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## **ABSTRACT**

### **COMPASSION: THE INWARD JOURNEY TO LOVE**

by

Vaughn W. Thurston-Cox

Today the Church looks little different from the world around it. While affirming Christian belief and practice, the people of God enable social forces that sexualize women and call it submission. They eviscerate political opponents and call it truth. They contribute to economic systems that push the poor closer and closer to the cliff and call it blessing. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not enough to transform the soul in the Beloved. Without orthopathy, they only become another way to entrench the ego in itself. Compassion opens the heart to suffer with Christ for the world he came to love and make new again.

This research explored the development and practice of compassion through silence, solitude, and deep listening. Nine participants from Alanson, Epsilon, and New Hope United Methodist gathered over a month and a half to learn and practice these means of grace corporately and alone. Formation included four small group sessions, deepening silence, centering prayer, study, journaling, retreat, and Communion. Experience was essential to the formation process. While theological ideas needed shaping, theological ideas were not enough. Change requires the theological life. The research enjoyed a positive participation rate. Two-thirds of all participants completed either the entire project or everything but a single small group session or retreat.

I made five key findings central to the work to spiritual formation and compassion:

1. Experience is central to formation. While instruction on new spiritual disciplines provided insight for participants, the experience and practice of these disciplines transformed them.
2. The practice of the presence of God in silence touches something incredibly human, often an unidentified need left unexpressed in the world.
3. The natural world played an important role in helping participants reach a place of silence and solitude.
4. Participants reacted physiologically to the rest of silence and of solitude.
5. Compassion formation encompasses a deliberate decision to practice the means of grace for the nurture of compassion's emergent qualities: self-presence, presence to others, self-compassion, and with-ness.

The local congregation can organize itself around the nurture and practice of compassion and learn to suffer with Christ for the world. Compassion sits at the heart of God, and it must sit in his children's heart for all those he loves.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

COMPASSION:

THE INWARD JOURNEY TO LOVE

presented by


Vaughn W. Thurston-Cox

has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY degree at


Asbury Theological Seminary

  
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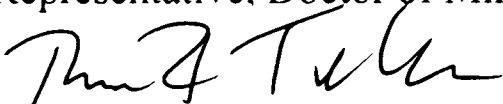
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THE INWARD JOURNEY TO LOVE

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Vaughn W. Thurston-Cox

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For Jesus, who calls me His beloved.

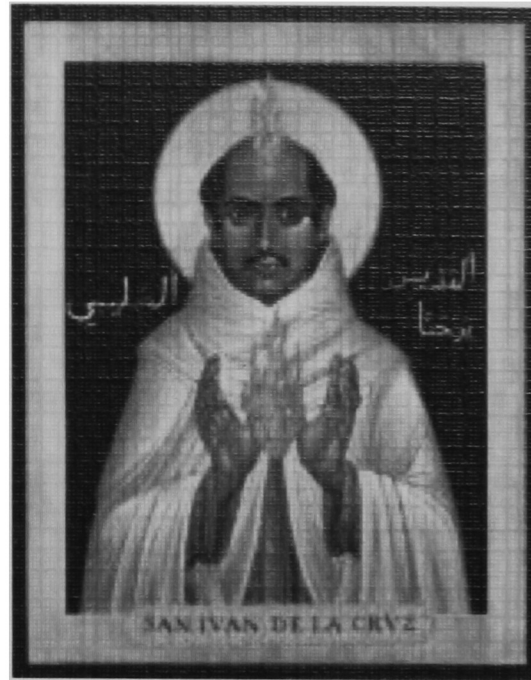
For Hillary, whom I call my beloved.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Few words capture the heart of God for his people better than these: “[A]bide in my love” (John 15:9b, NRSV). Those four words underlie the prophet’s cry: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8) and the command of James: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas. 1:27). God calls his people to embody his own compassion in a world in rebellion against love. This research, set within the context of two small United Methodist congregations, invites participants into this life, this compassion that suffers with Christ for the world.

Robert Lentz’s icon of John of the Cross vividly depicts the meaning of this calling to abide and to embody. Flames burn at his head, his heart, and his hands, representing the living flame of love alive in him. He had no time for anything else. He wrote to Mother Ana de Jesus in “Spiritual Canticle” that “this love is the end for which we were created” (588). Men and women do not exist for power, for pleasure, or for function. They exist by love, for love. Living souls are loved into being to be loved and to love.



Source: Lentz

**Figure 1.1. Icon of John of the Cross by Robert Lentz.**

The people of God have always struggled to embrace and embody this simple reality. James Allison Belcher describes the congregation he served as he prepared similar research in the fields of both silence and solitude:

Something was seriously wrong at Summerville. To sense the problems, one did not have to read the statistical reports in the *Conference Journal* nor listen to the horror stories of disillusioned members. All that was necessary was a walk through the building. The damp, mildewed Sunday School rooms, the pastor's study that had not been cleaned out in years, the broken toilets, and the musty odor in the fellowship hall told their own stories. All one needed to do to sense the low morale of the church was to stand before the congregation on Sunday morning and feel its coldness, alienation, and hostility. Personal observations were confirmed in subsequent weeks by parishioners' reports of conflict and by encounters with disillusioned long-term members.... The most pressing problem was a division in the church. (4-5)

This coldness, this alienation, and hostility he describes run rampant through the church. They eat away at the glue of love and divide the fellowship into factions driven more by ego than by the self-emptying life of Christ. A lack of compassion creates an atmosphere of competition over control of whatever resources are at hand and scars its victims.



Ms. V grew up in a working family's home. While they were not impoverished, they worked very hard for what they had. While still a young woman, she made the decision to join the small country church of her childhood. After making arrangements with her pastor, she waited with high expectation for morning she would make her full commitment to these people she loved. Meanwhile, she also began setting aside a little bit here and there for the purchase of a new hat in celebration of the joyous event. When the Sunday morning arrived, the appointed pastor called each new member forward by name, except her own. She did not understand why he did not call her forward. After service's end, she went to make certain he had not forgotten and was told the church dare not take any member into the church who chose to wear such an ostentatious hat to worship in the presence of the Lord. This personal experience was shared by an eighty-eight-year-old woman who wept before asking her pastor if somehow she had made an awful mistake all those years ago. The absence of compassion leaves scars few can imagine.

These stories are easy to tell because they are so incredibly common. In a poignant moment in his memoirs, Eugene H. Peterson tells the story of his friend, an artist, who warned him against entering Christian ministry. This friend painted his portrait, as he imagined Eugene twenty years into the future. As the artist revealed his work, his wife cried out, "Sick! Sick!" (*The Pastor*, 164). Peterson describes the eyes as vacant, flat, and empty, "The face gaunt and unhealthy" The artist insisted on his vision for his friend's future:

He's not sick now, but that's the way he will look when the compassion is gone, when they mercy gets squeezed out of him.... Eugene the church is an evil place. No matter how good you are and how good your intentions, the church will suck the soul out of you. I'm your friend. Please, don't be a pastor. (164)

While Peterson would not listen and would go on to become a leading light in the field of spiritual formation, the artist prophetically spoke against the pressing reality of the church's indifference.

These acts of spiritual violence pock the life of many cherished by God. This problem, this failure to abide in the love of Jesus, is not limited to any one body, to a single church, denomination, or parachurch organization. Selfish faith—a faith whose only love is self—consumes the people of God across time and space. Whether the elder writing to the Johannine communities or Paul to the Corinthians, the Spirit confronts the Church repeatedly for its failure to abide in love. The continued failure of God's people to abide has eaten away at shared fellowship with Christ and one another.

Paul says quite vividly in his letter to the Corinthians that service apart from love mean nothing:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

The failure of love within the community of faith is not secondary to building campaigns or vision statements or worship programming. Apart from Christian love, nothing the people of God believe, say, or do matters. If they believe Paul, what they believe, say, and do apart from love causes real and substantial harm. Abiding in the loving awareness of the Beloved is, in fact, what brings all other things to life.

The spiritual problem this research addressed is not lack of feeling in personal devotion or even general boredom in acts of Christian fellowship. It is the failure of God's children to abide in the loving awareness of God and, failing to abide in his

presence, harboring growing indifference not only to the Beloved but toward all those he gives them to love with him. This selfish indifference turns the soul back in on itself. It leaves all his sons and daughters utterly unchanged and untransformed. They look no different from the world because, in their hearts, they are no different from it.

### **Background**

In 1989 Belcher researched personal and corporate spiritual growth through the graced disciplines of silence and solitude. Appointed to the congregation in 1986, he immediately became aware of a coldness, alienation, and hostility that prevented “the closeness, generosity, and expectancy that characterized the New Testament Church” (5). He characterizes its people as divided over continual power struggles, some of which went on for years, and diagnosed the problem as one of acedia, or a profound spiritual apathy. Program after program failed to address the problem until he decided that the solution was “bringing renewed spiritual vitality to the Summerville United Methodist Church [by restoring] the spiritual bond between the people and God” (21). While compassion is not specifically mentioned under the broader idea of spirituality, he expressed its absence through his description of community life. Utilizing a program of silence and solitude, he hoped to see the vertical and horizontal relationships restored.

By research’s end four of his sixteen participants dropped from the program. While eight of the twelve participants believed they spent more time in silence and solitude, his measurement of that time showed differently. Few of the participants experienced a change of habit that facilitated either silence or solitude. They simply did not sustain the change. Despite the results, Belcher believed that the “participants’ heightened understanding of silence and solitude enhanced the spiritual growth and

program of the church” with a deeper emphasis on “personal and cooperate spiritual growth” (158). Belcher appears to have spent more of his time measuring the practice of the disciplines than utilizing specialized coding to understand what changes may have actually happened within the group.

Timothy James Clemons also writes about the disciplines of silence and solitude, but several years following. Clemons believes that silence and solitude restore “the spiritual bond between God, self, and others within the church” (Abstract). The church he served, Tice United Methodist, had been in decline from some time. He believes, like Belcher, the decline was due to “spiritual apathy” (4). The problem was not programmatic or financial but spiritual, with an emphasis on reconciliation. Working through a small group study, he introduced them to silence and solitude, including a section on “redemptive listening” (95).

He found that time to spend in prayer and contemplation was still difficult to carve out, even after instruction. Despite the difficulty the participants experienced in practicing the disciplines, Clemons believes they experienced spiritual transformation:

[Participants] experienced spiritual power from the Holy Spirit....  
 [U]tilizing the disciplines of silence and solitude sharpened the participant’s [sic] and the leader’s capacity for spiritual discernment....  
 [P]racticing silence and solitude taught the members the value of withdrawing from the busyness and noise of our daily lives. (66-67)

Several participants spoke about how these practices improved their spiritual lives, and all the participants felt much more closely bonded. Participants spoke often about developing stronger unity within the church as a whole. However, Clemons offers little insight as to how these changes influenced the congregation as a whole.

C. Otto Scharmer, a German researcher with an emphasis in economics, comes at this problem from a very different direction. He suggests that the current models of human relationships, whether capitalism or socialism, have simply failed. They cannot cope with today's global problems, in part because of the disconnect they create ecologically, socially, and spiritually. His model to address the mounting crisis is a way of listening to one another that respects and honors each other's humanity through the practice of an open mind, an open heart, and an open will. He believes that these three dynamics will release people to become cocreative. He advocates, very simply, the embodiment of compassion among people of all kinds to address mounting inequalities. In this way Apple's customers become aware of what their electronics cost not only in dollars but in environmental impact and humanity. He advocates a position of openness that allows for the creative work of many people together. It is an act of becoming present to the self and to others. This small act, too, is compassion, even a practice of silencing or stilling that frees the mind from its incessant worry and anxiety.

Compassion, whether addressed directly or indirectly, continues to be a problem for researchers in various fields, as Scharmer illustrates. While past research has nibbled around the edges, this research tries to get at the heart of the matter: the life that abides in God's people when they choose to abide in God.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this ministry project was to explore how a self-select group from among God's people at New Hope and Epsilon United Methodist Churches understand, experience, and incarnate the compassion of Christ and how that compassion may be nurtured in them through spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening.

Rather than simply demanding acts of compassion from a position of moral or biblical authority, this research contends that the compassion of Christ must first be experienced before it is embodied by the people of God and that ancient disciplines provide the best means for this inner transformation. In short, this process of prayer invited participants to change not only their minds but also their hearts and lives as sons and daughters of the One who “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7) for all those within the world.

