

ABSTRACT

WHISPERS FROM EDEN:

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE LONG-TERM INFLUENCES OF THE CIRCLE OF TRUST RETREATS FOR CLERGY PARTICIPANTS

by

Diane Martin Bell

The Circle of Trust retreats, hosted by the Center for Courage and Renewal, grew out of the writings and work of Parker Palmer as he looked for ways to help educators and the educational community revive their vocational purposes. Circle of Trust retreat series were created to support and encourage those educators. Several studies have looked into the influences of the retreats in the lives of educators along with evaluations from participants after the retreats.

Over time, retreats were offered for other professions, as well. Two grants from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., helped to fund Circle of Trust retreat series for clergy and congregational leaders. While evaluations of the retreats by the participants indicated that the retreats had had an influence in their lives, no research had been done on the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust practices in the lives of the clergy. This narrative inquiry study focuses on the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreats in the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of clergy participants. Through semi-structured interviews, seven clergy told their stories about the influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in their lives.

All seven participants related stories from their lives of the ongoing influence of the Circle of Trust practices in their spiritual, personal, and professional lives. The Circle

of Trust practices were especially helpful in growing their relationship with God, discerning vocational issues, and navigating conflict and differences. Two unexpected understandings resulted from this study: the transferability of the practices into prior learning and reading and the ability of the practices to be helpful in relationships with people of all ages.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

My journey began at a time when local church ministry was overwhelming me. I felt as if I was on a bicycle and could not pedal fast enough to keep up with the multiple responsibilities placed on my days. I was often tired, discouraged, and emotionally drained.

Added to my own personal struggles was the reality of several colleagues who decided to leave local church ministry. They were friends who had inspired me by their ministerial skills and passion for ministry. I wondered what had happened to them.

Around that same time, I read Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, where she struggled with sustaining and balancing ministry in the local church. As I read the book, I knew that my story differed from hers. Our lives, while comparable, were dissimilar as well. Eventually, she chose a different path and left the local church (125). I feared for myself. I had balanced and sustained ministry so far, but I wondered if I would continue in ministry.

As my fears grew, I sought out my district superintendent and supervising pastor, the Reverend Glenda Ulmer. Our relationship had a long, positive history. I trusted her. When we met, I poured out my feelings of discouragement and fatigue. I voiced my fears of not being able to sustain ministry in the local church. At that point, my heart broke because I believed my words betrayed God's call in my life.

When I finished my story, a wave of terror coursed through me over what I had just confessed to my district superintendent. However, Glenda did not overreact to my

story. She knew my current struggles and asked questions to clarify details. Then, she gave me what turned out to be the first epiphany that shed light on my predicament.

Though she had not personally read the book, she had heard good reports about Parker J. Palmer's book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* and recommended it to me. I had read his book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* a few years prior when reflecting on burnout (48-49). Without hesitation, I took her advice. The church season of Lent began soon after our meeting. I decided to add the reading of Palmer's book to my list of disciplines I would take on during Lent.

Within the opening pages of Palmer's book, I found words that resonated with my heart and soul: "Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.... [W]e can use devastation as a seedbed for new life" (*Hidden Wholeness* 5). In ministry, brokenness often surrounded and overwhelmed me: broken hopes, broken promises, broken relationships, broken church systems, and broken lives. If I reframed the brokenness around me and saw it as containing the potential for new life, I would have a practice to assist me when such circumstances sought to overwhelm me. I was encouraged.

I continued into the book, taking my time and checking out the footnotes. In the footnotes, I found a reference to a Web site, www.CourageRenewal.org (188), where I could find out more about the work discussed in the book. The second epiphany occurred when I discovered the retreat schedule on the Web site. My eyes were drawn to the Circle of Trust retreat, "The Journey toward an Undivided Life." The retreat was after Lent, in the season of Easter, a time of resurrection, hope, and new life. I knew I had to attend that retreat. I made the arrangements and counted down the days to the retreat.

On the retreat, I found home. I found a place that was safe and accepted me as I was. In this welcoming space, I did not have to morph into others' expectations of me for them to honor me. My playfulness and creativity were freed. I was listened to without judgment. The other retreat participants did not try to fix me or to shape me into being like them. I liked who I was there. Many times, I thought I was the center of attention. I believed that everything was about me and my deep, inner needs.

Paradoxically, the retreat was about everyone else on the retreat. As the other people on the retreat listened to me in open and honoring ways, I listened to others in equally open and honoring ways. As they did not seek to fix or change me, I did not seek to fix or change them. We gave focused attention and listened to each other as we shared our stories and experiences. When others shared, they became the focus of our time together. In this give and take, a deep sense of community formed from within and among us.

In order for us to provide this safe and spacious place for each other, the two facilitators for the retreat both instructed us in the practices or Touchstones of the Circle of Trust model (see Appendix A) and lived the practices for us. They set the stage physically by placing the chairs in a circle. Often, they provided a visual place of focus with a lit candle. They were welcoming and calming as the retreat began. They gave focused attention to each of us, thereby, living what they were asking us to live in our relationships with each other over the course of the retreat.

To bring us into community with each other, the facilitators used poems, readings, small group discussion, journaling, and painting to give us shared experiences. We came from different places and different professions. Each of us had various joys, sorrows,

frustrations, successes, and failures. We were a diverse group. To create community among such dissimilar people, we shared our thoughts and insights with each other. As we shared, our intent was to listen to each other in respectful, honoring ways. We gave each other space so that the individual could hear him or herself speak guidance, correction, encouragement, or anything else the individual's self needed to speak. Being with each other in these ways drew us together in strong community.

As the time approached to leave the retreat, I wondered more and more how I could continue to grow into the ways of being I had experienced on the retreat. I wanted to internalize those ways of being. I wanted to treat others with the kind of respect and honor I had experienced in the Circles of Trust we had shared. I wanted to be that way with my daughter, my extended family, the people of the church where I served, and, idealistically, with everyone, everywhere. I wanted to hear the stories of others about how they had internalized and integrated the practices of the retreats into various aspects of their lives.

The Circle of Trust retreat model was developed from the work and writings of Palmer. Early evaluations by Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner in 2000 and by Janet Smith in 2008 showed that the Circle of Trust retreat practices significantly influenced participants in studies conducted on educators who attended teacher formation, Circle of Trust retreats (Intrator and Scribner 12-14; Smith 29-31). Teacher “[p]articipants have extensively applied their learnings from COT [Circle of Trust] retreats in diverse and myriad ways in both their personal and professional lives” (Janet Smith 29). The teachers evidenced the integration of the Circle of Trust practices into their daily experiences.

As an outgrowth of these retreats for teacher formation, the Center for Courage and Renewal held multiple, seasonal series of retreats for clergy and congregational leaders to assist them in their personal and professional development. While evaluations from the clergy and congregational leaders attending the retreats indicated that the retreats were influential in their lives, no in-depth research had investigated the long-term influence and integration of the retreats' practices into the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of the clergy participants.

Therefore, I chose to study the Circle of Trust retreat work conducted by the Center for Courage and Renewal with clergy and congregational leaders, focusing on the clergy participants. I hoped to learn how the retreats had influenced them over time, and how they integrated the retreat practices into their lives.

Purpose

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices through the storied experiences of the clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats or a Seasonal Retreat Series offered by the Center for Courage and Renewal with particular attention to its influence on their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.

Ministry Inquiries

Three inquiries guided the process of exploring and understanding the influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices through the storied experiences of the clergy who participated in the retreats.

Ministry Inquiry #1

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the spiritual lives of the clergy in regards to their relationship with God?

Ministry Inquiry #2

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the personal lives of the clergy in terms of their relationships with self, their families, friends, and community that were not necessarily work related?

Ministry Inquiry #3

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the professional lives of the clergy, including the relationships and settings that were primarily ministerial and work related: preaching, teaching, counseling, administrating committees and staff, addressing conflict, and relating to colleagues?

Definition of Terms

Several phrases used within the study need definition.

Whispers from Eden

Whispers from Eden is a phrase I coined to describe the sense of coming home I felt on the retreats. The whispers were those times and situations when I knew I was living in the good and very good of Genesis 1. They arose when I experienced a wholeness in my humanity and in the events taking place around me. They came from respect-filled relationships with others as created in the image of God and occurred from

the quality and wholeness of the community formed on the retreat. They were beautiful, holy times that echoed Thomas Merton's poem, "in all visible things ... a hidden wholeness [resides]" (1). The whispers originated from a sense of God's loving grace surrounding the situation and from a sense that the situation was realizing God's good intentions for creation.

Circle of Trust

A Circle of Trust was the term used by Palmer to describe the environment and culture of relationship people created for each other that were open and hospitable to everyone. The intention was to create safe spaces for people in order to form community, while deeply honoring each person's individuality. The design was intentional to allow the participants to hold both a safe space for each other and to find a safe place for the self in the hopes for the "vulnerable soul to show up" (*Hidden Wholeness* 58-59).

Third Things

Third Things were made up of a "poem, story, a piece of music, or a work of art" (Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness* 92-93) that metaphorically embodied the topic the facilitators chose to address. Reflection and conversation followed as the participants explored where the Third Things intersected their personal experience.

Seasonal Retreat Series

The series consisted of four to five retreats, extending over a period of a year to eighteen months, attended by the same group of people, using seasonal (fall, winter, spring, and summer) metaphors. These metaphors provided the overarching Third Things that gave direction to the content of the retreat and formed the common ground upon

which participants reflected and created community. Appendix A provides a sample retreat schedule.

Touchstones

Touchstones were the relational, communal practices and boundaries agreed upon by each group of participants for how they would interact with each other during the retreat. They were originally created by Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal. Therefore, in every Circle of Trust retreat, participants agreed to interact with each other guided by these same communal practices (see Appendix B).

Clearness Committee

During each retreat, smaller groups formed from the larger retreat group. Each smaller group consisted of four to six of the participants who gave two hours of focused listening to one member of the group, the focus person, who identified an issue or concern with which he or she wanted help and support from group members. Palmer describes the underlying conviction behind the Clearness Committee:

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. (original emphasis; Clearness Committee 1)

The Clearness Committee process gave the retreat participants an opportunity to practice the Touchstones as they devoted time to and focused attention on the story and concern of one of the other retreat participants (see Appendix C).

Ministry Project

In order to explore the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreats on the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of clergy participants, I selected a narrative inquiry methodology to the research that aligned with the values and practices of the Center for Courage and Renewal. John Fenner, Program Director for the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders, purposefully selected the clergy as those who evidenced a strong understanding and commitment to integrating the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats into their spiritual, personal, and professional lives. Nine of nine clergy Fenner contacted were interested in being a part of this study. However, when the time came for the interviews, only seven participants were able to complete the process. I followed the procedures of narrative inquiry outlined in D. Jean Clandinin's and John W. Creswell's works. I interviewed and recorded the seven participants using a researcher-designed, semi-structured, in-depth interview. These interviews became my field texts. I transcribed these field texts, restoried them into interim research texts, co-composing the story with each clergy participant, and then created the final research text (Clandinin 45-51; Creswell, *Educational Research* 523-26.)

Context

The Circle of Trust retreats began in 1994 in a series of quarterly retreats offered to educators over the course of two years called Courage to Teach. The retreats hoped to be a source of renewal for the inner lives of professionals in education (Intrator and Scribner 8). Palmer and the Fetzer Institute piloted the program. The success of the first series of retreats with educators led to subsequent retreat series.

In 1998, Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* made the concepts readily available to educators. The need for the retreats grew, and multiple sites around the country developed sets of the retreats. Soon other professional groups wanted access to the retreats. In 2005, Circle of Trust retreats were developed and offered to mixed professional groups in education, law, medicine, and religion.

In addition, in 2005, the Center for Courage and Renewal, with funding assistance from the Lilly Endowment in the form of a three-year grant, offered a series of seasonal retreats for clergy and congregational leaders. Ninety clergy and congregational leaders comprised four cohorts in this Phase I of the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders.

In 2007, the Lilly Endowment funded Phase II of the Courage to Lead: Creating Circles of Trust for Clergy and Congregational Leaders. Phase II broadened the scope of the project, developing partnerships with other institutions to further the Circle of Trust work. Five cohorts of clergy and congregational leaders attended the Seasonal Retreat series that were continued and implemented in the Phase II work.

Methodology

In order to obtain the storied experiences from clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats, I used a researcher-designed, semi-structured interview process in combination with a narrative inquiry methodology. Aspects of the methodology allowed me to remain in conversation with the participants throughout the process by conducting two member checks. The first occurred after each interview as I created a restoried narrative from their interviews. The second happened after I compiled my findings from all of their restoried narratives in the final research text. I was able to

enhance the credibility of the research through triangulation with my Research Reflection Team as they reviewed each participant's restored narrative and the final research text.

Participants

Fenner purposefully selected the clergy as those who evidenced a strong understanding and commitment to integrating the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats into their spiritual, personal, and professional lives. He identified nine possible clergy participants and contacted them by e-mail. All nine of the clergy responded back and were willing to participate in this study. However, seven ultimately participated in the study.

Instrumentation

I used two instruments. I composed a demographic questionnaire for each participant in order to obtain basic information about them. I also created a semi-structured, in-depth interview that I conducted with each clergy participant. The interview explored the long-term effect of the participants' retreat experiences. I recorded six interviews using an audio recorder. I added video recording to the audio recording with one participant over Skype.

Field Text Collection

I sent a packet to each of the nine possible participants either by e-mail or by the postal service. The packet included an introductory letter with an explanation of the research interview protocol and ethical standards, a consent form for them to sign, a demographic questionnaire, a copy of the interview questions with instructions to reflect on the questions in advance of the interview, and a document containing the Circle of Trust Touchstones. A scheduled interview was then conducted via phone, Webcam, or

fact-to-face contact using the researcher-designed, semi-structured, in-depth interview protocol. Each interview called for a minimum of forty-five minutes and a maximum of sixty minutes. I made an audio and/or video recording of each interview and transcribed it.

Field Text Analysis

I read each transcript looking for the participant's reoccurring phrases and repetitive threads in the stories told. After identifying these, I created a narrative of the experiences that each clergy participant had reported to me using his or her pseudonym in the narrative. Before I sent this restoried narrative to the respective clergy participant, I first sent it to my Research Reflection Team members. They checked for gaps and additions I needed to address before I sent it to the clergy participant. Then, I sent this restoried narrative to the participant to have him or her check the accuracy and to see if I needed to add any details or understandings. Together, we co-composed the story from their interview by e-mail. Then, as Clandinin suggests, I pulled together the major findings "or plotlines that threaded or wove over time and place through an individual's story" (132). After reviewing each participant's story, I took an overarching view of all the interviews and subsequent co-composed, restoried narratives to search for "resonances or echoes that reverberated across all the accounts" (132). As I identified these threads and resonances, I wove them into the learnings in the final research text.

Transferability

Transferability, as described by Donna M. Mertens, consists of a researcher emphasizing "the total context in which the research takes place to enable readers to make judgments as to the transferability of the study's results to their own situations" (4).

According to Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, the job of the initial researchers was to provide “sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible” (298). The degree of transferability depends not upon the researchers who only know the context of their own studies but upon those who subsequently utilize the studies to draw applications to their own research.

Throughout the work of the dissertation, a wholeness guided my process. The theological foundation, in the methodology of narrative inquiry, or in the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats were all firmly rooted in the intentions of creation in terms of humanity and the relationships people have with each other and God. The quality of these relationships comes from the fact that all people are created in the image of God and, therefore, worthy of respect and honor. These whispers from Eden comprised the underlying theme of this dissertation, holding it together and making it congruent from beginning to end. Therefore, the very whispers from Eden became the most transferable aspects of the research.

Theological Foundation

The design of the Circle of Trust retreats created safe places that honored each person. The Touchstones gave instructions about how to treat each other while on the retreat. The deep levels of respect and honor that participants gave and received from each other on the retreats characterized the story of human beginnings in the opening chapter of Genesis. In verses twenty-six and twenty-seven, humans were created in the image of God. God gave the humans the task in verse twenty-eight of subduing the earth and ruling over the other creatures of creation who occupy the seas, air, and land. God created humans in the image of God, which set them apart from the rest of creation. The

concept of being created in the image of God included different aspects of being human.

David R. Hodge and Terry A. Wolfer describe the different schools of thought that have developed to explain what characteristics make up the image of God in humans:

One prominent stream of thought understands the image to be reflected in various human attributes. To be made in the image of God means that humans possess certain personality attributes that are similar to those exhibited by God. Specifically, various scholars propose that rationality, volition, creativity, and other personality characteristics reflect or image God in human beings.

Another stream of thought emphasizes relationships. In this understanding, to be created in the image of the triune God means that individuals are able to enter into loving relationships. The image is manifested in the fact that humans are able to enter into other-centered relationships with God, with one another, and, to some extent, with the creation.

A third perspective emphasizes humans as representatives or viceroys of God. God delegates to, or shares with, humans the exercise of royal power on earth. Imaging God's caring and creativity, humans are invited to exercise stewardship over the creation, creatively shaping the cultural environment in ways that reflect God's peace and concern for people. (304)

Because all people are created in the image of God, all receive respect, honor, and love.

Participants in the Circle of Trust were committed to living out that respect, honor, and love in relationship to one another.

Participants on the Circle of Trust retreats were committed to building safe, supportive community among themselves. The Circle of Trust retreats used Third Things to create a shared experience through which community-forming conversations took place among participants. A strong sense of community grew out of these shared experiences. Again, another aspect of the creation story served as the theological root of this need humans had for community. In Genesis 2:18, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (TNIV). God then created the animals, birds and livestock, and man named them. However, none of these

creatures was a sufficient helper. God then caused a deep sleep to come upon Adam, took one of his ribs, and formed Eve, the helper and companion Adam needed. Human beings are unable to be alone. Humans need another or others. Isolation is not good. Humans need relationships and community.

All was going well between God and humans, between humans and humans, and between humans and the rest of creation. However, in chapter three Adam and Eve made choices that resulted in the breakdown of all the relationships of Eden. Eden's harmony shattered, and God's quest began to reestablish the relational intent of creation. Throughout the rest of the biblical narrative, God sought to restore the lost relationships and community of Eden.

In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20:1-17, served as a corrective bridge to help restore the broken relationship between humans and God as well as the relationships between human beings. The first three commandments gave guidance about restoring relationships between God and humans. The God who led the Israelites out of Egypt was the only true God. They were to refrain from making images to represent God in order to have an object to worship. They were to keep God's name holy and not misuse it. They were to rest from their work on the Sabbath day, mirroring the resting of God after the work of creation. Through worshiping only God, honoring God's name, and mirroring God's Sabbath actions, the people of Israel had the means by which they could renew and restore their relationship with God.

The remaining seven commandments address relationships between humans. Each commandment shows people how to respect others or encourages behavior towards others that is honoring and respectful. Honoring father and mother shows respect for

those who gave each person the gift of life. Not murdering another person respects the very life of another. Not committing adultery honors the promises made to the marriage partner. Not stealing respects the belongings of others. Not lying about a neighbor honors the truth about that neighbor's reputation. Not coveting anything that belongs to a neighbor honors the relationships and possessions of the neighbor. Through these behaviors, the people of Israel could build strong, respectful, and life-honoring relationships with other people, all of whom carried the image of God imprinted on their very beings.

In the New Testament, in the Gospels, when Jesus was asked about which commandment was the most important, Jesus responded by quoting two Old Testament passages. In combination, the passages address the restoration of relationships between God and humans and among humans. In Mark 12:30, Jesus said the greatest commandment was to “[l]ove the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5. The most important task in life, according to Jesus, was to love God, thereby emphasizing the primal necessity of being in close relationship with God. Without pausing, in Mark 12:31, Jesus launched into what commandment came next, quoted from Leviticus 19:18: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Therefore, the second most important task in life is to love the neighbor, emphasizing the necessity of having loving relationships with others.

Again, Jesus affirmed the significance of loving one another when he gave final instructions to his disciples in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. In verses twelve and seventeen, Jesus said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved

you.” Followers of Jesus were to love each other. He had loved them, and they were to give that love to others. All were worthy of love.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples were to carry on the message and to figure out how to live their faith. In the Book of Acts, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost ushered in a new era in which followers of Jesus could rely on the power and work of the Spirit to assist them as they sought to follow Jesus. In Acts 2:42-47, the leaders in the early Church continued to address how to love each other and, therefore, how to restore relationships in the various communities.

Paul’s letters encouraged the people to go even further in loving each other. He challenged them to attempt outdoing each other in loving and in showing honor to each other. In Romans 12:9 and 10, Paul writes, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” As he continues to the end of the chapter, he outlines actions and behaviors that exemplify love for others.

Again, in Philippians 2:3-4 Paul writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Paul encouraged the people to show their love for each other through valuing others above themselves.

In the fifth chapter of Galatians, Paul lists attributes that reflect love for each other and life in the Spirit. Believers who walk by the freedom found in the Spirit do not live under the Law. Those who live in the life of the Spirit bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). The fruit of the Spirit, when practiced, honor relationships with others,

restore any brokenness in relationship, and, ultimately, build strong bonds of love and community with others.

These passages, throughout the biblical narrative, address the need of human beings to honor, respect, and love each other and serve as indicators of humans being made in the image of God and, therefore, deserving of that very honor, respect, and love. In the same way, these passages speak about the necessity of human beings to love each other as signs of both their love for Jesus and their need to live in loving community with each other.

The communal practices of a Circle of Trust retreat echo these same high levels of respect and honor. As participants practiced these ways of being with each other, they created deep relationships that, in turn, created a deep sense of community among the participants. The community seemed to embody the attributes and very essence of living a life in and by the Spirit.

Overview

Chapter 2 reviews the theological underpinnings from Genesis chapters one through three, my own experience on the Circle of Trust retreats, a review of the evaluations from Phase I and Phase II of the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders, the importance of the use of narrative and story, and an overview of the research design. Chapter 3 explores the significance of selecting a narrative inquiry methodology for this particular dissertation and outlines the details of the methodology. Chapter 4 discusses the interwoven threads and themes that came from the understandings embedded in the conversations and the co-composing of the stories that I created with the participants. Chapter 5 involves discussion of the implications of

the findings, limitations of the study, and unexpected observations and makes recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Introduction

Though evaluations from clergy about their experiences on Circle of Trust retreats indicated that the retreats had been valuable and even life changing, no research has been done to find out what long-term effects the retreats had in their lives. This study sought to inquire about the long-term influences and integration of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of clergy participants. The study utilized a narrative inquiry methodology in order to obtain the storied experiences of clergy who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats.

Biblical Foundation Story

The stories in the opening three chapters of Genesis provide the theological foundation for this study. The two different stories of creation in chapters one and two address the perfection of creation and the wholeness of the relationships between God and humans, among human beings, and between humans and the rest of creation. Chapter three tells the story of the breakdown of the relationships and the subsequent consequences. I used Dick Murray's three theological Bible study questions as an outline for theologically understanding these chapters in Genesis: (1) "What did this passage tell us about God?" (2) "what did this passage tell us about men and women [human beings]?" and, (3) "what did this passage tell us about the relationship between God and human beings?" (41).

