welcome is found in both the old and new

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testaments. An embracing God also inspires humanity as presented in the scripture to extend hospitality.

Creation Narrative

The self-image of Our Savior’s wavered in recent years. Low energy, lack of vision, and instability in pastoral leadership contributed to this dynamic. The path to reclaiming innate worth is found in the first chapter of Genesis. God delights in all that is made, labeling it as good. The Trinity welcomes creation and affirms innate worth. Beginning with the first chapter, Genesis tells the whole story and establishes the entire theological framework. Matthew Fox has a term for this affirmation, “What I call ‘original blessing’ can also be named ‘original goodness’ or ‘original grace’ or ‘original wisdom.’ It is not just about the goodness of our species but about the goodness and blessing that fifteen billion years of the universe’s grace has revealed and shared with us.”

Many Christian communities frame their biblical narrative around the theological premise of Genesis three and the fall of humanity. Starting from sin and the need for grace, limits the understanding of humanity’s innate worth in God’s eyes. Bypassing Genesis one and two and building from Genesis three results in an arc of the biblical story centering on sin. This reductionist viewpoint ignores the fact that God’s first impulse toward creation was embrace.

Dallas Willard describes this as limiting the gospel to a narrative of merely managing sins rather than cultivating deeper transformation. This limitation in

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understanding God results in half-hearted discipleship and casual faith that makes no mark in daily living. This theological reduction reinforces a narrative centered on Genesis three. Dallard explains,

When we examine the broad spectrum of Christian proclamation and practice, we see that the only thing made essential on the right wing of theology is forgiveness of the individual’s sins. On the left it is removal of social or structural evils. The current Gospel then becomes a ‘gospel of sin management.’ Transformation of life and character is no part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faith and eternal living.  

The distinction between the gospel of sin management verses original blessing makes a profound difference in the theological and biblical framework that informs discipleship. The first builds a narrative from Genesis three. The latter encompasses the welcome of creation, an embracing Trinity, and the reassurance of innate worth. While Genesis three is a part of the story of humanity’s relationship with God and an important position of recognition, it is possible that much of the historical and current understandings of sanctification stem from a place that forgets the hospitality of God by diminishing one’s relationship with God to this story alone.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux framed her own understanding of God from the Garden of Eden in Genesis one and thus discovered the joy and delight of a God who embraces. Anchoring herself in her identity as the Little Flower sustained her with resiliency in a difficult ministry situation. Her trust in God’s welcome toward her empowered her to welcome others. She recognized that everyone is celebrated by God as a divine image bearer. This foundational understanding of God’s affirmation was essential for members

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of Our Savior’s to reconnect with their mission. With fresh, stable pastoral leadership, new life was breathed into this congregation. This newfound energy also sparked the inspiration to live into the new mission statement.

Hospitality of Abraham

The story of Abraham demonstrates a human response to a divine encounter. St. Thérèse wanted God to feel loved in return. Abraham also modeled this in offering sacrificial hospitality to three mysterious strangers in Genesis eighteen. To welcome the other involved risk and compassion. Pohl writes, “In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations.”

Throughout the Bible, extending hospitality to the stranger often involves meals. As soon as Abraham sees the three travelers, he provides water, washes their feet, and offers shade under a tree. Abraham instructs Sarah to bake bread, and a calf is sacrificed for a meal, served along with curds and milk. This is a costly visit that required time and resources to provide welcome.

Abraham offered hospitality by being mindful of his surroundings, ceasing activity, and honoring and approaching these visitors. There is no indication that the guests were expected or known. Extending hospitality to the three visitors was a calculated risk. The alternative was to exclude them and see them as enemies. But

Abraham and Sarah knew what it meant to live a nomadic lifestyle and felt compassion toward these visitors.

It is unclear if Abraham and Sarah knew the identity of the three guests. As this couple blessed their travelers with a meal, in turn they received a prophetic promise of a hopeful future. In a year’s time they would bear a child. When they extended hospitality and welcome to strangers, unexpected blessings flowed. Giving to others may lead to abundance. Henri Nouwen explains, “We will never believe that we have anything to give unless there is someone who is able to receive. Indeed, we discover our gifts in the eyes of the receiver.”

Abraham and Sarah welcomed the three visitors and were changed and blessed in this encounter. Our Savior’s members also discovered renewal in extending compassion to others. Gifts are meant to be shared and extended for the neighbor at hand. In offering simple gestures of hospitality, Our Savior’s brought the congregational mission statement into a lived reality. As a result, greater energy and resiliency emerged.

Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz

As Our Savior’s sought to express a deeper compassion to the wider community, the book of Ruth offered inspiration. Extending care, service, and faith are all exampled in this narrative of scripture. God reveals a compassionate heart for the widow and the foreigner. Ruth is a story of compassion. This book mirrors the welcome of God. Ruth embraces a new culture, country, and religious practices. She offers consolation for the

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grief-stricken Naomi. She travels to a new country, Moab, where the two of them must also be received with openness. While Naomi lived in Moab for at least ten years, Ruth was a foreigner and was not guaranteed welcome. It was uncertain if they would receive hospitality.

A redemptive move of God’s welcome occurs. Ruth is a Moabite. According to Genesis nineteen, Moab was the son of Lot, born out of incest from Lot’s eldest daughter. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s two daughters wanted to preserve the family line. They schemed to ensure their father would become intoxicated two consecutive evenings and then proceeded to seduce him. The eldest daughter gave birth to Moab. The younger daughter bore Ben-Ammi, the father of the Ammonites.

As Lot’s uncle Abraham welcomed the stranger, it is argued that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was due to a violation of hospitality. This destruction could have been prevented if compassion had been extended to the stranger. Genesis nineteen tells the story of a devastating collapse that was restored in the Ruth narrative. A Moabite is welcomed in a new land.

Boaz, the kinsman redeemer, reflects the welcoming nature of God. He ensures that the foreigner Ruth will be protected as she gleans the fields. As affection grew between them, it was discovered that he had the power to welcome Ruth assuring a new chapter in their legacy. Aside from offering compassion and hospitality, Boaz created the opportunity for redemption. As Ruth marries Boaz, she becomes part of the lineage of the future King David. Ruth’s name is also mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel in the genealogy leading to the birth of Christ. The list of Christ’s descendants in the book of Matthew also
includes other women such as Rahab the prostitute, Tamar, and Bathsheba. This controversial list implies a gracious God that redeems histories.

The story of Ruth reminds readers that any history can be transformed. Our Savior’s recent history of high clergy turnover impacted the congregation’s energy, satisfaction and identity. As God transforms the past and paved a bright future in Ruth’s narrative, so God offered this same transformational healing for Our Savior’s. The past is redefined as the future is paved with caring initiatives and offers this same healing embrace to the wider community.

The Good Samaritan

The mission statement of Our Savior’s directly ties into this biblical story. Our Savior’s new mission is to be a caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith, and this parable is a prime example of what compassion embodies. The parable of the Good Samaritan holds a double meaning. The man who was left to die by the side of the road and rejected by religious leaders and keepers of the law can be a metaphorical representation of the treatment of Jesus. The priest and the Levite pass by the wounded stranger and the unclean Samaritan embraces him, subverting cultural norms of the day.

As humanity is created in the image of a welcoming God, the actions of this foreigner toward a Jewish man suggest that salvation will be made possible for those previously considered unclean. Later in the book of Acts, welcoming the unclean became a hallmark of authentic Christian hospitality. Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, and Peter fellowshipped with the Gentile Cornelius. This radical inclusion of those beyond
one’s typical social circles was an indication that the Holy Spirit was guiding the church to mirror the image of a loving God that fully embraces all of humanity.

Parables usually hold multiple meanings. The Samaritan, rather than the wounded man, may have represented Jesus as the outsider. The wounded traveler may also represent Christ rejected by the religious officials. But no matter the deeper symbolic meaning, Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan is a radical story of grace and embrace. At surface level, the welcoming of an unclean Jew by an unclean Gentile at the time was doubly offensive. Pohl explains,

> Because the practice of hospitality is so significant in establishing and reinforcing social relationships and moral bonds, we notice its more subversive character only when socially undervalued persons are welcomed. In contrast to a more tame hospitality that welcomes persons already well situated in a community, hospitality that welcomes ‘the least’ and recognize their equal value can be an act of resistance and defiance, a challenge to the values and expectations of the large community.”  

13 The Levite and priest held strong convictions that reaching out to the marginalized, wounded traveler would make them unclean. Their reluctance to offer help was impacted by pragmatic concerns of their historical context. The spread of disease is prevented by maintaining good hygiene. A field of psychology known as the science of disgust reveals additional reasons for avoidance of others beyond protection from potential infection. According to psychological research, disgust and rejection often occur in tandem. This creates a hierarchy of human relations. Beck explains, “Given the impact of sociomoral disgust upon human affairs, it is not surprising that the act of hospitality is

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fundamentally an act of human recognition and embrace. If exclusion is fundamentally
dehumanizing, hospitality acts to restore full human status to the marginalized and
outcast.”

Jesus told this story of the Good Samaritan to challenge the hearers to embrace
the unclean. Jesus is often depicted in a dual role: as the wounded and as the one who
welcomes the wounded. As the incarnate member of the Trinity, Jesus challenges the
church to recognize its own calling to love without limitation. This was St. Thérèse’s
intent: to offer unconditional embrace of the unloved. This mirrors the embrace Jesus
offers humanity on the cross. This is also the calling of Our Savior’s to reach out with
caring compassion and love to the world.

The Prodigal Son

The mission statement of Our Savior’s as a caring community ties directly with
the heart of this parable. Extending embrace to those that have a questionable past is a
crucial element of a life that embodies the love of Jesus. God embraces a prodigal
humanity. In the prodigal son parable told in Luke fifteen, the father expresses God’s
deep, loving welcome to both sons. The younger son wasted his inheritance. The eldest
son misunderstood the meaning of grace. Yet their father continually bestowed this
abundant love on both. God’s love is always given without merit. The surprising
generosity of a gracious father offended the human culture of the era. Jesus illustrates the
natural inclinations of a welcoming father in this prodigal story.

Jesus tells this story in response to criticism he receives for eating meals with sinners. This parable concludes with the recognition that both sons misunderstood their father’s grace and welcome to the table. This radical welcome of a loving father offers hope to those who are excluded as well as those who excuse themselves from this table grace.

This meal provided by God is transformative. Sara Miles relays her story of radical conversion in her memoir detailing her life and first communion. Placing boundaries on God’s gracious welcome wreaks confusion and creates wounds. Miles explains, “Whenever the church powers get around to feeding, ‘Swin said, ‘it’s usually conditional—you have to be baptized, you have to belong to our club—and it stops being Jesus’ meal. Churchly legitimacy gets its hand in rather than crazy hospitality, the open extravagance of the Last Supper. And you get further and further from the power and the genius of that meal.’” 15

In this story both sons were prodigal, wasting away and misunderstanding their father’s lavish love. Jesus indicates that all are included at this meal of grace. Our Savior’s also shares this calling to consume this meal of Holy Communion and become the embodied presence of Christ in the world.