### **Research Questions**

The issue at the heart of this experiment in spiritual formation was very simple: whether or not a faith community can nurture the compassion of Christ in God’s people through spiritual disciplines that offer them places both to experience and to incarnate that compassion for themselves and for others. Each research question sheds light on this single pursuit. Because the disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening work relationally rather than mechanically, this research could not simply chart individual success in the completion of formation assignments. Achievement could not be measured in how long participants spent alone or how many minutes they may have spent without noise. Success could not be measured in the number of conversations they listened rather than spoke. Each discipline only provides a space for shared love. Said another way, each discipline offers a means towards the experience and incarnation of compassion but is not compassion itself. These research questions, then, focused on the understanding, experience, and incarnation of compassion before, during, and after their practice. The purpose of this research was not new religious experience but real and abiding change in their souls as those who abide in the compassion of Christ and share this presence with

others. The language of experience is only meant to describe the movements of the participants' hearts and souls, not as an end in itself.

### **Research Question #1**

How do participants experience, understand, and incarnate the compassion of Christ prior to the intervention?

### **Research Question #2**

How do participants experience silence, solitude, and deep listening both as disciplines and as fertile ground for the compassionate life following the intervention?

### **Research Question #3**

How do participants understand this experience of compassion and embody it for themselves and others following the intervention?

### **Research Question #4**

What changes did I observe in how participants embody compassion for themselves and others following the intervention?

## **Definition of Terms**

Several key words and theological ideas that must be understood in the reading of this research. Apart from them the spiritual disciplines and even their object in the nurture of love may easily become something other than what they are meant to be. Special attention has been given to Carmelite sources that first inspired this research and shaped its contemplative approach.

### **Carmelite**

Carmelite refers to the Order of Carmelites, Discalced. Their roots go back to a small contemplative community of hermits who lived on Mount Carmel in Palestine. War

drove friars from their sanctuaries into Europe, and, after receiving their first rule in the thirteenth century, they were recognized by the Roman Catholic Church (Thompson 33-36). Teresa of Avilla organized a new Carmelite community under her own rule in 1562. In 1567 she received permission to create similar communities for Carmelite friars. Together she and John of the Cross founded what became the Order of Carmelites, Discalced, who “dedicated their contemplative lives of prayer and friendship with Christ for the unity and holiness of the Church” (“The Teresian Carmel”). Then, as today, Carmelites practice a special devotion to Mary, called Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

### **Compassion**

From the Latin, meaning to suffer with, *compassion* means much more than mere empathy. Aura Glaser describes compassion:

[It is] the basis of connection, intimacy, openness, kindness, hospitality, and joy. It is an expression of human freedom, flowing from a sound intuition of the unity of life and all living things.... It begins with a willingness to open ourselves and to life as it is. Instead of rejecting one part of life and grasping at another, compassion moves closer to all of life ... by fostering a willingness to be unconditionally present to the whole range of human experience. (11-12)

For the purpose of this research, four specific properties of compassion include self-presence, presence to the other, self-compassion, and with-ness, or one’s willingness to live in community with others.



## **Deep Listening**

Deep listening, also called holy listening, invites the people of God to be fully present to one another. Deep listening invites the participant to an act of unconditional presence:

[As long as] we are comparing and differentiating from the other, we can't love the other. We judge it. As soon as we are in a judging mode (higher/lower, inferior/superior), we can't love.... What flourishes is control, comparison, and competition—which blind us to love. (Rohr 55)

Practitioners of deep listening refrain from acting as judge of the other in order to open themselves to the other. They enter into the experience of the other and allow the story of the other to have power over them.

## **Emergent Properties**

An emergent property rises from the interaction of interrelated constituent elements: “[It is] the product of interactions among several elements” (Gharajedaghi 46). These properties do not exist in and of themselves but by the ongoing interaction of other primary elements. Emergent properties, such as compassion, can only express themselves in the dynamic of their individual parts.

## **Exploratory Qualitative Method**

The exploratory qualitative method serves best in instances where research explores the inner lives in participants. It “investigates people’s reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world” (House 89) It is most helpful when exploring “perceptions and perspectives [that] cannot be measured in the statistical sense, and require qualitative method” (House 88). In the case of this research, it is used to assist the work in investigating in how each participant understands, experiences, and embodies compassion themselves.

## **Means of Grace**

John Wesley defines means of grace as “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God . . . to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men [and women] preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace” (original emphasis; 160). A broader category than sacrament, means of grace may include prayer, the reading of Scripture, corporate worship, acts of service, the reading of spiritual books, silence, solitude, the practice of the presence of God, or any spiritual discipline. He describes them as channels, streams of water, in which the people of God immerse themselves to receive the work of God in grace. One means of grace may also be described as a spiritual discipline.

## **Participant Observer**

The participant observer is an “observational role adopted by researchers when they take part in activities in the setting they observe” (Creswell 214). In the case of this research, participant observers studied small group sessions and facilitated conversation among participants while being careful to reflect only what the participants themselves shared.

## **Practice of the Presence of God**

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a Carmelite religious, describes the practice of the presence of God as a continual “sweet and loving gaze of God . . . [that] insensibly kindles a divine fire in the soul which is set ablaze . . . ardently with the love of God” (96). Whether in times of corporate prayer or work, this practice keeps one grounded in the presence of Christ.

## **Silence**

The discipline of silence involves withdrawing from the noise of the world to quiet the “inner chatter and clatter of our noisy hearts and be increasingly attentive to God” (*Life with God Bible* 530). Much more than a simple negation of the sound around people, it is the surrender and abandonment of noise within that allows practitioners to set their hearts more clearly on the Beloved. Like the practice of God’s presence, it is an act of love. In silence Christ prays with his people and for his people.

## **Solitude**

In choosing solitude one chooses withdrawal from relationships that connect those within the world to be alone with God, to love and be loved by the Bridegroom. As a means of grace, this discipline frees practitioners to love others more wholly with the Father who has become their only need.

## **Ministry Intervention**

The Church fails without love. The people of God are called to lives born in love. The cost of failure is the erosion of their common Christian witness, the continued wounding of souls, and even spiritual death. This ministry intervention of silence, solitude, and deep listening is designed to immerse participants in the Father’s love and invite them to incarnate that ministry of compassion with one another.

One formation group including congregants from both Epsilon and New Hope United Methodist met four times over forty days. During this time of gathering in they received instruction on the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening and also practiced them together. Each session began with silence and ended with words of blessing shared among participants.

Following these four sessions, participants met for an overnight formation retreat for the purposes of

1. Drawing these various spiritual practices into a cohesive whole that feed and nurture one another, and
2. Exploring how each one could continue in these disciplines following the ministry intervention.

Essential to this retreat was the exercise of silence, prayer, and deep listening and the introduction of several authors in the fields of prayer and spiritual formation.

Data was collected before, during, and after the ministry project through preintervention interviews and spiritual autobiographies, spiritual life journals and a research log completed during the project, and focus group afterward. Initial data collection focused on the participants and their own spiritual autobiographies, including their own understanding, experience, and incarnation of compassion. The initial data tells the story of how their own religious experience has shaped them and what role compassion has played in the formation and exercise of their faith life. I gathered this data through one-on-one interviews, which allowed for privacy and the freedom that privacy affords.

Throughout the ministry project, participants were asked to complete spiritual life journals, exploring their experience of each discipline and how those experiences may or may not have nurtured the realization of God's love for them and their love for others. In addition are my notes, or research log, of participants within the church and out in the community. Its primary purpose was to seek any discernable change in the life of Christian community.

During the retreat, a focus group was held with the primary purpose of looking at how this ministry project changed participants, if at all. Special concern was taken to explore not simply a change in practice of these disciplines but a change in their understanding of the exercise of compassion. I selected a focus group model in hopes that they might be able to build on one another's thinking and what those weeks together meant for them as the people of God living together in community.

### **Context**

This ministry project was completed across a two-point charge that includes two distinct churches joined on a circuit served by a single pastor. Separated by twenty-four driving miles, each sits in a different socioeconomic milieu and possesses its own history. The West Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church joined them in order to create a single, well-paid pastoral position, instead of leaving both churches to fend for themselves.

Along with general statistical data and observations, this research included a written survey distributed to elected leaders of both congregations in 2012. The survey provided insight that statistics cannot, namely an understanding of how compassion functions within each congregation. It included seven brief questions:

- Number of years spent within the faith community;
- Describe your most cherished memory about the faith community;
- To the best of your ability and without any references, please define compassion;
- What is your experience of compassion and specific ways you seek to nurture compassion within your life?

- What is your experience of compassion in the lives of pastoral leadership over time? Its emphasis in their life and teaching? (Please be specific as you can be.):
- What is your experience of compassion within your own faith community in practice and/or neglect over time? (Again, please be specific as you can. Stories welcome.); and,
- Reflecting on these questions what value do you believe your faith community has placed or places on compassion as central to the spiritual life on a scale of one to ten, with 1 being none at all and 10 being complete importance?

Ten of these surveys were distributed at Epsilon; seven were received back. Seven were distributed to leaders of New Hope, and five were received back. The second half of question four, specifically asking about the nurture of compassion, proved difficult for all but three respondents. Most ignored it altogether. Congregants may not have fully understood. Likewise they have not given the deliberate nurture of compassion much time for reflection in the past.

While question one does not directly address compassion, it offers respondents an opportunity to share the most cherished memory of their faith community. This research question asked how those favorite memories might tie back into compassion.

### **Epsilon**

Epsilon United Methodist Church is located outside Petoskey, Michigan, in a largely rural township. Today it sits across from Springvale Township Hall and the local volunteer fire department. Nothing else of the old Epsilon village remains. The post office and grocery store have disappeared entirely, but the countryside is not desolate. Just six miles from Petoskey, a bustling resort town that boasts North Central Michigan

Community College, Bayview Association, a well-kept harbor, and a great deal of old money, Epsilon is slowly transitioning from agrarian backwater to a quiet bedroom community of professional workers looking for escape from the city. Racially the small community remains overwhelmingly anglo.

The church itself goes back to 1885, when Rev. W. A. Koehler from the Evangelical Conference of Michigan began holding meetings. Within a year the budding congregation built and dedicated a building. In 1946 the Evangelical Church merged with the Church of the United Brethren in Christ to form what became the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Many of Epsilon's long-time residents grew up worshiping within that church, and some of them still keep its old holiness traditions, such as abstaining from alcohol and card playing of any sort. While they joined the Methodist Church in 1968, the culture of the church remains fairly independent. The *United Methodist Hymnal* is not used. Methodist liturgies are ignored. By one person's account, a pastor did try introducing Methodist materials shortly after the 1968 merger, but the people resisted. Later the old Methodist hymnals were boxed up and left to gather dust in the supply closet.

This story is not incidental. It expresses what the church has been as well as what it is today. The old families remain strongly rooted in that Evangelical holiness tradition, which clings to its own rules of holiness of the outward life that tend toward a harsh legalism. Congregants find greater fault with its mother church than good, and some people struggle to tithe, believing their finances support spiritually destitute denominational structures. Newcomers who do not share this history sometimes struggle to fit in well here.

Between 1998 and 2012 attendance has ranged between sixty-five and ninety-one, with highest attendance coming in the years of 2006 and 2007. Since 2007 attendance has decreased to sixty-six. While average attendance for those fifteen years was seventy-seven, it most often sat at just sixty-nine. The majority of attenders are beyond middle age, which reflects trends within the United Methodist Church and the American church at large. While the church sends thousands of dollars to mission agencies around the world, far less is spent to impact the lives of Epsilon's immediate neighbors.

Epsilon's relationship to the compassion of Christ is complex and, I believe, begins to expose what sits just beneath their declining attendance, as well as this dichotomy between ministry to strangers versus their very own neighbors. When asked the question in the 2012 survey, "What is your experience of compassion and specific ways you seek to nurture compassion within your life," five respondents provided very clear examples of how they express compassion. One said, "I ... gravitate to people who appear in need of love,... searching out real ways I can act/relate to them...." Another shared how he or she "picked up children and young people who did not have a way to Sunday School and Church." When asked the same question, another answered more vaguely:

I try to be a good listener, try to see a need and respond in an appropriate way. I give hugs and words of encouragement. I cry with someone who is crying, and rejoice with those who are rejoicing. I try to walk in that person's shoes, or at least try to imagine how I would feel if I were them and respond accordingly.