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Whenever I have read the opening of Genesis, my thoughts and heart have soared. The narrative creates such majesty and grandeur, not only in the account of the creation but in the tone and mood as well. I imagine that I can hear a cymbal roll begin softly and quietly in the background. The roll slowly crescendos to a deafening level at the point in verse 1:31 when God declared all of the creation “very good.” An immediate decrescendo concludes the passage as God blessed the seventh day and rested. The dramatic account of creation entralls me in its beauty and simplicity. For R. K. Harrison, the first creation account deals with the vast “cosmological generalities,” describing the earth in relation to the rest of the universe (555).

What this passage says about God. In Genesis 1:1-2:3, God is the Creator of everything and was present before creation. Tremper Longman, III and Raymond B. Dillard observe that Genesis 1 clearly explains that God was the “sole cause behind the creation of the universe and of humankind” (57). As God created, Rosemary Nixon observes that God’s actions were “orderly and deliberate” (190). God was not a part of the created order but separate and different from it. God took no physical form. God simply spoke the creative act and turned chaos into order.

John C. L. Gibson and Walter R. Thorson note that God’s transcendence permeated the narrative as creation took place (Gibson 19-20; Thorson 39-40). In spite of God’s transcendence in relationship to the creation, Walter Brueggemann remarks, “The world [also] belonged to God and had no life without reference to God suggesting a kind of intimacy between God and the creation” (17). Paradoxically, God transcends the created order and yet is intimately present to it.

All that God created was good. Richard J. Foster observes, “God loves matter.... [T]he material world is intended to enhance human life” (260). The goodness and perfection of all that God created rang out repeatedly in the account, reflecting the graciousness of God (Gibson 22). Richard H. Lowery even suggests that the Hebrew word for good has expressions of “God’s pleasure at creation’s every detail.... [T]he created world was ... charged with joyful delight” (148). God provided everything that humans and animals needed to survive and thrive and delegated the care of creation to humans. At that point, God pronounced everything as very good. Gordon J. Wenham notes, “The harmony and perfection of the completed heavens and earth expressed more adequately the character of their creator than any of the separate components” (34). Finally, God gave a blessing to the seventh day and rested from the work of creating.

What this passage says about human beings. Human beings are part of creation. In this account, all of humanity was created in the image of God. R. L. Harris states, “God’s image obviously did not consist in man’s body which was formed from earthly matter, but in his spiritual, intellectual, moral likeness to God” (768). That image makes humans different from other creatures previously made in terms of the attributes humans possess; the ability humans have to be in relationship with God, other humans, and the rest of creation; and, the role humans play as representatives of God in ruling over and caring for the creation (Hodge and Wolfer 303-04).

David Cairns notes that all human beings share a common beginning with no cultural, national, or racial differences (36). Stefano Levi Della Torre points out that humans were created together as male and female in equality with no hierarchy (10). All humans are worthy of respect, honor, and dignity. Christopher J. H. Wright adds that the

image of God in humanity “formed the basis of the radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social, economic, or political status” (423). Because all humans are created by God in Genesis 1, they share a common beginning as well as an equality of status because they all are created in the image of God.

God told humanity to be fruitful and increase in number, like the other created creatures. However, Bill T. Arnold and others note that humans were to rule over creation much as a viceroy exercises rulership over a kingdom under the direction of the king (Hodge and Wolfer 304; Gibson 81-82; Arnold 44-45). R. Paul Stevens comments that God designed humans “to thrive and to make the whole of creation flourish” (120). Humans were part of the good and even the very good that God created.

What this passage says about the relationship between God and human beings. The relationship between God and humans described in Genesis 1 was paradoxical. In relationship with God, humans were part of what God created and, therefore, lesser beings than God. God created order from the chaos so the humans would have a “functioning environment” suitable for their sustenance, according to John H. Walton (60). God provided everything humans would need to survive and thrive.

However, since humans were created in God’s image, God delegated the care of the rest of creation to humans, bestowing on them a vocation of stewardship. God entrusted the rest of creation to the care of humans, elevating the status of humans over the rest of creation. Humans are not God but given dominion over the rest of creation as God’s viceroys (Gibson 81). Brueggemann notes that God spoke “directly only to human creatures,” denoting “a different, intimate relationship with the creator” (31). God spoke

a blessing on the humans to be fruitful and increase in number, signifying that God was “favorably disposed toward” them (Arnold 47). The relationship was good with signs of God’s trust in the abilities of humans to care for the rest of creation.

Genesis 2:4-25

Genesis 2:4 begins another story of creation. The story stands in sharp contrast to the story of Genesis 1. The one location of the garden and the “specific pair of individuals” served as significant points of differentiation (Harrison 555).

The tone shifted from a story of whirling galaxies, God speaking creation into existence, and flourishing multitudes of plant and animal life to more earthy beginnings. The author exchanges the vastness of creation in chapter one for a more personal intimacy of the garden in chapter two (Arnold 54-56). The soft sound of river water and the names given to the animals, as Adam named them, moved the storyline along, filling it with “tranquility, trust and harmony” (Gibson 117).

What this passage says about God. Contrasted to a transcendent God in Genesis 1, in chapter 2 God was an immanent creator intimately engaged in the work of creation (Arnold 56). Instead of speaking creation into being, God planted the garden, formed the animals, formed man and breathed life into him, and made woman. In spite of the anthropomorphisms concerning God’s activities, God had no physical form and existed prior to the creation. God showed great concern for the man’s loneliness and did not want him to be alone. God recognized a need man had for companionship and community.

What this passage says about human beings. Man was made from the dust of the ground and brought alive by God. God provided the man everything the man would need. God gave man the vocation of working in the garden and taking care of it. The man

enjoyed the freedom to eat freely from the trees in the garden. However, Charles F. Kraft observes that man received “one simple prohibition” on his freedom from God and could not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (47).

Man was lonely but found no suitable companion in the rest of creation. In his devotional, John Indermark suggests that as God saw the lack of goodness mirrored in man’s loneliness, God realized an “unfinished act of creation” existed and “fashioned human community” (18). Without community, man would be forever lonely. Therefore, God made a woman partner for him from his own person. In each other, man and woman found the “mutual support [that] companionship provided,” satisfying the loneliness (Wenham 68). In addition, Stanley J. Grenz writes, “God created the first human pair in order that humans might enjoy community with each other” (232). Man and woman became one flesh, “an ideal symbol of the bond that ought to exist between all people the world over” (Gibson 119). C. Wright continues the thought that humans “were created in relationship, for relationship,... [including] wider circles of human community” (428). The human need for community and companionship goes back to the beginnings of humanity. Since creation, being alone was not good and even difficult. Humans need each other in ways that give respect and genuine care.

What this passage says about the relationship between God and human beings. In Genesis 2, the relationship appeared closer between God and human beings than in Genesis chapter one. God and man interacted with each other. God related to man by giving him the vocation of tending the garden. Kevin Mellish observes that man took actual “responsibility toward the Garden which he tilled and kept” (162). God trusted man to exercise stewardship of the garden.

God set a boundary on the Adam's freedom by commanding him to eat freely except not from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God respected Adam and gave him freedom to tend the creation and to choose whether he would live within God's boundaries.

In his commentary, Matthew Henry discerns how deeply God cared about the man and realizes that, in spite of the many gifts in the garden of food and the presence of the other animals, the man was lonely (18). Therefore, God fashioned a woman from the man, and she became a suitable partner for him.

Genesis 3:1-24

The second story of creation continues into Genesis three where the intimacy of relationships and the harmony in all of creation broke. Paul Borgman notices, "[T]he companionability between human and human and human and God was lost" (29-30). Through the choices made by the man and woman, God's original intentions for the unity of creation shattered. Serious consequences followed the disobedience of Adam and Eve. However, whispers from Eden continued, pointing to God's original plans for humanity and the rest of creation.

What this passage says about God. In giving humans freedom to follow God or disobey God's commands, God trusted humans to be able to choose well and wisely. God's disappointment was palpable when God searched for the man and woman in the garden and wondered if the woman realized the enormity of her actions. However, God followed through with consequences when the woman and man ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God compassionately provided better clothes for the man and woman as they left the garden.

What this passage says about human beings. Humans were creatures who succumbed to temptation as they exercised their freedom of choice. Humans were capable of negatively influencing each other when making decisions. Eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil resulted “in a sort of cognitive enlightenment, which [was] not good ... since it also [bore] moral culpability” (Arnold 59). Unable to take responsibility for their own actions, humans started pointing fingers of blame at each other instead.

Through their choices, the man and woman lost what God intended for them in life. Eventually, the humans would die and return to the dust of the ground. In the meantime, the man worked the ground with much trouble and toil while the woman gave birth in severe pain, her desire was for her husband, and he ruled over her.

What this passage says about the relationship between God and human beings. The original, intimate relationship between God and human beings broke and shattered because of the choices the man and woman made. The man and woman hid from God. Their choices and actions had consequences as they disobeyed God. God meted out the consequences to each of them accordingly. However, as Victor P. Hamilton points out, God’s “concern and compassion” for the man and woman continued as seen when God clothed them before sending them away from the garden (48). In a similar vein, all the gifts of creation remained available to the humans. Regardless, the relationships changed and were broken in a type of death. Something died in their relationship with God, in their relationships with each other, and in relationship with the rest of creation.

Implications of Genesis for the Study

In “The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap,” Palmer describes some of the dynamic around what changed and what was lost in the opening chapter of Genesis. By the “tragic gap,” Palmer points to “the gap between what is and what could and should be, the gap between the reality of a given situation and an alternative reality we know to be possible because we have experienced it” (13). All of creation continues to live in the gap between God’s original intentions and the ongoing, brokenness throughout creation.

Genesis 1 and 2 tells the “story [about] what human beings should be—at peace and in harmony with God, with each other, and with the world of nature” (Gibson 120). The kind of world that God created no longer existed in reality. The events in Genesis 3 diminished the image of God in humans. Though the image was reduced, it still “endured after the expulsion in Genesis 5:1 and after the flood in [Genesis] 9:6” (Brueggemann 14). Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch agree as they note, “God’s image was so indelibly stamped on our nature that not even the fall could completely erase it” (33). The image of God was borne by every person in every age and time as part of his or her humanity.

As the idyllic world of Eden crashed in the third chapter of Genesis, the intimate bonds broke between humans and God, among humans, and between humans and the rest of creation. Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, God attempted to restore what had been lost in Eden. From God’s covenant making with Abraham and Sarah, to the Ten Commandments given to Moses and the people of Israel as they reentered the promise land, to the formation of the priesthood and the sacrificial system, to the

establishment of the monarchy with the corrective voices of the prophets, God continued to reach out to humanity in attempts to restore the relationships lost in Eden.

In the New Testament, God restored the original design and intent of creation in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. N. T. Wright writes, "In Christ was the moment all creation had been waiting for.... [T]he whole creation can be reconciled to God.... [T]he good creation is brought back into harmony with the wise creator" (96-97). In Christ, God provided the means by which creation's "tragic gap" can be spanned.

Darrell L. Guder notes that while the full reconciliation and restoration will take place in the future, humanity currently lives in the present time when God's kingdom is breaking into the world. The future-present reign of God on earth is the reality in which humans find themselves (187-89). In the tragic gap, the whispers from Eden were and will always be heard as E. Stanley Jones described humanity's return to the "nature that God created,... restored to the image of God" (243). Iain W. Provan explains humanity's restoration:

Redemption is, rather, the restoration of the divine image in human beings, and the intrinsically-connected reconstitution of the right relationships that we were created to have with God, neighbor and creation,... a redemption in respect of God's creation purposes for us, which are closely connected with God's purposes for us also in the *new* creation in which we are caught up in Christ. (original emphasis; 302)

Therefore, the work of respect, honor, and love for each other as shown in the Circle of Trust retreats mirrored the present pieces of the image of God being restored in humanity through Jesus. The work of building a safe, close community in the Circle of Trust retreats mirrored the present pieces of the need humans have for each other.

My Story of the Circle of Trust Retreats

My interest in the Circle of Trust retreats originated from my own personal experiences. I attended two Circle of Trust retreats over the course of three years. After each retreat I wondered how to integrate the practices into my life spiritually, personally, and professionally.

Personally, a gap existed between what I knew was possible and the actual experiences I lived. As I attended the Circle of Trust retreats, the practices and Touchstones of those retreats sent whispers from Eden to me—whispers about what I could and should be experiencing in my life. Those whispers comprised the essence of coming home to what God had intended for humans from the beginning. As time went on, I found several approaches that helped me integrate some of the Circle of Trust practices into my daily living.

Santa Sabina Center Circle of Trust Retreat

Words of blessing from an anonymous source greeted me at the Santa Sabina Center in San Rafael, California, as I attended the Circle of Trust Retreat, Journey toward and Undivided Life in April 2007:

May you be happy.
May you find peace.
May you be free from suffering.
May you find home.

Little did I know, as I entered into the retreat experience, that I would find home.

The feeling described as *finding home* was one of uncovering the essence of who I was and knowing that essence as being created in the image of God. This home was what God intended for me and for others to experience in humanity and in relationships with

each other and with God. I discovered a way to be at home with others and to be at home within my own skin.

In terms of being at home in my own skin, I knew that the financial situation at the church I served was draining me. Along with the difficult finances was the residual effects of conflicts among some members of the congregation. To my core, I was a peacemaker. I joined the congregation in seeking solutions to the significant difficulties we faced. We all knew that our work was difficult, and we worked together without blame to find solutions to the problems. I used my peacemaking skills to help us work and pull together. However, I knew that my slow, gentle, inclusive ways both irritated some people and wore me out as I held steady and true to myself. I was grateful for the retreat because it gave me space to remember who I was, to remember that I liked who I was, and to renew my commitment to be true to myself.

I knew that when I was true to myself I was better able to relate to others calmly and not change myself for them when under pressure. The church situation was quite anxious and rightly so. I knew we needed each person's gifts and perspectives in order to make good decisions for the future of the church. The retreat reinforced the necessity to respect each person and to include each person's ideas and hopes in the conversation. I knew our course of action would be stronger and more complete if we honored each other as being wonderfully created in the image of God. The retreat helped me return to ministry with renewed vision for our work together and with renewed confidence in my gentle ways of leading.

I purchased two books before I left the Santa Sabina Center. I used both of them for my devotions for the next several years. The first book was by Marv and Nancy Hiles,

All the Days of My Life: A Yearbook of Found Sentences for the Human Journey. Each day's reading was short and allowed me plenty of space in which to ponder. Many readings sent my mind and heart to wondering and some gave me gifts of kindness and grace towards myself: "Intent is everything. To intend to pray is to pray. Willingness, not performance is everything" (October 22). Busy days pushed and pulled at me. The idea that the mere intentions of my heart mattered was a counter intuitive, tender mercy when my day held too many demands.

The second book was *Peacemaking: Day by Day* by Pax Christi, USA. The book is a compilation of short quotations or stories related to peace and peacemaking. As a peacemaker, I found the book invaluable in supporting my very nature and in helping me keep my focus. My favorite story came from an unknown source:

It was a chilly, overcast day when the horseman spied the little sparrow lying on its back in the middle of the road. Reining in his mount he look down and inquired of the fragile creature, "Why are you lying upside down like that?"

"I heard the heavens are going to fall today," replied the bird.

The horseman laughed. "And I suppose your spindly legs can hold up the heavens?"

"One does what one can," said the little sparrow. (64)

The image of the sparrow on its back with its legs in the air always brought a smile to my face. Many times with my strength and courage waning, I joined the sparrow in simply doing what I could.

With the support of these two small devotional books, I daily set out to integrate the practices I had experienced on the retreat. The majority of the practices dealt with how I interacted with others in honoring and respectful ways. Each encounter and conversation provided opportunities to hone my skills.

Another act of integration revolved around my use of quotes as words for meditation in each week's worship bulletin and in each month's newsletter as incorporating Third Things into my work. Although I had employed these quotes for years, I better understood how God's Spirit could draw on them to broaden and deepen the intent of worship or of the newsletter article in the lives of the people.

Finally, whenever in informal conversations with others or in counseling situations with a church member, I diligently listened for opportunities to ask open questions. I knew how to ask leading questions, but cultivating the skill of asking a truly open question proved difficult. Such asking involved much time and effort, not only on my part but also on the other person's part as he or she reflected on the question. Rarely did I have the extended time I needed to engage in such questioning with an individual. However, I did what I could. Over time, I started blending the use of open questions and leading questions in order to assist the people who came to me for help.

Spiritually, I found a renewed freedom to worship God in ways that suited me and expressed my devotion. I loved to sit quietly and listen for the ideas and thoughts from the Spirit. Pondering and wondering about life, relationships, and God were my favorite pastimes. I found myself resting my weary soul on the assurances that I was created in God's image, which helped me respect and honor my own personhood. I felt God's abiding love surround me.

The Meuncha Retreat Center Circle of Trust Retreat

In May 2009, I attended another Circle of Trust retreat, Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community, at the Menucha Retreat Center in Corbett, Oregon. The retreat was

a gift to myself. I looked forward to the time away so I could be open to whatever the retreat would hold for me as I listened for God's Spirit to speak and move me.

As I moved through the retreat, I became more aware of how violent my thoughts were towards myself. I felt no need to figure out why my internal dialogue could be so mean and tough. I simply acknowledged it and desired to practice the art of gentleness towards myself. As I saw violence to myself in a different light, I saw violence towards others in new light. I realized violence wore the faces of hurry, push, pull, put-downs, rolled eyes, impatience, rudeness, resentment, anger, and on and on. During a time of reflection, I wrote the following about the violence within me in order to acknowledge its existence, to learn how to let it pass through me, and to transform it into gentleness:

Life pulls ... people pull ...
Pull away.
For now pull moves through me
to soft eyes.

The poem supported me as I sought to see nonviolence through what Peggy Way calls "changed eyes" (158). To counter my violent ways, I decided to move through my days a bit slower. I perceived that I needed to take time to be more aware and really see the wonderful people around me.

After the retreat, I purchased two books by Wayne Muller: *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* and *How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*. The *Sabbath* book gifted me with ways of slowing down and reveling in the quiet and solitude that I have always loved. Muller quotes Sharon Salzberg who suggests, "[W]e practice guerrilla compassion—silently blessing people on line at the bank, at the supermarket, in the cars next to us in traffic. Each blessing a tiny Sabbath, a secret sanctuary offered to a hurried

and unsuspecting world” (46). As I practiced the “guerrilla compassion” usually while waiting, I discovered a quiet joy in praying a blessing on the unsuspecting people who were in line waiting with me.

Muller’s other book *How, Then, Shall We Live* helped me reflect on my life, notice how I defined my life and experiences, and consequently how I told the story of my life. He addresses four questions: (1) “Who am I?” (2) “What do I love?” (3) “How shall I live, knowing I will die?” and (4) “What is my gift to the family of the earth?” (ix-x). As I worked through these questions chapter by chapter, I revisited past wounds, explored my own death, and determined what contributions I could make to the world as I lived my life.

As I returned home, I appreciated myself and treated myself in kinder and gentler ways. Subsequently, I treated others in kinder and gentler ways. I discovered that I did not need to push and pull at the people and situations around me. Calmly, I chose to let things be and offered alternative thoughts and ideas. Again, I had experienced ways to respect and honor others that whispered of humanity being created in God’s image and worthy of respect and honor. God’s original intentions, when humans were created, resonated deep within me. On the days I struggled to live in more peaceful ways, I came to understand better Catherine Whitmire’s words: “I have also found that I have to *keep* learning and practicing nonviolence, because peace is not a steady state: I find it, lose it, and then have to search for it again” (original emphasis; 23). The challenge faced me each day of living God’s intent with myself and in community with others.

Before the retreat, I had chosen to preach through the fruit of the Spirit as listed in Galatians chapter five. The summer months stretched before us with enough weeks to

cover one fruit each week. As I preached sermons on the fruit of the Spirit, I continued the opportunity to live gently into my life each day and take the congregation along with me as traveling companions. Amazingly, God's Spirit had sent me down the preaching path I needed before I knew I needed it. Opportunities for integrating the practices of the retreat followed me in the months after the retreat.

The Dailiness of the Circle of Trust Retreat Practices

To this day, I have continued to apply the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats in my daily living. I have sought to live them not because I have become a follower of that model but because I am a child of God living with other children of God. I have pursued them because, in living the practices, I believe I follow the intentions of God in creating us. When I have lived honorably and respectfully with others, I have discovered that those whispers from Eden have lived on and into today's world.

The Story of the Circle of Trust Retreats in the Lives of Clergy

As the Circle of Trust Retreats for clergy began, the Lilly Endowment, Inc., awarded the Center for Courage and Renewal a three-year grant to give financial support to launch the endeavor. From 2005-08, this Phase I of the project hosted multiple Seasonal Retreat Series for clergy and congregational leaders. Listed below are the results of the evaluation of the Phase I Seasonal Retreat Series from the 2009 *Courage to Lead* Annual Report to the Lilly Endowment, Inc.:

1. The Circle of Trust model creates safe communities in which clergy and congregational leaders can explore issues of identity, authenticity, and vocational calling;
2. The opportunity for clergy to engage in deep discernment related to call to ministry—specifically the clearness committee process—was helpful.

3. The Circle of Trust model proved to be a trustworthy community in which to explore matters of the soul not often found in one's own church or denominational structure;
4. Shared practices were instrumental in the creation of community; and
5. Circles of Trust helped clergy reclaim some of their own spiritual practices. (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 1)

The evaluation of Phase I revealed significant areas of influence the retreats had on the participants.

The Lilly Endowment approved a second grant for the years 2008-12. The goals of this Phase II grant were to support “the personal and professional formation of clergy and congregational leaders; contribute to the strengthening and renewal of congregational life through the development of strategic partnerships; and to develop models for the growth and replication of Courage to Lead Programs” (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2010 1). Phase II continued to offer Seasonal Retreat Series for clergy and congregational leaders. However, Phase II offered opportunities for groups and organizations to form partnerships with the Center for Courage and Renewal to strengthen the work in congregations and with clergy themselves.

Phase II operated with six themes and core questions that guided the selection of the partnerships as well as served as the overall goals for the cumulative work funded by the grant. The first five themes and core questions are relevant to this study. Each set of the five themes and core questions listed come from the 2009 *Courage to Lead* Annual Report to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., accompanied with the preliminary observations and learnings from the 2010 *Courage to Lead* Annual Report to the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

The first theme centers on spiritual formation. The guiding questions in the 2009 report for spiritual formation are the following: “In what ways are clergy and congregational leaders finding a Circle of Trust supportive of their personal and

professional/spiritual formation? How does it support an inner journey in community?"

(Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). In the 2010 report, certain practices and experiences reportedly supported the participants' spiritual formation as listed below:

"Circle of Trust principles and practices/Touchstones; trust and safety; silence, individual and in community; slower pace; counter-cultural nature of gathering—no problem solving, fixing, giving advice; invitational nature; new appreciation for lectio divina and the use of poetry; sharing that takes place at a vulnerable level; power of discernment in community; and non-anxious way of relating to others." (*Courage to Lead* 2010 20)

One participant described it this way, "I feel as though I have fallen into God's lap" (20).