Jesus Welcoming the Marginalized

One of the ways that Our Savior’s began intentionally living into the new mission statement was through offering ministry initiatives supporting people broken by life’s circumstances. A strong Stephen minister program was developed at Our Savior’s. There

is yet more work to be done in this area, as people beyond the church walls may have limited access to a caring community. This may be especially true during a time of global pandemic. As Jesus offered unconditional welcome to all he encountered, so too, Our Savior’s members challenged themselves to intentionally extend welcome to those beyond their social circles.

Social exclusion often stems from messages received from a young age about who is or is not welcome. The tendency to exclude certain people is a learned behavior, often shaped by societal messages and norms. In contrast, God’s embrace of humanity is natural. Claiming the theological concept of the image of God proves helpful. If humanity is truly created in the image of an all-embracing, loving, and welcoming God, there is a similar capacity in the human heart that must be fostered. Volf writes, “We who have been embraced by the outstretched arms of the crucified God open our arms even for the enemies—to make space in ourselves for them and invite them in—so that together we may rejoice in the eternal embrace of the triune God.”

Jesus sought out the marginalized to assure them of their value. While society excluded lepers, demoniacs, infirmed, women, and children, Jesus fully embraced them. The ill and demoniacs received healing. Women, such as the isolated woman at Jacob’s well in John four, discovered that Jesus welcomed all and satisfied their deep spiritual thirst for acceptance. Children had no authority in biblical days, yet Jesus welcomed them to come and hear stories.

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Jesus offered compassion to the marginalized and an invitation to restored community. These healing acts of inclusion reflect the social trinitarian desire to expand the circle dance of abundant life. Jesus engaged with those on the outskirts of societal acceptance, which challenges the church to similarly embody this way of compassion. There is often a social gap between church and culture. For Our Savior’s to close this chasm, a greater outreach of authentic hospitality to the world is required.

Jesus in the Stranger

Stillwater, Minnesota is famous as a tourist destination. Encountering newcomers in the downtown district is a commonplace experience in this community where Our Savior’s resides. Another population residing in Stillwater are inmates at the state penitentiary located a few miles from the church. The head chaplain stated there was no space for ministry organizations to interact with the inmates. It was my hope to end the retreat in January by offering a joint worship experience with Our Savior’s members and the inmates, but this ministry door did not open at that time. Our Savior’s continues to ponder what it means to live deeply into being a caring community and extend compassion beyond its doors. Compassion to the state penitentiary residents may serve as a great ministry initiative in the future. This would continually expand the boundaries of Our Savior’s circles of affection and create new opportunities to encounter Christ. Jesus makes himself known through unexpected people and places.

Matthew twenty-five unveils the face of Christ as the poor, hungry, and imprisoned. Christ equates serving the hurting world as an act of serving God. The rule of St. Benedict so beautifully articulates that when welcoming the stranger, one welcomes
Christ. Beck cites the Greek interpretation of hospitality. “Instead of xenophobia, the fear of strangers, hospitality is philoxenia, the love of strangers.”

Jesus explains that feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and clothing the naked are acts of serving Christ. The church’s response to the needs of the world is a reflection of authentic discipleship. Welcoming the stranger is the calling of the church. This welcome requires an expansion of one’s affinity circles. Churches often exclude rather than extend inclusion to a hungry world. As hospitality often includes a meal, Jesus offers a radical welcome through Holy Communion. Our Savior’s members are fed by this meal and challenged to be a living expression of the body of Christ in the world.

Eucharistic Embrace

Our Savior’s stated a new vision to demonstrate God’s love to all. As this congregation practices open communion, all who gather for worship are invited weekly to experience the holy supper. This radical inclusion makes a statement that this is indeed Christ’s meal and Jesus is the host, inviting all who are spiritually hungry to the table.

Christ’s ministry was often spent with individuals and people groups who questioned their own value. Jesus embraced the tax collectors and ate with a sinful crowd. After Jesus shared a meal with the notorious tax collector Zacchaeus, this short-statured thief became a follower of Christ. After raising Lazarus from death, Jesus broke bread at the home of Mary and Martha. Mary responded to Jesus’ miracle of raising her brother from the grave by anointing Jesus’ feet with a costly ointment, valued at a year’s salary.

In the upper room, Jesus broke bread with imperfect disciples. Jesus permitted Judas to dip bread in synchronicity, demonstrating a godly grace. The Eucharist is a timeless meal connecting recipients to the past saints and giving a foretaste of a future heavenly banquet. This is Christ’s meal. St. Paul admonished Corinth, advocating that communion must be open to all, not simply the wealthy. Miles says, “Early Christians, worshipping in houses, shared full feasts, following Jesus’ promise that he would be among them when they ate together in his memory. They ate believing that God had given them Christ’s life and that they could spread that life through the world by sharing food with others in his name.”18

The invitation to the table of God’s grace is extended to everyone. It is in this upper room that Jesus also commissions the church to love one another. Jesus distills the essence of the ten commandments to loving God and loving one’s neighbor. This God of welcome, found in the incarnate Christ, calls the church to demonstrate this selfless love toward the world. Jesus tells a parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew twenty-two where the invitation included the broken, poor, and marginalized. God intends to nourish all at the table.

It is through discovering a God of total gracious embrace that St. Thérèse of Lisieux was empowered to extend that same embrace to her environment. It is in God’s nature to embrace the creatures made in his image. This triune God of hospitality embraces all of creation. Made in God’s image, Our Savior’s call to hospitality requires a deepened discipleship to make this embrace of others stronger. While Our Savior’s

18 Sara Miles, Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 75-76.
practices open communion and all are invited to the table, the congregation is also called to be fed and then feed the world by serving and living in faith.

Discipleship: The Church’s Response to God’s Welcome

One of St. Thérèse desires was for Christ to be assured of humanity’s love in return for the grace poured out on the cross. Our Savior’s vision uses the American Sign Language love sign, which illustrates a theological complexity of up, in, and out. Up refers to worship, an entry point for Our Savior’s members to experience this love of God. In, is the inward flow of God’s love as members engage in faith formation and Bible study. The emphasis on deepening discipleship through spiritual practices empowers Our Savior’s to later be equipped to spread this love of God out to the world in service and mission.

Lutherans emphasize the importance of justification. Salvation comes from grace, not good works. The Gnesio-Lutheran tradition was formed after the death of Martin Luther to oppose Phillip Melanchthon’s ideals that steered the church toward responding to God’s grace. Concerns arose that responding to godly grace took away the purity of this gift of salvation. Sanctification through a discipleship process was not emphasized.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed in 1988 when the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) merged with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The ALC derives from the Hauge Synod, which began in 1876. The Hauge tradition emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus over strict doctrines. This emphasis translated to moral living as well as an increased desire for growth through spiritual practices. The Gnesio-Lutheran tradition focuses on the purity of God’s grace,
whereas the Hauge tradition recognizes the importance of responding to this grace.
Sanctification is therefore emphasized in the Hauge tradition, which is also my heritage.

From a Trinitarian, Christological, biblical, and Eucharistic, perspectives, a reverence for God’s hospitality is found. The church is called by God to mirror this divine embrace to the world. A deepened journey of discipleship increases an individual’s capacity to extend compassion to those beyond one’s circles of association. This process of sanctification, of becoming more like Christ, happens through spiritual disciplines.

Scholars throughout church history define this spiritual journey of sanctification in a variety of ways. St. John of the Cross speaks of a dark night of the soul. Dionysius discovers a journey of purgation, illumination, and union. Evagrius Ponticus points to the eight deadly thoughts, which foreshadows the development of the Enneagram, a popular modern-day personality model. St. Augustine recognized an inner turmoil, “Restless in our heart until it comes to rest in you.”

St. Bernard of Clairvaux diagnosed a four-fold progression of deepening expressed love, from love of self to a richer love of God. The first degree involves love for the self out of necessity and development. The second degree of love is a dependence on God in order to receive blessings. The third degree is a greater love as one becomes intimate with the divine and loving God for God’s sake. The highest degree involves an even greater intimacy of being united with God in God’s love. St. Bernard thus echoes St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s desire that God experience love in return. He states,

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Confess that God deserves to be greatly loved, or rather that He should be loved beyond measure. He was the first to love; He so great, we so little; He loves us to excess, just as we are, and without any claim whatsoever on our side. This is why the rightful measure of our love to God is to exceed all measure; for God, the object of our love, being infinite, how can we weigh or measure what we owe to Him in love?20

What St. Bernard declares as a deepening of discipleship is also expressed by other great saints in church history in their own unique interpretations. St. Thérèse of Lisieux was named after the famous St. Teresa of Ávila. St. Teresa, a Spanish nun from Ávila, provides a framework for a life of discipleship in her written works. In her book *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Ávila describes seven chambers discovered in one’s own soul. She states, “It came to me that the soul is like a castle made exclusively of diamond or some other very clear crystal. In this castle are a multitude of dwellings, just as in heaven there are many mansions.”21 Scholar Dr. Chuck DeGroat, in a series of lectures at Fuller Seminary in November of 2017, labeled these inner chambers as curiosity, commitment, control, crisis, conversion, cruciform, and communion.

St. Teresa employs another element of a traditional castle, the drawbridge, in this metaphor, when she writes about the first chamber or mansion. The lowering of the drawbridge is an invitation to enter the first mansion, which DeGroat labeled curiosity. In the initial stage of curiosity, a lowering of the draw bridge piques interest. This type of movement toward an embracing God is found in the enjoyment of a sunset or the joy of a child’s birth. It is a stage of wonder drawing the disciple toward this loving God. St.


Teresa’s theory held that entering the castle and exploring it further led toward a life of committed discipleship.

Eventually individual disciples grow so dramatically in their faith that they are overcome by a rigid belief or need for control. For some, this can also lead to a crisis in the faith. Very few disciples press past the crisis and toward a conversion experience. St. Teresa of Ávila compares this conversion to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.\(^{22}\) She uses other metaphors in these deeper castle chambers to describe a greater unity with God. Colossians three articulates that the disciples’ life is hidden with Christ. St. Teresa of Ávila speaks of two flames becoming one while originating from different candles.\(^{23}\) Or like rain falling into the ocean, St. Teresa of Ávila describes that one cannot tell where the rain begins and the ocean starts.\(^{24}\) Oneness with God becomes a blissful union. Spiritual visions encouraged her soul. St. Teresa states, “Once, when the Christ child appeared and asked her who she was, she replied, ‘I am Teresa of Jesus. Who are you? ‘I am Jesus of Teresa,’ He said.”\(^{25}\)

St. Teresa of Ávila experienced progressive stages of discipleship throughout her life. A similar progression can be found in St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s journey as well. St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced a traumatic illness when she was thirteen years of age. After her miraculous healing, her temperament changed, and she was convinced of her calling into the ministry. Upon entrance into the convent, she confronted challenge in a

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 270.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 196.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 10.
new environment. Pushing through this difficulty, St. Thérèse of Lisieux discerned her inner calling to be a manifestation of Christ’s heart on earth. As she developed The Little Way, she entered into the later stages of St. Teresa of Ávila’s seven chambers: conversion, cruciform, and communion with Christ. It was this rich union with Jesus that compelled St. Thérèse of Lisieux to demonstrate God’s love to all she encountered. This was not out of obligation, but out of an overflow of the divine love she experienced in her spiritual practices. This divine delight through prayer, meditation, and worship empowered her to share this transformative love with everyone.