This response stands out not because of the sheer number of listed compassionate acts but the word *try* which is used four times in four sentences. Asked to describe specific acts of compassion, the respondent chose to answer by explaining how he or she tries to do



things he or she believes to be compassionate. Reading this reply, I could not escape the notion that the individual believed he or she knew the right answer, that a compassionate person does these sorts of things, and so tried to do the same, placing compassion within the moral complex of right and wrong rather than relationality.

This same sense is carried into the following response on the experience of compassion in the lives and teaching of their pastors:

All of the pastors that I have known throughout my life have not only preached about compassion but shown it through the way they lived their lives. They visited the shut-ins and those in the hospital or prison, they helped feed the hungry and clothe the needy, and treated all with respect and understanding.

I not only struggle to believe their blanket statement “all ... pastors” but hear again echoes of biblical texts, as if the person were simply typing from Matthew:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:34-40)

The respondent chose not to address specific acts of compassion he, she, or anyone else may have personally experienced. The respondent perceived pastors as having acted in specific ways they believe to be compassionate because they did as Scripture commanded. This dynamic presses the question about the degree to which this particular respondent connects compassion either to relationship or the heart.

If compassion can be reduced to moral commands of right and wrong, neither relationship nor heart matter. Compassion becomes a legal matter of whether a person has or has not behaved in specific ways regardless of his or her connection to the other or to the inner state of the soul. Only two of these seven respondents emphasize the importance of authenticity, that compassion, to be real, must spring from a real place in the heart. Numerous respondents talked about feelings of love or concern, but only two underlined that apart from genuine compassion the soul cannot act in genuine love. Acts are not loving because they have been commanded. Acts are loving, in part, because they spring from a deep place in the life of the one who acts compassionately.

The last respondent answered this question surrounding the expression of compassion primarily in terms of affectivity, or “showing a loving heart and open arms to those around me,” without any mention of compassion’s practical demonstration. His or her response creates tension as illustrated in how the respondent describes a most cherished memory: “each and every Christmas Eve candlelight service.” The individual does not even mention a specific Christmas Eve service or important relationships experienced during the Christmas Eve service. He or she simply talks about the congregation’s candlelight service. This failure to mention relationship creates tension. He or she talks about a “loving heart,” which implies relationship, but when asked to talk about the most treasured moment, he or she describes something entirely abstract and relationshipless.

Several specifically mentioned feelings of love or concern or compassion. One used these words to define compassion: “feeling empathetic towards those who are struggling.” Only one, though, used the word *understanding*. That particular respondent

went even further to say to “walk in another’s shoes and to feel what they are feeling.” These responses make one wonder whether these feelings spring from empathy, sharing in the interior experience of another, or simply sympathy—feelings of grief or concern for those going through difficult times. Often confused, empathy and sympathy are vastly different inner experiences. Sympathy represents the ego’s own reaction to what another individual experiences. The person may think, “I wonder how I would feel,” or, “I’ve been through something similar,” which keeps the center of the experience within the self. Empathy more powerfully draws the ego into the actual experience of others and how they experience moments of delight or suffering. The work of empathy requires understanding, greater engagement with the other.

Question five asked, “What is your experience of compassion in the lives of pastoral leadership over time? Its emphasis in their life and teaching? (Please be specific as you can be.)” Four respondents had nothing but positive things to say about the exercise of compassion by their pastors. Two shared stories that reflected both indifference and compassion. The last respondent said nothing at all. Many of these comments, whether positive or negative, emphasized a very limited range of pastoral functions, centering on what is normally called pastoral care: visits of shut-ins and those in the hospital. Primarily two-thirds of the respondents experienced the compassion of their pastors through ministries of visitation. This attitude is very traditional, especially in a church with country roots where so much of their pastor’s time is often spent in those caring roles. Unfortunately, this attitude fails to recognize everything else a pastor does: leading worship, teaching, preaching, administering. None of these actions are highlighted as moments when congregants experienced the compassion of their pastor. I

cannot believe that none of their pastors exercised compassion in these other places and so believe that somehow those specific acts listed represent acts of pastoral compassion in the respondents' minds. Whatever other compassion the pastor offered may never have been recognized as compassion by the people.

When asked to share special stories about Epsilon, five of the seven chose stories that involve relational connection of some sort. One shared an invitation to come and speak to United Methodist Women about themselves; another talked about the help received around the farm while his or her spouse was laid up in bed with a sore back. One respondent shared this story:

My most cherished memory about my faith community was when we had a 24 hour prayer session to prayer [sic] for God's vision for our church. It was life altering for me. I heard God speak to me about areas of my life that needed attention and ways to serve.

This story of relationship illustrates a culture of connection that values love in action.

When asked to rate their faith community's place on a compassion scale (1 showing the community places no emphasis on compassion and 10 showing compassion is highly important), these same respondents chose 2.5-4, 5, 6-8, 7-8, 8, 8, 8. One scored their faith community very low; three gave Epsilon middling scores; and, only three gave their own church family a high score. These scores express a tension between these moments of relationship they value and feelings about compassion within the church as a whole. Something is not being realized in these relationships, which is compassion. Some record experiences of compassion for or by others, but not all. Three of the eight rated the value Epsilon places on compassion as low as 2.5-6. These are people who understand the value of being together but appear much less clear on how to be together.

The results showed the longer individuals worship at Epsilon, the more likely they are to believe Epsilon places a high value on compassion. In part this trend makes sense. Few people are going to stay somewhere they do not experience compassion, but no one taking this survey was present less than three years. The four people who gave a score of eight have been at the church for twelve and twenty years. Two did not provide the length of time, but their stories fix their time here well in the past. The fifth, with a tenure of twenty years, scored the church from seven to eight. The lowest scores came from those with the shortest time in, 2.5-4 and 5. Community at Epsilon works best for insiders, not outsiders. Insiders experience in themselves greater levels of compassion and acceptance than those here for short periods. While probably true for most organizations, this dynamic presents a challenge to the church, which has been called to love. The numbers also continue to work against the church as those in community for long periods of time pass and newcomers fail to receive compassion from those left at the church.

Another interesting observation rises to the top of this survey: Only two respondents of the seven bothered to answer the second half of question four, which was to name specific ways they seek to nurture compassion within their lives. Respondents chose not to answer this question. It sought to discover how people deliberately cultivated the compassion of Christ in themselves. Most could only list specific acts of compassion that they seek to do in the world. The question may have confused most and was simply ignored. Respondents may not have understood, by which I mean that no thought has been given to how children of God inculcate the compassion of Christ in themselves. That question had never been asked, and they did not know how to respond.

This failure to respond more than likely also goes back to the problem of compassion within the moral complexity of right and wrong. One of the two respondents in talking about compassion in his or her own life said, "As you know there are no end to examples of Jesus giving compassion. Reading the New and Old Testament." Even in one of the two only responses, respondents reduce compassion to act. He or she only needs to figure out the right/wrong, so he or she can do what is right. This research argues vehemently that real compassion only follows the experience of compassion within and that it can be nurtured through acts of spiritual discipline. Because they only understand compassion as act, the soul work necessary for compassion's nurture is ignored.

Two of the seven Epsilon respondents, when asked to share their most cherished memories of their faith community, shared events: a lay witness weekend, a baptism in Pickeral Lake, and any Christmas Eve candlelight service. No person or relationship is named. The moments they value, as written, are utterly relationshipless. They were moments for them, not others. The events the respondents chose to share interest me as an American raised in an American consumer culture, where decision is driven by the self's pursuit of happiness and religious practice is largely dictated by the very same question of self and desire. Two leaders of Epsilon asked to share what is most important in their memories who then choose relationshipless events centered on the self raises concerns about the congregation's spiritual health. The respondents do care for others. The lay witness mission weekend prepared people for evangelism service. It still bears paying attention to their responses in order to understand how leadership functions together and what may drive some groups within the church.

Finally, one respondent offered a very interesting answer when asked to describe his or her own practice of compassion:

I lead a very demanding life. I am blessed to have a career that makes a difference in the lives of fragile elderly. This career is of God. I never dreamed that I would be leading an organization with 113 residents and over 240 employees. God has a huge plan for my life.... [H]e leads and I follow usually saying, "Really, you want me to do what?"

This response by a leader who has withdrawn from the congregation for a time marks something very special, which is compassion as vocation. This respondent has moved past compassion as moral right and wrong, or even as an individual act performed in love for another. This person has owned compassion as life. It shapes who and how they are from family to friends to work. Compassion is their way of being with others in the world. This level of formation is not normative. This person struggled so much serving among Epsilon's people, he or she chose to leave.

Epsilon is a gathering of God's people in Springvale Township. For over 125 years, it has been leaping, dancing, falling, running, and stumbling with God, and none of that history should be dismissed. God dwells in the hearts of those gathered at Epsilon, but just a brief survey of its leaders illustrates the complexity of its relationships surrounding compassion. Whether compassion's meaning, exercise, nurture, or experience, this grace is not functioning as it should, and this dysfunction continues to cost Epsilon in congregants.

### **New Hope**

New Hope United Methodist Church sits between the villages of Pellston and Levering, Michigan. In fact, the United Methodist churches in Pellston and Levering merged to form this single congregation. The community is thoroughly agrarian, and

many of the families there still farm land inherited from their parents and grandparents. Snowbirds fill homes along the shorelines of the many lakes. The most northern church in the West Michigan Conference, it is located over half an hour from Petoskey and Cheboygan and twenty minutes from Mackinaw City.

Overall the population is aging. Most of the children who grew up on the farms did not stay. Levering, once a thriving little town that included a school, hardware stores, and stately brick Methodist church, struggles to get by with a part-time post office. The stately church, once occupied by people from New Hope's congregation, could not be maintained and has been turned into a rental unit.

Pellston boasts a very nice regional airport that services clients across Northern Michigan, though fares are more expensive than larger facilities. A modern motel sits just across the way. The village has been able to maintain its own school system, as well as several churches and businesses. Like Petoskey, much of the economy revolves around tourism of various kinds: snowmobiling, skiing, hunting, playing polo, boating, fishing. This area also attracts many snowbirds who want to escape the Florida heat. The winter of 2011/2012 was especially difficult. After one or two snows, temperatures rose. All the accumulation was lost, and very little came down after January. Winter sports came to a grinding halt all around.

The congregation is made up of locals, transplants, as well as snowbirds, primarily past middle age. While finances first drove their decision to merge in 2000, many members were either family or friends. Those relationships facilitated what is often a difficult process. Between 2000 and 2002 their attendance grew from one hundred to one hundred thirty-five. Since that time it has declined to sixty.



Seven surveys were distributed to leaders of the congregation. Five returned. Of these five, three scored the importance the church places on compassion at only 5-7.5. Another did not bother scoring numerically. Instead this person replied, “They have compassion for doing good especially missions but do we really care for each other deep down from the heart? I don’t know.” This particular leader has been at New Hope for seven years, but, when asked about the practice of compassion within the church, begins with the word *they* a word used to describe the other. Either this person feels a certain level of disconnection from the congregation or identifies the lack of compassion as someone else’s problem. While not questioning the good works the church does, this individual does question whether real compassion exists for one another from the heart. This concern alone is disturbing. Coupled with the other three low scores, a picture begins to develop that the experience of compassion is not the rule but may very well be the exception.

When asked to share stories of relational connection, three responded very specifically. One told about sharing his or her testimony and the affirmation received doing so; another talked about support during health problems; and another shared about the surprise wedding shower the church organized. The single one who did not cite a specific story said, “[T]he type of people at this church remains my most cherished memory, the way they pray and care for each other.” These are very positive statements about the church, but three of these same respondents score the church low on the importance it places on compassion. Again, people experience a disconnect between the positive dynamic of relationship set up against a feeling that something is wrong, that

even in the context of those relationships they perceive dysfunction. Things are not as they should be.

Answers varied wildly when asked about their experience of compassion from pastoral leadership. One respondent said, “[Over time] I have not seen the compassion that Jesus had for people.” Another said nearly the opposite: “I have felt all the pastors we have had were good ones and had their heart in the right place. They were good for the church and for the congregation as well.” Because the question explored their own perceptions of pastoral leadership, neither can be discounted. Each tells its own truth about the same history. The experience of compassion can be limited by the attitude of those in community.

Only one replied to the question about how he or she nurtures grace within his or her life, leading one to wonder if the questions were unclear or their thinking overly limited. These may not be questions with which they previously wrestled, and, therefore, proved challenging for them. Their spiritual formation may have primarily rested on doing what is commanded rather than becoming who they are in Christ. While the data is limited, what the survey does show is very disturbing at best and an absolute crisis at worst.