Throughout the evaluation process conducted by the Center for Courage, participants reported experiencing meaningful spiritual formation.

The second theme revolves around personal and professional renewal. The 2009 report lists these guiding questions under renewal: "In what ways are clergy and congregational leaders experiencing personal renewal and exhibiting a clarified and renewed commitment to vocation?" (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). The 2010 annual report observes that "vocational clarity" for participants came within the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat and especially during the Clearness Committee process (*Courage to Lead* 2010 21). Participants revisited the priority of self-care and planned to be intentional to "integrate more of what sustains them" into their daily lives (21). Finally, participants noticed "improved relationships with family members and colleagues" (21). The Circle of Trust practices helped participants enhance both personal and professional relationships as they integrated the practices into their daily living.

The third theme concerns the integration of the Circle of Trust practices into leadership and ministry. The core question from the 2009 report is "How are clergy and congregational leaders integrating the Circle of Trust approach as they lead their

congregations?” (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). According to the 2010 report, clergy integrated Third Things such as poems, retreat themes, and seasonal metaphors into sermons. Other Circle of Trust practices showed up in “various leadership roles and ministry” (*Courage to Lead* 2010 22). Participants reported “having a different understanding of leadership—one that embraced flaws and different traditions—and a different way of leading from the heart as well as the head” (22). Participants utilized the Circle of Trust practices in ministry and noticed changes in the ways they led with more understanding and grace.

The fourth theme, listed in the 2009 report, inquires into the unique contribution of the Circle of Trust approach. The core question wondered, “What is distinctive about the Circle of Trust approach that differentiates it from other formational and renewal opportunities offered clergy and congregational leaders?” (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). In the Circle of Trust approach, the integration of courage and renewal served as a unique experience. As participants gained vocational clarity and renewal, they often confronted new situations and choices that involved certain risks on their part. “Teachings around paradox, holding the tension of opposites, and the opportunity to embody practices which create safe space for soul work” were all distinctive, according to the 2010 report (*Courage to Lead* 2010 23). The depth of conversations in a Circle of Trust and the deep bonds that quickly formed were equally unusual. Finally, the “greatest gifts” were the “Clearness Committee process and learning the art of asking open, honest questions” (23). The Circle of Trust retreats offer unique, transformative learning opportunities.

The fifth theme that guided the Phase II work addresses the sustainability of the practices within congregational and institutional settings. The 2009 report listed two core questions: “Can Circles of Trust be integrated and sustained in congregational and institutional life? If so, how do they strengthen and renew those communities?” (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). In the 2010 report, participants recounted the implementation of the Circle of Trust approach into “existing small group ministries and ... in congregational study groups” (*Courage to Lead* 24). “Stephen Ministers, Care Companions, Sunday School Classes, prayer groups, book studies” (24) utilized the Touchstones and other practices. One congregation established a Discernment Committee that used the Clearness Committee model to facilitate their work. Lastly, Third Things, “poems, essays, teaching segments migrated into staff briefings and committee meetings” (24). The Circle of Trust practices were adaptable into the congregational life of the churches where the participants served.

The 2009 annual report introduced the evaluative tool of story catching from participants as a means of understanding their experiences (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 10). The *Courage to Lead* 2010 annual report overflowed with narrative snippets and full-blown stories from participants. These narratives compellingly pointed to the influence and integration of the Circle of Trust practices in the lives of participants in the areas of the themes and core questions.

The three ministry inquiries of this study reflected the goals of the five themes and subsequent core questions. One hope of this study was that it would continue to elucidate more stories of the influence and integration of the Circle of Trust practices for

the Center for Courage and Renewal, especially in terms of the ongoing and long-term implications years after participants attended the retreats.

The Importance of Story

Story and narrative formed the backbone of this study on the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreats in the lives of clergy participants. My personal story opened this study with more details about my experiences on the retreats told in this chapter. The introduction of this study recounted the story of the development of the Circle of Trust retreats with a detailed look at the clergy retreats given in this chapter. Biblical storytelling, theology, the future of the church, and the evaluative process of the Center for Courage and Renewal also shaped the need for narrative and storytelling in this study.

Biblical Storytelling

From beginning to end, the Bible consisted of a collection of stories about God's encounters and relationships with humanity. In one way, Brueggemann views Genesis as "a process of storytelling in which there are important transactions between listener and teller... [Stories] are told and valued, transmitted and remembered by a community which is seriously engaged in a life and ministry of faith" (4). The stories contained a richness, a depth, a commonness that infused them and allowed them to reach into the memories of people across time in order to "intrude upon and transform ... present situation[s]" (4). The biblical stories happened in the past but were, also, "concrete and particular ... [and] open-ended" (4). The biblical stories held the tensions of past and present together in order to work God's intentions in the lives of both the original tellers/listeners and today's tellers/listeners.

Gibson notes other tensions in the stories. Coming from a “mostly unlettered society,” the stories both “amused and entertained” as well as told “important matters of philosophy and culture” (11). Stories revealed lives and relationships. Stories taught about God and how God related to the world and to humans. Stories explained origins and pointed to what God was doing in their lives and communities.

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen indicate the many ways the biblical stories entered and engaged the lives of those listening:

Church liturgy ... reminds us constantly of the story that should shape our lives. Hymns and choruses celebrate it. The creeds rehearse it as we confess our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sermons explain its importance to our lives from week to week. (21)

Repeatedly, in many forms, the biblical stories registered with stories from the lives of the listeners so that the biblical stories lived again to teach and encourage the gathered community.

Stanley Hauerwas elaborates on the significance of the biblical narrative to inform the church community. He views the sermon as “a churchly event ... as it proclaims the power of God to create a new people by being made part of God’s continuing story,... a people capable of being the continuation of the narrative by witnessing to the world that all creation is ordered to God’s good end” (3370-77). The church community joins the biblical story as it continues to witness to the biblical narratives that culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Theological Storytelling

Stephen Crites in “The Narrative Quality of Experience” argues that the “quality of [human] experience through time is inherently narrative” (291). He writes of the temporality of time that contains the past, the present, and the future, all of which are part

of storytelling. All stories travel with their characters and readers through time (298-99). Most stories are of everyday life. However, some stories are sacred. Such sacred stories resonate deeply within people, becoming those almost “unutterable stories” that people “know most of all” (294-97). He reveals the paradox that the stories of everyday life carry evidences of the sacred stories, while the sacred stories infuse the stories telling of everyday life (296-97). He further notes in “Angels We Have Heard” that to understand reality as people have experienced it stories make that reality known with all the details and particulars (31-32).

Inquiring into the influences the Circle of Trust retreats had on the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of the clergy participants revealed that changes took place in their lives. Changes occurred that resulted in transformations in how the participants viewed and subsequently treated themselves, God, and others. Michael Novak recognizes that storytelling gives people a vehicle by which they describe what has happened to them in terms of what from their past changed into what they currently experienced and would experience in the future (175-78). Theologically, narrative gave the clergy participants a means by which to explain the transformations they experienced in their lives. In fact, Crites points out in “Storytime” that narrative is the way people construct “a continuous life of experience” filled with details about how they deal with life’s changes (159).

Storytelling for the Future of the Church

Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk explore the issue of narrative and its importance in forming missional communities. By connecting both the biblical narrative and the life narratives of the people in a congregation, a strong memory forms that allows

the people to “give sense to the present and shape their future” (69). The strategy that formed vital, missional communities included the process of listening to each other’s personal stories, discussing the biblical narratives that gave insight to understanding the changing neighborhood around the churches and freeing people to turn their ideas into reality (151). James K. A. Smith addresses the power of narrative: “Stories seep into us—and stay there and haunt us—more than a report of the facts” (58). Telling and hearing each other’s stories is foundational to forming missional communities.

Similarly, Lisa M. Hess looks at the impact story sharing had on the formation of covenantal community. The personal stories and the stories of God’s people in the Scripture intertwined drawing people closer to each other and to the biblical narratives (37-38). In addition, as people share their stories, their relationships became more intimate and counter cultural in a world of “detachment” (41) and “objective distance” (45). Hess believes, “The telling and hearing of our different stories, over shared time and space, may be the only way for incredibly diverse peoples to build relationships within and beyond that difference” (43). Relationship building through storytelling is crucial in order to create covenantal communities.

Storytelling in Circle of Trust Evaluations

As the Center for Courage and Renewal applied for a second grant with the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Center encouraged the facilitators of the retreats to listen for the stories of the participants and catch their stories: “At the 2009 Learning Conference, Dr. Sally Z. Hare introduced story catching as a narrative evaluation form to help facilitators capture and communicate the power of our work” (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2010 47). As the facilitators included in their evaluations the stories the participants told,

the Center gathered a deeper understanding of the influences of the practices of the retreats.

Each facilitator compiled a yearly report to the Center for Courage and Renewal. The Center requested that each facilitator include a personal story from a participant that reflected the influence the retreats had in the life of the individual. Subsequently, personal stories formed part of the backbone for the 2010 Annual Report to the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The stories reflected the depth of the personal growth of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in the lives of the clergy participants.

Dr. Hare's vision for the narrative use of story in evaluation was rooted in her experiences that "narratives are single threads, but when woven together they form a web that reveals the breadth and depth of the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders project" (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead 2010* 47). The participants' stories added thick description to the influences the retreats had on clergy participants. Therefore, the implementation of narrative inquiry for this study aligned with the narrative evaluation practices of the Center for Courage and Renewal.

Research Design

Years ago, a colleague of mine invited me to participate in her Doctor of Ministry research. She conducted semi-structured interviews that she recorded. I agreed to participate, and we arranged a phone interview. As she questioned me, I answered as openly and thoroughly as I could. However, I needed time to think about the questions in order to answer well. After we hung up, I wished I had received the questions prior to the interview in order to ponder how I would address them. I also thought I could verify the research if I received her findings and could give any additional thoughts or ideas I had. I

longed for the conversation to continue for clarification and the enhancement of her findings.

Because of this experience, I chose to work with the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry as I sought to discover the long-term influences and integration of the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats for clergy through their storied experiences obtained through semi-structured interviews. The flexibility of the narrative inquiry process allowed me to send the semi-structured interview questions to the participants prior to our interview time. As D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly and Creswell explain, the process insisted that I co-compose the narrative from each interview with each participant as I moved from the transcribed interview or field text to the interim research text (Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* 130-35; Creswell, *Educational Research* 525). In their work, Clandinin and Janice Huber emphasize “that a person’s lived and told stories are who they are and who they are becoming and that these stories sustain them.... [N]egotiating research texts creates a space where participants’ narrative authority is honored” (15). Therefore, I was able to have those ongoing, respectful conversations with the participants that I needed when I contributed to my friend’s research.

As I composed the final research text, a member check allowed the participants a final opportunity to give their thoughts and insights. The member check provided me one last time to co-compose the findings with the participants, to deepen and build our relationship (Clandinin 200-01). As Susan E. Chase mentions, narrative inquiry allowed me to work with the participants narrating their own story in their own voice as the story related to their experiences with the Circle of Trust practices (660).

Summary

In order to honor and serve the Circle of Trust retreat practices best, I chose the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry as this study's research methodology. To understand the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreat experience in the lives of the clergy participants, I needed to hear their stories and learn from their stories in order to tell about how their lives and relationships changed. Working with the participants' stories supported the evaluative practices of story catching from the Center for Courage and Renewal.

Grounding the biblical foundation in the opening chapters of Genesis set the stage for the life-honoring ways of the practices in the Circle of Trust retreats. Humanity's creation in the image of God provided the theological foundation for the honoring practices of the retreats. Humanity's need for companionship and community in Genesis chapter two formed the basis for the deep sense of community building that occurred on the retreats. Genesis chapter three points out how all the relationships humans have with God, each other, and with the rest of creation remain broken but not totally obliterated. God's plan for reconciliation and restoration endured through the centuries and endures still.

Telling my personal story of my experiences on the Circle of Trust retreats set the stage for the rest of the participants' storytelling during the interviews. Explaining the goals for the clergy retreats funded by the Lilly Endowment and reviewing the evaluations of those grants provided a foundation for understanding the possibility of the long-term influences of the retreats in the lives of the clergy participants and the need for this study.

Exploring the importance of story biblically, theologically, and missionally as related to the future of the church built a stronger foundation to support the significance of narrative inquiry for the study's methodology. The fast pace of change in the world and in the lives of people shaped the need to develop listening skills in order to understand other peoples' stories better as they sought to integrate the continuous changes in their individual, life stories.

The narrative inquiry methodology assisted me as I approached the participants and entered into relationship with each of them. Elliot G. Mishler notes in his work, "[I]f we wish to hear respondents' stories then we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about" (249). Instead of being a researcher in control of the interviews and the interpretations applied to the interviews, I became a fellow pilgrim, listening to them in order to understand their lives and their stories. I walked with them in the midst of their experiences and did not stand outside observing them. The methodology helped me enter into the research with a humility that allowed me to focus on them as separate persons outside myself and worthy of my time and attention as described by Palmer in his book *To Know as We are Known* (108-11). I hoped to realize the connection between the participants' stories and mine in such a way that I recognized their stories as being part of my own as James B. Wiggins mentions (17).

Elizabeth McIsaac Bruce identifies the depth of the spiritual dimension of our humanity as experiences were shared through storytelling ("Narrative Inquiry" 327). She even describes the collaborative nature of the narrative inquiry process as having provided opportunities for her to "walk on holy ground as researcher and participants

share mutually in the insights and learning that occurs in life. It is a significant privilege to share in key aspects of another person's life history" (328). The narrative inquiry methodology turns interviews into conversations where a safe environment encourages the soul of the other to show up (Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness* 122).

I experienced the sense of walking on holy ground as I conducted the pilot interview with a clergy who had attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats. He gave himself the pseudonym, Newt. As Newt shared his experiences and epiphanies from the Circle of Trust practices, I walked in transcendent places where God had been active in his life. When I restored the interview transcript and created a narrative from our conversation, I realized, again, the sacredness of the time and space I shared with Newt. A couple of members of the Research Reflection Team commented on the transformative power of the Circle of Trust retreat work and how clearly it was conveyed in Newt's narrative.

Therefore, in terms of the spiritual nature of the Doctor of Ministry work, narrative inquiry seemed to be the best methodology for this study. Bruce goes so far as to suggest that "researchers in Religion and Education who are desirous of a research methodology that is aligned with spiritual and liberating values may find in narrative inquiry a potentially empowering, ethical, and transformational means of doing research in their field" ("Narrative Inquiry" 336). I believed that the narrative inquiry methodology enhanced the spiritual depth of the research as well as honored the lives of the participants as being incredible people created in God's image.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem and Purpose

Though a significant amount of evaluation and research has been conducted on the Circle of Trust retreats for educators, no research has been done on the in-depth, long-term influence the Circle of Trust retreats have had on clergy participants.

Therefore, the purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices through the storied experiences of the clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats or a Seasonal Retreat Series offered by the Center for Courage and Renewal with particular attention to its influence on their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.

Ministry Inquiries

Three ministry inquiries explored the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreats on the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of clergy participants. Since I viewed Genesis chapter three as a breaking of human relationships with God and each other and took the position that the retreat's practices aided the restoration of those relationships, the ministry inquiries were focused around these relationships of the participants.

Ministry Inquiry #1

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the spiritual lives of the clergy in regards to their relationship with God?

This Ministry Inquiry question explored how the Circle of Trust retreat experiences were influential in the spiritual lives of the clergy participants. Interview question #3b addressed the spiritual aspect of their lives (see Appendix D).

Ministry Inquiry #2

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the personal lives of the clergy in terms of their relationships with self, their families, friends, and community that were not necessarily work related?

This ministry inquiry question investigated how the Circle of Trust retreat practices were influential in the personal lives of the clergy participants. Interview questions 3a, 3c, 3d, 3e, and 3i addressed the personal aspect of their lives.

Ministry Inquiry #3

In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the professional lives of the clergy, including the relationships and settings that were primarily ministerial and work related: preaching, teaching, counseling, administrating committees and staff, addressing conflict, and relating to colleagues?

This ministry inquiry question considered how the Circle of Trust retreat practices were influential in the professional lives of the clergy participants. Interview questions 3f, 3g, 3h, 3i, and 3j addressed the professional aspects of their lives.

Population and Participants

The selection of the clergy participants began as I negotiated with Fenner for access to clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats or a seasonal

series of retreats. From the outset, Fenner was supportive. I e-mailed him the problem, purpose statement, and ministry inquiries so he could understand the research project I wanted to implement. I clarified that I was looking for a purposeful sample of clergy who seemed to be integrating the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats in order for me to understand better the influence of the retreats (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry* 125).

He selected nine possible participants based on the following criteria:

1. Clergy participants who had significant experience in Circles of Trust seasonal series retreats or at least several Circle of Trust retreat experiences.
2. Clergy participants who were diverse geographically, denominationally, and in gender.
3. Clergy participants for whom the Center for Courage and Renewal still had contact information.

He sent an e-mail to each of them with a brief description of my research project and asked for their permission to send me their contact information. Nine replied, giving their consent for him to send their contact information to me (see Appendix E).

I sent the nine an initial e-mail and thanked them for their willingness to participate in the study. I let them know that I would be back in touch with them in six to eight weeks to give them detailed information and arrange a time for an interview if they were still interested (see Appendix F).

Instead of the six to eight weeks, six months passed before I contacted the nine again. One clergyperson had changed churches across the country and did not respond to any of my e-mails. Another clergy was too busy to participate. The remaining seven were interviewed. Three men and four women clergy participated. All were ethnically white.

Five were married, and two were single. Four denominations were represented: three from the Presbyterian Church (USA), two United Methodist, one Episcopalian, and one from the United Church of Canada. They lived in six different states (Alabama, Colorado, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee) and Canada. Their time in ordained ministry ranged from 2 ½ years to thirty-four years. All seven had attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats.

Design of the Study

Because the Circle of Trust retreats invited participants to honor and respect each person and that person's ability to come to know what he or she needed or needed to do, participants endeavored to ask only open and honest questions. In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Palmer writes that the use of open and honest questions "invite the speaker to reach for deeper and truer speech" (130). As I searched for an appropriate methodology to use in this research, I decided that a qualitative study best served the Circle of Trust work in terms of the types of data collection (i.e., interviews that I conducted). Interview questions in qualitative research are designed to be "general and broad ... so that you can best learn from participants" (Creswell, *Educational Handbook* 55). Monique M. Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey further elaborate that interview questions needed to be "open, short and simple ... to invite the interviewee to share their perceptions and tell their story in detail" (118-19). Qualitative interviewing was congruent with the Circle of Trust experiences and the long-term influence they may have had in the lives of the clergy participants in the study.

I selected narrative inquiry as the type of qualitative research I conducted. I wanted to hear the stories of the clergy participants as they wrestled with the Circle of

Trust practices in order to integrate those practices in their lives. As F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin write, “[P]eople by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (2). I wanted to learn from the clergy participants about how the Circle of Trust retreats influenced their lives. In order to learn about their experiences, I would need to hear their stories about those experiences. The narrative inquiry process was the best way to achieve that goal as it guided me while I listened to and explored the stories from their experiences.

Narrative inquiry was also a methodology that demanded relationality and collaboration. Relationality involved my ongoing commitment as a researcher to attend to the establishment of a relationship with each clergy I interviewed, the ongoing negotiation of that relationship, and the ethical practices within that relationship (Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* 189; Clandinin 51-52, 197-201). Clandinin further discusses the significance of relationality: “Narrative inquiry as a deeply relational practice sees research as an unfolding of lives in relation” (141). The creation of safe, supportive relationships was foundational in the Circle of Trust practices of honoring each other, respecting each other’s differences and attending to each other with deep listening. Throughout the narrative inquiry process, I attended to the relational aspects of the research that were also crucial for the formation of community on the Circle of Trust retreats.

The collaborative nature of narrative inquiry flowed directly into the respectful relationships created on a Circle of Trust retreat. As I collected the field text during the semi-structured interview, the process often became conversational, a give-and-take

between the clergy participant and me. After transcribing each interview, I restoried it in way that showed temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin 38). Each restoried narrative utilized each participant's pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

In order to enhance credibility and the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry as defined by D. Jean Clandinin and Vera Caine, I took each restoried interview to my Research Reflection team that served as my Response Community (173; Clandinin 210-11). Within the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary, I brought together a group of people called the Research Reflection Team to support me during the doctoral process. They agreed to take on the additional role of being a type of Response Community to listen to the narratives I created from the interviews. The Research Reflection Team comprised a retired dean and professor in a school of business, a current teacher at a local college, a retired nurse who taught nursing classes, and a retired professor whose doctoral work was in qualitative research methodology.

The Research Reflection Team gave input into the restoried narrative by asking questions, pointing out gaps in information, and checking for overall narrative sense. I sent each restoried interview, called the interim research text, back to each clergy participant to see if I had captured his or her story and used his or her essence and voice in the story. Sometimes I had additional conversation over e-mail exchanges. I continued this process until each clergy participant was satisfied with the interim research text.

The last collaborative process was to create the final research text that contained the threads and resonances from all the clergy participants. The Research Reflection team reviewed the final research text as well as each clergy participant. The review allowed us

to collaborate once more before the completion of the final research text and enhanced the credibility of the research.

Instrumentation

I used two instruments. The first was a researcher-designed demographic questionnaire. The second was a researcher-designed semi-structured interview (see Appendixes G and D, respectively).

The researcher-designed demographic questionnaire contained seven questions. The questions covered basic items such as gender, age, ethnicity, and marital status. The ministry question involved their denominations and number of years they had been in ordained ministry. The final question concerned what retreats they had attended. I sent out the demographic questionnaire with the initial letter of invitation, consent form, Touchstones, and semi-structured interview explanation and questions. I used the responses to create the demographic table and to learn a little information about each participant prior to the interview to support the process of establishing relationality.

The researcher-designed, semi-structured interview contained five questions. The first two questions involved understanding how each clergy participant came to know about the Circle of Trust retreats and what motivated them to attend. The third question explored their spiritual, personal, and professional lives in various ways to assist them as they prepared for the interview. The fourth question asked about any artifacts they might want to send to me to explain their experiences further. The fifth question allowed them to select the pseudonyms by which I would refer to them in order to keep their identities confidential. In the sixth question, I asked if they had anything else they wanted to share with me about their experiences.

Pilot Interview

I e-mailed a clergy participant who had attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats to see if he would be interested in participating in the pilot interview. He agreed to take part in the pilot interview, and we scheduled a time to get together. I e-mailed him the packet of information I planned on sending to each of the nine clergy participants. The packet of information included the following items:

1. A letter of invitation that introduced myself, explained the interview process, the ethical procedures I would follow, and the co-composition of the interim and final research texts that we would do together (see Appendix H);
2. The consent form (see Appendix I);
3. The semi-structured interview questions and introductory explanation of the narrative inquiry interview process (see Appendix J);
4. The list of the Circle of Trust Touchstones; and,
5. The demographic questionnaire.