In their book *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, Hegberg and Guelich relay a similar understanding of St. Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle*. Hagberg and Guelich also note seven major stages of faith development, including recognition of God, discipleship, productive life, journey inward, the wall, journey outward, and a life of love. In this multi-phase formation, they describe the wall as a solid blockade on the spiritual development pathway, “We sit in awe of the process of surrendering and going through the Wall. But as we emerge, we are able to move along on our journeys with much less clarity about the direction and much more assurance of not having to be in charge of our lives. We are being transformed, turned inside out.”

In addition to *The Critical Journey*, Hagberg also wrote a book called *Real Power*. *Real Power* describes stages of power as related to individuals and institutions.

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The first stage is powerlessness, where someone has no voice in an institution. Next is a power that comes from association with others. This can manifest in a compulsion or need to drop names of influence or scholars. A greater level of institutional power is found in the third stage. Running parallel to a commitment stage of faith, a crisis or wall emerges that often stunts organizations and individual growth.

Congregations are often heavily influenced by the most curious and committed of their members. Church functions, such as programs and worship experiences, often cater to these highly engaged individuals. When a rigid doctrine or belief becomes central in a community, a control and eventually crisis can follow. With the right leadership and vision, a congregation or an individual has the capacity to push through this wall or crisis and into a fruitful place of union with Christ.

At Our Savior’s, a crisis or wall appeared during the recent history of pastoral turnover. Losing six pastors in last seven years impacted the congregation’s capacity to welcome others. While Pastor Molin served, a golden era of flourishing occurred. Hagberg describes this as Stage three of both the critical journey and real power. Stage three in faith formation is one of deepened commitment. In organizational strength, stage three is that of success.

The loss of congregational esteem and energy at Our Savior’s in the past seven years may be seen as either a return to an earlier stage of faith or a holding pattern as the church faces a theological obstacle. What Haberg calls the wall could be compared to what St. Teresa called a crisis of faith or St. John of the Cross’ theory of the dark night of
the soul. All three of these writers maintain that in the darkness, in the unknowing, God is at work.

Pushing through the wall occurs only through the practice of spiritual disciplines. As Our Savior’s experienced the replenishing love of God, the capacity to welcome others grew. In a busy world full of distractions, silence and meditation provide a pathway of transformation and renewal. At Our Savior’s, this is a return to the castle within one’s soul.

The Little Way as a Gesture of Hospitality

With a new mission statement and fresh pastoral leadership, Our Savior’s felt ready to live into the vision of demonstrating God’s love to all. The Little Way as a gesture of God’s hospitality brings Our Savior’s focus outward. The Little Way as introduced at the retreat served as an accessible spiritual discipline. This practice of compassion brought renewal and strategy to embrace and welcome others.

God welcomes humanity as a loving parent embraces a child. When this relationship is reciprocated with the child offering love in return to the parent, a greater intimacy is created. This is the divine delight that St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced, entering into a deepened discipleship as described in the latter stages of The Interior Castle. St. Thérèse of Lisieux approached God with innocent intimacy. Pohl says, “The demands of hospitality can only be met by persons sustained by a strong life of prayer and times of solitude.”

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The result of this divine delight is The Little Way. St. Thérèse of Liseux carried with her a childlike mentality of total surrender and delight in Jesus. As she experienced the love of God, she also desired for God to feel loved in return. In this dynamism of spiritual surrender, the love she experienced through her spiritual practices could not be contained to herself or to God. The overflow of the joy she felt was lived out in what she called The Little Way. One of St. Thérèse followers, Dorothy Day, spoke of this joy. Day writes, “She herself says that it was her destiny to show the world of today that holiness is accessible to all, that all are called, and that it is a ‘little way,’ a simple way for all to follow. And never once does she say that these transports, these joys are not for all. As well as the Cross, there are the joys of the spiritual life. Little attention has been paid to these joys in the life of Thérèse.”

The Little Way and The Great Commandment

The Little Way focuses on loving God and loving neighbor. It is a pragmatic approach to living out the Great Commandment. The Little Way is fueled by experiencing God’s embrace in spiritual practices and then expressing this love to the world. In the Great Commandment, Jesus instructs the church to love God and one’s neighbor. Pathak and Runyon, Denver clergy, took this key concept and strategized a renewal plan. Pathak and Runyon believe this may unlock a global renewal if all Christians loved their proximate neighbors. They explain,


30 Dorothy Day, Therese (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2016), 119.
We believe strongly that too few of us actually take the Great Commandment literally. But what would it be like to actually love our neighbors, the people who live no less than thirty feet from us? Imagine if every Christian interpreted what Jesus said as the most important thing to do and actually did it. Imagine if every person made decisions about their schedules to make good neighboring a priority. There’s so much potential in this movement. The world really could be changed.\textsuperscript{31}

The Great Commandment starts with approaching one’s immediate social circles.

In the convent at Lisieux, St. Thérèse noticed that some sisters were highly regarded by their peers, while others were treated with less honor. The Little Way was St. Thérèse’s response to the Great Commandment. St. Thérèse shares,

\textit{No doubt we don’t have any enemies in Carmel, but there are feelings. One feels attracted to this Sister, whereas with regard to another, one would make a long detour in order to avoid meeting her. And so, without even knowing it, she becomes the subject of persecution. Well, Jesus is telling me that it is this Sister who must be loved, she must be prayed for even though her conduct would lead me to believe that she doesn’t love me.}\textsuperscript{32}

**The Little Way and The Great Commission**

The Little Way also leads toward The Great Commission which calls disciples to tell the good news of Jesus’ love and resurrection to the world in words and actions. In the process of experiencing God’s love and extending this divine affirmation to the world, the church lives into its calling by preaching the Gospel. This love that cannot be


contained in discipleship with Christ extends to the neighbor and to the world. In this growing expansion of circles of affection, love was St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s vocation.

This is also the calling of Our Savior’s to reflect a God of inclusion. Schorn identifies the importance of this notion. “Christian love should not be a feel-good ideal or something to be confined to church buildings on Sundays. Every Christian is to embrace love as a personal vocation and bring it to bear on how we live. We are to be evangelists of love, witnesses of a Christian-informed love in all our relationships.” The Little Way is the overflow of divine delight expressed to the world as God’s love.

Theological Conclusions

Our Savior’s articulated a new mission as a caring community. The image to convey this is the American Sign Language sign for love. Three fingers, the pointer, pinky, and thumb, move in various directions to represent the flow of love. The pointer finger flows upward, indicating that members experience God’s love in worship, prayer, and spiritual practices. The inward thumb points toward the signer, symbolizing the relationships cultivated within church walls through faith formation classes and small groups. The pinky finger spokes outward in service and mission, symbolizing God’s love flowing out into the surrounding world.

A strong case is built from Trinitarian, Christological, Eucharistic, and biblical perspectives that God embraces all of creation. In a sanctification process of deepened discipleship, scholars such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Teresa of Ávila, and Hagberg

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describe the inner workings of spiritual transformation. Both individuals and congregations may undergo such a process of growing enlightenment. As Our Savior’s embraced spiritual practices, an overflow of divine delight occurred that increased the capacity to welcome others. As humanity is created in the image of a welcoming God, the church is called to embrace the world. As a gesture of Christian hospitality, The Little Way offered a pragmatic approach for Our Savior’s to extend God’s love.
PART THREE:
MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 4:
A CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL STRATEGY

After surviving a seven-year liminal period from 2012 until 2019, with chronic pastoral turnover, Our Savior’s was ready to launch into a new era of ministry. The congregation discerned the new mission statement as a caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith. This mission was also visualized with the American Sign Language symbol for love. The fingers indicate various flows of God’s love. The pointer finger directed upward to identify connecting with God in worship and prayer. The thumb is pointed inward to reveal the importance of strengthening the church through faith formation groups and programs. The pinky gestures outward, a reminder to reach the world in service and mission.

To effectively make this vision of up, in, and out a reality, the church needed to heal from constant changes and a mass exodus of members. Energy and satisfaction levels were both low in comparison to the church’s vibrant history. To reenergize the congregation and bring continued healing, a resiliency retreat helped move Our Savior’s in a healthy direction.
The retreat’s purpose was two-fold: expose members to new spiritual practices and then commission them to put these new disciplines into practice for a forty-day experimental period. Because research indicates a transformation in brain functioning through regular prayer and meditation, it was presumed that this would positively impact retreat attendees. Meditation holds the capacity to rewire the brain into a state of flourishing, resiliency, and health. While physical exercise creates a healthier mind, prayer also improves one’s mental and spiritual health. Weber writes,

Many studies like this show that while in prayer and deep meditation, the flexible, transforming capacity of your brain is able to let go of negative thinking and the need to control, clearing your mind to simply relax and go with the flow. When your heartfelt prayers are voiced to God and shaped with gratitude, worries are unburdened and anxiety is released. The result of all your life systems working together for change results in divine calm that fills you with peace like a river, enough to whisper, ‘It is well with my soul.’

Based on the scientific evidence of meditation’s ability to greatly improve one’s personal spiritual health, curiosity arose on how this might impact organizational health at Our Savior’s if many active members began practicing meditation regularly. The Loving Kindness Meditation was intentionally utilized as a method to experience God’s love and extend divine compassion beyond the self. This is a concentrated meditation that focuses on deepening compassion in concentric circles: for self, loved ones, acquaintances, and those beyond one’s circles of affection. “Loving kindness (metta)

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meditation is a contemplative practice considered to promote a state of acceptance and compassion for the self and others.”

After practicing the Loving Kindness Meditation in the morning, participants were then asked to attempt The Little Way as a practice to engage one’s daily environment. It was presumed that practicing these two disciplines would build capacity for compassion. The Little Way would flow out of the prior practice of meditation. The Loving Kindness Meditation also reminded participants of their innate worth and embrace from God. According to researchers, The Loving Kindness Meditation holds the capacity to transform personalities: “In LKM, people cultivate the intention to experience positive emotions during the meditation itself, as well as in their life more generally. Moreover, mind-training practices like LKM are thought to not only shift people’s fleeting emotional states but also reshape their enduring personality traits.” The purpose of the retreat was to inspire and empower members to deeply live into the new mission at Our Savior’s through the daily practice of these two spiritual disciplines.

Research Questions

Research sought to discover how an intentional use of spiritual practices would inspire members to easily live into the new mission statement. Research questions sought to know if participants experienced greater daily life resiliency through meditation.

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Inquiries also sought to know if members grew in their compassion toward self and others by expanding circles of affection. The research also determined if this process of intentional inner work and outward practice of compassion created an organizational resiliency at Our Savior’s.

Appendix C is the compassion survey that was administered at the retreat to gauge the level of compassion for each participant before beginning the forty-day experiment. Questions in this survey concerning compassion included a five-point scale ranking how much love each member had toward self, others, and people that may be in disagreement. This was an important tool as the participants took the same questionnaire after the forty-days were completed. The purpose of this assessment tool was to see if there was an increase between the introduction to compassion at the retreat and intentionally practicing compassion toward self and others after the forty-day experiment.