### **A Pastoral Perspective**

In building a better understanding of both Epsilon and New Hope, I attempted to contact three former pastors: the two immediately preceding my appointment and another who served these congregations from June 1981 to June 1987. Only the last replied to the questions sent them:

- Define compassion.

- In what ways during your time at Epsilon and New Hope (Pellston and Levering) did you exercise compassion? What was its emphasis in your preaching and practice?

- What was your experience of the quality of compassion both in its practice and neglect? Please talk about each church separately.

- During your tenure as pastors at New Hope (Pellston and Levering) and Epsilon, what value did the people place on compassion as central to Christian faith and praxis? Please talk about each congregation separately.

- How might your answers change were your family to respond?

The respondent answered without attaching their replies to any one of these questions and without identifying specific churches, but he does offer insight into his experience between these two congregations, especially concerning compassion.

The respondent began by stating that churches he has served affirm that compassion has been among his greatest strengths. He then went on to define compassion:

It has to do with empathy, walking in their shoes with them through whatever they are going through without judgment or lots of advice. It has to do with hearing them and reflecting on what you are hearing them say with them, then asking questions about their statement.

This retired pastor identified and intensified the quality of empathy seen in the survey of laity in leadership positions. He does not simply identify empathy but goes on at length to describe it in terms of understanding, withholding judgment, and active forms of listening.

He also clearly identifies what nurtured, and continues to nurture, compassion in his life as the “growing awareness of the paradox of my own life ... we are a mix of good

and evil ... do good things and bad things sometimes ... are very loving and at other times ... we can be very hate full. ” He sees in the eyes of *sinner*s his very own self, and that shared humanity nurtures compassion.

He identified at least two distinct problems with compassion in the church. The first is meritocracy: “[W]e keep on trying to earn Gods love instead of accepting the fact that love is God’s very nature.” The people of God are loved for no other reason than that they have been created for that purpose. Because the egos of many within the church cannot accept this absolute love, they pretend a life in grace, all the while feeling entitled to grace through good works.

He also said that the “loudest voices were the ones that were judgmental. These are the people that believe God will kill or send to hell any one that does not do what is right.” While he believes compassionate individuals worshiped there with him, their voices were not as strong as the judgmental others. For some reason power gravitated towards those who defined faith simply in terms of right and wrong. As a congregation the church rewarded outward righteousness and penalized the practice of compassion.

This pastor firmly committed to the work of compassion then went further:

For the most part my family was unaware of the hatred I felt from the righteous. They came after me in part because I had compassion on people that they believed should be put out of the church because of sin in their life.... I have been accused of not being a biblical preacher in half of the churches I have served.

This congregation and others branded this pastor as unbiblical. This observation illustrates the active resistance to compassion by those who have little use for it. This particular pastor believes they do so because they simply do not understand the depth of their own sin.

These problems that both Epsilon and New Hope face are not new. They are systemic and require spiritual transformation. As Belcher, Clemons, and even Scharmer argue, a program is not enough. The necessary change must take place inside them.

### **Methodology**

After thoughtful reflection I chose an exploratory qualitative inquiry study model. This method is especially useful in addressing the interior experiences of participants through interviews and journaling taken through coding programs such as ATLAS.ti. The need for an exploratory qualitative inquiry model is especially apparent in Belcher's research, which could only measure the frequency of disciplines practiced. Clemons went a bit further in picking out themes that came out of his research. Because of this my interest in understanding participant subjective experience of the disciplines, as well as their evolving understanding, experience, and incarnation of compassion within Christian community, a qualitative method is needed that allows for clear collection of data. Research tools have been selected that solicit a subjective set of information that cannot be measured by me looking in from the outside. Again, this specific study is not so much interested in the disciplines themselves as in the transformation they allow through the Spirit's work.

This project's purpose was very concrete: to understand how a life of compassion could be developed in the people of God from Epsilon and New Hope United Methodist Churches through disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. To get at the experience of this compassion required a study model flexible enough to allow each participant his or her own voice throughout the process.

The research tools selected give participants that voice by allowing them the open-endedness to respond fully. These surveys were then read with special attention paid to developing themes ranging to include perspectives before, during, and after the spiritual formation process.

### **Participants**

The population for the research into the nurture of compassion was selected as a matter of purpose, which is the good of the faith communities I serve. This population of largely rural United Methodists is also fairly representative of other small town and country churches in West Michigan Annual Conference: a blue collar agrarian orientation. Because small group meetings were held in a United Methodist congregation between the participating churches, its pastor and pastor's spouse were also invited to participate.

Participants self-selected into the group following announcements made during worship. Very little criteria were applied in allowing their full participation. Participants could not include any member of the research reflection team. Members of the research reflection team were each very familiar with the research and proposed project. Their participation would skew results. Participation was also limited to congregants from the churches I served, with the exception of an invitation extended to the ministry couple who serve the congregation where the participants meet for small group. Otherwise, all were encouraged to join in: men, women, members, and nonmembers. This approach maximized the total possible number of participants. Participants are each expected to participate and signed a covenant to that effect. A special emphasis was placed on trying

to solicit the participation of key leaders such as the board chairs, pastor-parish relations chair, and lay leader.

### **Instrumentation**

The research for this ministry project on the nurture of compassion relied on four specific means of data gathering before, during, and after implementation: a preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, spiritual life journal entries, a researcher's log, and a focus group. While each focuses on different phases of the research, they shared the same object: exploring how each participant understands, experiences, and embodies the compassion of Christ. These qualitative tools were all typed and coded by me to see how the participants' attitudes and lives changed over time.

The first instruments, the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, comprised a one-on-one interview held between a participant and me. In addition to gathering basic demographic information from participants, such as age, occupation, and education, special attention was paid to their religious experience and how compassion has played a part in that experience. Understanding these latter two dynamics not only provided a qualitative baseline but also exposed otherwise latent undercurrents shaping not only their experience but the experience of the group as a whole.

The second tool, spiritual life journal entries, included predetermined questions that participants answered in writing throughout the implementation of spiritual disciplines. More than anything else, these entries asked them to explore their experience of each discipline, awareness of God's compassion for them, and notice of change in their exercise of compassion for others. This self-reflection is very important because it

underlies the object of the entire project and invites them to articulate their experience in their own words rather than in my words.

Thirdly a researcher's log, or formation observation, was kept throughout the project to note group dynamics, the perceived success or failure of small group gatherings, and observation on the behavior of individuals. This instrument not only kept me engaged but provided qualitative research to measure against spiritual life entries kept by participants, providing some balance in perspective.

The final tool, a focus group, was held during the overnight retreat to allow participants to reflect not only on their experience as a whole but on changes surrounding their ideas and practice of Christian compassion. Special attention was paid to their definitions of compassion, their experience of God's love through each discipline, and the manner in which the project nurtured the incarnation of compassion for others.

### **Variables**

Independent variables, or variables the research sought to introduce and control, included the following: personal practice of prescribed disciplines, assigned reading, and participation in small group gatherings. All of these were designed as a means to educate participants about ancient spiritual practice and to provide a context for their formative exercise corporately and individually.

Two dependent variables or values the research hoped to shape include the personal and corporate practice of tried spiritual disciplines and the nurture of compassion as a result of this practice. The intention of this research was to initiate change within the heart through change in habits of spiritual formation. Failure in the



nurture of compassion, however faithful in exercise of the spiritual disciplines. amounts to little more than religious show.

Unfortunately, the possibility exists for any number of intervening variables. This study allowed participants to self-select into the ministry project. Seven of these nine participants specifically mentioned their interest in compassion as a reason for choosing to participate. Of the remaining two, another one chose cited a felt need to become involved in a small group ministry for spiritual formation purposes. These eight participants may already have been predisposed to this kind of soul work. Others come from traditions that practice silence. This research project may not fully explain their response to the disciplines. Influences, positive or negative, may have come from other congregants not participating in the project. Two married couples participated. How one experienced the project may have influenced how the other experienced the project. Most of these participants have lived much of their lives following Christ, and they carried that experience into the project with them. I had to ask to what degree they were already moving towards the compassionate life without this intervention.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data over three periods: before, during, and after the implementation of the ministry project. The ongoing work of data collection paid special attention to the experience of each participant throughout the practice of spiritual disciplines, change in understanding of compassion, and how personal experience of compassion nurtured compassion for others. The quality of the data depended on the faithfulness of both the participants and me to complete each survey thoughtfully and then for me to work carefully in exploring themes that developed among the group at large.

### **Data Analysis**

I coded each of the tools, from the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography through the focus group, to explore developing themes and patterns later concerning not only what participants experienced but the ministry project's effectiveness in achieving its primary goal: the nurture of Christ's compassion in the lives of his people. The analysis provided data for application within each congregation's ministry.

### **Generalizability**

Grounding this ministry intervention in classical spiritual theology, the results of this research are beneficial to a wide variety of people. They will be most beneficial for Western Christians saturated in the noise and distraction of the twenty-first century. Catholics more than Protestants may feel comfortable with the approach these disciplines take and may already be familiar with them. They become less effective in contexts where emphasis has been placed on either extemporaneous forms of prayer or supernatural manifestations. Groups steeped in those spiritual traditions sometimes struggle with what they may experience as aridity, which is good for the soul. The spiritual laws underlying this work have been tried by spiritual masters throughout Christian history, even outside the Christian tradition. The greatest obstacles this research faced is the natural fear of silence and community, which invites the people of God to be vulnerable to one another.

### **Theological Foundation**

The elder, or author of 1 John, leaves absolutely no room for confusion. If anyone follows in the way of Christ, he or she must abide in love. This abiding is the living, beating heart of the spiritual life. To abandon the way of love is to abandon God because

God is love. Redemption is itself an escape from sin into Trinitarian love through which the community of faith becomes one together in the Beloved. The elder says the life of the soul is bound not only in life with God but in life with the souls of others:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. (1 John 4:17-12, 16b-17)

The elder weaves together three very closely related words throughout these eight verses: *avgaphto*, *avgapaw*, and *avgaph*. Each of these words gets at the heart of this Christ life that the author pleads to see alive within the community of faith.

The first term—*avgaphto*—means beloved, cherished, dear ones. It is a term for heartfelt endearment. This word is the same one the Father used to describe his Son at his baptism in the Jordan and again at the transfiguration. Used once in this single passage, the first readers would have found it six times in this five-chapter book and ten times between this letter and the last, 3 John. Repetition within the Johannine epistles gives this word special meaning, pointing towards the relationship the elder shares with the people of this faith community. It is something intimate, close to the heart, reflecting the love relationship between the Father and his Son.

The second term—*avgapaw*—is similar and shares common roots. The word simply means to love or to cherish. This word is the same one Jesus used to describe the love of the Father for the world to Nicodemus. It is the love that offers up its only son to

see all of creation redeemed. In just these eight verses, it is used eight times. The elder exhorts the people to practice this love for one another twenty-eight times in 1 John and another three in 3 John, which is only a single chapter in length. The people of God love as their Abba Father loves them, with total and complete abandon.

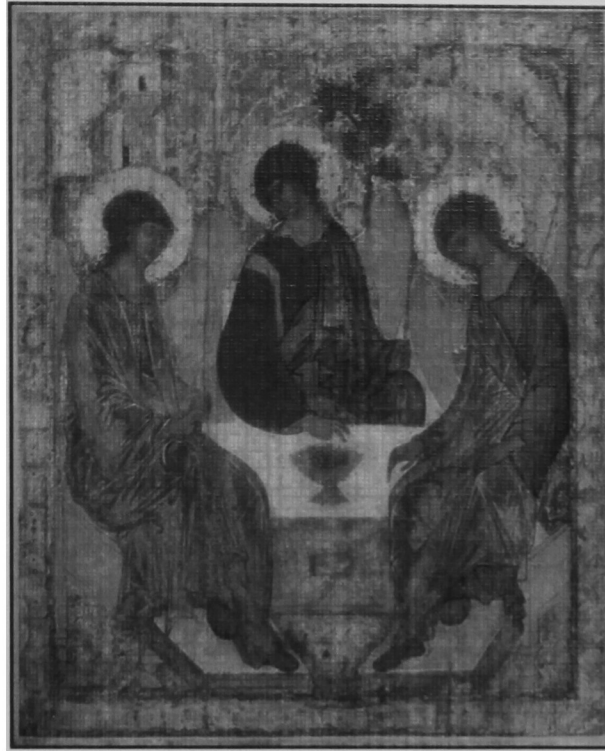
St. Andrey Rublev's *The Holy Trinity* (see Figure 1.2) captures this Trinitarian life, especially when seen alongside the words of John of the Cross:

As the lover in the beloved  
Each lived in the other,  
and the Love that unites them  
is one with them,  
their equal, excellent as  
the One and the Other....  
Thus it is a boundless  
Love that unites them,  
for the three have one love  
which is their essence;  
and the more love is one  
the more it is love. (John of the Cross, "Poetry" 61)

Before anything else at all Father, Son, and Spirit lived bound together in an infinite love. Seen clearly in the physical gestures of the Father, Son, and Spirit, each submitted themselves to the other for love. The Father bows his head to both Son and Spirit; Son and Spirit bow their heads to the Father; and, the Spirit carries the very same staff of authority as both Father and Son.