I received feedback from him regarding all the documents. He helped me spot inconsistencies in my language regarding the Circle of Trust and Seasonal Retreat Series in the letter of invitation and addressed areas of concern that I corrected.

The interview lasted just over an hour. He selected the name Newt as his pseudonym. I transcribed the interview and began the work of creating the interim research text or re-storied narrative from his experiences, paying attention to address the three areas that denote narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* 50). I sent the interim research text to my Research

Reflection Team for their review and comments. From their comments, I made additions, corrections, and clarifications in the interim research text.

I sent the interim research text to Newt for him to review to see if I had adequately reported what he had told me during the interview about the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreats. I resent him the demographic survey and consent form. I gave him another opportunity to give me any additional input about the interview process.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

In the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry, trustworthiness, and credibility replace the quantitative criteria of reliability and validity. In one of the earliest works of Connelly and Clandinin, criteria for good narrative included John Van Maanen's verisimilitude (33) and Guba and Lincoln's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (300).

Though I did not have extensive or long-term contact with the participants, my ability to interview seven purposefully selected participants allowed me to triangulate their interim research texts with each other to address the credibility of their stories concerning the influences of the Circle of Trust retreats in their lives. A consistency arose as the participants told of their experiences and how the practices of the retreats influenced their lives spiritually, personally, and professionally that addressed the three ministry inquiries.

As I composed the interim research texts with the participants, credibility was enhanced with their continued feedback that ensured I had adequately captured their story. During the co-composing of the interim research texts, the participants had more

opportunities to engage their stories. As Clandinin and Connelly observe, “[A] person is ... engaged in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories” (“Narrative and Story” 11). The narrative inquiry process facilitated this retelling and reliving of their stories and enhanced the credibility of the study. Triangulation occurred again when my Research and Reflection Team reviewed each interim research text and gave me feedback.

When I created the narrative for the final research text, I had my Research Reflection Team review it for additional clarifications and input. I also performed a member check with each participant. Each participant responded back to confirm or disconfirm my analysis of the threads and resonances that I found from the restoried, interim research texts of the seven participants. Such member checks added to the credibility of the research.

Trustworthiness was affirmed from the triangulations with both the participants and with my Research Reflection Team, the member check, the co-composition of the interim research texts, the learnings from the pilot interview, the reflexivity from my journaling my experiences after each interview, and the consistency of the use of the semi-structured interview.

Field Text Collection

In order to help each participant prepare for the semi-structured interview, I sent each one the letter of invitation, consent form, demographic questionnaire, a copy of the Circle of Trust Touchstones, and the semi-structured interview questions with the explanation of the type of study being conducted by postal mail and e-mail. Once a participant returned the signed consent form and the completed demographic interview, I

contacted him or her to schedule the interview conducted by phone, Skype, or in person. I audiotaped all the interviews and added video recording of the Skype interview.

Each interview opened with the questions of how the participant came to be involved with the Circle of Trust Retreats and what motivated him or her. As I moved into the long-term effects of the retreats with each participant, the interview became more conversational and relational (Clandinin 45). I paid particular attention to each conversation to ensure that the spiritual, personal, and professional dimensions of the inquiry were discussed. I concluded each interview by clarifying that I would transcribe the interview, re-story it into the interim research text, have my Research Reflection Team review it, and then send it to the participant for purposes of collaboration and verification.

During each interview as the dialogue became conversational, I recounted parts of my story as they related to each participant's story, which reinforced the relationality of the interview (Clandinin 51). Often the interviews turned into what Bruce identifies as "a story-telling dialogue where both researcher and participants honour experience as a place of knowing and learning" ("Theological Education" 115).

Following each interview, I paused to journal in order to identify my thoughts and feelings about the interview and questions the interview raised interpersonally and to reflect on the times I shared from my personal story. As John B. Morse discovered in his narrative inquiry dissertation, the journaling enhanced the co-creating of the narrative process (42) and provided another source of triangulation (51). Finally, the journaling adhered to the reflexive nature of the narrative inquiry methodology as described by Nancy Kendall and Miriam Thangaraj (93-96).

Field Text Analysis

The demographic questionnaire was compiled into a table to show the level of diversity among the participants (see Table 4.1, p. 65). No names or pseudonyms were listed on the chart to ensure that anonymity was upheld and identities protected.

In narrative inquiry, the transcribed interview became the field text with which I worked. My first level of analysis was to review the field text multiple times, looking for the elements that corresponded with the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place in order to compose the interim research text that restoried the interview. I began to formulate the narrative in my mind so it would flow in terms of the chronology of the story, including the people and the places involved in the restorying for the interim research text (Clandinin 47).

As I determined the narrative in terms of the three-dimensional space, I listened and looked for each participant's recurring words, phrases, and themes. I wove those items into the restoried interim research text, taking care to avoid any "smoothing" of the narrative (Clandinin 48). "Smoothing" of the text refers to the tendency to turn the narratives into happy, conflict-free stories. I endeavored to adhere to qualitative methodology by providing rich, thick descriptions of each participant's experiences as suggested by Burke Johnson and Larry B. Christensen (312).

When I was satisfied with each restoried narrative, I handed it to my Research Reflection Team. They gave me additional reflections, sought clarifications, and raised questions for me to clarify within the study and with the participant. I edited each interim research text accordingly based on their feedback.

I e-mailed each interim research text to the respective participant in order to collaborate further and verify whether the interim research text had captured his or her authentic voice and story adequately (Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* 148). From each participant's feedback, whether by e-mail or subsequent conversation, I conducted a final edit on each interim research text. Even though I created a final interim research text, narrative inquiry methodology would acknowledge that the research continues, and in some ways full closure was not possible because lives continue to be lived, experiences told, and stories created.

The movement from individual interim research texts to the completed research text was full of tensions (Clandinin 139-51) and challenges. However, at the point of creating the research text, I analyzed all of the interim research texts I had co-composed with each participant. I took a birds-eye view of the narrative accounts to search for "resonant threads or patterns, . . . resonances or echoes that reverberated across accounts" (132). After identifying the threads and resonances, I chose a narrative way in which to report them in the final research text. I sent the report to each participant for feedback. I collected all the feedback and addressed it in the narrative of the final research text as a last effort at co-composing the text with the participants. I sent it to my Research Reflection Team for their feedback as well. As the research for the dissertation came to an end, the relational and ethical responsibilities I had to the participants continued as all of our lives and stories from our experiences continued.

Ethical Procedures

I outlined the ethical procedures in the letter of invitation. The consent form was included in the packet sent to each participant and was signed by each participant.

To ensure anonymity, each participant selected the pseudonym by which he or she would be known in the study. I did not list their pseudonym in the results of the demographic questionnaire but started with their gender to protect further any identifying information being linked even to a pseudonym. In my journaling after each interview, I used the participant's pseudonym.

All recordings, transcripts, interim research texts, and final research texts that went out for the member check are stored on a password-protected, external drive in a locked file in my home. I shredded all hard copies of the transcripts, interim research texts, and final research texts that I had or that I had given to my Research Reflection Team. I deleted all files from my computer's hard drive and retained only the external drive.

In narrative inquiry, the relationality created between me and each participant formed the basis for all the ethical procedures. Each participant trusted me to do no harm throughout the narrative inquiry process. Each participant trusted me with the stories of his or her experiences with the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats. Each trusted me to convey their experiences through the co-composing aspects of the study. Each participant could have withdrawn from the study at any time, and I would have shredded all documents and deleted all files that pertained to his or her interview. In addition, having the theological foundation that all individuals are created in the image of God and worthy of honor and respect served as the ethical foundation for this research.

CHAPTER 4

RESONANCES AND THREADS

Problem and Purpose

The work of the Center for Courage and Renewal has had many evaluations, master's theses, and dissertation projects conducted on the influence of the Circle of Trust retreats in the lives of educators who participated in the retreats. Though evaluations of clergy participants support the effectiveness of the retreat experiences in the lives of clergy, no long-term study into those influences has been conducted.

Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven clergy who evidenced integration of the Circle of Trust practices into their lives, this study addressed that gap in the research. Therefore, the purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices through the storied experiences of the clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats or a Seasonal Retreat Series offered by the Center for Courage and Renewal with particular attention to its influence on their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.

Participants

Fenner purposefully identified nine possible participants and received permission from them to send me their contact information. All nine were clergy who seemed to be integrating the practices into their lives and all were interested in participating in the research process. However, one clergy took on a new church assignment between my first contact and conducting the research. Another was too busy to participate at the time of the interviews. Therefore, seven clergy were interviewed using the narrative inquiry process that included two member checks, allowing each participant to continue

conversation with me. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the demographic chart listed none of their pseudonyms (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Demographics of the Participants

Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Marital Status	Denomination	Years in Ordained Ministry	Retreats Attended (n)
Female	White	50-59	Single	United Methodist	8.0	5
Female	White	40-49	Married	Presbyterian USA	3.5	10
Male	White	40-49	Married	Presbyterian USA	2.5	4
Female	White	40-59	Married	United Church of Canada	13.5	9
Male	White	60-69	Married	United Methodist	34.0	20
Female	White	60-69	Single	Presbyterian USA	15.0	7
Male	White	60-69	Married	Episcopal	28.0	8

All of the participants had attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats. Two participants were two and three years out of their first Circle of Trust retreats respectively. Likewise, the remaining five participants were five, six, seven, eight, and eight years out of their first Circle of Trust retreat. Therefore, this study was able to address the long-term effects and influences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in the lives of the clergy participants.

Four participants became aware of the Circle of Trust retreats through the writings of Palmer: *The Promise of Paradox*, *To Know as We are Known*, *Let Your Life Speak*, and *A Hidden Wholeness*. One was introduced through the invitation of a colleague. Another saw a brochure in a local retreat center hosting a Circle of Trust retreat and signed up. The last one was invited by a Circle of Trust facilitator.

Initial responses to the introductory interview question regarding what drew them to attend multiple Circle of Trust retreats were effusive from all seven clergy participants. Al, a recently retired minister, commented, “I was captivated by what I experienced. It resonated so deeply in terms of what was being said about the spiritual life and the true self. It felt like putting on an old slipper,... coming home,... life-changing, absolutely life-changing.” Kelly, an associate minister, called herself a “junkie for Circles of Trust.” She added, “It felt very native to me. I took to it quickly. It was congruent with many of my beliefs about how people change,... listening to their inner self and learning what the Spirit of God looks like when it’s working.” Bruce, an associate minister with youth and young adults, saw “the power of the technique and the skills it taught me.... Every day that I’m exposed to it, I learn more about it. I’ve been intrigued. It’s been very meaningful to me.” Marie, an associate minister in a large church saw herself “as a poster child for the Circle of Trust work.” Ultimately, she described the retreat experiences as “finding my peeps.... It was such a sense of coming home and that these were my people,... [people who] had the desire to talk about important things in a sacred way.... [E]verybody had this open spirit,... this desire to go deep.” Brigid, the sole minister at her church, found the first retreat to be “just really good.” She “connected with the sense of metaphor, imagery and using open, honest questions.... [T]he creative parts felt like, ‘This is exactly what I like to do in my spare time. This is what I like to do when I grow up.’” Brigid continued with additional retreats because of the “support for life and work in ministry” that she experienced. Liz, another sole pastor, had done training in Christian spiritual direction. She discovered that the Circle of Trust work “refined what I had and expanded the possibility of that [prior work in spiritual formation and direction].” She

found that “the Circles of Trust are a Third Thing that allow us to come as individuals and drop those things that divide us. I just love the work for those reasons.” After her first retreat, Liz felt “renewed, clear, grounded, and thought, ‘Wow. That was really a remarkable experience!’” Bryan, a senior minister, said he was “blown away” by his first retreat experience. In a subsequent retreat, he was the focus person in a Clearness Committee. According to Bryan, that experience of vocational discernment literally, “Saved my life ... and lit a fire in me.” All seven clergy participants connected, deeply, with the Circle of Trust retreat experiences.

Ministry Inquiry #1

Since Genesis chapter three describes the breakdown of the relationship between God and humanity, the first ministry inquiry explored how the Circle of Trust practices helped restore aspects of that relationship in the lives of the clergy participants. The first ministry inquiry asked the following question: In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the spiritual lives of the clergy in regard to their relationship with God? Through the narrative inquiry process, all seven of the clergy described changes in their relationship with God.

When Al attended the first sampler retreat, he became motivated by the methodology he experienced on the retreat especially because of “the permission you have to do what you need to do and not what somebody else thinks you need to do.” As a practicing contemplative for a long time, he found that contemplative side of himself “honored in an unmediated way” on the retreats. The methodology was “so deeply resonant” with his own spiritual practices.

Kelly noticed changes in her relationship with God as, over time, she attended the retreats:

There was a deepening, a real deepening belief and conviction that ... I had everything I needed within me.... That and this strong belief of God within me and within others and trusting that. I think that came out a lot in my practices. At the last retreat in the first year, I was talking to a woman and said, "When I came here I was really looking for safe space." But as I was leaving the retreat, I realized I was taking that space with me everywhere. I kind of discovered that that safety resided within me. That was a huge kind of breakthrough of hearing myself say that. I hadn't even thought about it in that way. But in terms of my relationship with God I think it really strengthened that conviction.

During the interview, Kelly noted that many changes had taken place in her life as she attended the various retreats. The deepening of her relationship with God was one of those changes.

In Bruce's relationship with God and his spiritual practices, he gained a "respect for silence." Bruce learned, "With God, it's taught me to just sit and listen. I appreciate the silence a little more and don't expect a loud voice every time, to understand he speaks in the quiet times as well." Through the Circle of Trust practices, Bruce developed a deeper appreciation for silence in his relationship with God.

When Bruce was determining God's call to a church after seminary, he spent time listening for God. He was about to accept a position at another church when the church he was serving decided to make his youth and young adult ministry a called position:

They asked if I would wait to make my decision a little while longer, which for me was a hard thing. I was ready to do something. It was the time to act! I waited, and they formed a search committee and went through the process. It took a little time. I had to be honest with the other church about the discernment process. I went away and spent some quiet time then just sitting and reading Scripture and being very intentional about listening for God's call in the back of my mind and even intentionally valuing the silence. I really heard God's call at that point. It

really brought me to a good place, and I stayed where I was at the current church. The work wasn't done here yet.

This fall, Bruce took some quiet time away as part of his continuing education:

I really didn't have time in the summer. In youth ministry, you're never home you know. It's one trip, you come back the next week and plan for the next trip. I'm getting a little older and noticed that at 48 years old, after keeping up with thirteen and fourteen year olds, I was mentally and physically, and emotionally spent. I had a great time. But it just wore me out.... So I just got away for a few days and sat and read and took quiet time with God. I would never have done that before being introduced to Circle of Trust.... I went and sat in a condominium at the beach. I sat by the shore and fished. And enjoyed just time outside.... I'm always closer to God when I'm standing about waist-deep in the water fishing in the surf.... [T]hat's where I feel closer to God than ever. To have those discussions with him when I'm out there and to think through things and sometimes to think about nothin' at all. So, in my own personal life, just learning to sit in silence with God and to have more open and honest communication with him, that's been a big thing. I think that too much of my prayer life before was not being able to open up and be honest with him. I think I've learned to do that more through the exposure to the Circle of Trust.

Through his Circle of Trust experiences, Bruce learned the gift of silence and listening, especially in his relationship with God.

Since the retreats, Marie has created a sacred place in her home where she daily meditates and worships God:

I have been one of those people that's always loved the church. I mean when I was kid, I was on the front row. I always have been a musician in the church until I went back to divinity school. I'm one of those crazy people that feels like everything we do, in a church, comes from worship. That it's out of our worship of God that we are able to go out, and do missions and outreach. It's out of our worship that we go out to learn and grow by studying.... To me, the center of my spiritual life is grounded in worship and is not relegated to the four services we have on Sunday. I'm able to do worship in this little place that I have set aside in my house, which ... I realized I got from them. They said we needed to find a sacred space where we would go every day, walk through it and do some meditation. I do it in the morning before we start the crazy day. I do some meditation. I've been reading Mark Nepo, which seems to go right along with the Circle of Trust things about self-discovery and allowing things to

happen, letting go, not being so in control of things. I do some Scripture reading, ... non-work Scripture reading, ... realizing what great comfort and healing this sacred place gave to me. [Also,] so far as a spiritual practice, and this may sound crazy, ... I am a pianist. To me when I'm not able to verbalize what is going on in my spiritual life, in my work life, in my personal life, I play the piano. It's just like this direct line to God, and there's so much that can be expressed that doesn't have any articulation in terms of language. That's probably the most sacred.... I can't describe it. I know there are things in my head. I know there are thoughts going around when I'm playing. But, somehow it bypasses all the neurons in the frontal lobe. I would consider that playing the piano is one of my spiritual practices.

Marie's spiritual practices in her relationship with God deepened through the creation of the sacred space in her home and understanding, in new ways, that through her piano playing she worships God without words or conscious thought.

Through the Circle of Trust retreat practices, Brigid found "more ways of connecting" with God in her spiritual life. The retreat facilitators were creative in the activities they invited the participants to do. Brigid discovered that the creative side of her that loves crafts could also become new ways to connect with God:

So working on this drawing right here is a spiritual practice. I'm allowed to do this. This is good for me.... I went through quite a stressful time and transition in life, ... especially work life, while I was in that seasonal retreat series. I think about how I went through it with that group and some of what we did as spiritual practice, some of the creative stuff that I've kept on doing.... I don't consider myself a good drawer. I'm more crafty. But I can allow myself to say, "It doesn't matter actually what it looks like. I can use glue and paper, and I can do whatever I want." I've been keeping an art journal. It's been actually neat looking back through it. To say, "Yeah this is what my relationship with God, with the Spirit has been about." They're mostly drawings, collages or different things, mandalas. I often have some writing as well. I've written as though they were my own psalms. Working on them is one part of the practice. But, actually looking back through it is pretty neat to see where the journey has taken me in the time that I've been working on it.

Learning to use her creativity to explore and journal with new methods connected Brigid to God and allowed her to accept her own ways of being in relationship with God and growing that relationship.

Liz saw the Circle of Trust work deepening her relationship with God:

There's a new way of looking and listening, a deeper way of looking and listening, and maybe a wider openness than I've known before.... I think before Circles of Trust, I was conscious of a need to be attentive. I'd move in and out of places or times of being attentive. Some days it was easier than other days. Now I feel like I kind of swim in that attentiveness. I'm more likely to stop and notice what my soul is noticing, honor that and allow it, if not to speak in the moment, to go back to it later.... We [the church building] sit on about ten acres of property.... We have a beautiful green space with a lot of trees and grass and birds.... [A]s I've driven up on the property I've thought, "Yeah, that's a resurrection plant, let it speak to the day." Just taking the time to notice what I notice and why I notice it and letting it take me somewhere,... letting it be underneath what I'm doing and through what I'm doing.

In her relationship with God, Liz's attentiveness to the things of God deepened and expanded so that it surrounds her and moves with her through each day.

Bryan spoke of a different level of alignment with his soul in his spirituality:

I wouldn't like this answer if I heard somebody else give it, but it just feels like my life is almost a walking practice of the soul and role alignment. I can tangibly feel when I've done something to violate that. It just is painful in a way that causes me to say, "No more. I won't do that." I really got angry with somebody earlier this week. Anger in itself is not bad but this was not what I would want to have done. So I need to not do that again.... This work is very nature based in the seasons, the Third Things. Nature has always been very real for me. This work has accentuated that.... Each year I do an eight-day backpacking trip in the wilderness with a friend. It's very strenuous.... We are off the grid for eight days. My cycle is this. I have that annual Touchstone of the wilderness, and I write a journal. That's what feeds my soul and cleanses my soul. Then I do, on a weekly and daily basis, physical exercise. I spend time each night before I go to bed for reflection. I don't have necessarily the formalized prayer life. Then, I have structured in my normal week a Friday Bible class so that causes me to do the scriptural reading that I probably wouldn't do if I wasn't doing that. That engages at a deep level for me,... [and] recently I've been writing poetry.

Another aspect of Bryan's spiritual practices came as a result of his coordinating Circle of Trust retreats in his region for the last five to six years. Bryan noted, "[T]he retreats have been a major part of my spiritual practices." The Circle of Trust experiences brought several new understandings to Bryan's spiritual practices in his relationship with God.

All of the clergy participants observed changes in their relationship with God that continued to this day. They described the changes in their relationship with God in terms of deepening, connecting, and aligning in new ways. The practices of the retreats introduced several of them to new methods to use during their intentional times with God. For others, discovery occurred when they understood how their, seemingly, nonreligious practices actually drew them deeper into God's presence.

Ministry Inquiry #2

In the third chapter of the book of Genesis, the breakdown of the relationships humans have with each other was portrayed through the finger-pointing of Adam and Eve as well as in the power hierarchy that started between them and with the rest of creation. Therefore, the second ministry inquiry explored how the Circle of Trust practices helped restore aspects of those relationships in the lives of the clergy participants. The second ministry inquiry asked the following question: In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the personal lives of the clergy in terms of their relationships with self, their families, friends, and community that were not necessarily work related? Influences occurred in all the areas in the personal lives of the clergy.

Relationship with the Self

All of the clergy interviewed told stories of new insights about themselves that they discovered through the Circle of Trust retreat practices. Some of the insights involved their finding new gifts in themselves or accepting aspects of their personality in more grace-filled ways. Others gained new understandings about their vocational call and their role as clergy in ministry through the Circle of Trust retreat practices, by using Third Things (e.g., poetry, music, drawing, painting, journaling), listening to their inner teacher, and experiencing the discernment process in the Clearness Committees as a focus person when they responded to the open, honest questions asked.

Al found the use of poetry as a Third Thing helpful for his own self. Poetry turned out to be much more powerful for Al than expected: “I really was pretty skeptical and maybe even afraid of poetry until I was confronted with it so regularly on those retreats.... [I] discovered that there was a poet in me that I hadn’t known was there,... the guy who likes to write or rewrite hymn texts.... [H]ymnody had been my poetry for a long, long time.” Al reported having a “brief, major moment of awareness that I had never really rejected poetry. I had just been using it in a different way.” Being able to see how he was a poet in his own way was “pretty important” for Al.

The Clearness Committee experience and learning to trust his inner teacher helped Al as he discerned major vocational decisions. Al participated in a Clearness Committee when he was discerning whether he was called back into senior pastor ministry one more time. Al described the Clearness Committee experiences he had as “some of the most authentic discernment experiences I’ve had anywhere.” When he was discerning whether he should retire, the Touchstone about listening to his inner teacher

guided him. Al is a very strong Myers-Briggs N or intuitive. As he began retirement, he began to look at those “traits of my intuitive nature,... the intuition and about trusting my gut.” He described the importance of trusting his intuition or gut as he headed into retirement:

I knew it was time for me to retire before anyone else did and there were some people who thought it was a mistake,... including my wife, saying, “You’re not done.” I said, “Well it’s not about being done. It’s about being done with full-time work so that I can do several things part-time.” [In retirement] if my gut says, “No thank you. You may think that’s a really good idea for me to do that,... but I’m really not ... interested in it enough to make a commitment to doing it on a weekly basis....” Paying attention to my gut had everything to do with just knowing in my mind, body, and spirit, in my soul, that I just wanted to have ... more of an opportunity to make choices about what felt like the best stewardship use of my time and talents.... My gut confirmed for me how tired I really was of working hard for so long in ministry.