Questions in the compassion survey centered on how much kindness members extended to themselves and to others in a variety of social scenarios. For example, at moments of failure, respondents indicated if they saw such occasions as opportunities to learn or a reflection of their innate worth. Negative self-talk was also examined to see how often patterns of thinking impacted the brain to be wired in defeat. A total of fifteen questions were asked. For each question, participants marked how frequently they reacted in certain ways to social encounters that impacted interpersonal communication as well as personal interpretations of scenarios.

The inquiry of retreat participants involved discovering a level of compassion members had toward self and others. Upon completion of the forty-day exercise of
engaging in meditation and The Little Way, participants responded to the same questionnaire to see if there was a marked change in average scores of compassion toward self and others. Scientific evidence indicates that a deepening and intentionality of spiritual practices creates greater physiological health, lowers blood pressure and positively impacts mood. This experiment then strived to see if retreat participants experienced greater resiliency in their daily lives through achieving greater inner peace and compassion toward self and others.

An additional survey located as Appendix D, was given after the forty days. This survey asked questions about the use of spiritual practices beyond those initiated at the retreat. Participants were asked about the different types of spiritual practices they exercised as well as the duration of these practices. This survey also sought to determine if participants demonstrated a greater resiliency and joy in their daily lives. Research questions investigated the connection between engaging in spiritual practices and reenergizing church leaders to extend compassion into the congregation and city of Stillwater.

Goals

One of the foundational desired outcomes of the retreat was to empower members of Our Savior’s to rediscover God’s delight in them. The congregation had experienced a 40 percent loss of engaged members during the seven-year liminal space of pastoral turnover. This upheaval took its toll on Our Savior’s self-esteem as an organization. It was discovered that prior to my arrival, another wave of exodus was poised to occur as members waited to see whether the new pastor would be highly relational. My leadership,
vision, and tactics to accomplish goals were well received, preventing another wave of membership loss.

Due to the organizational changes Our Savior’s endured in recent years, another goal was to remind members of their innate worth and the value of the congregation at large. The cultural phenomenon of living a busy life makes it challenging to slow down and hear God’s voice of delight in spiritual practices. New spiritual practices such as the Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way helped Our Savior’s members to re-encounter God and experience God’s presence alone and with others. The dance between quiet contemplation and actively living out faith in service to others also appealed to Our Savior’s members. This gave them a chance to express love as an outpouring of their personal experience with God in meditation. The ultimate goal was to deepen spiritual formation in members and thus equip them to effectively carry out the new mission of the church. Introducing a new compassionate leadership model of The Little Way empowered the desire to actively live out the faith and make an enduring positive impact both within and outside of the church.

An additional goal was to renew members by reinforcing the importance of daily discipleship. With a greater intentionality centered around spiritual practices, it was believed that members would continue creating space for daily Sabbath moments. Multiple spiritual practices were experienced at the retreat, including worship, yoga, silence, meditation, prayer, and fellowship. Members were encouraged to create a prayer journal and explore other ways that they might connect with God. They were also encouraged to delight in creation and rediscover a child-like joy in simplicity and natural
states. All of these spiritual practices seek to raise awareness of the importance to slow down, experience God, and hear the divine voice of personal affirmation.

With greater awareness of spiritual disciplines and the positive impact toward individual health, it was also a goal that this would ensure a healthier organization. A greater energy, resiliency, and joy would emerge that would create opportunities for service in the metro area and strengthen global partnerships. The extended development of spiritual practices as a daily discipline would inspire members to deeply live into the new mission as a caring community.

The use of spiritual practices would be an on-going reality creating a sustaining resiliency. It would also stir energy for future initiatives to express compassion within and outside of church walls. Creating future partnerships within Stillwater and extending compassion to others would empower members to live into this calling as caring community in a deepened capacity.

Contents of the Strategy

The contents of this retreat included both experiential components as well as informational elements. The retreat began in the evening on Friday January 10 2020. The event involved prayer and listening to God through quiet contemplation. A short message based on the Magi from Matthew’s Gospel was also read, and members participated in lectio divina, a sacred reading, parsing out words and phrases that were compelling and inspiring.

After this initial time in God’s word, participants entered the larger contemporary space of the community life center (CLC). Chairs were dispersed in front as a yoga
instructor helped members reconnect with their breath and stretching movements. This time of re-centering created a sense of peace at the end of a busy week for many of the members. Afterward, participants enjoyed a time of fellowship with refreshments in the lobby, which lasted around thirty minutes. The initial scripture devotion was forty-five minutes, and the yoga exercise was forty-five minutes. This sacred time was around two hours.

The following Saturday morning, participants arrived at 8:00 AM in the smaller sanctuary. Retreat participants entered into a serene environment. The lights were dimmed, and candles decorated the front of the altar. Contemplative centering music created an atmosphere of reflection and peace. Participants were asked to find their own pew or enough space for them to lay down for an early exercise at the retreat. Once everyone was checked in at the registration table outside of the sanctuary, I began the Saturday morning portion by leading members through worship songs. As an accomplished musician, I utilized my guitar and voice in this time of praise.

After experiencing God’s presence in worship music, I explained the foundations of the Loving Kindness Meditation. This would be an exercise in demonstrating a growing compassion for self and others. The furthest stretch of extending compassion would ask participants to offer a blessing to someone with whom they have found conflict or difficulty in forgiving. It was encouraged that if this was not yet something they held a capacity to offer, they should wait until this compassion model developed internally. Participants were also told that they did not necessarily need to think of the most difficult person in their lives unless they had undergone extensive counseling or a
journey of forgiveness. Guided by a narration from an episode of the Liturgist Podcast ⁴ from January 30, 2018, members experientially were led on a journey of extending compassion outwards to others.

The Loving Kindness Meditation has roots in a Buddhist tradition and offers pragmatic skills for someone attempting to increase their capacity to embrace self and others. During the meditation, participants imagined extending kindness toward themselves, a loved one, someone they admire, a relationship that holds neutral feelings, and someone they have found challenging to embrace. This guided meditation took twenty-five minutes to complete. The loving kindness that was extended included saying these phrases to self and others: “May you be happy, may you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be loved.” ⁵ Beatrice Alba explains The Loving Kindness Meditation succinctly: “The practice involves holding in mind a particular person (or being) and repeatedly wishing for them to be well and happy.” ⁶ Participants found this exercise to be relaxing and reinvigorating.

After this portion of the retreat, they were assigned during a time of fellowship to notice something within the building that bothered them. They were instructed that this not be aimed at a person, but rather something within the building or something outdoors, if they wanted to walk outside in Minnesota winter. This segued into a time of teaching

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⁵ Ibid.,

about the psychology of disgust and visceral reactions people have toward others and objects.

After naming the difficulty to embrace something fully, an educational piece followed with the introduction to the psychology of disgust. As there are many obstacles that get in the way of embracing a person, place, or object, great conversation ensued on why and how that may often be a psychological response to a situation. The brain is triggered in ways that create defined boundaries of clean or unclean. “Whenever the church speaks of love or holiness, the psychology of disgust is present and operative, often affecting the experience of the church in ways that lead to befuddlement, conflict, and missional failure.”

Embracing people and environments beyond oneself remains challenging in certain contexts. Offering a full embrace begins with a greater self-compassion. A Ted Talk called “What if there is nothing wrong with you?” by Susan Henkels prompted conversation. This time of teaching was located in the larger CLC space. After thorough teaching and conversation on disgust psychology, a presentation on St. Thérèse of Lisieux helped people develop a new methodology for showing compassion toward self and others. The presentation included a discussion of the theological background of her nickname, The Little Flower, and conversation on God’s welcome of all creation in Genesis the first chapter.

After hearing about The Little Way, participants were given four case studies to discuss at their tables. These were based on real scenarios in my own life, where

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practicing The Little Way was a personal challenge. In some cases, it was evident that there are dangers of extending too much embrace and that healthy boundaries are necessary to preserve and protect life. The particular interpretation of The Little Way that was introduced at the retreat offered a very accessible methodology of putting this new spiritual discipline into practice.

The Little Way as a Pragmatic Spiritual Practice

Retreat participants were introduced to The Little Way as a spiritual practice of hospitality. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux understood God’s hospitality to embrace all souls, this premise informed her own motives in extending compassion to others. She adopted this theological concept of embodying the heart of Christ on earth as her own personal mission. It was her desire that no one should feel left out or unloved in her presence. What resulted was her understanding of The Little Way, as a pragmatic approach to loving the neighbor in her midst.

During a lecture at Fuller Seminary on August 11, 2017, Beck unpacked the theological concept of The Little Way as an accessible four-fold spiritual practice: see, stop, honor, and approach. This is one of multiple interpretations of The Little Way. Other interpretations of The Little Way also offer key insights into what St. Thérèse tried to accomplish and the theological rationale behind her behaviors.

For example, many scholars emphasize her focus on becoming small and unnoticed. This intention afforded St. Thérèse to do her work humbly and eliminate egotistical motivations. The Little Way creates space to experience God’s grace. The
disciple would allow Christ to be revealed without interference from their own ego. St. Thérèse explains this concept of the importance of becoming small and unrecognizable,

I understood what real glory was. He whose Kingdom is not of this world showed me that the true wisdom consists in ‘desiring to be unknown and counted as nothing,’ in ‘placing one’s joy in the contempt of self. Ah! I desired that, like the Face of Jesus, ‘my face to be truly hidden, that no one on earth would know me.’ I thirsted after suffering and I longed to be forgotten.8

In this process of becoming small, St. Thérèse understands her own simplicity as a child trusts God without reservation. This state of acknowledging her own helplessness speaks to another theological concept she coined, called the elevator to Jesus.9 This elevator means that by admitting her need for Christ, she has full access to the divine. St. Thérèse explains that it is in becoming small, like a child, one grows closer to God. She states, “Because your soul is extremely simple, but when you will be perfect, you will be even more simple; the closer one approaches to God, the simpler one becomes.”10

Another way to interpret The Little Way is through the theological framework of the hospitality of God. Beck utilizes a pragmatic methodology to living out a calling to extend the hospitality of God. According to this four-fold practice, St. Thérèse begins with an astute observation of her surroundings. Her observations were key to recognizing the need for social transformation to change the interpersonal climate of the convent. St. Thérèse states,


9 Ibid., 207-208.
10 Ibid., 151.
I have noticed (and this is very natural) that the most saintly sisters are the most loved. We seek their company, we render them services without their asking; finally, these souls so capable of bearing the lack of respect and consideration of others see themselves surrounded with everyone’s affection. On the other hand, imperfect souls are not sought out. No doubt we remain within the limits of religious politeness in their regard, but we generally avoid them, fearing lest we say something which isn’t too amiable.\textsuperscript{11}

The Little Way notices and analyzes the social hierarchy at the convent. This was an insightful breakthrough for her to recognize that not everyone was treated with the same respect. Taking a wider view of the social dynamics served as a leadership vantage point. This is what adaptive leadership experts Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky refer to as a balcony view. They explain how observation is a key dynamic to positively transforming an environment,

Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening. Going back to our metaphor, you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again throughout the day, week, month, and year. You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality.\textsuperscript{12}