Just over the left wing of the central figure, Jesus, is a tree, and on the table a bit of lamb. Set within the context of a sacrificial meal, the lamb and tree take on special significance. The lamb towards which the Son gestures represents his own life, given as the lamb of the world, and the tree transforms into a cross. Meanwhile, the Spirit, figured in the far right, draws attention to a small rectangle set into the altar, an empty space for those who would become a part of this love feast. *The Holy Trinity* expresses the lavish

love of God for his creation and his intent that all people should be included in that act of love.



Source : Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*

**Figure 1.2. The Holy Trinity.**

The last word—*avgaph*—forms the root of the previous two. This love, which first existed between the Father and Son, now abides in his people, and the elder uses this word eight times in these eight verses to call the people back to life in Christ, seventeen times through the book in its entirety, and twenty times in all three of the Johannine epistles.

Taken altogether these words form a braided thread that works itself not only through this passage but throughout 1, 2, and 3 John. The elder uses these three words not simply to communicate love for those who first read them but to shape the lives of the readers in love for God and one another. The author knows nothing of loveless faith

because it is an utter impossibility for him or her. The community of faith will either embrace both sisters and brothers in divine love or become a community of the faithless.

Compassion, then, is not secondary to belief. It is not the purview of pastors or priests alone. Compassion is belief come alive because the one in whom the community of faith believes is holy love. The primary concern for any community following after the way of Jesus must be love, without which all things fail.

### **Overview**

The first chapter of this research proposes a spiritual cancer, namely that Christians struggle to express real Christian compassion towards one another. It has also proposes spiritual disciplines designed to provide a cure to our souls by facilitating the experience of God's care for us. Chapter 2 explores existing literature related to the growing crisis of compassion and the disciplines offered here, as well as a look at this project's research design. Chapter 3 explains the project's methodology in greater detail, and Chapter 4 contains the findings gathered throughout the project. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in specific relationship to the project's purpose.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The failure of compassion among the people of God bears witness to their failure to keep faith with their Abba Father. Whether an Old Testament prophet pleading with his people to “act justly, . . . to love kindness and to walk humbly with [their] God” (Mic. 6:8b) or a first-century disciple of Jesus confronting “envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling” (1 Tim. 6:4b-5a), keeping faith with Abba Father has always meant keeping loving faith with one another. His heart aches for the wounded his children leave to die alone. The failure of mercy and compassion to hold hearts captive within community springs from the failure of Christian community to abide in the life of Christ, who is love.

John of the Cross does not describe the act of creation in functional terms. Each word the Father spoke in the beginning he spoke in love of his Son and in love of that which he created. He invested each act of creation—day, night, earth, and ocean—with his glory for no other reason than to create “a palace for the bride” (“Poetry” 63). John understands the life of God wholly captivated by love and that this love defines his every act in life with his people from the foundation of the earth.

Ezekiel relies on this intimate language of lover and beloved to speak about the life of God with his people:

I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, “Live! and grow up like a plant of the field.” You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness. I

pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine. (Ezek. 16:6-8)

This language is not commonly used by conferencing Methodists today. It is explicit; it is sexual; it is intimate. This passage uses the language of lovers in one another's embrace, enjoying one another's shared intimacies: breasts, nakedness, and a shared covering. The book of Ruth uses the very same language when she uncovered a sleeping Boaz, nestled into his legs, and asked him to "spread [his] cloak" over her (Ruth 3:9b). It is language that calls God's people to expose their most hidden selves to the Father who already embraces all they are.

This intimate language finds concrete expression in the creation of Eve whom God formed from the flesh of Adam. Adam was not whole in himself. Created by God to keep Eden, he was somehow incomplete apart from intimate relationship with one like him. He could not bear the image of God fully without bearing his life, which continually emptied itself into the life of the other.

God creates for the purpose of love. He has written love in the deepest recesses of his people's hearts and minds. It is the reason for which he called everything from nothing, to share his life together with all those he created. The way of Christ for his people roots itself in Trinitarian relationship.

Trinity sits in the heart of the One in whose image humanity was first made, eternal self-emptying love. Much more than some vague theological construct used to describe what God is, it describes how he is, and so how people are with him and one another. Father, Son, and Spirit exist coequally, coeternally since time before time, and the desire of each is for the others. Each pours themselves into the others, and love makes them one together. When the Son shares his life with his people, he shares this life. The



Spirit draws them into Trinitarian love that they not only receive but offer this love to the Beloved and one another. The Son's prayer for his people in John is that they will be one, and that they will be one in the Father with him. Union in love sits at the heart of God's redemptive purpose for all his people.

Rebellion against love is rebellion against the One who creates and sustains all creation for love. The people of God cannot keep faith with the Crucified and withhold love for those he died to save. The people of God either receive cruciform life as their own or abandon life in him for life in this world. The call of God through the Christ is a return to communion in love.

When the Elder wrote to his or her community, he or she connected love to knowing. The root of that word *know* is *ginwskw*, an intimate knowing often used to refer to sexual relationships. When love and compassion fail in the people of God, they are no longer intimate with him. They may know creeds and apologetics and liturgies, but they no longer know his heart. They are strangers to the God they claim to worship because their life opposes the very nature of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Compassion is not incidental; it is not secondary; it is not for elites. It is for everyday Christians. Christ redeems the people of God for this life with him in order that they might love all those he loves. In love he makes them "the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, in ministry to all the world" (*United Methodist Book of Worship* 38). Love animates the heart and soul of God, and God redeems them in order for their hearts to come alive in his heart.

Among a people of faith, the failure of love can only be understood in terms of the Spirit alive, or dead, in them. Failing to abide in love cannot be reduced to simple

patterns of speech and behavior. No one who behaves compassionately for their own sake understands or practices Christian compassion. Compassion must be rooted in the heart of the Crucified, beating in his people. This compassion demands an inner transformation from self to Christ and requires real spiritual work.

The purpose of this study was to nurture that transforming work in parishoners from two United Methodist congregations through the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude. The disciplines draw participants from the din of this world towards the heart of God to experience his life, which is eternal, self-emptying love. Coupled with deep listening, they are each a means of grace to reform and transform the human spirit within the Spirit of Christ, offering each participant the opportunity to embody God's life of love here among their brothers and their sisters.

In his book *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen argued for solitude that reshapes the heart:

What becomes visible here is that solitude molds self-righteous people into gentle, caring forgiving persons who are so deeply convinced of their own great sinfulness and so fully aware of God's even greater mercy that their life itself become ministry.... When we are filled with God's merciful presence, we can do nothing other than minister because our whole being witnesses to the light that has come into the darkness. (37)

Compassion begins as a movement of God within the soul, which displaces the importance of the false self and draws its spirit into solidarity with others. A great deal of what is called *compassionate* is not because it remains rooted in selfdom. It reinforces self-importance, even self-righteousness. Instead of strengthening relationship with the other, it reinforces otherness, power structures, and ego. The inner transformation of the spirit in Christ must precede the work of compassion because otherwise the Church is only play acting, pretending at something it really knows nothing about. The Church and

world ache for a people radical enough to embody a compassion that does not serve the self and draws people through a shared, broken humanity. This pursuit of compassion through transformation in Jesus Christ is not some pietistic project for religious introspective.

Compassion sets the people of God in opposition against meritocracies of all sorts. Donald P. McNeil, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J.M. Nouwen, each professors of pastoral theology, explored this question of compassion. They make no distinction between the compassionate life and the life of an everyday Christian. The two were always meant to be one and the same. They recognize, though, the active conspiracy against any compassion that threatens to seize the hearts of people, quoting British journalist Sir Peregrine Worsthorne:

A genuine compassionate society, one that has succeeded in achieving the ideal of actually putting itself in the shoes of the unfortunate, will soon find itself marching in the direction of collective solutions inimical to individual freedom.... There is a real and awful danger of people actually beginning to identify with the world of suffering.... No healthy society should allow itself to see the world through the eyes of the unfortunate, since the unfortunate have no great interest in perceiving, let alone exploiting, the highest value of civilization: individual freedom. (5)

Compassion, as a way of being within the world, threatens power structures both within the world and the church, giving its pursuit real and potent meaning far beyond routine religious exercise. The challenge of compassion demands more than adolescent emotionalism. Compassion recognizes the lives broken at its own hands and the hands of its very own people. It sees itself in the eyes of the other.

### **Aches for Compassion in the World**

The problem of compassion reaches far beyond any one person or any act. Christians and non-Christians experience its lack through vast forces of institutional

indifference and cruelty around the globe. Mark McConaghy argues this fact in his reflection on the Chinese movie *Blind Shaft*.

*Blind Shaft* tells the story of Tang and Song, both *liudong renkou*, “migrant peasant laborers who have left their homes in the countryside to look for work” (McConaghy 72) who offer nothing else than backbreaking labor to urban industrialists. Like many migrant workers, Song sent most of his money home in hopes his son would be able to finish school and not be forced into the life Song chose for himself, but Chinese capitalism is a brutal force.

China’s own government admits to the death of at least 5,986 miners in 2005 alone, or a little over sixteen per day. Companies desperate to increase profits ignore safety issues and pay local officials to do same (McConaghy 73). The “logic of profit, competition, and individual self-interest [mediates] all forms of social relationships” (71). The primary values that shape governmental, corporate, and personal relationships are the values that govern a cruel capitalism driven by an insatiable discontent for more and more. These three ends justify the dehumanizing of others as means to an end rather than as one who bears the Image of God.

This brutal force drove both Tang and Song to repeated acts of murder of *liudong renkou* who wanted nothing more than to hold body and soul together. They simply found a migrant worker eager for work and told the individual that together they had a better chance of getting into a local mine if they lied about their relationship. The victim must insist that they were somehow related. Desperate from want, their targets agreed, never guessing that this simple lie was all Tang and Song needed from them. When the three found themselves alone in the dark, Tang and Song murdered the hapless stranger

and passed it off as an awful accident, knowing that no company wants the government looking over its shoulder. After a payoff to the supposed family members to keep the incident quiet, Tang and Song simply found another victim, another mine, and another payday. Exploited members of Chinese society, they killed those exploited with them in order to manipulate the greed and self-interest of mining companies.

While a breach of both civic and moral law, both Tang and Song sent most of their money back home to feed and educate their own families. Somehow their devious acts are themselves rooted in an act of love for specific others, but it is a love somehow twisted by logics of profit, competition, and individual self-interest:

[The] only thing that matters is the preservation of self-interest (one's own and one's family) through the acquisition of money, and any responsibility out of that—a calling to respect the rights of others, to organize around common goals as a community, to form the basis of some kind of class solidarity—remains the stuff of fantasy. (McConaghy 75)

Social forces at work against compassion have made Tang and Song both victims and perpetrators. Only Song found the will to choose another way, and that choosing cost him his life.

The problem of compassion cannot be understood simply within a personal context. Indifference and cruelty work at global levels, systemically reinforcing compassion-resistant ways of being within the world. In 2009 the United States Department of Labor identified at least fifty products “involving significant use of forced labor across twenty-nine countries” (Crane 49). Researchers estimate that between 50,000 and 150,000 people “are currently enslaved” within the United States (49). Andrew Crane, who expands the understanding of slave beyond models of strict ownership, includes in his understand the fundamental idea that the enslaved are “dehumanized and

treated as a commodity” (51). Before slavery becomes an act of violence inflicted on the other, it is an act of the will that refuses to recognize the humanity of another. Crane goes further in arguing that those who manage slave-operated ventures institutionalize the crime through moral legitimization. In order to ensure that “it is at least minimally accepted within the immediate institutional field around the organization, including among nonslave employees, enslaved workers, ...clients, and local communities” (61), operators justify exploitation by appealing to a sense of fair play that is paying off debts that only ever increase in amount. Slave operators may also claim that the slave is not a victim at all but is somehow due this treatment. Other times they may appeal to higher loyalties, such as a national or ethnic identity. Americans, consciously or not, continue to play this game by denying an understanding of slavery, which may mean confronting the use of migrant labor or the consumption of foreign products manufactured in places that do not protect the rights of common workers.