When in doubt and wondering what decisions to make through and into his retirement, Al checked to see what his gut was saying in order to attend to his own inner teacher.

Kelly experienced greater understanding of herself and clarified her role in ministry through the practices of the Circle of Trust. On one of the retreats, Kelly wrote out her core beliefs:

They are justice, community, spirituality, encounter, I/Thou, reconciliation, healing, wholeness, truth telling, and embrace. I wrote a letter to myself: “These are the things you are about in this world. These are why you do what you do. It’s been good to be reminded of these things and to have a clear head for the way forward.” But every time I come across this list, I look at it and it kind of helps me. It helps me clear away all of the tasks, the conflicts, the expectations, and the projections and the drama.... It helps me focus on, “Ok this is why I’m doing what I’m doing, and this is what I believe in.” So, returning to that kind of work in Circles every few months has been really helpful to just help me regain my footing in a job that is always pulling me in a million different directions and a life that pulls me in a million different directions.

Reaffirming her core beliefs about who she is and why she does what she does steadied Kelly in her personal life and ministry.

Kelly was in her first pastoring job: “The Circle of Trust retreats really helped me catch up in my soul to where I was in my work.” Kelly reported doing “a lot of work around my identity as a leader, my identity as a pastor and taking quite a bit more confidence in how I led.” Her first Clearness Committee as a focus person was around being a pastor and what that means: “How do I function as a pastor and how do I see myself as a leader?” Kelly described the experiences as a “time of huge learning and growth and strength, . . . inner strengthening. It was like my backbone had become a lot straighter after the end of the year” of attending the Circle of Trust series.

Bruce served as the minister of youth and young adults. However, since the long-tenured senior pastor of the church recently retired, the church hired an interim senior pastor while they searched for the next one. Subsequently, his pastoral role shifted as people outside of the youth and young adult ministry started approaching him for help. The Touchstone of asking open, honest questions led Bruce to describing his current role in his church as being a pine tree: “Sometimes it’s not that straightforward question that gets you thinking the most. . . . That’s what so powerful. When you ask a question that’s so totally out of the box that really starts bringing out honest answers, . . . with yourself at least.” Bruce commented on how the unusual, off-the-wall questions took him to deep places. When asked if he were a tree in a forest, what tree would he be, Bruce related to the pine tree:

With the challenge and turmoil going around in our church, . . . I have people of all ages coming to me with questions and concerns. They’re seeking somebody who’s been there for a while, . . . who knows the situations, knows the culture, knows the personality of our church and

who's gonna to be there awhile. Someone who's not gonna to change and blow with every trend that comes along. Someone who's steady and sure and who doesn't "lose its leaves." That's where I've tried to be. I've tried to be that kind of evergreen.... I'm there. I'm not going anywhere yet. They know I'm gonna be there. It's hard when you have an interim pastor come in for a short amount of time, for people to go down the hall, even if he's the senior pastor, and ask questions. Because they know, he's going to go at some point. That's the nature of being an interim. So, it's been a curse and a blessing that they come to me. But, I try to be that pine tree that's there all the time. I may shed a needle here or there, but most of the time I try to keep my leaves on and stay strong.

The use of an unusual open, honest question from the Touchstones combined with the use of a Third Thing like a tree helped Bruce find clarity in his pastoral role during this difficult time of transition in the church he serves.

Marie found that being the focus person on a Clearness Committee instrumental to her reopening her life to the gift and grace of music. She had responded to God's call to ministry after having a career in music education for over fifteen years. Marie acknowledged that she had given up parts of her creative side as she became a minister, thinking, "Ok. Now I have to be this serious, dour, reserved minister." The vocational question Marie took to the Clearness Committee was, "Am I living out my calling to use your [God's] gifts to build up the body of Christ?" Marie found the discernment process with the people on her Clearness Committee "exhausting, but incredibly helpful":

I remember becoming very emotional in the middle of it because when they ask these fantastic questions, it took me to places I would never have thought about. The one thing that kept coming up was how much I missed my music. You know you do something for many, many, many years, and even though I felt called to the ministry, I think they helped me recognize that.... I had tamped that part down. It was a big piece of who I was that I was missing. I kept trying to find the same kind of joy and energy and completion and self-revelation in another area.... They sort of helped me navigate that: "You've chopped off one of your legs here Marie. You're wondering why it hurts, and you're wondering why you can't walk well. Is there a way that you could keep your leg in the situation you find yourself in now, in ministry, but incorporate all of you into your ministry?" It

sounds so simplistic when I say it now, but I really did not get that that's what I'd done.... I had made this decision to separate myself from something that was very important to me. It was pretty obvious to all of them right away. They said, "Your body language, your eyes lit up. Your speaking got more joyful and higher pitched." It's an experience that I wish everyone could have in the Clearness Committee because they did it with such love and such care and such focused attention. I think everybody comes out of one of those feeling very affirmed, supported, also stirred up a little bit: "Ok. Now I put it out there in the sunlight, now I gotta deal with it. These people aren't coming home with me to deal with this. I'm the one that's got to take their notes, take their questions and dig a little deeper." I would say probably the Clearness Committee that I went through means *more* [original emphasis] than anything else. It's amorphous. It's out there. It's not like the Touchstones that I can run off copies and hand to people. It's not like handing them one of the books. It's probably had one of the biggest influences on how I am still seeking, several years later, to stay open to what I understood to be the issue.... It's still a work in progress. But, it's not as concrete; it's not as practical. It's just something that I will probably play with the rest of my life. "Where's the balance? Am I doing what God's calling me to do? When I heard God say, 'Use your gifts to build up the body of Christ' does that mean inside a parish? What gifts are God talking about? What gifts actually build up and what gifts tear down?" It's something I will be working on for however many years I have left.

The support of the people in her Clearness Committee along with their keen observations and open, honest questions helped Marie see that her call to ministry and her gifts in music could be connected in her life.

When Brigid realized that using the Third Things, her crafts, in her spiritual journal deepened her relationship with God, she embraced the creativity within herself in new ways. She gave herself the gift of coloring, drawing, and writing her own personal psalms, among other creative activities:

For example with the art journal, it's just a letting go and there's no judgment. I can practice not judging myself because that's my experience of the holy this work.... Some of the learnings around the [enneagram] archetypes and some of the similarities with the Circle of Trust are brought together: "This is who you are and who lives within you. You need to nurture that." So being creative is part of what I need to do, what I know is healthy for me. It's sort of like, "Well, this is fun and it's also

good for me.” Not just fun in a trivial sort of way. It’s also holy, and that’s how it should be. It’s how I see the world, too. There’s so much goodness and beauty that this work has reminded me of and shows me. Again that connection with appreciative inquiry that if we focus on the beauty and the Spirit and the wisdom within then you’re going to see it. And if you don’t focus on that, then you’re not.

Through the use of Third Things, Brigid connected in new ways with her own creativity.

Liz said that the Circle of Trust practices “help me live into some things that I believe.” The practices helped her be who she wanted to be as she related to other people:

I believe in the goodness and the giftedness in each person. Somehow, this work opens me to it in a way that helps me to live into that.... Knowing that someone else has a different experience, a different expertise, a different perspective, a different way of looking at things. But we’re both working as souls together.... It adds a layer of richness and takes away some anxiety.

The Circle of Trust experiences assisted Liz to remain true to herself in relationships with others whether the relationships were easy or complex.

Bryan found being a focus person with a Clearness Committee vocationally life saving as he found a way to align and assess his priorities and call:

I had gone to the worldwide denominational meeting in 2004.... I swore I’d never go back to one. I had a number of people say to me, “But you have to, you have to engage the church. You carry a particular voice and presence of progressiveness, and you have the ability to walk through institutions. You have to carry this banner.” Well that’s very seductive: “O wow, me? You picked me?” But I was never comfortable with that decision and was wrestling with it. In the seasonal retreats, that was kind of my driving question. “What does my future hold as far as institutional church?” What I countered that with was what I’d like to do which is what I am doing: working with the interfaith community. But that was ill-defined then.... This was the question [I took to that Clearness Committee]: “Should I take this thing that leads me into the institutional work of the church, be an advocate for this area of the denomination, that maybe places me in more institutional authority, or do I take this other work that I’m just trying to define myself. There’s no real public affirmation for it, I don’t even know what the outcome is.” So somebody said ... this was one of the open, honest questions: “Well imagine you’re at the fork in the path. One path is what you described and the other is the

other one. What do you see?" What's so wonderful about those kinds of questions is it did hit me from a slant. Because I had been working with this either/or rationally.... But in that Clearness Committee was a visual. The visual was absolutely convincing. The visual of going down the institutional path was literally smoke, mirrors, fire, and ultimately death. The visual down this other path was ... out in the meadow and there was light and there were birds and there was life.... I was like there's no choice. So I pretty much closed off all of that other stuff.... [W]hat that did is it allowed me to come back here to this congregation.... I could say, "This is my passion and I believe this could be the passion for this congregation." They've been very responsive. In the end, I've been able to stay within the institution.... This really made a major difference. It aligned, in a surprising way, my soul and role. I got connected to a deep-felt place, and I could look at what was being asked of me as a clergy, and I could discern what was complementary to my soul and what was harmful to my soul. I could pretty much mitigate the harmful and accentuate the strengthening of that. It just lit a fire in me.... I would still use pretty strong language that this discernment work saved my life. Perhaps the difference in my story is I wasn't dealing with an overt crisis. I was dealing with an overt seduction. The institution will do that:... suck you in with these promises.... I was in the heart of the institution. And that was fine. But I think I've been able to walk with integrity. In some ways I have more influence now than if I had taken the other path that wanted the influence.

As Bryan felt the allure of the institutional seductions, as he called it, he found a clear direction that aligned his soul to his ministerial role through the Clearness Committee experience.

Relationships with Family Members

Several participants identified the influences the Circle of Trust retreat practices had in their relationships with family members. Often a Touchstone proved effective.

Al noticed that the Touchstone about turning to wonder had been beneficial in his relationship with his wife and in relationships in general: "The business about when the going gets tough or rough, turn to wonder, which for me is, simply, a question about projection." Al described it as turning the wondering question around and asking it of himself, "I wonder what is going on inside of me that makes this a rough patch or a rough

situation. Rather than I wonder what's wrong with them that things are so rough for me at this moment." Al finds this Touchstone practiced often with his wife, saying, "I have daily opportunity for my wife and I [sic] to look at the wonder of the rough patches." Turning to wonder helped Al navigate projection in himself and from others.

In terms of relationships with her family, Kelly explained that her husband often traveled: "I think there has been quite a bit more confidence for myself in just managing our house and managing our family with two children." Kelly began "asking better questions of our kids and being more committed to being a better listener of them and of my husband." When Kelly was in conversation with her children, she realized that she was more persistent with them:

One is a teenager and one is in preteen stage, so like the last thing they want to do is to sit down and have a conversation. But I've become more persistent with that. Right now our church is reading a book together. So my husband and I are making our kids sit down once a week and read the chapter with us and answer the questions. I probably would have given up on that more easily because of their complaining and all of that two years ago.... But I'm more persistent now in having those conversations and opening that space and trusting that even though there may be a lot of complaining and moaning and even teasing about it, that it's opening spaces for them to think about things. For us to have those conversations together is going to pull us closer. So I'm more intentional ... with my kids and with their friends. Probably, because of my confidence as a pastor and as a woman, as a mother that I've gained since I started the retreats, ... being encouraging, listening and just trying to speak a good word into their friends' lives in this really tough time.

Through her experiences on the retreats and with the practices of the Circle of Trust, Kelly gained greater self-assurance that benefited her family relationships.

Bruce thought it "amazing" how the Touchstones "filtered into so many areas. In my personal life, just to keep the Touchstones in mind in personal relationships and conversations. Whether it's with my spouse or my children, I've tried to keep those

Touchstones in front of me.” Bruce described himself as a “typical male fixer. I try to remember to improve my listening skills, to not judge, not to try to fix. That’s been very powerful in personal relationships.” The Touchstones helped Bruce become a better listener, suspend judgment, and stop trying to fix situations.

Brigid and her husband, who is a minister at another church, have done other kinds of continuing education in appreciative inquiry and working with the enneagram archetypes. They have not been able to attend many events together. Brigid commented, “It feels like we bring things home to share with each other. Everything we’re both doing just always seems to connect and flow together.” In their relationship, Brigid enjoyed the sharing of experiences with each other:

It’s been fun, I guess is the word that comes to mind, just to share with him what I learn and vice versa and see the connections. We kind of make jokes about “that’s not a very open and honest question,” but that framework has given us an option to have a conversation with different types of questions. Or to say, “This isn’t a time for open, honest questions. I’m gonna tell you what I think.”

Through their connections to each other’s work in continuing education, Brigid and her husband acquired better ways to communicate, share experiences, and support each other’s differences.

Liz noticed that the Touchstones helped her be “able to let go, listen, and work with those Touchstones. I especially love the one ‘when the going gets rough, turn to wonder.’ I love the practice of that Touchstone and where it takes me.” One of her adult children, a son, returned home and currently lives with her. Liz observed differences in her relationship with him as well as with her other three adult children:

I think there’s a little richness that’s happening in our relationship that is new. As I find myself practicing things, I’m learning and growing, letting go and listening. All those things that I think in the past, I tried to do. I

find with the practice and intention, it's more natural. There's a more natural ground that I'm on in the relationship with my son. I have noticed our conversations have deepened. I was thinking about that the other day. I don't even remember what we were talking about, but I remember walking away from it thinking, "Wow that was really interesting," because it took both of us in directions we typically didn't go. I think sharing with him some of what I'm noticing is opening space for him to share what he's noticing.... He loves to garden. He's outside a lot. He's sharing little things: "Mom, I was noticing the hummingbirds," and some little something with the pets or the garden or the birds. Previously, he's never really shared ... or rarely shared. Little Third Things are popping up.

As Liz practiced living the Touchstones with her adult children and particularly with the son living with her, changes occurred in their relationships. Their conversations opened up in new ways.

Bryan observed the Courage work helping him with relationships in his family.

He was in another profession when he and his wife met and married:

My wife is involved with the church. But there is a lot of permission giving for what she does and doesn't do. That's actually been very healthy for me. There is a part of me that could just get sucked in—line, hook, and sinker—with the dynamics of the church. A major part of my life is outside the church. That's allowed me to be healthier within the church.... I have two children, grown adults. But what the retreat practices have done is allowed me to stay present in our family system with some members of my family that really struggle with substance abuse. It's allowed me to stay present with them in a way that I don't know that I could have any other way of staying,... of turning to wonder, trusting that God is somehow present in all of this. It's allowed me to be perhaps more graceful. There is always a side of me that can come across as pretty forceful. This being present to the tensions in my own life and owning them have allowed me to be perceived as softer, as more grace-filled. Some of that is still very real even this month, trying to be a constructive presence without rescuing.

As Bryan drew on the Touchstones and other practices of the Circle of Trust work, he gained a healthy way to stay in relationship with his family members and their struggles.

Relationships with Friends

Several participants acknowledged that the Touchstones had equal effects in their relationships with friends as with their family members without particular stories conveyed. Marie spoke about the response of her friends when she returned from the retreats. Her friends noticed that “it was the first time in a long time they had seen me so excited about something and that I just came alive.” As Marie began exploring her creative, musical side, the people around her said, “Oh, my gosh! We see who you tell us you used to be and who we think you probably need to be.” Marie found, “[For] my friends, it was a revelation, a revealing of who I was.... It has been interesting for my friends to see that I continue [with the retreats and the practices].” Since the retreats, Marie’s friends could see her enthusiasm for the retreats as well as changes in her demeanor.

Three of the clergy shared about the new circle of friendships they acquired with others who attended the same retreats they did. Liz realized, “New friendships through Circle of Trust work were maintained, particularly from the seasonal retreats. We were together four times. Several stayed in touch in the interim months and continued to stay in touch” after the retreats. Relationships between Liz and others on the retreats deepened into friendships over time.

Kelly, being in her first year of ministry in a smaller community, struggled “to find [her] own space at the church,... safe space” Kelly reported difficulty in finding “people to be really honest with. Or to work through my concerns about my job or my own growth.” Often the “Spiritual directors and therapists and all those people go to my church or are connected to people at my church.” For Kelly, the retreats “provided a great

space for [her] to get away and develop some relationships that ... would help support [her] work, as well as [herself] in [her] work.” The gift for Kelly was “to be able to have coffee with someone who [she’s] been to a retreat with and to explore what a friendship looks like after that kind of experience together has been helpful.” Through the community created on the retreats, Kelly has developed ongoing, trusting relationships with others who attended the retreats with her.

Brigid, too, continued relationships with friends she made on the retreats:

Five of us that live relatively close have continued to gather once a month since the end of the seasonal retreats. We wanted to continue to support each other in doing the work since we had been in a place that was so supportive and meaningful in the two years we were working together. So that’s been really neat. We take turns hosting, and we each do different things. That’s been neat to be creative and offer something that’s so good for me, that’s life giving and that is not going to be judged. We’ve done all kinds of things in that group. People have different skills. One of the people knows a bit about wool and fibers. We did some felting.... The last time I hosted, I took them to meet my yoga teacher in her home studio, and we had a session with her. The creativity is one of the things that I touch on there with that group.

With the monthly meetings with that group of friends, Brigid continued to experience the fun she has exploring and expressing her creativity in the use of Third Things.

Relationships in the Community

Two participants reflected on the influence of the Circle of Trust practices in their work outside the church, in the community. Kelly experienced a growth in her confidence that extended to understanding that as a pastor the pastoral role goes with her into the community. She described it, saying, “[I’m] not trying to be the pastor everywhere I go. But just recognizing that I am whether I want to or not, or that it’s being projected on me.” The experiences on the retreats helped Kelly figure out how she “might own that [role] in the world.” Kelly gave an example:

So today, I was at the gym. I have a personal trainer. He and I were talking about how he wanted to be: to wake up every day and be grateful instead of dreading the day. Someone had given me some quotes by Thich Nhat Hanh, and I brought him some of those. Instead, of being embarrassed or thinking, “Oh gosh, so pastoral.” I was willing to risk some of that in order to open that space in others and hold that space for others.... So whether it’s my kids or their friends or people I encounter in the community, the Circles work has really helped me understand what it means to hold that space in a way that’s not religious or pushy, but truly, hopefully, allows the soul some space to show up.

Kelly realized that the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats helped her navigate her pastoral role beyond the walls of her church. She discovered ways to own her role in her larger community.

Bryan recognized that the Circle of Trust work supported the calling he has always had to interfaith and community ministry. Bryan found that the work “allowed me to really embrace the passions that I have for being a pastor. Recognizing a tendency I’ve always had, which is my calling is not just to the local church. It’s to serve the greater good of the larger community.” Bryan devoted some of his energies to establishing Circle of Trust retreats in his region and growing that community. Additionally, Bryan helped the larger church he currently serves to merge or fold its ministries together with another smaller church nearby. As the two churches became one church, both congregations were transformed. Ministries within the merged church as well as ministry beyond the walls of the church and into the community, which have expanded.

Ministry Inquiry #3

The third ministry inquiry followed the same breakdown in relationships found in Genesis chapter three between human beings as it explored how the Circle of Trust practices helped restore aspects of those relationships in the lives of the clergy participants in terms of their professional relationships. The third ministry inquiry asked

the following question: In what ways were the experiences of the Circle of Trust retreat practices influential and internalized into the professional lives of the clergy, including the relationships and settings that were primarily ministerial and work related: preaching, teaching, counseling, administrating committees and staff, addressing conflict, and relating to colleagues?

Circle of Trust Practices in Preaching

The clergy utilized several practices from the Circle of Trust work in their preaching. Many used Third Things. Some used the act of wondering as they explored topics. Others asked open and honest questions in their preaching.

Al used the “honest, open question process in [his] preaching ... to reframe questions into non-either/or, non-polar kind of questions.” Al believes that asking honest, open questions during his sermons is “So very important. So very helpful.” When Al was working on the passage in Matthew when Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Al reframed the question to the congregation, saying, “Who does Jesus say you are?” The question came rather easily and quickly because Al was “really practicing this honest, open question piece.” Because of his work with the Touchstones, Al easily incorporated into his preaching the use of honest, open questions.

Kelly noticed that she has “changed a lot. I do a lot of poetry in my sermons. I give a lot more space for silence.” As Kelly became accustomed to silence, she was comfortable in allowing more silence during her preaching. She, also, explored ways to incorporate more poetry into her sermons.

Marie observed that she uses Third Things, questions, and incorporates the act of wondering in her preaching:

As far as preaching, I had always used a lot of the Third Things. I mean I bring up lyrics from songs, and all of that. I've used a lot of resources, a lot of the poetry that we received, a lot of the music that was shared. I would say, it has probably helped me reveal more pieces of myself and my relationship with God, which is what I think ministers are called to do. Barbara Brown Taylor says that when we become ordained, we consent to live our faith in view of everybody. It's out there. Everything is being looked at and is there integration between what the ministers say and what they do? I think some of the Touchstones come into play about being open not only to others, yourself, but being open to the differences that they bring. Speaking your truth in ways that respect other peoples' truth and that tricky line in preaching ... that doesn't go into a shaming, but asks questions.... When I preach I ask lots of questions. I'm more of a teaching preacher, so I love using that word wonder.... I just think so much of the animosity and the contrariness and all that is going on, if people could step back and wonder, "I wonder how that person came to that conclusion? I wonder why they go to anger immediately, what is that saying about what's going on underneath?"

Marie combined several Circle of Trust practices into her preaching in the weekly worship services.

Since Brigid's master's degree work involved a poet, she uses poetry as Third Things often: "It's something I've always done. I always liked poetry.... Sometimes there's a bit of a fear about poetry. But this was learning a different way to approach it and offer it to people." Brigid brought a particular understanding to the use of poetry in preaching: "It isn't about how well you analyze it or understand what it means. But, 'how does it touch you.' I'm more comfortable and feel more supported in using poetry in preaching and in worship." Mary Oliver's poetry has become a favorite for Brigid: "I make a joke, now ... for the people who know me or have heard me preach for a while. I say, 'Well here's another Mary Oliver for you!'" Brigid found new ways to naturally incorporate poetry as Third Things into her preaching.