As St. Thérèse begins The Little Way with careful observation of social interactions, a greater clarity surfaces on how to proceed by extending hospitality to the neighbor in her pathway. This was also a breakthrough moment for her as she carefully observed that humans holds differing encounters and experiences which result in either social status or collective disapproval. After careful observation of the social

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\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 246.
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environment, ceasing activity is the next step in The Little Way. This pause creates the space to enter into a social interaction with another. In a post-modern society, an overscheduled and busy lifestyle often makes this step difficult. It takes time to invest in relationships with people. Time is a scarce resource. In the book *The Art of Neighboring*, Denver pastors Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon offer practical ways of loving the nextdoor neighbor. They acknowledge that time is a constraint in doing this effectively. Using Jesus as the model for what relational ministry looks like, Pathak and Runyon state,

> The healthiest person who ever lived was Jesus. He got a lot done, but when we read about his life, the word hurried never comes to mind. Jesus came to offer us a different way of living. He said, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it to the full’ (John 10:10). He wasn’t talking about full in the sense of having a packed schedule. He meant it in the sense of abundance. In other words, a good meaningful life.\(^{13}\)

In slowing down to process one’s environment, the next step of The Little Way involves honoring another person. This step is grounded in the theological assurance of the Imago Dei, or image of God. St. Thérèse recognized that she belonged in God’s garden of various souls and delighted in the variety of people around her. In finally approaching her neighbor, a connection could be made that held the capacity to bridge social divisions over time. In approaching sisters that others avoided, she also grew in her own capacity to express the heart of God to others. St. Thérèse explains,

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Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more united I am to Him, the more also do I love my Sisters. When I wish to increase this love in me, and when especially the devil tries to place before the eyes of my soul the faults of such and such a Sister who is less attractive to me, I hasten to search out her virtues, her good intentions; I tell myself that even if I did see her fall once, she could easily have won a great number of victories which she is hiding in humility, and that even what appears to me as a fault can very easily be an act of virtue because of her intention. I have no trouble convincing myself of this truth because of a little experience I had which showed me we must never judge.  

While there are many interpretations of how one may practice The Little Way in daily living, it is this four-fold approach as interpreted from Beck that was introduced to the active members and leadership of Our Savior’s. Jesus called disciples to love God and neighbor, and The Little Way provides an intentional framework on how this call can be answered in daily life. As St. Thérèse practiced The Little Way, there was noticeable change in other sisters as they commented to her how they felt loved in her presence. One sister shared that St. Thérèse often smiled at her, offering a warmth to the social interaction. This gave the impression to the sister who had a disagreeable personality that someone found her to be an attractive soul.

St. Thérèse’s deep desire was not only to embody the heart of God on earth, but also that Christ would feel love from her as well. This is where the daily discipline of spiritual practices enter into the framework. It was her delight in God, her first-hand experiential knowledge of spiritual practices, that empowered her to express this love

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outwardly to others. St. Thérèse explains this in Manuscript C: “When charity has buried its roots deeply within the soul, it shows itself externally.”

Resources for the Little Way Retreat:

The main book sources consulted in formulating the retreat included The Story of a Soul by St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Unclean and Stranger God by Beck, and The Toughest People to Love Including Yourself, by Degroat. Each of these books helped participants understand aspects of The Little Way as well as its limitations when safety and security of life is threatened.

The retreat’s goal was to empower members to live into the new mission of the church. It was hoped that by hosting the retreat at Our Savior’s, members would recollect exercises in hospitality and extend future welcome toward others. The use of recorded music, guitar, hand-outs, a compassion survey, a podcast episode of the Liturgists narrating the Loving Kindness Meditation, refreshments and Holy Communion were also included. The church screens, computers and sound systems also required the aide of two volunteers to run the equipment.

Target Population

The target population of the retreat was staff, board members, and active members of Our Savior’s. Thirty people participated, representing all three groups. Staff and board member presence was crucial because they shape programs and policies of the church and assure that ministry initiatives are implemented. Active members also hold a vested

15 Ibid., 228.
interest in seeing Our Savior’s flourish. After years of pastoral turnover and a mass
exodus of 40 percent of engaged membership, it was vital for those most invested in the
future of Our Savior’s to develop the skills taught at the retreat. This empowered Our
Savior’s to deeply live into its new mission as a caring community.
CHAPTER 5:
IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

On September 9, 2019, my call began at Our Savior’s in Stillwater, Minnesota. During the first month of this new call, it became clear that the new mission, vision, and values aligned with the heart of this doctoral project. In this first month, I listened deeply to members’ stories on their assessments of the past twenty years of the congregation. This recent history confirmed the pragmatic need for developing skill sets and a deepened awareness of how one could become more compassionate toward self and others.

During the interview process in the spring and summer of 2019, the call committee and board knew about my doctoral research on The Little Way and its potential to bring a renewal to Our Savior’s. Beginning in April 2019, the call committee learned of my intention to organize and host a compassion and renewal retreat. As it was uncertain what my ministry context would be, my initial plan was to host a retreat for pastors within the ELCA to bring deepened resiliency. Statistics reveal an alarming rate of ministers leaving the pulpit. According to Dr. Robert Clinton, “One out of three or four
leaders finished well.”¹ This project was initially going to empower pastors to be resilient in tough ministry paradigms.

The basic content for the retreat was developed in March 2019. This was a general timeline of the content to be presented. When the initial project was aimed at a clergy retreat, the Southeastern Minnesota Synod, Southwestern Minnesota Synod, and an advanced leadership development program called SHAPE extended the invitation for The Little Way retreat to take place in September 2019. An outline of a full weekend retreat, including content, materials, and desired outcomes, was presented to key staff from these leadership synods and organizations.

Content for the retreat included exercises that would develop greater self-compassion through spiritual practices and deepened personal awareness. The retreat began with a devotion and a yoga experience, and there were other unique aspects of the retreat that would foster a greater self-compassion. For example, in advance of the retreat, participants were asked to create a family genogram. This was based on questions from the book Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving. By learning one’s personal past and how life’s circumstances, people, and environments shape us, an individual can unlock the potential for greater self-compassion. The retreat also included a journaling exercise to challenge the inner critic and nurture the inner child.

While the content of this retreat was initially designed to reenergize Lutheran pastors, the target audience of the retreat changed in mid-August 2019. When Our

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Savior’s extended the call to me as the new lead pastor, this project shifted to bringing a healing and renewal to this congregation. With excitement, staff, the board, and the call committee expressed interest in attending a January 2020 retreat. At the board meeting in October 2019, a great interest emerged in wanting to begin a significant ministry outside of Our Savior’s walls.

It was discussed that the retreat could offer a joint worship experience with inmates from the local state penitentiary. Immediately, this option was pursued. However, despite multiple attempts to inquire about potential outreach, this ministry opportunity did not come to fruition. According to the chaplain and staff at the state penitentiary located in Stillwater, there is a waiting list of people desiring to reach out to the prisoners. Though active leaders were disappointed, there was a consensus that this step could be a future caring initiative for Our Savior’s.

Retreat resources continued to develop from September through December 2019. Deepened research on St. Thérèse of Lisieux also occurred between June and December 2019. A variety of scholars and popular authors were read to conceptualize the impact that St. Thérèse had since her untimely death. From September through December 2019, staff meetings and board meetings included updates on retreat development. Leaders were also encouraged to attend the compassion and renewal retreat as it was made clear that this could help Our Savior’s live deeply into the new mission to be a caring community. Leadership was also recruited in advance to help with registration, purchasing supplies, room set-up, creating visuals on the screens, offering musical leadership, and setting up Holy Communion.
In November 2019, advertisement began that a Compassion and Renewal Retreat would be offered on January 10-11 at Our Savior’s. This was marketed via Facebook, the church’s website, the church’s weekly email newsletter, and worship services. A special invitation also went out to board members, staff, the call committee, and active members. The retreat was very warmly received by the active members and leaders of the congregation. Many commented on the importance of both the experiential knowledge of God through the Loving Kindness Meditation as well as the discovery of St. Thérèse’s ongoing impact.

The retreat was intentionally set in January 2020. During this timeframe, there is both optimism for a new year as well as the need for renewal after a hectic holiday season. The opportunity to slowing down, renew, in spirit and learn spiritual practices greatly appealed to the active members and leaders of Our Savior’s. Following the retreat, participants were commissioned to practice the Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way with intentionality for forty days.

Leadership Recruitment

In the fall of 2019, staff, board members, and other active lay leaders were recruited to participate. While active members and leaders of the church were the target audience for recruiting retreat participants, the retreat was not exclusive to this demographic. Members who only participate in weekly worship as well as a couple of people from the wider community also attended the retreat. The retreat required two active leaders from the technology committee and a staff member to help with room set-up and retreat logistics.
Resources

The retreat was held at Our Savior’s Lutheran in Stillwater, Minnesota. This was an ideal location as it allowed the event to be free of charge. A staff member donated refreshments and set up Holy Communion. Other resources utilized during the retreat included computer, projector, sound system, a media display of PowerPoint, guitar, handouts, and member experiences as data in conversation. Written materials gleaned insights from books related to Thérèse of Lisieux. Participants were also introduced to excerpts of the books *Stranger God* and *The Art of Neighboring*.

Compassion Survey

During the retreat, the compassion survey, located at Appendix C, featured fifteen questions and was given to all thirty participants. This survey was an original assessment developed by me. All retreat attendees were informed that all answers would be strictly anonymous and confidential. Participants consented to answering questions for research purposes. There was 100 percent participation with the compassion survey. It was also explained that after the forty-day experiment was completed, participants would be invited to take this survey again.

Each statement required members to indicate on a scale from one to five how frequently they responded to a scenario or thought process. One indicated a never response, while five revealed they responded in this way all the time. These statements were crafted to assess an individual’s self-compassion as well as their compassion toward others beyond their circles of affection. For example, question two in Appendix C gauges the level of self-criticism. Question one also inquires about the link between failure and
self-worth. The eighth question specifically ranks how much participants delight in people in their daily environments. This survey was given at the retreat as well as after the forty-day implementation of two new spiritual practices, with the goal of measuring whether participants grew in their overall levels of compassion. The higher the score on these statements indicated a stronger compassion level toward self and others. If the collective group’s average score increased after implementing two new spiritual practices for forty days, this would also indicate that these daily spiritual practices empowered participants to extend greater compassion toward self and others.

In particular, statements one, eleven, and twelve were interrelated key findings in this study. The first statement read, “When I fail at something, I see this as a learning opportunity, not a reflection of my self-worth.” If the answer were ranked a five for always, this revealed a secure and higher level of self-compassion. Statement eleven asked if participants engaged in three or more spiritual practices on a daily basis. This attempted to discern a link between high levels of compassion coinciding with participants that were spiritually disciplined. Statement twelve asked participants if they experienced the love of God through spiritual practices. Analysis revealed that members who engaged in daily spiritual practices were more likely to experience God’s presence and feel a higher level of compassion for self and others.

Spiritual Practices Questionnaire

A second tool that I developed was much more comprehensive. The spiritual practices assessment, located as Appendix D, was administered via Google. This was anonymous and confidential. This survey asked questions about spiritual practice habits,
such as the amount of time spent in spiritual practices on a daily basis. Participants also indicated what type of spiritual practices they most commonly practiced. The goal was to discern a link between the length of time in daily spiritual practices, types of spiritual practices commonly used, and elevated levels of compassion.