Economists such as Michelle Yates argue that this corruption represents the end result of all capitalism:

Under capitalism, labor takes on the form of a commodity. Thus, like other commodities on the market, labor is consumed (in this instance, by capital) and can then be disposed of when no longer needed. (1688)

While the question of economic models goes well beyond this research, the values it shapes in the heart are not. Capitalism is a way people choose to live with one another. As McConaghy says, it mediates all sorts of relationships within and without the marketplace. These relationships, this way of being with one another, leaves its mark on the soul. Economy is a spiritually formative force that demands attention in caring for the soul. The question surrounding compassion cannot be limited to any one person or any

single act because of world systems that incentivize the dehumanization of the other, that train people to understand the world in terms of value and commodity.

Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog explored the attitudes of young adults towards consumerism, expecting them to display “heightened awareness about environmental problems” or perhaps something related to “limits-to-growth” (71). They did not. Researchers pushed “emerging adults [they] interviewed to consider any plausible problematic side to mass consumerism.... They could not.... [For] nearly all emerging adults, mass consumerism is ... an unqualified good” (71-72). One young adult expressed concern over the exploitation of labor but remained relatively steadfast in support of the system:

I don't know, consuming is good for the economy. I don't like to do it but it's fine if people want to do that. I'm more concerned with the production end, the way things are produced. Unfortunately, to have a moving economy you got to produce things with cheaper labor and sometimes internationally exploit. I'm concerned about the exploitation factor. But I think consumption is, on a whole, good. (85)

Even among young adults who believe something in the reality of social injustice find some necessity in dehumanizing others to keep costs low.

Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Herzog refuse to blame young adults. They blame the broader social context:

[Emerging adults] are simply mirroring back to the older adult world, to mainstream society and culture, what has been modeled for them and what they have been taught. Emerging adults have simply been good learners and now are eager to enjoy the benefits of their material benefits of their material abundance and consumer choice. So if there is a problem here, it is a problem of mainstream American culture and institutions. (108-09)

Economic systems both nationally and globally are not value-free spaces. How individuals choose to live with one another and mediate economic relationships shapes the soul and self-perpetuates by shaping their children and their children after them.

Alongside the commodification of workers into functionary units by corporations of all sizes and sorts is the commodification of women into sexual objects through common advertising, “reducing women to what they refer to as the ‘sex class’” (Snigda and Venkatesh 10). According to Sukumar Snigda and S. Venkatesh while men appear more often in general advertisements “women are far more likely than men to be portrayed as nude, scantily clad or sexualized in some way” (11). Focusing on beer commercials, researchers found a 49 percent chance that at least one shot would focus on a woman’s breasts and only a 24 percent chance that they may focus on a man’s chest. Sex sells. Stripped of her humanity, a woman’s sexuality becomes a commodity for packaging consumer goods.

This dehumanization is not without cost. Snigda and Venkatesh cite research that indicates that some women who view these images suffer depression and eating disorders when their bodies do not reflect the image portrayed by marketing specialists. Snigda and Venkatesh go on to say that men who see print media “in which women are presented as sex objects” (12) are more likely to accept violence against women, as well as justify rape.

Amanda Zimmerman and John Dahlberg produced interesting research on the same subject, combining the work of two surveys taken in 1991 and 2000, exploring women’s attitudes towards sexual objectification in advertisement, as well as what respondents think about supporting the companies represented. The means score from



1991, 2.732, and from 2000, 2.84, showed women did not think they were well represented or shown going about their daily lives. This score ranges only from one to seven. They strongly believed that advertisers treated them as sex objects. 5.149. About half thought that those companies were more likely to discriminate, 4.053, and that the advertisements were, in fact, offensive, 4.032. Most, 5.043, might still buy the product (76). Women accepted this advertising as part of American culture. That acceptance becomes more clear in the 2000 study. On a scale of one to seven, the group believed that the advertisements presented to them were quite sexual (5.681) but culturally acceptable (2.713), with a very middling score of 4.096 for its moral acceptability (74). This study shows that women have tended to accept this treatment of themselves as sexual commodities and even commoditized men.

One female respondent to Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Herzog talked about sexuality:

I did hooking up in between dating. It was totally for my self-esteem. If I saw someone that I thought was absolutely gorgeous, it would be my goal to be able to [get him], like a fun game thing. Conquering, that's exactly what it was. And knowing deep down that they really didn't like me and that it wouldn't mean anything afterwards, that didn't matter because it was a hold of me and I was conquering that person to boost my self-esteem. (174)

This sexual attitude reinforces indifference. It contorts what is meant to be an intimacy shared between lovers into hormonal recreation that strips the other of any relational identity, a sexual functionary.

A popular pop artist, Pink, identifies this caustic dynamic in the song *Stupid*

*Girls:*

What happened to the dream of a girl president?  
She's dancin' in the video next to 50 Cent

They travel in packs of 2 or 3  
 With their itsy bitsy doggies and their teenie weenie tees....

Maybe if I act like that  
 Flippin' my blonde hair back  
 Push up my bra like that  
 I don't wanna be a stupid girl

The disease is growing, it's epidemic  
 I'm scared that there ain't a cure  
 The world believes it and I'm going crazy  
 I cannot take anymore. ("Stupid Girl Lyrics")

Snigda and Venkatesh's, Zimmerman and Dahlberg's research are not simply about advertising trends. They describe the objectification of women and how it changes human relationship. Pink graphically challenges thinking about how American society treats its own sisters and daughters in accepting sexual commodification as normative.

The question of economics and sexuality is not trivial. Brian Hoeppe believes this consumer culture damages the lives of young people around the globe:

In the lives of young people in countries like Australia, "business as usual" takes the form of a powerfully commodified culture. A startling study by Barbara Pocock and Jane Clarke (2004: xi) revealed that Australian teenagers live "within a powerful force field of competitive consumption" and that "the costs of falling behind are seen to be high—teasing, not fitting in, feeling bad, failing socially." (28)

Both economics and sexuality provide prisms through which the problems surrounding indifference and dehumanization come into clarity, including vast self-perpetuating systems on which people rely daily. People only begin to understand when they see how the present systems fight against the compassion Christ instills in them as his brothers and sisters.

In the same way American political relationships suffer from a refusal to see anything else in the other but otherness. Richard H. Pildes cites the record of George W

Bush while still governor of Texas: “By all accounts, Bush actually had a strong track record of compromise, accommodation, open-mindedness, accessibility, and bipartisanship in his six years as governor of Texas. He was considered as to have ‘changed the tone’ of politics...” (282). When he came into Washington, he offered the office of Secretary of Energy to a Democrat, Senator John Breaux, and later worked with liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives and Senate, whom he later praised, to pass No Child Left Behind. His job approval on 10 September 2010, sat at just 51 percent, with 90 percent support from Republicans and 27 percent support among Democrats (282). Seeing these numbers advisors to President Bush suggested he abandon bipartisanship to hold the conservative base, because of “too few persuadable votes out there” (283). Democrats did the same. Pildes concludes, “American politics today does not lack figures who might fill the role of [bipartisan statesmen]. Rather, larger forces marginalize these figures or drive them out altogether” (284). American society creates and sustains a polarized political system that stifles the work of government. The pursuit of power displaces the common good. The interests of one group are pitted against another, so that they must compete or lose. Individuals, whole groups, become faceless obstacles to a party’s political agenda, and in that moment the party reinforces the dynamics at work against the compassionate life.

The mercy and compassion of God are not natural to the followers of God because they are not natural to their way of being in this world. The work of compassion must become a deliberate choice to live in a way that makes no sense to logics of profit, competition, and individual self-interest.

Compassion costs something. Choosing compassion as a way of being in the world can exhaust the soul. Brenda M. Sabo calls this cost compassion fatigue or “the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (138). As those committed to the care of others, medical professionals often find themselves not only in need of greater and greater “technical competence” but “empathy, warmth, and respect” (137). They cannot afford the brutality of corporate mining interests because their practice of medicine requires a much more holistic relationship rooted in the trust of patients in those who care for them. In this sense their relationship begins in a very different place than commercial interest. Medical professionals struggle when they treat the body alone because bodies are attached to people who suffer in them, which means that treating an illness means treating a named other.

While researchers have not defined the absolute relationship between compassion fatigue and other psychological maladies, including burnout and secondary traumatic stress disorder, something in this act of shared suffering can nurture feelings of futility, depression, helplessness, and even a revulsion against their chosen profession of care. Somehow their acts of care lose meaning in the shadow of a growing interior darkness. Sabo cites “resiliency, hardiness, and social support” (140) as each essential elements in combating the effects of compassion fatigue but still “7% of all professionals working with traumatized patients exhibit emotional reactions typical of the ‘big bang’ trauma experiences” (140). Nearly one in ten care workers suffer emotional trauma alongside those for whom they care, which not only limits their work but damages them as individuals.

Choosing compassion, then, is not as simple as it might first appear. Choosing to suffer with the other means choosing to defy entire social systems that incentivize profit, competition, and individual self-interest and to bear real psychological cost that taxes emotional reserves. The people of God experience the same corrosive social forces.

### **Aches for Compassion within the Church**

Cultural forces resistant to compassion, such as consumerism, sexism, and hyper-political polarization, infect social structures around the globe, and the church is not immune. Christians carry the values and attitudes that give these forces life into their faith communities, reinforcing the compassion-resistant heart. The religious language and ritual remains the same, but each functions within the context of dominant social dynamics rather than as an alternative way of living and being with God and neighbor.

Shannon Jung minces no words in his judgment against a Christian culture that uncritically blesses American consumerism as its own gospel truth:

You know this as well as I do—you recognize that this is nothing less than sin and evil; it is greed; it is a system of consumption based on the structured violation of the tenth commandment, against covetousness. It is the production of the image of an economy of scarcity, of fear, rather than the abundance that God promises us, that has been revealed in Jesus Christ, and that is daily renewed through the work of the Holy Spirit.  
(285)

What Jung argues is the church's own complicit behavior in a way of being together that not only diminishes compassion but nurtures indifference, even cruelty, towards their neighbors. In Jung's mind Christians cannot separate their lives of faith from their lives within the marketplace at large. They will either model a new way of being together in the world as espoused within the pages of Scripture or be unfaithful to the most fundamental of Judeo-Christian moral laws.

In this sense, American Christians live no differently from their non-Christian neighbors, consuming goods and services without regard either to creation care or human community. The driving force of consumption remains an insatiable desire for that something more that never entirely satisfies the soul. Like a toddler it grabs for everything in reach, not knowing what it needs; it only knows its own hunger and acts on it. In a very real way, American Christians keep tidy lives whose religious compartmentalization mitigates whatever force radical love might otherwise unleash through them.

This capitulation to the gospel of consumerism malforms Christian relationship and commodifies the church as its own religious good. In their book, Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street quote sociologist Max Weber who describes the market community as “the most impersonal relationship of practical life into which human beings can enter with one another,... [in which] participants do not look toward the person of each other, but only toward the commodity”(61). Weber continues that such “absolute depersonalization is contrary to all elementary forms of human relations” (61). Weber simply exposes the nature of business. Consumer relationship is ultimately an exchange of goods based on an agreed-upon exchange of valued goods or services. As evidenced earlier, labor only functions as a value-adding unit. Reflecting on Weber’s assertion, Kenneson and Street ask, “If the very character of marketing relationships is impersonal and dehumanizing, does it make sense for the church to adopt a marketing orientation in the name of Christian ministry?” (61). They argue quite positively that the “church is not called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or visit the imprisoned because it is seeking personal or customer satisfaction but because the people of God have been called to bear

embodied witness to God's 'upside-down' kingdom" (71). The upside-down kingdom of God abandons power for love and wealth in the things of this world for the things of God. People who inhabit the kingdom of God choose forgiveness over payback and shared humanity over tribalism.