Many years ago, Liz was called to the church she still serves. The church had an emphasis on preaching and teaching. In contrast, Liz was drawn to a dialogical approach to teaching:

I'm shifting periodically to dialogue sermons and allowing for space in preaching. The first time I tried a dialogical sermon here, I invited it under the heading "We can sit together in silence. Or, if you're drawn to share, please feel free to speak." I was totally surprised by the response to that experience. Now that's become part of my experience.... I use the Circle of Trust work in liturgy and in the way that I conduct the children's sermon.... I brought poetry into preaching because I love poetry and sometimes attempt to write it. Sometimes, I'll use one or two lines, a stanza, or a fragment of poetry.... Another thing I've started offering a little Third Thing in the heading of our bulletin for silent mediation. When people come in and pick up the bulletin, at the very top there is a piece of poetry or a quote that's relevant to the liturgy that day.

Liz worked several Circle of Trust practices into her preaching as well as in many places in worship.

Circle of Trust Practices in Teaching

In their teaching, the clergy participants noted that asking open, honest questions, using Third Things, trusting their inner teacher, and turning to wonder were practices they employed.

Kelly mentioned, "When I teach I will often ask questions." She, naturally, began to consider "what are good questions to ask when asking people to break up into groups, trusting that the experience of people encountering each other is going to be a powerful experience for them." With her use of good questions, Kelly found she is "really asking them to go inside and pay attention to what they may already know or what's happening within their own soul." In teaching situations, Kelly engaged members of the congregation in productive, group conversations through the introduction of questions for discussion.

Bruce, as a minister with youth and young adults, has had significant experiences with the youth and young adults in terms of teaching. Bruce incorporated Circle of Trust practices with the youth and young adults with whom he works and even had Circle of Trust facilitators come and lead Circle of Trust events for the high school-aged and college-aged students: “It was just powerful with the youth and young adults, really resonating with them and with our group. Time and time again, when we’ve used it in bits and pieces within our ministries. It has been overwhelmingly well received.” In the church where Bruce served, both youth and young adults responded to the Circle of Trust practices when he offered them in teaching situations.

Bruce experimented with different aspects of the Circle of Trust practices:

I’m trying to be more conversational in the way we approach youth ministry and trying to use Third Things in a way to convey a message to the youth. That’s been very powerful.... Third Things really resonated with me. Even dealing with younger youth and introducing music as a way to express faith and to discuss how God is speaking to them through contemporary music, not even Christian music. That’s been really powerful, when you’re trying to look for God’s call into every day.

The world today is fixed on telling everyone, especially young people, what they’re doing wrong. What they can’t do. What they’re not able to do. My children in sixth grade had to start taking tests to determine what career path to take in school.... I think that’s amazing, because I’m thinking, “I didn’t know what I was going to do until I was 40 years old!!...” But the concept in my life that I saw over time was that we change. We develop. We see new clues. We move down different paths in our lives. I think it’s so terrible, to put that rigid expectation and limits on youth so early on in their path. “Ok you’re gonna take the math track. You’re gonna be science. You’re gonna be liberal arts or whatever.” I think that’s horrible to do to them. I think the Circle of Trust techniques show them that there are other possibilities. Maybe the voices that have been telling you all that’s wrong with you, or what you can’t do, or where you should be, you shouldn’t be listening to them. Let God talk to you in that. Let your own inner teacher teach you these things. There’s never gonna be a guarantee of total satisfaction and happiness anywhere in life. But if you do that a little more, you’re gonna find more contentment than if you try to listen to all those other voices out there that are sending you mixed signals and setting limitations on your life.

The youth are trying to figure out what they're going to do with their life [sic]. Trying to understand what God's calling them to do, whether it be career, and not just ministry, but career and relationships. We held two different conferences with our youth and used the Circle of Trust. We had a trained Circle of Trust facilitator leading us. We introduced the youth to the concepts and then used Third Things: video clips, Scripture. We introduced them to different ways to visualize or listen to how God's speaking to them. We broke them out into small groups or triads, having them go over questions together, using open honest questions with one another to help them discern what God's doin' in their life [sic] and where they should move in the direction of career and/or school and education. The kids really listened to one another. The facilitator encouraged them to share some positive feedback with one another after being in youth group, growing up in high school together. That was one of the most powerful things I've ever sat through.... I mean kids in general, they don't open up. I mean the girls, the young ladies and girls I've dealt with, of course, they talk. They're a little more expressive. But guys don't that much. You know they hit each other and play basketball and don't really talk. To have them listen to one another and then share, and then mirror with each other what they heard. They said to each other, "You know, you've always been a great listener. Whatever you do in your life you're going to be a great listener." Or "you're so intelligent. I've always respected that in you. I think one day you're going to be a college professor." Just to get that feedback was so powerful. They bonded on a closer level as a group than I've ever had them bond and some of these kids grew up together. It was just very eye opening. It was very encouraging. It has just been wonderful.

Bruce shared great excitement and enthusiasm over the influence the Circle of Trust practices had in the lives of his youth and young adults.

As an associate pastor, Marie teaches a couple of small groups: "I brought a lot of things back from the retreats because this had been living inside of me all this time. So in teaching, obviously, I use the Third Things." When facilitating classes, Marie turned to a Touchstone to help understand people and their comments:

One of my favorite things that I took away from the retreats is, "When you want to go to judgment or frustration or anger, instead turn to wonder." Oh, my gosh! If every divinity school student was taught that over and over, I think that would be huge. It has been very, very helpful in my teaching especially when people are saying crazy things like, "God is punishing the gays because of this and blah blah." Your first reaction is "Aaaaaaaah!" and then you want to start judging and teaching and

saying, “No-no-no.” But then, if you go to wonder it helps you: “Tell me how you arrived at that? Where did you hear that message? What do you see in the Bible that tells you that? Is there anything in the Bible that tells something different?...” I just think so much of the animosity and the contrariness and all that is going on, if people could step back and wonder: “I wonder how that person came to that conclusion? I wonder why they go to anger immediately, what is that saying about what’s going on underneath?”

Marie has learned several practices that help engage people in classes and that help people learn together in the midst of differences.

Bryan’s church is near a university. He found the courage work gave him a spiritual language to speak with college students:

Back when Parker wrote the book *Courage to Teach*, he was working with public school teachers who are, as clergy often get, chewed up and spit out. He had to figure out a language that secular teachers could hear that addressed their soul [sic]. I really like that. We see that with college students. They have deep hunger issues, but if we start using overt religious language, they’ll shut down immediately. It’s not that we’re apologetic.... I feel like I’m a missionary. I’ve got to learn to speak the language they can hear. This kind of secular soul language is, I think, valuable for dealing with the larger society. Because I think the society is hungry. But the minute I start using overt religious language, they put me in a niche that’s not a very friendly niche. I understand why they do that.... We in the religious community have our own sins and warts. But, I know of no other place in our society where people gather trying to figure this stuff out on a regular basis.... I think we’re perfectly positioned to help bring a degree of healing to the world that is ripe for it.

When working with university students in a secular setting, Bryan discovered, in the Circle of Trust work, the secular, soul language he needed to have conversations with them.

Circles of Trust Practices in Counseling and Spiritual Direction

As the interviews progressed, some of the clergy participants gave examples of the practices being used in counseling and other participants used the language of spiritual direction. Therefore, spiritual direction was included in this section.

Kelly found the Circle of Trust work helpful in counseling. During counseling, Kelly utilized “asking open, honest questions.... I think it has freed me from feeling like I need to have the answers for this person or give them necessarily my advice. It’s been a great tool that I use often in counseling.” In order to help people in her congregation Kelly asked honest, open questions in counseling situations. As she utilized the questions, she found a new freedom from having to give parishioners answers and advice.

Marie discovered that trusting the silence from the Touchstones influenced her counseling significantly:

I’ve had the pastoral care classes, so I get the no fixing, no advising, and all of that. But trusting the silence from the Touchstones was huge for me. I’m a rescuer like most clergy, and being able to allow the other person to feel comfortable in the silence and for me to feel comfortable in the silence was huge in counseling. And the asking of the open, honest questions. I remember of our facilitators just kept working us through that. We’d go over it each day about what are open, honest questions. Then we’d practice, and that was life changing for me. I come from a family of teachers. We’re the fixers. We know what’s right, what’s wrong and just jump in. To be able to keep following the pattern of what is an open, honest question and to see the results you get versus giving them the answer in a cloaked way and then saying, “Right? Did I get it right?” You know most people are gonna go, “Yeah that’s what I meant.” So the open, honest questions have been huge in my ministry.

I often recommend Parker Palmer’s *Let Your Life Speak* to people. We have a lot of people that struggle with vocational issues. We’re in a big city with many church members employed by financial institutions. Of course, in 2008, we just crashed big time here. There were a lot of people coming in asking questions about, “Who am I now? What do I do?” This is a very affluent church, and of course they couldn’t keep up with the mountain house, the beach house and the big mansion and the boat and all of that. Trying to figure it out,... listening to the inner teacher, helping them go back and ask, “What gave you great joy when you were a child? What do you miss? Tell me stories.” All of that has been tremendous.

Through asking honest, open questions, Marie discovered how useful they were for the people who come to her in counseling situations.

Brigid facilitated spiritual direction: “Some of the ways of listening and using open and honest questions are quite similar to some spiritual direction learnings around listening for the Spirit.” Brigid has been “feeling freer with some of those sort of crazy, . . . so-called crazy questions. ‘So, if this situation were a color, what color is it that you’re holding?’ For some people they’re like, ‘What?’ And sometimes it’s helped people to go deeper.” Brigid observed that asking even unusual, honest, and open questions allowed parishioners to address concerns in profound ways.

Liz found that asking open and honest questions is “catching. Sometimes people will ask me, ‘How did you learn to ask such good questions?’” Liz realized that she is always learning, but she “referred to the Circle of Trust work and said that it had had an important impact in terms of thinking before [she asks] the questions.” She discovered the other part of asking good questions: “[It involves] how I listen. I think some of that was there out of my spiritual direction experience and training. But the Circles of Trust work has deepen and widened that.” Liz noticed personal improvement as she honed the Circle of Trust practices by asking good questions and listening intently.

Circle of Trust Practices in Administrating Committees and Staff

Clergy spend a substantial amount of time supervising and meeting with both church members and staff. Several of the participants reported ways that the Circle of Trust practices assisted them as they organized and coordinated the administrative aspects of ministry.

In terms of administrative ministry, the Touchstones specifically made a difference for AI on an almost daily basis: “Whether it was in a church board meeting, staff meeting, committee meeting, any kind of meeting.” AI found that the Touchstones

“summarized the best of healthy behavior in a way that wasn’t too churchy or too ‘jargony.’” Al pulled them out “lots and lots and lots of times, . . . countless times, . . . very practical.” In church meetings of all kinds, Al discovered the Touchstones helped church members relate to each other and address problems in healthier ways.

Kelly met with the various teams that do the justice and outreach programs at the church: “We’re working on a project of doing visioning. For each of the teams, I’m meeting with them with a group of others this fall. We’re using a lot of Circles work to do goals and visioning with them.” During the times when they met together, Kelly “invited them to come with stories of what they’ve seen in the last year, asking them to do some journaling on their own of what their own goals and hopes would be for the next year.” Kelly was once again “pulling practices of Circles into that kind of work.”

Additionally, last year “[I] did an hour and a half long retreat for our elders before their day of a work retreat. I did just a small Circle experience with them, and it was awesome. They just totally went for it.” Kelly drew on the Circle of Trust practices to enhance the visioning and goal setting processes she created for various ministry teams at her church.

The Circle of Trust Touchstones aided Brigid during meetings of the church council: “[The Touchstones] help me to think about where other people are coming from . . . with more empathy.” Brigid assisted groups in the church to accomplish their work by asking them open, wondering questions and encouraging them to trust their inner teacher:

That sense of people having what they need from their inner teacher but not knowing about that or believing that or experiencing that. I try to hopefully, gently, bring in some of those questions. I wonder, “What the heck is going on for this person tonight?” Some of the Touchstones help me stay grounded or less stressed. But I’ve also used them a little bit in how I invite people to listen to each other. You just can’t show up at a church council meeting and say, “Ok here’s what we’re gonna do. Here are the new rules.” Or that’s not me anyway. But, modeling is really one

of the ways that we do ministry. I don't know if this comes from the idea of the inner spark or the inner teacher, but I love hearing what people want to do.... I will sit with the little Wee Worship Committee and say, "What do you guys want to try? Or what do you think?" I can honor that people don't have to be trained in a certain thing to have wisdom. I feel like I've always, hopefully, treated children that way, too. It's sort of eye opening and freeing to say, "Well, this weekend is St. Francis of Assisi Day. We have a pet blessing service at our congregation." All the kids have been counting down for it since last year. So I just asked them one day, a few weeks ago, "What do you think we should do?" It's not a worship committee meeting. There's nothing official about the conversation, but they were thinking about it and made some suggestions: "What if we do this,... and maybe we should try it outside this year." The connection for me is that sense of the wisdom that people have and every single person having a story. It's an honor actually to get to hear those. Even little bits like when the kids trust me enough to come in my office and say, "When we do our service," (because they all want to lead worship) "can we use this book? [and] We'll do this...." Hopefully it's a way to model listening for what everyone has to give.

From adults in a church council meeting to children in her office planning their next turn to lead worship, Brigid applied Circle of Trust practices.

As a leader, Liz tries "to approach things from a mutual team perspective.... [holding] lightly the projections that people offer. I think this work builds a layer of humility [in me]." Overall in ministry, Liz knows the following: "[B]ecause of my prior background in spiritual direction and spiritual formation, I bring in the aspect of deep listening. I allow time for listening in meetings and in classes and honor what bubbles up in those times." The Circle of Trust practices built upon Liz's style of team leadership as well as the commitment she brings to listening to the thoughts and ideas of others.

Circle of Trust Practices in Addressing Conflict and Differences

As the interviews progressed, the participants noted how the Circle of Trust practices helped them as they addressed conflicts. They added stories of the practices aiding in navigating differences as well.

Al told of one of the most difficult times in his life and how he managed to live in and through it. During one of the Courage to Lead retreats, Al was a focus person in a Clearness Committee. One of the questions Al held and took into the Clearness Committee was whether “[he] was called to be a senior pastor one more time” because he was in a search process again. He thought he “was done with being full-time, in charge of a parish as opposed to full-time and an associate.” Al went ahead and answered a call to be a senior pastor. Al described those five years:

[They were] the most difficult years of my life in ministry.... The verbal and other kinds of emotional and spiritual abuse that I suffered ... took so much out of me that I wasn't sure I could continue. But I did make it through.

Al described those years of ministry as being “shaped by and viewed through the lens of Parker’s work.” The situation raised questions for Al: “It was both a question of could I have or how could I have done it without that help? Was that part of the plan or how was that part of the plan? I don’t really know.” Of the images and metaphors that Parker created, the one that sustained Al the most, “especially in those difficult times has been the whole heartbreak metaphor from Parker’s book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.” Al described the metaphor:

The metaphor is this one—that when the heart breaks there are two ways in which it breaks. There’s one that we all know: It’s the heart broken apart. Here’s the way Parker describes it: It breaks apart into a thousand pieces, shards he calls them, which are sharp, and we can pick them up and go after someone with one of them. He later came to call that kind of breaking the politics of rage. So the heart broken apart, never to be put back together again. He said the other way a heart breaks is that it breaks open to receive what it is to receive. And that of course is the kind of heart break that we would just as soon not receive, thank you very much.... Can my heart remain open now that it’s broken long enough to learn what it needs to learn and be given what it need to be given? I just can tell you how many times that distinction has helped. Parker’s not really talking about an either/or, but a both/and,... that whole promise of paradox again.

We will be hurt, we will be angry, but can we move past that and through that into an openness?

In the midst of Al's pain and struggle at that church, he found strength and encouragement through the Third Thing of the heart broken open metaphor.

Kelly, in her work as an associate, supervised several staff. The practices of the Circle of Trust work proved helpful as she supported them through their conflict with each other. The church had recently changed aspects of the worship services. These two staff members each led a worship service:

They've had a lot of conflict with each other and a lot of struggle working together. But we keep asking them to work together more.... Both of them have come a long way in their ability to work with each other and see each other in a different way. I think a lot of the Circle's work has helped me to kind of stand in the conflict with them. Help them recognize that they have the resources within their own soul and within their own selves to be able to change and deal with the other person, to speak honestly with them, while being kind and compassionate, to see something from the other person's perspective. And yet at the same time, hold their own beliefs and their own gifts. So I think that the work I've done with them ... helped create a space for them to be able to grow into a new relationship with each other.

Along with helping Kelly supervise and support the staff, the Circle of Trust practices helped Kelly in dealing with the projections and expectations others placed on her:

It's hard to say how much of this is directly related to Circles and how much is just the growth. They've been so intertwined the last couple of years. But, I'm taking things much less personally.... I'm handling the projections better. It was really hard when I first came here. The projection that people put on you as a pastor is really crazy.... I have grown quite a bit. When that projection is coming at me I almost never see it as a personal thing.... They're projecting something on me and expecting something of me that is not who I am. It's not how I lead because it's not how I am.... I think just being more present to "this is what happened, this is who I am" and knowing that they're going to project stuff on me and expect things of me. I think the Circle work really helps, ... having those spaces to help me really own my own soul, and my own journey helps me with the projections and the expectations that are put on me.

As Kelly became more confident and clear about herself and who she was, she was able not only to be clear about her pastoral role but also able to assist staff to affirm each other and work through conflict.

Bruce experienced deep community in the midst of differences on a Circle of Trust retreat itself. With the retirement of the senior pastor and the additional responsibilities, Bruce was ready for the retreat and the time away:

All the pressures of work that we'd been going through the last several months, it was so freeing to enter that space with that group of people.... To walk into an environment like the retreat was probably the most diverse crowd I've ever been around.... I said, "I was the fish out of water." I was one of the few males. I was a fairly conservative, white southerner.... I was so different ... socially, politically on so many things. Even though we came from different backgrounds and different religious affiliations, very soon we were just all opening up and sharing that common story: the pains and the joys of ministry together. We found out how much common ground we really had. It was probably one of the best retreats I've ever been on in my life as far as renewing my spirit and focusing my ministry. It was refreshing. I'm so motivated to attend more because it really, really opened my eyes to the power of how we relate to one another in stories. It just blew me away that people were from across the country, very diverse backgrounds, yet we were all connected very quickly because we're all familiar with the [retreat's] techniques. There was no hesitation to share, no hesitation to listen.... When I walked out of there, I had made so many good friends. Maybe we disagreed theologically. There was everything from Presbyterians to Unitarians. I mean we had a little bit of everything there. We all connected.

The understandings Bruce received from the retreat practices have been equally helpful in the church as the congregation addressed denominational conflicts:

We've been dealing lately, like a lot of denominations, with issues that have divided the church. To introduce the Touchstones into those conversations and to teach people that we can talk to one another without talking over one another has been very good even in conflict resolution. We can truly listen. Not everyone can do this work. Not everyone can appreciate the concepts. But for the ones who get it, it teaches them to meet people halfway and to really be open and receptive to them. In our church we've had to address several major times of conflict. We had the debate over the marriage issue that our denomination's facing. A lot of

people were concerned on both sides of the conversation. We were trying to find a way to frame that discussion with a large group of people. My colleague, Peter, quickly said, “We need to use Touchstones.” We’ve done this periodically in different environments, so people weren’t totally unexposed to them. As we met, Peter reminded the people of the Touchstones, presented them, let people read over them, and said, “As we go through this discussion, let’s use the Touchstones.” We broke up into smaller groups to discuss the issues and by doing that allowed people to speak the truth. For the most part, I mean you always have some people who aren’t going to respect them, but most did. People walked out on both sides telling me what a beautiful time for our church. Because we were able to speak our truth and listen. People were advised not to judge, to turn to wonder, and ask the open, honest questions. In at least the group I was involved in, it was wonderful. Not everybody agreed, but people heard everyone out. I think it went well. I think that was a great time when the Touchstones were really, really important to our church.

In Bruce’s experiences, the Touchstones and other practices helped him find a positive way through conflicts and differences.

Through the Circle of Trust practices and experiences, Bruce learned the effectiveness of listening to peoples’ stories as a means to reduce conflict. When congregants came to Bruce with an issue, he turned the conversation and inquired, “Let’s share a story about something that’s beautiful about our church.” Bruce found that story sharing helped bring people together: “I talk about it in reference of common interests, common victories, common pain, and common joy. We can come together.... Hearing other people tell their stories is so important because I think it makes our [personal] story clearer, too.” Bruce learned that through sharing their stories and listening to others’ stories conflicts and disagreements subside.

In terms of addressing conflict, Marie in all honesty says, “I hate conflict. Hate it with a passion. But I have had to learn this idea of turning to wonder.” When in conflict with another person, Marie “goes to them immediately, obviously no triangulation, starts with affirmation, and asks questions. Just keep asking questions, using ‘I’ language.... So

again, just turning to wonder and asking open, honest questions are really good.”

Through her Circle of Trust work, Marie improved her ability to address conflict by utilizing several of the Touchstones.

In relationships with colleagues, Marie has used storytelling to help improve work situations:

I was looking back in my notes to the summer portion of our seasonal retreat. It was about storytelling and what that does to humanize us and actually makes us more faithful to the work we're doing. But it actually provides a wonderful working environment. It's just miraculous the change in people when what you're trying to accomplish is at this production level.... "It's gotta be good. What's my part? What's your part?" To just ask, in some way for a story. "You said something about your mom and what she used to do in the summertime? Tell me that again because I forget that." Oh my goodness. The temperature in the room changes. It's showing respect for that other person. It's asking for input. But it also takes us back to a person level and not a "what can you do for me in a timely manner." I really appreciate it.

In the fast-paced, hectic world of large church ministry, Marie described the gift and grace of asking for peoples' stories. She watched it change the tensions and panic that surrounded her clergy colleagues and staff.

Brigid realized that conflict does not stress her out as much as in the past:

I would say around conflict, it has been a helpful tool as far as listening. But it also helps me be more grounded and not take things as personally.... Conflict is not my favorite thing.... In the seasonal series, I had a lot of changes happening. There was a fair bit of conflict in the ministry I was in before. It was partly through the Circle and my art journaling and being with that group [of friends from the retreats] that I knew I needed to make a change in my work. I also felt like I knew I needed to go away from what was happening there. I went from a really big, suburban congregation with four hundred and fifty families in a team ministry ... to a little, tiny, heritage, rural church.... I think the Touchstones offer something like a fine balance between vulnerability and strength. The Touchstone of no fixing, no saving helps me balance things when people think that's actually what I should be doing.... Not too long ago, I had someone say to me, "I think you need to take more authority." At the time, I didn't respond as well as I could have. But thinking about

that now, hopefully in moments like that I can hear it a bit better and say, “Ok, so what is that about for that person? What are they telling me about themselves?” There are always gonna be people saying, “Why don’t you tell us what to do. Why can’t you fix this?” I think the Touchstones and the Courage work help in a community that finds themselves in that cycle.... I don’t have to regret being a sensitive person. I need to care for myself and be aware of boundaries and things, but I don’t need to change who I am.

With the change in her place of ministry, Brigid has “felt a shift in [her] own sense of self and being beloved. Partly because of moving to a situation that is more life giving for me and being so welcomed.” Consequently, she has become more grounded in her own sense of self and better able to work with others’ projections on her.