This questionnaire also revealed specific and measurable responses to The Loving Kindness Meditation. Multiple psychological studies reveal the positive impact of meditation to lower stress levels, improve cognition and recalibrate one’s day with a renewed focus. This study was designed to determine if respondents noticed any of these changes within themselves. Participants also revealed if the process of experiencing The Loving Kindness Meditation created a closer connection to God’s love and a heightened compassion toward self and others. Specifically, respondents ranked their levels of compassion toward the various individuals and groups they blessed in this practice. This would reveal if the desired outcome of an increased compassion for strangers and difficult people was possible in a short timeframe of a forty-day experiment. Short and long essay questions provided space for respondents to reveal any anecdotes on how this particular spiritual discipline made an observable change.

This study also asked questions about The Little Way’s impact in daily living. Respondents shared how they grew in observing their environments through the four-fold way of see, stop, honor, and approach. Participants also shared anecdotes of practicing The Little Way with intention in their daily lives. Members also shared whether they thought the two practices of The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way could empower Our Savior’s to live into its newfound mission.
Personal Interviews

The final research step was a series of confidential interviews that offered a clear picture of the forty-day experiment and the personal impact on participants. Out of the thirty retreat participants, seven interviews were conducted. The group comprised a fairly balanced blend of different ages, genders, membership durations and leadership positions. Board members, staff members, and active lay leaders were all represented in this group.

Each interview asked the same questions found in Appendix D. In a conversational approach, participants expounded upon their answers to the questions from this tool. This offered an opportunity for anecdotal evidence of transformation and further explanations to each question. This afforded direct understanding of The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way both at the retreat and during the forty-day experiment were also discussed. Finally, the interviews gave space to talk about resiliency and reenergizing Our Savior’s along with hoped future caring initiatives.

Report on Results: Compassion Survey

The compassion survey was distributed at the retreat as well as post the experiment. During the retreat, 100 percent of the thirty participants filled out the compassion survey. Answers were anonymous, confidential, and voluntary. After the forty-day spiritual discipline experience, twenty people, or two thirds of the original respondents, completed the survey again.

The compassion survey noted that overall, participants perceived a slight increase in compassion between the retreat and after the forty-day experiment. A possible reason
for only an incremental change is that forty days was not a long enough time period. Another reason for marginal results is that a global pandemic and stay at home orders were mandated shortly after this forty day period, resulting in less intentional interaction with others outside of their homes. At the retreat, the overall average score of all the questions was a 3.3. A one score would indicate never, two was seldom and three was often, four frequently and five was always. Other questions pertained to how frequently respondents offered compassion for self and others. When the survey was administered again after the forty-day experiment was complete, the overall average score had increased to 3.47. While this was an encouraging finding, it is also sobering to recognize this is a neutral level of compassion toward self and others.

Participants that did not engage in at least three spiritual practices a day or did not experience God’s loving presence through spiritual disciplines also ranked lower on self-compassion. To determine if there was a relationship between compassion and engaging in spiritual practices, the participants were separated into different groups for analysis. An observation occurred that the longer participants spent in their spiritual disciplines at home, a greater capacity to put this faith into action resulted. Participants that spent more time in daily spiritual practices also had a greater self-compassion and life resiliency to express compassion outwardly. The last statement on the compassion survey says: My self-worth is grounded in God’s delight in me and not in my accomplishments. Respondents that answered lower on the frequency scale to this question may find delight in others and in creation, but not toward self.
The general conclusion was that participants who were more grounded in spiritual disciplines and experienced more of God’s loving presence during these practices experienced higher levels of compassion for self and others. It was also noticeable that when self-compassion was less frequently experienced, overall scores were lowered for that particular respondent.

Spiritual Practices Survey

This questionnaire was distributed to all thirty retreat participants. A total of sixteen respondents anonymously and confidentially answered these questions. Of the respondents, 6.5 percent reported practicing spiritual disciplines for more than an hour on a daily basis. Six point five percent reported spending one to four minutes daily in a spiritual practice. A total of 74 percent of respondents reported spending between five and twenty-five minutes a day in spiritual practices. This larger percentage is evenly divided at 37.5 percent each in the categories of either five to fifteen minutes or sixteen to twenty-five minutes a day with God. Meanwhile 12.5 percent of respondents spent an average of twenty-six to thirty-five minutes a day engaged in spiritual practices. All of the respondents indicated that they spend at least some time with God daily. The pie chart below indicates the amount of time spent in spiritual practices daily.
Figure 3. Time Allocation to Daily Spiritual Practices

Responses to this question indicate that there is room for growth in the amount of time that respondents engage in a spiritual practice. A follow-up question asked what forms of spiritual practices participants most commonly utilized. Using a scale of one to five, respondents ranked the frequency of engagement with a particular spiritual discipline. A response of one meant that a participant never used this spiritual practice. A response of five indicated that this was a daily discipline.

Breaking down each discipline, prayer ranked as the most commonly used spiritual practice on a daily basis, followed by devotional books and Bible study. Fasting and yoga, both spiritual practices that engage the body, were the least common practices listed. The graph below indicates the types of spiritual practices used daily and the level of their frequency among respondents.
The next set of questions asked how implementing The Little Way impacted participants after the retreat. Over half of respondents, 56.3 percent indicated that they experienced a greater compassion toward others outside of their circles of association. 43.8 percent responded that they intentionally paid closer attention to their daily environments. One quarter of respondents admitted they were unable to practice this spiritual discipline daily. Another quarter also indicated that they approached individuals they would have previously avoided. Roughly 37.5 percent of participants acknowledged that they found this exercise to embody the heart of Christ through The Little Way challenging.

In the short answer questions, respondents shared stories of how The Little Way impacted their daily lives. One respondent shared that there was a person from the congregation that they found difficult. After this retreat, this participant mustered the courage to engage this person in a meaningful conversation. Through the use of The Loving Kindness Meditation and a greater awareness of the social environment, this
respondent shared that she recognized the importance of reaching out to this individual. The respondent shared that this person was who they envisioned during the Loving Kindness Meditation when prompted to think of someone they found challenging to engage with, indicating a softening of the heart. By engaging in conversation, the respondent learned that this person has a serious health concern in her life, which further contributes to her personal stress. With this greater awareness and compassion, greater understanding emerged. Now these two individuals approach each other with a higher regard. This anecdote was helpful information as the graph below reveals the basic impact of The Little Way.

![Figure 5. Observable impact of The Little Way](image)

**Figure 5. Observable impact of The Little Way**

The Loving Kindness Meditation was a new spiritual practice for 100% of participants. Of the respondents, 56.3 percent noticed that the daily implementation of this practice lowered their stress levels. 50 percent of respondents indicated an increase in compassion toward others. 43.8 percent indicated that they felt a deepened centering in
their daily life after practicing The Loving Kindness Meditation. Only one respondent shared there was no noticeable change, and two respondents reported that they did not practice this spiritual discipline. The full graph below reveals responses to all of the observable impacts.

Figure 6. Observable Impact of The Loving Kindness Meditation

After examining noticeable changes in participants from the use of The Loving Kindness Meditation, it was helpful to measure the changes in levels of compassion toward various individuals after practicing this spiritual discipline for forty days. A response of one revealed no compassion. The two on the scale shared some compassion. A three indicated a neutral level of compassion. A four was compassionate and five showed very compassionate toward another. As the general compassion survey also indicated, respondents overall held neutral levels of compassion toward the self, with eleven of the sixteen respondents answered a three. The other five respondents responded with a four.
The greatest compassion was held for someone that is already loved. However, the category of someone you love was the only one to receive the very compassionate ranking of a five. An interesting dynamic is that eleven of the respondents revealed that they shared a neutral level of compassion toward someone difficult in their lives.

Compassion toward a total stranger was ranked at higher levels. Eight of the respondents shared that they held strangers at a four level of compassion, while six had a neutral amount of compassion. While this question was not asked during the retreat, the interviews gave greater descriptors on how The Loving Kindness Meditation helped participants move the dial to exhibit a higher level of compassion toward difficult people and strangers.

After practicing the Loving Kindness Meditation and/or The Little Way, how would you rank your level of compassion toward each of the following?

![Figure 7. Compassion Levels After Use of Spiritual Practices](image)

**Interview Report**

The interviews gave space for seven participants to share confidentially the personal impact of the retreat and how they incorporated new spiritual practices in their daily lives. Conversation also revealed how respondents view the current energy and
satisfaction levels of the congregation as compared to 2017. During the end of Pastor Stiles’ call a thorough survey revealed that congregational energy and satisfaction levels were both low. During these post-retreat interviews in 2020, a remarkable 100 percent of interviewees revealed that despite the current paradigm of a pandemic world, Our Savior’s energy and satisfaction levels have significantly increased in the past year. This is in part due to the stabilization of the right pastoral fit as well as an openness to God leading into the future.

Respondents also shared that these two spiritual practices greatly improved levels of mindful awareness of surroundings overall and gave pragmatic approaches to develop greater compassion in difficult social scenarios. For interviewee A, The Loving Kindness Meditation was a very challenging practice where the mind could not focus. For this member, a greater intentionality of observing the environment and approaching others through The Little Way was an easier methodology to expanding compassion.

The other six respondents indicated that approaching another through first offering a prayer of blessing through The Loving Kindness Meditation gave them the capacity to both honor and approach an individual they normally would have avoided. During the retreat, interviewee B specifically experienced healing and forgave someone for a grievance. This inner healing continues to affect them several months later.

Interviewee C struggles with anxiety and depression. The incorporation of The Loving Kindness Meditation helped this individual with insomnia and created a greater resiliency to face life’s challenges. Once interviewee C started getting better rest, their
daily anxiety diminished and they even felt empowered to approach challenging individuals.

Interviewee D said that the collective experience at the retreat of being in the sanctuary together and envisioning various people to hold in higher regard during The Loving Kindness Meditation was a powerful experience. This respondent noted that even the collective energy of offering compassion to various circles in one’s life was inspirational. One-hundred percent of the interviewees also shared that the combination of both The Little Way and The Loving Kindness Meditation was a transformative practice that could reenergize the entire congregation to a higher level.

Since the forty-day experiment, four of the seven of interviewees continue to practice one or both of these new spiritual practices daily. As a result, resiliency, deepened joy, and a curiosity of new spiritual practices was piqued. Prior to the retreat, all of the thirty participants engaged in prayer or scripture study as a common spiritual discipline. While the energy and stabilization of the congregation returned, there is room for growth in experiencing a greater compassion for self and individuals that are considered difficult. All seven of the interviewees shared that this research and experience of spiritual practices helped Our Savior’s to bring the new mission into fruition.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The mission of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church is to be a caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith. The compassion and renewal retreat held in January of 2020 served as a starting point to live out this calling. After surviving a seven-year liminal space and losing 40 percent of engaged members, Our Savior’s needed to experience this love of God in a fresh way. The retreat and the commission to practice The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way offered inspiration to thirty participants. Interviewee C stated: “I liked hearing about St. Thérèse. This was really impactful for me to think that even one person can make a huge difference. You may not even know the difference in your lifetime.”