The force of consumerism within the church is to take what is done for love of God and neighbor and to malform that into what is done for self. It displaces love for the individual and replaces it for what that person means for the organization. It shatters a relationship meant to be born of shared love and turns it into an exchange of religious goods for a weekly offering of presence and finances. Sin within the church often operates in these hidden ways, an appearance of good that somehow warps the spiritual life together. Christ has not called the church to embrace the bigger and the better of American society but to incarnate the life of God in Christ that pours itself out for others again and again.

Consumerism puts the individual at the center of the life of the church with disastrous results. Churches now create crowds rather than communities where individuals gather and leave for their own psychological fix. The little interconnectivity that develops rises out of a felt need to feed oneself or to alleviate loneliness. Religious consumerism misidentifies the central spiritual problem, which cannot be solved through acquisition but only through cruciform love.

Thomas Merton, in *Choosing to Love the World*, argues that the world must remember the humanity of all people, whatever their socio-economic status:

We prescribe for one another remedies that will bring us peace of mind, and we are still devoured by anxiety. We evolve plans for disarmament and for the peace of nations, and our plans only change the manner and method of aggression. The rich have everything they want but happiness.

and the poor are sacrificed to the unhappiness of the rich.... How can we find peace, true peace, if we forget that we are not machines for making and spending money, but spiritual being. sons and daughters of the most high God? (17)

Merton understands that fundamental to solving the problem of compassion in the world is not giving more money to international missions, increasing entitlement spending, or even volunteering more hours at the local food pantry. It is reorienting how one understands and relates to the other. As long as Christians remain trapped within the consumer categories of the world, they cannot live in the upside-down kingdom of God.

The inability of the Church to share consistently in one another's common humanity reinforces some traditional theological understandings that more careful biblical scholarship discards, especially in the treatment of women. First Timothy provides an excellent example of this care early Christians embraced:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim. 2:11-15)

Read in the English, apart from any exegetical work, this statement would seem to say that the Spirit forbids women from occupying offices that may put them in authority over their male counterparts. Even further, Paul appears to demand that women remain silent and to argue that their God-given role is that of childbearing.

Doing the exegetical work that allows God's people to begin reading the Scripture with first-century Christians, though, frees the reader to strip women of the gender roles so often assigned to them. While much can be said about time, place, and textual context, the word the New Revised Standard Version translates *authority* dispels common



misconceptions. Paul uses the word *auvqentew*, which means to “domineer. lord it over” (*Friberg Greek Lexicon*). The word appears only once within all the New Testament. The common word used within the early Church for authority was *evxousia* or “authority. right, power; (1) as denoting the power of decision making, especially as the unlimited possibility of action proper to God’s authority. power” (*Friberg Greek Lexicon*). It is the word used in Matthew 7:29: “for [Jesus] taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” New Testament writers use this word thirty-nine times in the Gospels alone; Paul uses it twenty-five times in his epistles. This word is a kingdom word; it is language that points the readers to the supernatural power of God that gifts his people for service in the world. Paul chose not to use this kingdom word in First Timothy. Instead, he turns to a word used to reflect power that controls others through dominant force. Just basic vocabulary lessons chip away at poor interpretations of Scripture that reinforce the preservation of a gender class.

Perception of gender roles influences the interpretation of Scripture, even to the point of distortion. In Romans 16:7, Paul references the apostle Junia who was “in Christ before I was.” The vast majority of Greek texts record the name in its feminine, rather than masculine, form. The first reference to her as a man does not appear until some time late in the thirteenth century. Still the New Jerusalem, New American Standard, and New International (1984) versions translate the name in its masculine form: Junias. Engrained social patriarchy did not allow translators, and so readers, to understand the text any other way. Caving to the pulsion of Western culture strengthens compassion-resistant forces at work among the people of God by compelling men and women to view one another through assigned gender roles in which women’s primary value is gynecological.

Brian T. Kaylor examined the *Baptist Press* from 1 August 2004 to 31 January 2005, totaling 1,211 articles. Seven hundred and twenty-five, or 60 percent, included some feminine reference. Of the 725, 405, or 56 percent, mentioned women only in passing. Only the remaining 320 spoke to womanhood to any significant degree (338). Kaylor's primary discovery was that "the most consistent portrayal of women in the *Baptist Press* articles is as the wife only mentioned in passing" (339). Of the 725 articles mentioning women, 230 only mention women in relationship to their husbands. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a renowned author, is "first introduced in an article as a 'preacher's wife'" (339). Ten articles argue that women need men for emotional fulfillment and protection. Four articles diminish the importance of violence against women. One hundred and fifty primarily view the role of women as mother of children, some going as far to say that they ought not work outside the home. Nine explicitly argue against women serving in ministry leadership roles. Kaylor goes further to explore themes of sexuality and feminism, but these statistics alone provide some insight into the degree to which those within the Christian faith sexually functionalize women.

Rachel Held Evans recently spent a year in religious experiment, following all the scriptural commands given to women relying on religious authorities who espouse these practices. In the May of that year spent researching and practicing, she explored the Quiverfull Families (QF) movement. QF families take the command found in Genesis 1:28 very seriously and see their role in God's world as a procreative one. She cites Dorothy Patterson: "We need mothers who are not only family-oriented but also family-obsessed" (178). QF families maintain an open womb policy, refusing any form of contraception or family planning. Superficially, it appears benign, helpful even, to

encourage those men and women who wish to create healthy families for children in the world, but the QF movement has serious implications for the role of women in society.

Procreation is a command from God for all the faithful in the world. This position leaves women no option but to marry, bear children, and care for them in the home. All their personhood has been reduced to that of baby factory and daycare worker. All other opportunities are lost to them by the simple fact that they are told they have no real value outside of this role.

This emphasis on women as a sex class is reinforced by agencies such as Vision Forum, whose members pursue a return to biblical patriarchy. Evans lists the tenants:

[M]en serve as head of households, women work exclusively from the home, children are schooled at home, and young girls remain under the authority of their fathers until they are given in marriages that are overseen by their parents. (51-52)

This movement effectively marginalizes women from any power center and makes them little more than slaves to the men over them. Sexist culture has shaped a reading of Scripture within the church that reinforces rather than dismantles existing prejudice. These examples provide insights into the real and present danger indifference presents within the world and the church. The people of God are faced with a choice either to remain fixed in their rebellion or to embrace lives of radical compassion within the world.

Some women live quite happy lives as wives and mothers to be certain, but this perspective is not without some cost. Jesse W. Abell, Timothy A. Steenbergh, and Michael J. Boivin researched the use of cyberporn within a religious context. They note that past studies showed “an inverse relationship between religiosity and addictive behaviors, such as gambling, smoking, alcoholism, and substance abuse” (165). The same

cannot be said of online pornography. They cite a survey by *Christianity Today* that shows that “approximately one-third of Christian laity and clergy have visited sexually explicit sites and that 18% of clergy do so repeatedly” (166). A significant number of male participants, 31%, responded by saying, “‘slightly like me,’ ‘mainly like me.’ or ‘very much like me’, to the question, ‘It has been difficult for me to surf the internet without the urge to seek out cyberporn locations’” (168). Ultimately scores showed that while the religious were less likely to struggle with a sexual addiction, “those demonstrating higher levels of religiosity experienced more problems with cyberporn” (168). Rules about the use of computers and pornography fail to strike at the root of the problem, which is a compassion-resistant theology reinforced by cultural bias.

In the very same way, bitter politics grip the church as various groups vie for control of key decision-making positions. National special interest groups on both sides of the theological spectrum—Good News, Reconciling Ministries, The Confessing Movement, and Micah 6:8—together spend immense resources trying to influence votes on the floor of the United Methodist conferences everywhere: signs, literature, volunteers, mailings. In the Spring of 2011 Micah 6:8 sent out this letter to all pastors and lay members:

Laity and clergy from across the West Michigan Conference called Micah 6: 8 West Michigan United Methodists have come together to challenge and invite others to join them in standing for ... JUSTICE, KINDNESS AND HUMILITY....

They ask members at this year’s Annual Conference to affirm this scriptural mandate as they vote for 2012 General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates. Qualities the Micah 6:8 group says qualified delegates need to possess include:

- a deep and abiding love for the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- a demonstrated understanding of the meaning and intent of Micah 6:8, which calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God

- a clear commitment to The United Methodist Church, lived out in local, district, and conference settings, and beyond
- a firm grasp of how The United Methodist Church works
- an ability to listen to others, to see the Christ in them, and to then seek to discern the will of God

The Micah 6:8 West Michigan United Methodists say [sic] “After careful study, discernment and prayer the following persons we present have all these qualities and more. We ask that each annual conference clergy and lay member prayerfully consider these persons to represent not only West Michigan but also Micah 6:8. They are particularly qualified to be our Conference delegates and we recommend their election in this order”:

Clergy....

Laity.... (General and Jurisdictional Conference Delegates Recommended by Micah 6:8 Methodists—Press Release)

During the 2011 annual conference, members of West Michigan Hope, a conservative renewal group, printed materials that looked very much like ballots used for voting amendments to change the United Methodist Discipline, except that these checked their own interest group’s preference. This local political maneuvering reflects the national debate devouring the United Methodist Church. Kathleen Rutledge quoted Bill Hinson, then president of the Confessing Movement, who goes as far as arguing for the dissolution of the United Methodist Church:

We feel that the time has come to end this cycle of pain and conflict.... We feel that the gulf is too wide, the differences are irreconcilable—and we cannot bridge these.... So rather than having a winner or a loser here—as you would in a split—this is to be an amicable separation, so I’m sure both would continue to carry the best of Wesley’s tradition.

More liberal leaning Rev. Jack Jackson of Claremont School of Theology argued in 2012 that both the progressives and conservatives “begin serious discussion about dividing from one UMC to at least two new, distinct denominations.” Systems meant to inhabit ministry have not only become power centers but power centers for which caucuses compete. The acrimony has become so fierce that even those fighting for their vision of

United Methodism now wonder if partisans should abandon unity for theological tribalism. Brothers and sisters within the same denomination no longer view one another as spiritual siblings, but competitors, as spiritual enemies.

This politically charged thinking resists compassion's work. Because it puts the other in competition against the self or makes the other an enemy of God, it limits one's ability to share in their suffering, to see them as one with whom they share a common humanity.

Jonathan Bonk goes further by arguing that American Christians have succumbed to the lure of power and violence: "That economic, political, and military domination should generate self-confidence, assertiveness, and illusions of superior virtue on the part of those whom they most directly benefit is a truism" (343). Bonk connects the Christian West's collusion with power and violence as a simple function of its own sociological setting since Justinian's Edict of 529, when all pagan worship was abolished in favor of the Christian faith within the limits of the Roman Empire. He very pointedly argues that the people of God have embraced rather than resisted those cultural forces:

[Christians] contribute to and directly benefit from a way of life that was born in violent resistance to God-ordained authority, expanded in the genocidal occupation of a continent, enriched through the forced labor of tens of millions of enslaved Africans, and maintained by both use and threat of lethal violence-including nuclear-against civilian populations. (347)

However anyone feels about his characterizations of American history, American Christians have given both silent and vocal support to the use of political and physical violence to benefit themselves.

Again, this problem is not something that responds to fiat. Christian leaders cannot limit their efforts to banning membership with religious caucuses or to organizing

a peace march. Cultural dynamics at play prevent Christians from seeing the face of the other and experiencing real compassion, and this point is where Christians must focus their soul work as they labor together in ecclesial and national government structures.

Like secular caregivers, pastors face crisis in their work. David K Pooler explores how pastors develop self-concept in the face of religious consumerism. He believes that both pastors and churches are at risk. Self-concept develops around the “many different social role identities arranged by prominence and importance, and these identities guide behavior” (707), so that a person, or pastor, takes on the identity of the person his or her roles demand, such as parent, spouse, and friend. When religious consumerism takes hold of a congregation and the work of the church becomes consumption of pastoral attention, the work of the pastor becomes all consuming, diminishing the importance of other roles. For all intents and purposes, the pastor is cut off from life-giving identities apart from that of pastor, robbing them of essential support. The pastor is no longer a human being with whom others suffer. They are means to an end, a producer of spiritual experience for religious consumption. Acts of ordination reinforce this difference.