In times of conflict, Liz is “trusting something that [she hasn’t] trusted in the past, the power of narrative”:

I think in the beginning, when I came here in the early years, there seemed to be conflict everywhere I turned over something. Now I think we are addressing it.... [T]here is softening or maybe it’s not as polarizing. Yes, I think we’re not as polarized around things. I think some of it is the invitation of story and soul, which I’ve always believe in. But when you come into a congregation that’s highly educated and there’s an emphasis on statistics and studies and experts.... [A]ll of that’s good, but it leaves out the person. I think the weaving in of narrative and being in a place where you can be that open is something unique. I’m noticing people talking more and not just sitting. I’m just noticing more dialogue. I think it eases the polarization because we become more human, more on common ground. We all have a story. We all have our journey of experience. Here’s the thing. I think if the leader isn’t willing to do that, it’s not gonna happen among the congregants. If an issue comes up and you share a story out of your own experience of how it touched you, what it shaped in you, or what it opened in you, then I think others are more likely to feel safe to do that. A couple of things happen: I think we become more real to each other, and we also unconsciously know that we’re on sacred ground together. We shift from debate to dialogue.

Liz has had a long tenure at the church she serves. That long tenure helped change the church’s culture to one that engages with each other more, creating community and bridging differences through knowing each other’s stories.

Bryan found the Touchstones helpful in providing places where people could open up and share their thoughts and opinions without attacking each other:

Typically, if you say something I disagree with, I stop listening to you and immediately I'm just waiting for you to take a breath so I can come back with what I think is the correct statement. We do that in politics, in religion and theology. So we do battle with the other. Parker is saying on the Touchstones, "Let the other speak." In fact my role as a pastor, and I've done this a lot, if the other is having difficulty articulating what they are trying to say, I work with them and help pull it out. "Maybe this is what you're trying to say. Does that make sense?" I've got a group of men that is the most transformative thing we've done in this church. They're in their 80s and 90s.... We meet every week for an hour and a half. We've got very conservative almost Tea Partiers. We've got very strong Liberals. My experience with most men in the church is they've learned that they just need to be quiet because if they say anything they are going to get in trouble. So they just kind of sit there. Yet they've got all sorts of thoughts that are just underneath the surface. So we've created a group that really invites the differences. We don't have to be afraid of the differences. We don't have to vilify. We can just listen to each other.... "Maybe this is what you're saying? Does that help you?" What I'm finding is as a person learns to articulate their passion, they become less caustic. The reason most people are caustic is because I think they've never felt they were given permission to talk in the first place.

For Bryan and the people in the congregation, learning how to be in conversation with each other through the differences between them has proved healing and life giving.

In the congregation, Bryan started the Story Gathering Project that has helped build community and bridge differences:

It was a three-year project where we started interviewing people and just hearing their stories. We collected over three hundred of these interviews. They've just been wonderful.... This is a church that historically hasn't had a real strong sense of interrelationships with people. This is a church that sees itself as kind of an academic or progressive church. Content of knowledge is important, but they haven't fulfilled a lot of relationships and Christian fellowship. I think these narratives have helped people appreciate one another's stories. Even if they disagree politically with each other, they can value the stories. So the story gathering has been important. Now we've moved into what we call the Story-ing Our Future, which asks people, "Out of what you value about the church, what would you like to see four and five years from now?"

Telling and hearing each other's stories proved beneficial in the life of the church Bryan serves as members came to understand each other better and began to share their hopes for the future of their church.

Circle of Trust Practices in Relationships with Colleagues

Sometimes the clergy participants found the Circle of Trust practices helpful in growing and deepening their relationships with colleagues. Other times they found the practices helpful in difficult or conflicted relationships with colleagues.

This year has been a difficult one for Kelly at work, and she has used the Touchstones in her relationships with colleagues. In conversations, Kelly is "giving less advice and more often asking a question. There's also just a trust in what's happening in another person, trying to honor their soul and their own journey even as I honor mine." As Kelly supervised colleagues and navigated the complexity of relationships between colleagues, she drew upon several Touchstones to help them understand each other and work together as a team.

Bruce saw the potential of the Circle of Trust practices to help support seminary students as they moved through the ordination process as well as to provide practices and relational boundaries for colleagues as they discussed denominational issues:

[Our region] is unusually blessed with a lot of people, of different ages, that are seeking to discern God's call and to move into ministry or go to seminary. I went through that process as a 40 whatever-year-old, and the one thing I noticed about it was that you don't connect with people. You're going down a check list of tasks and duties: "Did I complete this course? Did I pass this exam? Did I answer this question right?" They give you a liaison and people that are supposed to be giving you spiritual care through this process, but there's no connection. So, [my colleague] Peter and I started talking, now that he's on the regional committee [for ordination], and he's introduced this to them: "Wouldn't it be neat to do a Circle of Trust event or have some kind of format that we share with the

people doing the care in the process.” Because if it truly is a way to bond and connect and to look inside yourself and seek God’s call in your life and at the same time form some sense of community, wouldn’t that be a wonderful way to help people through that process. What I found was that I felt very alone when I went through the process. My church was great.... It was home and everybody was very supportive at church. When you step up to the next, regional level, you find out there’s other people going through this that I don’t even know. Wouldn’t that be a great group of people to have this experience with to help them through the process to see if God really is calling you and into what area of ministry.... So I think that’s going to be a powerful way to use this within our region to build relationships.

Our region is in a discernment process to determine how it’s even gonna look in the next five, ten, twenty years with the realities of finances, of the realities of denominational issues, and all that. They’re going through the process of trying to figure out how it’s going to be structured. How are we going to interact with one another? What’s the staffing going to look like? This could be used in that area as well to have the conversation.... You’re wondering if they’re being open with you. You wonder if they hear you. You wonder if they really have your best interests at heart. There’s a lot of mistrust at the regional level. I said, “Wouldn’t this be a great way to interact with the ministers in our region, with people under the care of our region....” To talk about the tough issues and to find common ground at a time when we’re settin’ our stakes in the ground and buildin’ walls and fences around ourselves and trying to determine what identifies us, what makes us different than everybody else,... [w]e should be looking for some common ground even if we disagreed on certain issues, and this is a great way to have that conversation.... We had a regional meeting in August. After it was over, they had Peter and I [sic] sit around and introduce some of the concepts of this work. They briefly had people tell their story of their church and some victories in missions and some exciting things goin on at a time when people are talking about all the negative. We talked about some of the positive and then some of the challenges we’re facin’. It was neat to sit around a table with people you didn’t know and have these discussions.... I think it would be very helpful in a time when we need ... to unite, seeing what God is doing with us. I think it really builds community and trust.

Regionally, within his denominational structure, Bruce found opportunities for the Circle of Trust practices to provide support for liaisons of new clergy as well as for visioning discussions with colleagues at the denominational meeting.

Marie has many collegial relationships in her life. She is an associate in a large church with multiple clergy and staff:

I understand we're a large church, and it's about making things happen. Our senior minister ... is all about faster, higher, brighter, louder, you know, just throw the programming out there. It must be of an excellent quality, ... [w]hich obviously goes in direct opposition to what we learn in the Circle of Trust, ... that you need to have time, things need to wait, things need to germinate. ... You see [the faster, higher, brighter, louder] cascade down, trickle down to everybody in this panic to do more and to do it better. These Touchstones look like, "Oh my gosh, that would take some time. We don't have that kind of time." It's still a work in progress. ... We're still working on the open, honest questions. Because in a big organization like this, when you're panicking that you're not meeting the standards that someone has set for you, it can go to blaming immediately: "Well the reason why this didn't happen is because, so-and-so didn't get me their stuff in time and this person said this, that, and the other." I've tried to incorporate them [the practices] in my little piece of the church. I would love to see it go throughout the rest of the staff, but that's not the culture here. But my little group can be the model.

In a fast-paced church with multiple staff and clergy, Marie continued to work with some of the Touchstones to reduce anxiety and create a more supportive environment when she can.

Liz's story presented a contrast from the stories of some of the other participants in this study in terms of her relationships with colleagues:

I am in a small circle, ... a pretty small circle. The church is in an outlying area, and I moved from a different area of the country. I have been somewhat on the fringe, partly because of the nature of this church and partly because I'm an outsider. There's a geographical distance because a lot tends to happen in the place where our concentration of churches and leaders are. Those of us who are on the outskirts of that are out on the edge. I'm thrown a little bit further out on the edge because I'm serving a very diverse congregation and have stood on some controversial issues. I don't have a lot of opportunity to be in places with colleagues within this region. This region of the church has been going through and still is going through some pretty major conflict and dysfunction. If you're not invited in there's just not a lot that can be offered.

The Circle of Trust practices were often effective in improving relationships in all areas of the participants' lives. However, the practices were not a magical remedy or automatic bridge builder in every situation.

Bryan saw that the Courage work could help his clergy colleagues in their ministerial roles. He has worked with others in his region to increase the number of Circle of Trust retreats available to their area:

Initially when I started this work, I thought, "Why are they using this word courage,... grounded-ness?..." Parker Palmer does a lecture about grounded in the heart about when you engage in behavior that for others seems to be a risk, but you don't perceive it to be a risk because it's who you are, and you'll live with whatever the consequences. I would love to have our clergy go through these types of things. I think our clergy would be less vulnerable to the manipulation.... We love the people, and this isn't about judging them, but any community of people can get into machinations. If we become codependent on those machinations then it's impossible to untangle them. But if our clergy were able to go in, grounded in their soul and role, I believe we could serve our churches in wonderful ways. I see a lot of our hurting clergy and I think, "Gosh it didn't need to be that way." Some are clergy that should never have been clergy. But there are a lot that are very genuine that just got ripped apart by the church.

Because of Bryan's hopes for supporting other clergy, he has helped organize Circle of Trust work in his state. He worked originally with two other colleagues in his area to set up and host Circle of Trust retreats:

From 2008 until just the last couple of years there were about three hundred people who went through retreats that I helped set up. I became very clear that I was not being called to be a facilitator for the retreat. The other two are. My calling was to really help leverage this work into the larger realm. Particularly the religious realm. I feel like I've been very successful at that. We have a leadership team in our state. There's now an additional person on that team who is a facilitator. We've been operating as kind of a Ma and Pa store with each of us donating our time. We're at capacity. Because of some personal issues going on in my life and the others' lives, we are beginning to pull together a group and look at ways to create a funding base. We want to have an administrator that can oversee this work, create a Web site, and begin to work within the state around our

alums to help set up additional retreats. We just started to convene people that have been engaged with Courage work once a month as a way to be supportive, sharing thoughts. The session is two hours long.... The first hour is a Third Thing. Any one of the participants will sign up to do the Third Thing. The second hour is just, "Where are we with this work?" So I've been doing a tremendous amount at this larger scale trying to help set up something that impacts other clergy, other religious leaders around the Courage work.

Because of how Bryan experienced the Circle of Trust work saving his own life from the seductions of the institutional level of the church and setting him on the path of working in the local church and the interfaith community, he pursued ways to bring the work to his colleagues and area.

Summary of Major Resonances and Threads

After exploring how the Circle of Retreat experiences and practices influenced the spiritual, personal, and professional lives of the clergy participants, five major resonances and threads emerged:

1. The long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreat experiences and practices deepened the participants' relationship with God and often expanded their spiritual practices.
2. The practices and experiences on the Circle of Trust retreats allowed the clergy participants' times of deep discernment in vocational decisions and strengthened the clergy in their vocational role as ministers.
3. The practices of the Circle of Trust retreat model gave the clergy participants valuable ways of working with conflict and differences.
4. The clergy participants applied the Circle of Trust practices with people of all ages.

5. The Circle of Trust practices were transferable, enhancing or engaging prior educational experiences and reading.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Major Resonances and Threads

Evaluations and studies of the experiences of educators who participated in multiple Circle of Trust retreats hosted by the Center for Courage and Renewal indicated that the participants were significantly influenced by their experiences and integrated the Circle of Trust practices into their lives and relationships. However, no study had been done to explore the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in the lives of clergy participants.

Therefore, the purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreat practices through the storied experiences of the clergy participants who attended multiple Circle of Trust retreats or a Seasonal Retreat Series offered by the Center for Courage and Renewal with particular attention to its influence on their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.

Spiritual Practices and Relationship with God

The potential of the retreat experiences and the subsequent daily application of those experiences helped restore and deepen the relationship the clergy participants had and continue to have with God. Each of the clergy participants could articulate significant changes in their relationship with God because of the Circle of Trust practices.

Genesis 3 tells of the breakdown in the relationship and “companionability” between God and humans (Borgman 29-30). Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, humans experienced the forgiveness and restoration of relationships with God (N. Wright 96-97). The clergy participants were living and leaning into that restoration. They

reported growth in their relationship with God along with obtaining and including a broader range of spiritual practices that deepen their relationship with God. Their relationship with God was strengthened and sculpted in new ways through Third Things, silence, discernment practices, and the graceful application of the Touchstones to themselves in their relationship with God.

The first program goal of the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders Phase II 2009 report expressed the hope that the Circle of Trust retreats would be effective in the spiritual lives of the clergy (Center for Courage, *Courage to Lead* 2009 11). The 2010 report to the Lilly Endowment affirmed the influence of the Circle of Trust retreats in the spiritual lives of clergy participants (*Courage to Lead* 2010 20). The seven interviews conducted in this research confirmed that each participant's relationship with God was transformed through his or her experiences on the Circle of Trust retreats. Each participant reported ongoing growth after the retreats in his or her relationship with God.

Vocational Discernment and Ministerial Role

Each of the clergy participants could identify ways the Circle of Trust practices had helped discern his or her way through vocational decisions and helped navigate the multiple demands and expectations of the ministerial role.

The Clearness Committee experience proved particularly powerful as individuals participated as the focus persons. Through their open sharing with the members of their Clearness Committee, they received support, encouragement, and clarity. The members of their Clearness Committee used the Touchstones to help create a safe place in which the clergy participants could explore their vocational questions. Through asking open, honest questions, listening, honoring the focus person's ability to discern what to do, and

offering their observations to the person, the members of the Clearness Committee helped the clergy participants discover new directions and new insights about themselves. They came to deeper and renewed understandings about their call to ministry and about how God was leading them to live out that call in authentic ways.

The Circle of Trust practices helped them understand and clarify their ministerial role. Just as they honored and respected other people, some clergy participants realized that they needed to give that same respect and honor to themselves. As they respected the uniqueness of the people around them, they learned to give that same respect to their own inner teachers in order to value their uniqueness as being created in the image of God as Genesis 1:27 declares. Understanding these aspects of themselves gave them more self-confidence and helped them address the many projections they experienced in the ministerial role. Each discovered ways to honor his or her own self as being uniquely created in the image of God while equally honoring, rather paradoxically, the uniqueness of others being created in the image of God.

My personal story from the Circle of Trust retreat experiences mirrored those of the clergy participants' stories. During a difficult time in ministry, I found that the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats assisted me in accepting myself and my leadership style. I found support to remain true to my gentle but steady ways of leading. I trusted that, with the members of the congregation I served, we would find our way through the difficulties.

The second program goal of the Courage to Lead for Clergy and Congregational Leaders Phase II 2009 report addressed the prospect that the Circle of Trust retreats would be helpful in renewing the professional lives of the clergy (Center for Courage,

Courage to Lead 2009 11). The 2010 report to the Lilly Endowment states “Clergy and congregational leaders reported a sense of renewed vocational clarity and an increased awareness of the need to take care of themselves” (*Courage to Lead* 2010 21). They “especially [appreciated] the opportunity to participate in Clearness Committees, [that] gave people the opportunity to wrestle with changes in their ministry and to explore one’s call” (21). The stories from the seven clergy interviewed in this study corroborated the effectiveness of the Circle of Trust practices to support them in ongoing discernment of their ministerial call.

Bridging Conflict and Differences

Because of the breakdown in relationships between humans as described in Genesis chapter three, conflicts among human beings arose with no end in sight. Communities and families often found themselves divided over differences. The clergy participants discovered the Circle of Trust experiences and practices to be helpful in addressing both conflicts and differences. Every one of the clergy participants developed conflict resolution skills and ideas through the Circle of Trust work that resulted in the formation of a deeper sense of community in relationships with others.

The Circle of Trust practices were effective in building community while addressing conflicts and building bridges. The result was that the brokenness in relationships between people and groups was healed and mended as the clergy participants utilized various Circle of Trust practices. The asking of open questions, turning to wonder, and sharing experiences through storytelling proved especially helpful.

Often the use of story and narrative was mentioned as helping people work through conflicts and differences. As Hess writes, “The telling and hearing of our different stories, over shared time and space, may be the only way for incredibly diverse peoples to build relationships within and beyond that difference” (43). Hearing each other’s stories created understandings of other people’s motivations and positions on difficult issues. With the storytelling came the ability to respect and honor the other person without losing or sacrificing one’s own beliefs and positions on issues. The Circle of Trust practices helped restore broken and conflicted relationships at both personal and institutional levels, creating relationships and understandings between diverse people.

For All Ages

The adaptability of the Circle of Trust practices to people of all ages was a new understanding of the long-term influences in the lives of the clergy participants. The clergy shared stories of working with the Circle of Trust practices with people of all ages. Specifically, Brigid shared of her encounters with the children in her church and listening to their ideas in order to include them in upcoming worship. Liz incorporated the practices into children’s time in worship. Kelly became more intentional in listening to and drawing out her preteen and teenaged children and their friends. Bruce saw how powerful the practices were in helping his youth and young adults go deeper in their relationships with other and helping them learn to trust their inner selves as they discerned their future with God’s help. Bryan talked about the Circle of Trust and its secular soul language, giving him other ways to speak of God with college students. He also gave the experience of working with the practices weekly with the group of men in their 80s and 90s.

According to Genesis 1:27, all people were created in the image of God. While that image was diminished, in Christ, that image continued to be restored. The Circle of Trust practices gave ways to honor and respect to each person regardless of the age of the person. The youngest to the oldest recognized when the image of God within them was honored and responded positively. The practices helped the clergy develop respectful, honoring ways to be in relationship with people of all ages.

For the clergy who participated in this study, they found that the Circle of Trust practices instilled in them ways to reach out to all ages of people. Through intentionally growing the practices in their lives, they discovered ways to introduce the Circle of Trust practices to people of all ages.

Transferability

Transferability was another new understanding of the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust practices in the lives of clergy participants. Several of the clergy participants explained that the Circle of Trust practices supported prior educational experiences and prior reading. The practices were transferable, aligned with and enhanced prior work.

Al, a contemplative, had prior experiences at Shalem Institute. Kelly had a deep affinity with Martin Buber's *I/Thou* book, finding it aligned with her core beliefs about people and her relationships with them. Brigid had worked with appreciative inquiry and enneagram archetypes. Liz had done extensive work with spiritual direction training. In part of Bryan's interview, he referenced "minimizing ... anxiety levels ... around the non-anxious presence"—the language of family systems theory. The full list of events and authors mentioned in the interviews appear in Appendix K. The participants

discovered that they were able to weave the Circle of Trust practices into their lives seamlessly. The Circle of Trust practices supported and enhanced their prior vocational and spiritual development.

The practices themselves gave the clergy participants many ways to approach personal, spiritual growth and ways to navigate relationships. Bruce mentioned the transferability of the Circle of Trust practices:

The beauty of it is that's it's not a formula. There are things in there that wouldn't resonate completely with me. There are places I'm just not there or I'm not comfortable and that's ok. That's what I love about it. The techniques give you so many avenues to pursue what God's saying to you. It's not just a one size fits all, which is great. That's what I love about it.... I love the fact that this whole work is not "follow this formula and everything's gonna be alright." It's not a promise of answers. It's not a promise of people coming and giving you solutions.... I like the fact that it seems to have so much flexibility in it so that it changes as I change. It gives me something to grow into.... And I may, based on the situation, focus on one particular area or one relationship. I might focus on one or two of the Touchstones. But it gives you so many things to think about and so many tools. It's not as much about ... people telling us what to do, telling us how to act, telling us the solution. It's more about us wrestling with God and finding that solution, looking inside ourselves and looking to him more and building that trust.

The Circle of Trust practices allowed the clergy participants to connect the threads of their lives, combining them in ways that enhanced their ability to respect their own gifts, ideas, and humanity while respecting the gifts, ideas, and humanity of the people around them. Consequently, the practices empowered the clergy to trust their abilities and the abilities of the people around them, recognizing that all people are gifted and created in the image of God.

Implications of the Resonances and Threads

As Newt, who participated in the pilot interview, stated, "This stuff really works! With God's help, this stuff really works!" Therefore, this study verified and expanded on

the efficacy of the Circle of Trust retreat practices in the lives of the clergy participants as reported in evaluations conducted after the retreats. The participants in this study related strongly to the Circle of Trust practices. They continued to participate in the retreats. They consciously engaged the retreat practices, utilizing them in their spiritual, personal, and professional relationships. They acknowledged that the integration of the practices into their lives took time and practice. Sometimes the clergy were successful and sometimes they were not, yet each clergy participant had a level of integration that was evident in his or her daily life. For all seven participants, the work continued. Each one had future plans about personally integrating the practices more: starting studies or classes on aspects of the Circle of Trust work, using it in premarital counseling, working with it in an upcoming women's retreat, expanding the availability of the retreats in their region, working at regional levels in their denominations to develop the work in those environments, and continuing follow-up with a group that attended a Circle of Trust-type retreat in their churches.

Limitations of the Study

The very nature of researching the long-term influences and integration of a learning experience requires access to participants. Often, the participants were lost to the organizers of the experience as the years passed, shrinking the number of available participants.

The sampling was purposeful. I asked for participants who seemed to evidence that they were integrating the Circle of Trust retreat experiences and practices into their lives. The sample was not random and did not include those who stopped the Circle of Trust work.

I conducted five interviews over the phone, one interview by Skype, and the final interview in person. I was unable to observe the participants as they were in ministry or with their families. My experience of the majority of the interviews was from a distance without even knowing what people looked like. The narrative inquiry methodology recommended multiple engagements with participants in their own environments in order to get rich, thick descriptions of each participant's experiences (Johnson and Christensen 312). I was not able to implement multiple engagements with the participants except through the member checks with them.

Since I was researching the influences and integration of the Circle of Trust practices in the lives of the clergy participants, I focused on what practices were working in their lives. However, I do not mean to suggest that everything was perfect and wonderful in their lives and ministry because of the Circle of Trust experience. The clergy participants expressed having difficulties, challenges, and failed attempts of introducing Circle of Trust practices to others.

Unexpected Observations

I was surprised by how deeply, on an affective level, the clergy participants engaged the practices and were committed to continue to grow in the practices. Their enthusiasm, their understanding of the work, and the deeply felt transformations that occurred in their lives was palpable. I would characterize these phenomena as those whispers from Eden that the clergy experienced in their relationships with God, self, others and the rest of creation. In their stories were evidences that new types of restoration in their relationships. Provan describes the transformation in relationships as

the result of Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the image of God began to be restored in humanity (302).