Our Savior’s was founded in 1858 and has strong relational roots in meeting in homes. Throughout the 162-year history of this congregation, the love of Christ has been experienced both within the walls of the church and beyond the doors. Mission partners in Mlafu, Tanzania; Zacaulau, Guatemala; Mission Jamaica; and Open Hands, a soup kitchen in St. Paul, Minnesota, all inspire members to love others. A reminder of God’s love for each member was deemed necessary after years of loss, lack of vision, and a leadership void.

In the midst of chronic changes and pastoral transitions at Our Savior’s in the past seven years, this congregation questioned God’s abundance of gracious welcome. As Our Savior’s delighted in an era of flourishing and growth, the congregation blossomed under the leadership of Pastor Molin. During a liminal space over a seven-year timeframe, 40
percent of engaged members left the church. An identity crisis ensued causing the congregation to forget of God’s great delight in each member.

The recent congregational renewal retreat offered an opportunity to reclaim innate worth, experience God’s gracious welcome and practice extending compassion to others in daily life. Over the course of a forty-day experiment, participants developed greater capacity for self-compassion. They were also challenged to extend kindness to others by offering blessings via the Loving Kindness Meditation and approaching others through The Little Way. This consciousness of self, others, and God’s delight inspired resiliency among active leaders of the congregation.

There is still room for growth as Our Savior’s continues to live into its mission as a caring congregation. Based upon the compassion survey taken during the retreat and after the forty-day experiment, participants reported experiencing only a slight increase in compassion for self and others. A couple possible reasons exist for this marginal change. First, forty days may be too short of a time period to enact wide-sweeping change. A second rationale is that shortly after the forty-day experiment, a global pandemic and stay at home orders mandated less socialization beyond participants’ homes. With intentionality, a continued effort of daily delight in God’s presence through meditation and active outreach could empower the congregation to grow in confidence and compassion. Four of the seven participants that were interviewed continue to practice elements of The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way on a daily basis. Interviewee A stated: “I now approach the world with a greater observance. I realize how many people I do not truly see in my daily life. I am now attempting to make a concerted
effort to not only see people but acknowledge their presence and even say hello. This is an intentional change in my life.”

Retreat participants also noticed observable changes through daily practice of The Loving Kindness Meditation. 56.3 percent of participants noticed a reduced stress level after mediating. Interviewee C identified that she meditated to alleviate her insomnia. This member has suffered from anxiety and depression for multiple years. Extending a compassionate blessing to herself and others in different areas of her life gives her peace enough to fall asleep at night. After offering the blessings of The Loving Kindness Meditation at night, combined with her morning devotions, she felt better equipped to face the challenges of daily life. The retreat also prompted her to practice The Little Way by seeking a compassionate interaction with someone she normally avoids. A breakthrough occurred as she found commonalities with and a genuine compassion toward someone she once found abrasive.

Interviewee D commented that the group practice of The Loving Kindness Meditation at the retreat created an inspirational atmosphere. This participant stated, “I felt this incredible peace knowing that all of us at once were intentionally blessing ourselves and others. This was a pretty powerful experience. I had never done anything like this before, and certainly not in the presence of others. Knowing that we were all working toward the same goal of extending the love of Jesus is something I will take with me for the rest of my life.”

The Loving Kindness Meditation was a unique spiritual practice that challenged and inspired members. Interviewee A stated, “I will admit that I struggled with this
exercise. I could not shut my brain off. There were just too many distractions and I was judging myself. I feared I was not good at it. This is why I also liked the challenge of The Little Way. This was a pragmatic approach to life that I thought I could accomplish. It challenged me, but it also felt possible.”

The Loving Kindness Meditation offered an experience of God’s delight that fueled participants to share this love with others. Of the participants surveyed, 50 percent reported a growth in compassion for others due to daily practice of this exercise. It is notable that a higher than neutral level of compassion was also increased for an acquaintance. However, the love for self was ranked at merely a neutral level. There is room for growth in this area.

As retreat participants grew in their compassion for self and others, 100% of the interviewees reported that The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way were pragmatic spiritual disciplines that, when combined, could revitalize the entire congregation to live into the new mission statement. On Ash Wednesday, The Little Way was introduced as the Lenten Theme for 2020. The entire congregation was invited to practice The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way. All members had access to the Compassion Survey to measure their own levels of compassion toward self and others before and after a forty-day experiment. Efforts to include the entire congregation in this renewal opportunity came to a swift halt in mid-March. On March 15 2020. Our Savior’s radically shifted gears and pivoted to virtual worship in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Active leaders that participated in the January retreat had already completed the forty-day experiment of adding new spiritual practices to their daily routine.
Despite the reality of a global pandemic, Interviewee E stated, “Even though we are currently navigating a pandemic, we are now a healthy organization. We found stability and optimism for our future. We will weather this pandemic storm well.” This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee F, who stated, “This retreat was absolutely wonderful. I firmly believe that I grew from this time, and I think our whole church is experiencing a new energy and joy despite living in a pandemic.”

During this time of pandemic, Interviewee G expressed that she has more time to engage in Bible study and prayer. She shared that the retreat raised her consciousness of the importance of adding new spiritual disciplines into daily life. The pandemic is a time of personal renewal and spiritual growth for Interviewee G, who said, “I am eager to read a devotional book that I used several years ago.”

Caring initiatives continue in the midst of this newfound reality. For example, a caring tree was developed, in which thirty volunteers make a monthly phone call to every member. From these efforts, inactive members have discovered they are not forgotten during this time of exile from the church building.

In the wake of George Floyd’s death, which occurred just twenty-five miles from Stillwater, a deepened partnership is formulating with Our Savior’s mission partner congregation Bethlehem Lutheran in St. Paul, Minnesota. After the fires from civil unrest, there are no grocery stores within walking distance of Bethlehem Lutheran. Our Savior’s quickly raised $4,000 worth of relief aid to distribute items to the hungry and homeless the summer of 2020. On one of these service distribution days, a family traveled to the George Floyd memorial after serving at Bethlehem Lutheran. The twelve-
year-old son was moved to see that his life was making a difference. He commented to his parents that he wanted to sign up for youth group.

In addition, conversations and book studies about race relations and re-discovering God’s delight in all of humanity followed. Members of Our Savior’s met outside at safe social distances while engaging in tough conversations with grace and compassion. Continued book studies and conversations about race relations will follow into the new school year. An awakening occurred for members to recognize the hurting neighbors in the community that deal with racial injustices.

More opportunities will continue to appear for Our Savior’s to extend compassion to each other and the world. In the fall of 2020, Zvago plans to break ground on a new senior living coop. In 2021, this building project will be completed, with forty-eight units. Residents preparing to move into this development are already engaging in online worship and ministries through Our Savior’s. The Planned Unit Development (PUD) offers an intentional relationship between Our Savior’s and Zvago. Residents are open to Bible studies, programs, and outreach from Our Savior’s. There will also be shared parking and green space.

The LADC preschool and nursery also plans to build a new playground, expanding outreach to younger families. This preschool housed at of Our Savior’s also went through a time of leadership transitions in recent years. There is new energy and optimism with a strong preschool director. Historically, many families that come to the preschool often find their way into the life of the congregation. However, this also requires intentionality of building relationships. As a musician and storyteller, I offer a
chapel time for the children as an entry point to building relationships. Additional partnership opportunities for our children’s ministry and the preschool are evaluated every year, and the relationship continues to deepen.

Opportunities also arose during this time of global pandemic to ensure that worship is accessible through multiple avenues. Our Savior’s now offers worship on the local public access television channel, the church’s website, Youtube, Facebook, a dial-in phone service, and even a radio transmitter at a live parking lot worship gathering. Just as beloved pastor Molin utilized the church sign as a method of lighthearted and often humorous evangelism, Our Savior’s is now using an inspirational meme of the day that is shared on Facebook. A daily prayer and praise moment is also offered where I sing a hymn or a contemporary worship song on the guitar and pray for the world’s healing. This song and prayer are found on the Our Savior’s website and Facebook page. These efforts stir an energy and an enthusiasm for local members as well as viewers as far away as Texas, Oregon, and Colorado to engage as virtual members.

One of the active leaders that participated in the compassion retreat, Interviewee A, remarked that there is so much potential at Our Savior’s to deepen its mission as a caring congregation. He has often commented that to truly live into this calling requires stepping outside of the building and out into the community to build relationships. This participant articulated, “In Stillwater, we are insulated from many people. It is really easy to stay in our bubble. We need to see people who are out in the community too. The teachings of The Little Way were good to internalize and feel compassion toward others.”
As St. Thérèse of Lisieux sought to embody Christ’s heart on earth, her efforts changed the social climate of the convent. A Lutheran doctrine called the priesthood of all believers invites Christians to see their daily contexts as a place for serving the neighbor. Pastors and church professionals are not the only Christians with a calling from God. Each person, uniquely gifted and skilled, is called to extend the love and grace of God in daily life. As a cloistered nun, St. Thérèse was limited in her opportunities to travel beyond the confines of the convent. In a congregational context, a variety of occupations and settings throughout the metro area are represented as members attend work, school and volunteer.

As Our Savior’s continues to explore new ways to deepen in compassion toward self and others, future ministry opportunities are appearing. It was remarked that an annual renewal retreat could become a new tradition. Ideas such as the family genogram, challenging the inner critic, and nurturing the inner child could be explored. This would offer a healing balm for members to make peace with any pain in one’s personal past. Additional spiritual disciplines could be explored and studied.

As Our Savior’s finds ways to offer compassion, there is interest in expressing compassion with the inmates at the local state penitentiary. While the initial retreat was designed to offer a joint worship opportunity, the prison chaplain stated there was no space at this time for outreach. If this door would open for Our Savior’s, this could also be a way to intentionally express compassion for a population often neglected and ignored by the wider world. This would be a challenge to practice The Little Way and likely be a transformative interpersonal encounter for Our Savior’s members.

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Reenergizing and revitalizing the congregation was achievable through slowing down in Sabbath delight, cultivating spiritual practices, and reimagining the future. Our Savior’s is known for highly relational ministry. There is also a similar humble quality about this organization that mirrors the heart of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

In twenty-four years of life, St. Thérèse of Lisieux made an indelible impression living out her calling to embody the heart of Christ on earth. When she died on September 30 1897, the sisters of Lisieux struggled to craft a meaningful message at her funeral. The quiet confidence of The Little Way went largely unnoticed by others in her daily life. After her manuscript was discovered and published, a greater revelation of God’s hospitality to all spread worldwide. Her legacy impacted the next century. On May 17, 1925, Thérèse earned the title of Saint in the Roman Catholic Church. One hundred years after her death, she also merited the elite distinction of Doctor, a rarified group of thirty-six theologians highly honored for their theological insights.

The ripple effect of this one life and her humble practices inspired key leaders who followed The Little Way into the next century. Dorothy Day began ministry to the homeless based upon inspiration from St. Thérèse. Mother Teresa of Calcutta changed her name from Anjezë to Teresa in honor of her role model. Mother Teresa of Calcutta drew inspiration from her namesake by extending dignity to an impoverished population.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux was empowered to share divine love with others from the overflow of love that was first instilled in her. She reported that the love of God was evident throughout the entirety of her life. Her initial memories involve experiencing the love of God. St. Thérèse states, “God was pleased all through my life to surround me
with love, and the first memories I have are stamped with smiles and the most tender caresses. But although He placed so much love near me, He also sent much love into my little heart, making it warm and affectionate.\textsuperscript{2}

In a similar fashion, my earliest memories involve experiencing a joy and delight in Jesus. My mother launched me on a mission to extend compassion to a very special girl in my kindergarten class when I was five years old. I now see this interaction from a new vantage point. There indeed was an extension of grace toward another classmate. As I observed, honored, and approached Kristin, this simple introduction set me on a lifelong trajectory. The mission of kindness was two-fold; before I could extend this overflow of gracious love, I had an unwavering understanding at that age that I too was special. The welcoming arms of God extended to me, ensuring my capacity to extend this same hospitality to others. This empowerment to offer grace is challenged whenever I struggle to remember God’s gracious welcome.

When Christians do not take time to slow down and delight in God and others, great opportunities are missed. The greatest spiritual teacher in my life never went to college. She does not know how to drive a car and will likely never experience marriage or childbirth. A kindergarten friendship continues to fuel my life with inspiration. I learned from Kristin what a kind and welcoming soul embodies. Kristin embraced even the bullies seeking to harm her life. Assured of her own innate worth in the imago dei, Kristin offered the clear message that the love of God and the way of compassion transforms the world.

In the midst of chronic clergy turnover, Our Savior’s forgot God’s great delight in each member. Offering a compassion and renewal retreat was the first of many steps to introduce members to a newfound way to see the world. Through the lens of God, all of humanity is welcomed in creation and at the cross. Introducing new spiritual practices such as meditation and active service empowered Our Savior’s to recognize an innate worth. From the overflow of experiencing God’s delight, disciples are equipped to demonstrate divine love to others. Our Savior’s energy is revitalized. The pathway of intentional compassion toward self and others continues to direct the steps forward. The path is a Little Way, with dynamic potential to transform Our Savior’s in Stillwater Minnesota.
Appendix A: Retreat Schedule

“The Little Way” ~ Retreat Schedule

Friday Evening: January 10th 2020
6:30 PM Opening Devotions: New Year and The Mystery of the Magi
7:00 PM Yoga Flow: Re-centering and experiencing God
8:00 PM – 8:30 PM: Fellowship and Refreshments

Saturday: January 11th 2020
8:00 AM Opening Worship: Praise songs, message, contemplative music and silence
8:30 AM The Loving Kindness Meditation as Narrated by the Liturgist Podcast
9:30 AM Break with Refreshments~ Assignment during break: Look for items that you find “difficult”. Take pictures with your phone or a mental image.
10:00 AM Introduction to St. Therese of Lisieux
   • Brief explanation of her short life and legacy
   • 1 Corinthians 12 and 13: The Heart of God in the Body of Christ
   • The Little Flower and the Little Way
   • Saint and Doctor of the Church
   • Historical significance in the next century (Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day)
10:30 AM “Unclean” images: psychology behind disgust (visuals: mental shifts, WW2 photo, Kitty Litter cake etc.)
11 AM Cultivating the Will to Embrace: Excerpts of book as a theological concept
11:15 AM Ted Talk “What if there’s nothing wrong with you?” by Susan Henkels MSW
11:15 AM Practicing the Little way: Case Studies Triads Conversation of the Little Way in your contexts: when has the little way been needed or utilized intuitively? Who are the difficult people in your life that you can practice this little way?
11:45 AM The Challenge of The Little Way: Dealing with Difficult people, personality disorders and boundaries (based on the book, “The Most difficult people to love.” By Dr. Chuck DeGroat)
1200 PM Closing worship with Holy Communion
Appendix B: OSLC 40 Day Compassion Challenge!

**OSLC 40 DAY COMPASSION CHALLENGE**

What if we can radically transform our entire culture of Our Savior’s and even our own personal lives by intentionally living into our vision, mission, and values of a “caring community”? What if we could radically experience the loving presence of God daily, and practice compassion for others through the steps of the “Little Way”? Will this change our own levels of self-compassion? Will we feel loved by God and naturally share this love with our neighbors? Could it soften tensions with others, create new friendships, and even foster a greater sense of inner-peace? Let’s experiment and see!

*This experiment will involve the daily discipline of two practices:*

1. **Loving Kindness Meditation**: Spend 5 minutes daily (at a time most convenient for you) practicing the loving-kindness blessings.
2. **The Little Way**: Attempt the 4 steps of the “Little Way” in all your encounters: people you love, admire, feel neutral toward, and especially if there is anyone where you are not close/do not get along. See if these two practices combined will change your levels of experiencing self-compassion and loving the neighbor.

*The Little Way ~ Involves 4 Movements*

1. **See** (notice your environment)
2. **Stop** (focus on what you see and stop doing what you’ve been doing or thinking)
3. **Honor** (this person is made in God’s image—what qualities does God delight about in this person? Try to sift that out if it is difficult)
4. **Approach** (Do not avoid, but draw toward this person. This might be as simple as a smile, a nod of acknowledgement, listening or even dialogue with this person)
The Loving Kindness Meditation

Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. For the next few minutes, there is nothing for you to do, nowhere to go, nothing to accomplish. This is a time simply to be with yourself. As you breathe in, imagine yourself sitting in a room praying. Let the image come to you however it comes. Let the image fully emerge. See yourself in a comfortable position, sitting in a comfy chair. Simply notice your breath. As you settle into the image, you hear someone open the door to the room, walk in and sit in front of you. You open your eyes and see it is you sitting there in front of you.

Somehow, in an instant, the entire story of this person is known to you. You know all the ways he or she has suffered, has been betrayed, and has betrayed others. You know all the moments of despair and loneliness. You know all the places of shame and neglect, loss and death. And you say to yourself, “this person knows suffering.”

In this moment, sensing this person’s sorrows in your heart, simply radiate loving kindness to the one sitting in front of you. Distracting thoughts will naturally arise, but just come back to hear your heart and extend your compassion to this person. Let this flow happen for several minutes if you can. (A little tip: if you have a difficult time imagining yourself sitting in front of you, sit in front of a mirror and continue with this practice.)

When you feel ready, offer these blessings:

May I be happy, May I be well, May I be peaceful, May I be loved

And now, let this image fade and allow the next closest person in your world take this seat. It may be your spouse or partner, your child, your parent, your best friend. This person also knows suffering and is worthy of your compassion. Offer this person your loving kindness for a few minutes followed by the blessings.

May you be happy, May you be well, May you be peaceful, May you be loved

Continue outward to friends, community, state, nation, planet, all beings

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Appendix C: Compassion Survey

1=Never    2=Seldom    3=Often    4=Frequently    5=All the Time

1. When I fail at something, I see this as a learning opportunity, not as a reflection of my self-worth.________________

2. Negative self-talk or critique is typically not something that I do.____________

3. When I see other people that are going through hardships, I wonder what their story might entail________________

4. When I encounter people that are different than me (race, creed, or appearance), I delight in these differences and I want to learn more about them.__________

5. My social network and daily interactions involve a very diverse group of people._______

6. I get along with most people I interact with in my daily world. Conflicts that arise are resolved quickly.__________

7. When I find myself in a tense social situation, I approach others easily and with curiosity.____________

8. When I look at my environment, I take delight in the people around me__________

9. Finding fault in myself is a rare occurrence.______________

10. Finding fault in others or my environment is a rare occurrence.______________
11. I engage in at least three spiritual practices a day (examples: prayer, scripture, reading, meditation, worship, silence, exercise, fasting, devotional book, generosity, service.)

12. I frequently feel God’s love for me through spiritual practices and interactions with others.

13. It is easy for me to find beauty and God’s delight in people and places in my daily life.

14. When tensions arrive in this world, my first impulse is to listen to God, pray for the world and seek to understand others with whom I may disagree.

15. My self-worth is grounded in God’s delight in me and not in my accomplishments.
Appendix D: Spiritual Practices Assessment

Our Savior's Mission as a Caring Community

Thanks for attending the Compassion and Renewal Retreat at Our Savior's in January. Pastor Karma is doing doctoral research.

How much time do you spend in spiritual practices on a daily basis?

- I do not engage in spiritual practices
- 1-4 minutes per day
- 5-15 minutes per day
- 16-25 minutes per day
- 26-35 minutes per day
- 36-45 minutes per day
- 46-60 minutes per day
- Over an hour daily
What spiritual practices do you regularly use?

1=NONE 2=Rarely 3=Often 4=Very frequently 5=Daily use

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After the retreat, how did the daily practice of the loving kindness meditation for 40 days impact you? *(Offering blessing to self and others)* Check all that apply.

- [ ] I noticed changes in lowering stress levels
- [ ] I felt centered in my daily life
- [ ] I grew in my self-compassion
- [ ] I grew in my compassion for other people
- [ ] I felt closer to God
- [ ] I grew in my confidence
- [ ] I did not notice any changes
- [ ] I did not practice the Loving Kindness Meditation
After the retreat, how did the daily practice of The Little Way impact your life? (See, Stop, Honor and Approach) Check all that apply

☐ I was a careful observer of my environment

☐ I stopped what I was doing to help others

☐ I felt compassion toward others

☐ I approached others that I wouldn't have in the past

☐ I was challenged by this exercise

☐ I did not notice any changes

☐ I did not practice The Little Way
After practicing the Loving Kindness Meditation and/or The Little Way, how would you rank your level of compassion toward each of the following?

1=No compassion  2=Some compassion  3=Neutral 4=Compassionate  5=Very Compassionate

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What aspects of the retreat did you find helpful in your spiritual life?

Long answer text

-------------------------------------------------------------
In your opinion, how might the Loving Kindness Meditation and/or The Little Way empower Our Savior’s to live into our mission as a caring community?

Long answer text

Is there any anecdote or story you would like to share about your practice of The Little Way?

Long answer text

Is there any anecdote or story you would like to share about your practice of The Loving Kindness Meditation?

Long answer text
Appendix E: Research Consent Form

Our Savior’s Lutheran recently adopted a new mission statement after a seven year time of transition. It is the goal of my doctoral research to empower Our Savior’s to live into this new reality of being a “caring community called by Christ to serve and live in faith.”

The retreat on January 10-11 2020 was designed to help active members and leadership of the congregation learn spiritual practices that unlock a greater capacity to be compassionate toward oneself, others, and the wider world. Through use of The Loving Kindness Meditation and The Little Way, participants embarked on a forty day challenge to determine the effectiveness of these practices to also bring renewal and reenergize Our Savior’s.

Your participation in the questionnaire, surveys and interviews are voluntary and confidential. Your identity will be protected. The information you share will be used to analyze the effectiveness of these spiritual practices to renew Our Savior’s.

Thanks in advance for your participation in this important research that will enliven Our Savior’s to bring the new mission into fruition.

Participant’s Signature: ______________________________

Pastor’s Signature: ______________________________

Printed Name: ______________________________

Printed Name: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________
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