I was surprised by the way the clergy participants applied the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats to people of all ages. As they grew in living the practices daily, they naturally engaged the people around them in the practices and, inadvertently, adapted it to age-appropriate ministry.

I was surprised by how transferable the Circle of Trust practices were to the prior work and readings in the lives of the clergy participants. The clergy did not have to discard important parts of their lives in order to engage the practices. Rather, the Circle of Trust practices seemed to pull in and weave together those previous threads in the lives of the clergy participants.

Finally, I was surprised by the clergy participants naming the importance of story and narrative. Story and narrative drew people together in deeper community and bridged differences. Throughout this research, the importance of story was a foundational aspect of the narrative inquire methodology, the biblical foundation, the interviews, and for future practices in church communities. To have it surface organically in the interviews truly surprised me.

Recommendations

The first recommendation involves clergy who are seeking new opportunities for continuing education and spiritual renewal. The Circle of Trust retreats can be an avenue for deepening their relationship with God, enhancing their spiritual practices, and developing healthier relational practices in their personal and professional lives. The Circle of Trust practices, while not for everyone, can give them resources that both

connect with their prior continuing educational work and that continue to grow in their lives long after the retreat experience.

In terms of any grant writing the Center for Courage and Renewal may do, this study gives the Center additional evidence of the long-term effects of the retreat experiences and practices. The Circle of Trust retreats do make a difference in the lives of the participants that, in turn, ripples out to the people and places that make up their daily living. Because the Circle of Trust practices are not a guaranteed formula or a bulleted check list, the participants are empowered to utilize them in ways that make sense for their setting and the people around them. The result is confident, humbler, bridge-building leaders whom God can use to transform their parts of the world.

For my seminary Doctor of Ministry program, I hope this attempt at the narrative inquiry methodology for the dissertation will open new possibilities for others as they seek an appropriate methodology for their research. I believe the deep listening, the restorying of the interviews, the continuing collaboration with the clergy participants, and the extensive reporting of their stories are skills that need to be developed in clergy in these times of ongoing, extreme change. Listening to and understanding the lives and stories of others are skills that are paramount in the life of the church as supported in the missional work cited in this dissertation from Roxburgh, Romanuk, J. K. Smith, and Hess. In addition, from the very stories of the clergy participants in this research, listening to other peoples' stories and understanding them helped diffuse conflict and bridge differences while still respecting and honoring the differences. Finally, as Bruce notes the narrative inquiry methodology has at its core a type of spiritually particularly suited to research in institutions of religious higher education ("Narrative Inquiry" 336).

The narrative inquiry methodology is a powerful, soul-honoring, bridge-building, and rigorous methodology that would enrich the lives of doctoral students and enhance their research.

Finally, other possible research into the influence and integration of the Circle of Trust practices in the lives of clergy participants could be conducted. Additional studies could explore, in more in-depth ways, the experiences of one or two clergy and how they were integrating the practices into their lives and relationships, including interviews with family, friends, congregants, and colleagues. Additional studies could interview participants in the Circle of Trust retreat who stopped engaging the work. Additional studies could, simply, continue this research and interview a new group of clergy participants.

Postscript

I am grateful that through the dissertation process the Spirit of God helped me pull the meaningful and significant bits and pieces of my life together in this research. I wrestled within my spirit and with God's Spirit to find research that would allow me express what helps me stay true to myself and my call in ministry, while living amid the multiple challenges in local church ministry.

I continue to believe as I did when I started this research that the Circle of Trust practices touch on what I believed was God's intention for humanity and the rest of creation from the beginning. Those engaged in the Circle of Trust work have found the work to be transformative. The practices helped the clergy participants to approach their lives and their relationships with honor and respect. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the intentions of God for the restoration of relationships between

God and humans, among humans, and with the rest of creation are being realized. The image of God within human beings, while diminished, remains with incredible resiliency. The practices of the Circle of Trust retreats continue to help me hear those whispers from Eden as I seek to live in the restoring grace and love of God.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE CLERGY SEASONAL RETREAT SCHEDULE

**Holy Listening in a Circle of Trust
2011 Fall Retreat—Discovering Seeds of True Self**

Thursday, September 29

- 2:00 **Session 1: Welcomes, Introductions, and Creating a Circle of Trust**
- 5:00 Break
- 6:00 Dinner
- 7:00 **Session 2: Reflections on Autumn**
- 9:00 Evening Rest

Friday, September 30

- 7:30 Optional Morning Silence in Community
- 8:00 Breakfast
- 9:00 **Session 3: Exploring the Seeds of True Self**
- 12:00 Lunch & Sabbath Rest
- 2:30 **Session 4: Clearness Committee**
- 5:30 Break
- 6:00 Dinner
- 7:00 **Session 5: The Man Who Planted Trees**
- 8:30 Evening Rest

Saturday, October 1

- 7:30 Optional Morning Silence in Community
- 8:00 Breakfast
- 9:00 **Session 6: Scattering Seeds**
- 11:30 **Closing Circle**
- 12:00 Lunch & Departure

APPENDIX B

CIRCLE OF TRUST TOUCHSTONES

- **Extend and receive welcome.** People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- **Be present as fully as possible.** Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- **What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.** This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.** Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a Circle of Trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- **No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight.** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- **Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions** instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- **Attend to your own inner teacher.** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a Circle of Trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- **Trust and learn from the silence.** Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- **Observe deep confidentiality.** Nothing said in a Circle of Trust will ever be repeated to other people.

- **Know that it's possible** to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

APPENDIX C

THE CLEARNESS COMMITTEE

A Communal Approach to Discernment

By Parker J. Palmer

Many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner “stuff”—confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair. On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice—a common and alienating experience. As a result, we often privatize these vital questions in our lives: at the very moment when we need all the help we can get, we find ourselves cut off from both our inner resources and the support of a community.

For people who have experienced this dilemma, I want to describe a method invented by the Quakers, a method that protects individual identity and integrity while drawing on the wisdom of other people. It is called a “Clearness Committee.” If that name sounds like it is from the sixties, it is—the 1660’s! From their beginnings over three hundred years ago, Quakers needed a way to draw on both inner and communal resources to deal with personal problems because they had no clerical leaders to “solve” their problems for them. The Clearness Committee is testimony to the fact that there are no external authorities on life’s deepest issues, not clergy or therapists or scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the Clearness Committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect the power of the inner teacher, the Clearness Committee can be a remarkable way to help someone name and claim his or her deepest truth.

The Clearness Committee’s work is guided by some simple but crucial rules and understandings. Among them, of course, is the rule that the process is confidential. When it is over, committee members will not speak with others about what was said and, equally important, will not speak with the focus person about the problem unless he or she requests a conversation.

Guidelines for facilitating Clearness Committees at retreats:

1. Facilitators assign members to committees. But before doing so, ask each focus person for a confidential list of any persons he or she especially wants to work with or feels unable to work with. Promise focus persons they will be

given as many names from the first list as possible, and none from the second list.

2. At a retreat, focus persons are asked to reflect on the following three areas:
 - a concise *statement of his or her problem*, even if it is not clear—this process can work as well with murky issues as with clear ones;
 - a recounting of *relevant background* factors that may bear on the problem;
 - an exploration of any hunches the focus person may have about *what's on the horizon* regarding the problem.
3. This is done so that the focus person can present their problem orally to the committee at the start of the session in a concise but helpful way, ten or fifteen minutes maximum.
4. Clearness Committees last two hours. A detailed schedule is provided to all committee members before the process begins. When fifteen, and then five minutes remain, someone on the committee needs to notify the others, for reasons explained in note 9 below. Committee members for whom note-taking enhances attentiveness may take notes, turning them over to the focus person before leaving the room. This helps guarantee confidentiality and is a great gift to the focus person, helping him or her remember the questions and answers in the hours, days and months to come.
5. The meeting begins when the focus person breaks the silence, and gives a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak—but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: *members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions*. This means absolutely no advice and no amateur psychoanalysis. It means no, “Why don’t you...?” It means no, “That happened to me one time, and here’s what I did...” It means no, “There’s a book/therapist/exercise/diet that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. I may think I know the answer to your problem, and on rare occasions I may be right. But *my* answer is absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth and allow you to have a personal dialogue with it—while the rest of us refrain from trying to define that truth for you or guide that dialogue.
6. What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so skilled at asking questions that are advice or analysis in disguise; e.g., “Have you ever thought that it might be your mother’s fault?” The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it; e.g., “Did you ever feel like this before?” There are other guidelines for good questioning. Try not to get ahead of the focus person’s language; e.g., “What did you mean when you said ‘frustrated’?” is a good question, but “Didn’t you feel angry?” is not. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with

- background considerations and rationale—which make the question into a speech. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem—for example, questions about feelings as well as about facts. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall; e.g., “What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered?”
7. Normally, the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long—resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question! It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material the person—and the committee—will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person’s need to protect vulnerable feelings or to maintain privacy. It is vital that the focus person assume total power to set the limits of the process. So everyone must understand that *the focus person at all times has the right not to answer a question*. The unanswered question is not necessarily lost—indeed, it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.
 8. The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling or cross-examination. The pace of the questioning is crucial—it should be relaxed, gentle, humane. A machine-gun volley of questions makes reflection impossible and leaves the focus person feeling attacked rather than evoked. Do not be afraid of silence in the group—trust it and treasure it. If silence falls, it does not mean that nothing is happening or that the process has broken down. It may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening: new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance.
 9. From beginning to end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain *totally attentive* to the focus person and his or her needs. This means suspending the normal rules of social gathering—no chitchat, no responding to other people’s questions or to the focus person’s answers, no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter. We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present with our attention and our questions and our care. If a committee member damages this ambiance with advice, leading questions, or rapid-fire inquisition, other members, including the focus person, have the right to remind the offender of the rules—and the offender is not at liberty to mount a defence or argue the point. The Clearness Committee is for the sake of the focus person, and the rest of us need to get our egos to recede.
 10. The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. Don’t end early for fear that the group has “run out of questions”—patient waiting will be rewarded with deeper questions than have yet been asked. About fifteen minutes before the end of the meeting, someone should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the “questions only” rule and invite committee

members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if he or she says yes, mirroring can begin, along with more questions if they should arise. Mirroring does not provide an excuse to give advice or fix the person—that sort of invasiveness is still prohibited. Mirroring simply means exactly what the word suggests: reflecting the focus person’s language—and body language—giving him or her a chance to say, “Yes, that’s me” or “No, that’s not,” though no response is required. In the final five minutes of the meeting, the clerk should invite members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and his or her strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours being very vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee, people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at their deepest and best.

11. Remember, the Clearness Committee is not intended to fix the focus person, so there should be no sense of let-down if the focus person does not have his or her problems “solved” when the process ends. *A good clearness process does not end*—it keeps working within the focus person long after the meeting is over. The rest of us need simply to keep holding that person in the light, trusting the wisdom of his or her inner teacher.

The Clearness Committee is not a cure-all. It is not for extremely fragile people or for extremely delicate problems. But for the right person, with the right issue, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, to draw deeply from the wisdom within all of us. It teaches us to abandon the pretense that we know what is best for another person and instead to ask those honest and open questions that can help that person find his or her own answers. It teaches us to give up the arrogant assumption that we are obliged to “save” each other and learn, through simple listening, to create the conditions that allow a person to find his or her wholeness within. If the spiritual discipline behind the Clearness Committee is understood and practiced, the process can become a way to renew community in our individualistic times; a way to free people from their isolation without threatening their integrity; a way to counteract the unhelpful excesses to which we sometimes take “caring;” and a way to create space for the spirit to move among us with healing and with power.

NOTE: People who wish to make significant use of the Clearness Committee process are urged to read Chapter VIII, “Living the Questions,” in Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009). There you will find detailed, step-by-step guidance, as well as a DVD with footage of the author teaching the process to a group. The Clearness Committee is a powerful method that is both simple and demanding. Done well, it is a positive experience for everyone involved. But done poorly, it can cause hurt and even harm. So a deep understanding of its principles and practices is essential to using it responsibly. People who want an experiential immersion in the process—which is, of course, the best way to learn how it works and how to offer it to others—should peruse our retreat calendar and learn more about our programs, many of which offer the Clearness Committee experience.

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you learn about the Circle of Trust retreats?
2. What motivated you to attend the retreats?
3. As a result of your experiences and learnings on the retreats, have you noticed changes in your relationships and ministry as you have incorporated the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats in your life (e.g., the Touchstones, Third Things, the Clearness Committee, the seasonal retreat series)? If so, tell me how your relationships or ministry have changed. Below are relationships or areas of ministry to help you in your reflection:
 - a. with yourself and how you view yourself or treat yourself?
 - b. with God or in your spiritual practices?
 - c. with any spouse/partner if you have one?
 - d. with any children if you have children?
 - e. with friends?
 - f. in how you preach/teach?
 - g. in how you counsel others?
 - h. in how you administrate as you work with staff, church leaders and/or committees?
 - i. in how you address conflicts?
 - j. in your relationships with colleagues?
4. Are there any materials (e.g., newsletters, studies, sermons, journals) that you want to share with me?

5. What pseudonym would you like me to use when referencing you in the study?
6. Anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX E

**E-MAIL SENT BY JOHN FENNER,
PROGRAM DIRECTOR FOR THE COURAGE TO LEAD FOR CLERGY
AND CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS,
TO POSSIBLE CLERGY PARTICIPANTS**

Dear _____,

We are fortunate to have been contacted by Diane Bell, a DMin candidate and past Circle of Trust participant, about her interest in researching the impact of our work with clergy.

She is seeking about 5-7 past clergy participants in Center for Courage and Renewal programs to do a narrative inquiry/interview. Would you be willing to be contacted by Diane? If so, I will give her your e-mail address and have her follow up.

Blessings,

John

APPENDIX F

INITIAL E-MAIL SENT TO INTERESTED CLERGY PARTICIPANTS

Dear _____,

My name is Diane Bell. I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. John Fenner let me know that you were willing to be a part of the clergy interviews I will be conducting on the long-term influence of the Circle of Trust retreats.

I wanted to let you know that I am six to eight weeks from beginning the interviews. When I have everything ready, I will send you a packet of documents that will contain a letter explaining the project and how I will protect you and your information. A consent form, a list of the Touchstones, a Demographic Questionnaire, and a list of the Semi-Structured Interview questions I will use will also be included.

When I get to the point of sending you the packet of documents, how would you like to receive them—by e-mail or the postal service? Please send me the best address to use if you want them by mail. After you review the information in the packet, let me know if you want to continue in the interview process or if you want to bow out.

Thank you for your interest. I am excited about beginning the interviews when the time comes. I look forward to getting to know you more and hear your stories about the influence of the Circle of Trust retreats in your life.

Blessings,

Diane Bell

APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

- 1. What is your gender: Male _____ Female _____

- 2. What is your ethnic background? (circle your response)
 - a. White
 - b. Black or African-American
 - c. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 - f. From multiple races
 - g. Some other race

- 3. Which category below includes your age? (circle your response)
 - a. 25-29
 - b. 30-39
 - c. 40-49
 - d. 50-59
 - e. 60-69
 - f. 70 or older

- 4. Marital status: married _____ single _____

- 5. Do you belong to a denomination? If so, which one? _____

- 6. How many years have you been in ministry? _____ years

- 7. What Circle of Trust Retreats did you attend and where were they located:

APPENDIX H

LETTER OF INVITATION

DATE

Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear ,

Thank you for being interested in participating in the dissertation study on the Circle of Trust retreats. I am a doctoral student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. The dissertation topic I am researching concerns the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreats on clergy participants such as you. This letter will explain the interview process utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology and let you know what it will involve. If you are still willing to be interviewed at the end of this letter, a consent form is included in the materials sent to you for you to sign and return to me.

My interest in the long-term influences of the Circle of Trust retreats began with my own participation in the Courage to Lead retreats. I attended two retreats for mixed professional groups. Two practices on the retreats both intrigued me and touched me deeply. The first practice was the gift of honoring each other by simply holding a safe space and listening to each other in respectful ways. The second practice was the belief that each person held within herself/himself the ability to address any personal problems or concerns. No one needed to be fixed by another person.

After I returned home, I began rather feebly to embody those practices in my life. I found it quite challenging and wondered how other clergy were integrating the practices into their lives. I decided to do my doctoral research on how other clergy were influenced by the retreats and integrating the practices into their lives.

Your participation would involve an interview/conversation with you concerning the influence the retreats had on your spiritual life and relationship with God, on your personal life and relationships, and on your ministry and relationships that are work related. The initial interview questions are included with this letter so that you can know the general topics and reflect upon them prior to the time we spend together with the interview. The interview would take place over Skype or by phone and would be recorded for transcription purposes. During the interview, you could pass on addressing any question or stop the interview altogether.

I am using a narrative inquiry design for the dissertation, which means that I continue to follow up with you after the interview. I will transcribe the interview verbatim. Then, I will restory the interview into a narrative that pulls together the interview into a coherent

story of your experiences. I will protect your identity and honor confidentiality by using the pseudonym you selected in this story.

As part of the narrative inquiry methodology, I am working with a group of people from my church (Mountain View United Methodist Church, Woodland Park, Colorado) with whom I will share a hard copy of the anonymous, restoried narrative of the interview. Their review of the restoried narrative serves to give credibility and triangulation to the research findings. I will receive their input, their questions about the story, etc., to see if there is further information that would help clarify your experiences. When they are done, I will collect the hard copies from them and shred those copies.

At that point, I will send the narrative created from our interview time together. You will have opportunity to readdress what you told me as well as address any questions or gaps that arose during the restorying process. You can readdress the story in writing or we can find another time to talk via Skype or phone, again recording it. We continue this until the restorying document is satisfactory to you and adequately reflects your experiences.

Your final participation will be as I put together the final research text for the dissertation. First, I will have the group from my church review the final research text for their comments and input. Then, I will send you the text I create as I pull together all the stories and themes from all the interviews I conduct. You would have another opportunity to review and give further input about my interpretation of your story in conjunction with the stories from the other interviews.

As you can see, the narrative inquiry process keeps us in conversation as I move from the original interview to composing the narrative story of the interview to the final compilation of all the interviews and the emerging themes for the final draft of the dissertation. I believe this process honors the very practices of the retreat series itself as we co-compose your story of the influences the retreats had on your life. At any point in the process, you may choose to withdraw, and I would honor that choice destroying the interview recordings, transcriptions, e-mails and restorying documents.

I will protect your information, interview, and subsequent documents by keeping them password protected on my computer and any other electronic devices. Your pseudonym will be used throughout the study. After the final dissertation document is completed, I will transfer all computer documents, transcripts, and video/audio files to a password-protected external drive. I will keep that drive in a locked file in my home office. I will shred all hard copies of your transcribed interviews and restorying documents. I will delete all e-mails from my e-mail account.

Your participation may involve several hours of your time over the course of the next couple of months. There is no physical risk to you as you participate in this study and no direct benefit to you. However, I hope this interviewing, storytelling process will be an affirmation to you of how you have integrated the practices of the retreats into your daily life. If you are willing to participate, please sign and return the consent form to me as

well as the demographic survey. After I receive them, I will be in touch with you to set up a convenient time for the interview.

If you have further questions or concerns, please contact me by using the contact information below. If you want to talk with my mentor, Dr. Beverly Johnson-Miller, at Asbury Theological Seminary, her information is given below as well.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Diane M. Bell

Mentor: Dr. Beverly Johnson-Miller
Asbury Theological Seminary
204 North Lexington Avenue
Wilmore, KY 40390
859-858-3581

APPENDIX I
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING
IN THE NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY OF THE LONG-TERM INFLUENCES
OF THE CIRCLE OF TRUST RETREATS 2014

I have read the letter of invitation and understand how the research process will work:

- **I understand my identity and confidentiality will be protected in publications of the research by use of a pseudonym I select.**
- **I understand that all e-mails, audio or video recordings, text transcriptions, and any other documents will be stored on password-protected devices during the research collection.**
- **I understand that after the research is collected, it will be transferred to a password-protected external drive and kept in a locked file box. All materials on any other password-protected devices will be deleted.**
- **I understand I may withdraw at any point and all documents, recordings, or e-mail related to me will be deleted and destroyed.**
- **I understand that there are no physical risks as I participate in the study and that there are no direct benefits.**
- **I have had my questions and concerns addressed by the researcher or her mentor.**

I give my consent to participate in this study.

Interviewee:

Signed _____ **Print name** _____ **Date** _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ **Print name** _____ **Date** _____

APPENDIX J**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND AN EXPLANATION
OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEW PROCESS**

A narrative inquiry semi-structured interview is more a conversation than a strict question-and-answer session. There are a couple direct questions listed below that we will cover. When we get to the long-term influences of your retreat experiences, I have given a suggested list of areas and relationships in your life that may have been influenced by your personal work both while on the various Circle of Trust retreats and in the time since the retreats. The list is for your use as you do your reflection in order to help you walk around in your life and perhaps see how the retreat work has created change in your life.

Also, a copy of the Circle of Trust touchstones is included in your packet of information, since they form some of the basic practices of the Circle of Trust work. Feel free to refer to it as you address the following questions during the interview.

1. How did you learn about the Circle of Trust retreats?
2. What motivated you to attend the retreats?
3. As a result of your experiences and learnings on the retreats, have you noticed changes in your relationships and ministry as you have incorporated the practices of the Circle of Trust retreats in your life (e.g., the Touchstones, Third Things, the Clearness Committee, the seasonal retreat series)? If so, tell me how your relationships or ministry has changed. Below are relationships or areas of ministry to help you in your reflection:
 - a. with yourself and how you view yourself or treat yourself
 - b. with God or in your spiritual practices
 - c. with any spouse/partner if you have one
 - d. with any children if you have children
 - e. with friends

- f. in how you preach/teach
 - g. in how you counsel others
 - h. in how you administrate as you work with staff, church leaders and/or committees
 - i. in how you address conflicts
 - j. in your relationships with colleagues
4. Are there any materials (e.g., newsletters, studies, sermons, journals) that you want to share with me?
 5. What pseudonym would you like me to use when referencing you in the study?
 6. Anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX K

RESOURCES MENTIONED BY THE PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR INTERVIEWS

Third Things—Books, Authors and Music:

Parker Palmer

The Promise of Paradox

To Know As We Are Known

Let Your Life Speak

A Hidden Wholeness

Healing the Heart of Democracy

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Life Together

Henri Nouwen

Bread for the Journey

In the periodical, *Weavings Volume 72: Forgiveness*

Donald E. Zimmer

Leadership and Listening: Spiritual Foundations for Church Governance

Sister Macrina

Seven Sacred Pauses

The Songs of the Seed

Martin Buber

I/Thou

Barbara Brown Taylor

Thich Nhat Hanh

Mary Oliver's poetry

Mark Nepo

Carrie New Comer's music

Other Resources and Events Mentioned:

Lilly Foundation Sabbatical Grant

Devotional Web site—D365.org

Spiritual direction weekend with Sister Macrina Wiederkehr

Shalem Institute

Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator

Enneagram archetypes

Appreciative inquiry

Spiritual direction training

Family systems theory

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