When the role of pastor cements the identity, moral or spiritual failure becomes a real problem. Because they are not consistent with their chosen, affirmed identity, they are often denied. Pastors, then, struggle more with whatever is eating away at their lives. They may choose to immerse themselves in this role even more deeply to cover up their failure, which only makes them more vulnerable. Congregations, pleased by pastors’ relentless commitment to their own growth and care congratulate their leaders. Rather than question what needs their pastors may experience in their lives, they affirm a destructive habit that refuses to acknowledge the humanity of the other. In a tremendous

irony, “the role of the pastor can de-humanize the pastor” (709) in the eyes of congregants and pastors themselves. This dehumanization paves the way for depression, burnout, compassion fatigue, even sexual misconduct. In this way honoring the office of elder becomes a trap that ultimately sabotages both clergy and congregation.

Lack of compassion is a problem, in the world, and in the church. It is a problem socially and personally. Beyond acts of indifference and cruelty is a way of being together in the world that saturates the human soul and calls for real spiritual work to reorient the lives of all God’s people around shared humanity. It is a calling to change the terms of relationships from means to ends to an encounter with a holy other.

### **Forming the Compassionate Soul through Spiritual Disciplines**

When Jesus called his disciplines to come and follow, he called them to a specific faith formation relationship. He wandered Palestine as their rabbi, and they each came after him. Much more than a teacher, the rabbi formed the spiritual lives of those who followed him; disciples who kept faith with their rabbi did so by becoming like him. Disciples could not simply know what their rabbi knew; they must live as their rabbi lived.

This devotion gave birth to the maxim, “Be covered in the dust of your rabbi” (Bell). While theologians argue whether this language refers to dust kicked up in following behind the rabbi along the way or dust stirred in sitting at their feet (Seid), it speaks powerfully of the meaning of discipleship. Disciples live intimately with their master; they are never so far from their rabbi that the dust that covers their lives does not also cover them. The life of the rabbi becomes the life of their disciples.



Nouwen explains the importance of embracing the rabbi's life graphically in his book *Spiritual Direction*:

Many years ago, there was a young man who searched for truth, happiness, joy, and the right way of living. After many years of traveling, many diverse experiences, and many hardships, he realized that he had not found any answers for his questions and that he needed a teacher. One day he heard about a famous Zen Master. Immediately he went to him, threw himself at his feet, and said: "Please, Master, be my teacher...."

The Master listened to him, accepted his request, and made him his personal secretary. Wherever the Master went, his new secretary went with him. But although the Master spoke to many people who came to him for advice and counsel, he never spoke to his secretary. After three years, the young man was so disappointed and frustrated that he no longer could restrain himself. One day he burst out in anger, saying to his Master: "I have sacrificed everything, given away all I had and followed you. Why haven't you taught me?" The Master looked at him with great compassion and said: "Don't you understand that I have been teaching you during every moment you have been with me? When you bring me a cup of tea, don't I drink it? When you bow to me, don't I bow to you? When you clean my desk, don't I say, 'Thank you very much'?..."

The young man could not grasp what his Master was saying and became very confused. Then suddenly the Master shouted at the top of his voice: "When you see, you see it direct." At that moment the young man received enlightenment. (3-4)

The disciple relationship the Son initiates among God's people calls them to a position of watchful attentiveness for the way, a way of being together with God that conceives and gives birth to life. Much more than something that can be said, it is something the disciples see within the heart of their master that forms them to become like the one they follow. The secretary believed he needed answers to his questions about the good life from his Zen master. The Zen master understood that the secretary most needed the life that makes sense of the questions.

Very simply, the way matters. However the people of God choose to live matters. For disciples to keep faith with their master they must live like him or her in this world.

They allow the example of their master to form and shape common, everyday living because this life is the spiritual furnace that forms and transforms the hearts of disciples into the heart of their master. How disciples choose to live continually reinforces their own way of being. Disciplines, then, do not focus on rule keeping or spiritual achievement. Disciplines are not about what the people of God do for themselves or others. Spiritual disciplines create space where practitioners bear the Son in their hearts as Mary did in her body.

How disciples choose to live determines the degree to which they allow the compassion of Christ to come alive in them. Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* addresses love directly:

The performance of an action is worthless in itself, if it is not done out of charity. Charity must be our motive: then everything we do, however little and insignificant, bears a rich harvest. After all, what God takes into account is not so much the thing we do, as the love that went into doing it....

[The disciple] ascribes the possession of [love] to God alone; to God, the Source from which all things flow, the End in which the Saints, all of them, attain fruition and repose. (45-46)

Compassion begins in God. The people of God are not simply called to do compassionate things; they are called to become a compassionate people. Cassandra Vieten, Tina Amorok, and Mandala Schlitz reinforce à Kempis' work. Together they interviewed leading practitioners from a wide variety of faith and philosophical practices surrounding the nurture of compassion. Central to their findings was that "individuals will not simply conform their consciousness and actions to abstract moral orders but must internalize them through personal transformative experiences" (917). The command to behave compassionately eventually fails because the act only reinforces self-will. The self's decision to act compassionately remains oriented around the self and its own needs. The

cost of action then becomes cost of self, which turns attention back on the wants and needs of the one acting. Personal transformative experience changes the disciples' perspective, freeing them from seeing the world only from their own viewpoint. They see "‘themselves as strongly linked to others through a shared humanity.’ leading to spontaneous altruistic acts" (925). They act compassionately because they have a "sense of having ‘no choice’ but to act altruistically" (925). Compassion, as a way of being in the world, cannot be forced from without. It can only be grown within.

When only twelve, Sue Monk Kidd went with her youth group to visit a local nursing home. She did not want to be there. Summer was ending, and soon she would be back in school. She wanted free time with friends at the pool. She got a medical facility full of aging men and women in wheelchairs hungry from loneliness.

As she passed out crepe paper flowers, one of the residents saw through the act of kindness to her reluctance: "You didn't want to come, did you, child?" (Kidd 20). Looking at the woman, she denied it. Of course she wanted to be there, to be about good things, caring for others. The woman reassured her, "It's okay. You can't force the heart" (20). Reflecting on that moment nearly thirty years later, Kidd understood what she did not at the age of twelve:

Genuine compassion cannot be imposed from without. It doesn't happen simply by hearing a sermon on love, or being sent on a loving mission.... [Y]ou don't arbitrarily make up your mind to be compassionate so much as you choose to follow a journey that transforms your heart into a compassionate space. (20)

Compassion is not simply a choice. Individuals may choose to bind their hearts to a compassionate set of values. They may choose to behave in ways that reflect the life of compassion, but the heart will not be forced. Genuine compassion that springs from the

soul's deep well comes only through "slow and often difficult metamorphosis" (20). If compassion, or the heart of God, is to become alive in disciples, they must choose a way of life that allows the Spirit's work there.

Luke records Jesus telling his disciples a story:

"A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance. (Luke 8:5-15)

God's people sometimes reduce the word of God to the words and pages of Scripture.

This mistake misses the larger point. The Word is not a what but a who: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This parable explains the life of God seeking to come alive in people through the Son, but that life, however powerful, requires soil that disciples have already prepared. The self, the world, and the devil all subject the soil of the soul to hazards of all kinds: trials, hardness of heart, distraction. The grace of God is always falling, but only those who have done real spiritual work have hearts able to receive and nurture the Spirit's life. This understanding creates some tension within the Wesleyan tradition.

In his seminal work on B. T. and Ellen Roberts, Howard A. Snyder retraces their lives and the formation of the Free Methodist Church. Key to the church's mission was the grace of entire sanctification, which both Roberts believe the larger Methodist Episcopal Church had abandoned. On 23 August 1860, Free Methodists gathered in Pekin, New York, to draw up their own Book of Discipline. After some debate the conference adopted the following as one of their twenty-three articles of religion:

Merely justified persons, while they do not outwardly commit sin, are nevertheless conscious of sin still remaining in the heart. They feel a natural tendency to evil, a proneness to depart from God and cleave to the things of earth. Those that are sanctified wholly are saved from all inward sin.... Entire sanctification takes place subsequently to justification, and is the work of God wrought *instantaneously* upon the consecrated believing. (emphasis mine; 523)

Some opposed this language and believed that holiness came about through journey with God and went so far as to say that the conference ought to abandon the formation of the church if the Roberts' language failed to pass, saying that the "gradualistic theory is what made so much mischief" (524) in the larger Methodist Episcopal Church. Eventually the proposed article passed without amendment. B. T. Roberts' language is theological not developmental; it roots itself much more in theological abstraction rather than in human experience.

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection cultivated the soil of his heart through the practice of the presence of God, a "simple attentiveness and ... loving gaze upon God to whom I offer myself united with greater happiness and satisfaction than that of an infant nursing at his mother's breast" (56), which "inflames [the soul] with the fire of divine love,... a consuming fire that reduces to ashes whatever is opposed to it" (100). This very simple discipline asks the disciple to do for God what is often done only for the self. The

practice of the presence fixes a loving gaze on God throughout the coming and going of everyday life, opening disciples to the work of the Spirit moment to moment and day to day.

Thérèse of Lisieux, another Carmelite, practiced what she called the Little Way, which is to say “doing the least of actions for love” (163). Born a girl in a time and a church that forbade feminine leadership, she joined a cloistered order at only fifteen years of age. In her heart she craved an active life, the life of a priest or a missionary or martyr. Knowing these were impossible, she made a decision to become love’s victim, to die to all but love, and to die to all but love by embracing small sacrifices. These little sacrifices might include a smile, kind word, act of service, or the relinquishment of a small pleasure for another. In doing these small things over and over, she slowly crucified self-love. She offered her life as a conduit for the compassion and grace of God.

Spiritual disciplines challenge and upend the interior life. They compel disciples to see themselves for who they are and are called to be. Disciplines wrest the spirit from the flesh and the things of this world for Christ alone. Disciplines cannot simply desire compassion. They must allow God’s compassion to confront and challenge indifference and hatred through deliberate acts of discipleship that free them from the tyranny of self, remembering that the promise of any discipline rests in the Spirit’s work not their own.

This research explored how the disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening facilitate this process of spiritual transformation. The first two of these have long histories in the work of the spiritual masters, and all three lend themselves to ready practice in the warp and woof of life. As a means of grace, they connect disciples to God and one another.

## Spiritual Disciplines and the Role of Silence

American culture specializes in the art of noise making:

[Wherever] we go we are surrounded by words: words softly whispered, loudly proclaimed, or angrily screamed; words spoken, recited, or sung; words in many sounds, many colors, or many forms; which flicker off and on, move slowly, dance, jump, or wiggle. Word, words, words! They form the floor, the walls, and the ceiling of our existence. (Nouwen, *Way of the Heart* 45)

From the moment the alarm clock blares to the very last minute of that late night television show, noise fills the air. It is relentless. Radios accompany commuters to and from their places of work; gossip keeps the seconds passing in fluorescent-lit cubicles; cell phones, instant messages, and tweets follow their victims into the bathroom. Because silence “stands outside the world of profit and utility... [and] cannot be exploited for profit,... it is regarded as valueless” (Casey 29). People push silence from their lives in part because they know no other way to be within the world, and the noise consumes them.

Gray Matthews reflects on Merton’s own work on silence. Chief among the harms Merton credits to the endless noise of mass media is an inner “fragmentation” (61). The “perpetual erosion of silence threatens to sever our abilities to reflect, rest and to understand our true self” (62). In other words, the perpetual loss of silence in one’s life prevents one from creating the space needed to explore the deep places of one’s very own heart and soul. Loss of silence allows the people of God to remain strangers to themselves, never allowing them to go further into their own lives than the identities the world constructs for them: child, spouse, parent, worker. This failure of inner work may be most evident among those who experience traumatic events and refuse the silence and the soul work to own them for themselves. They bury the pain, expecting it to go away.

or at least not bother them. They run from distraction to distraction until the hurt will not allow to run anymore. They cannot be whole persons until they enter the quiet of their soul space with their brokenness and live with it there. Noise prevents Christians from going into places in need of healing. It prevents them from ever knowing themselves as they truly are.

The endless noise also prevents relationships with others by never allowing the soul to settle into a relationship-building space to listen:

The constant din of empty words and machine noise, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés. (Matthews 63)

The influx of noise and information keep people from listening. Scharmer refers to this inability to hear as downloading, “the seed and mother of all the remaining practices of the absencing cycle” (183). It reconfirms “habitual judgments” (11). Downloading prevents listening, understanding, and cocreating with the other. It simply reinforces the judgment, the cliché. It never allows the silence that frees space for understanding.

Downloading propels people into hypercommunication, “an obsessive process of sending and leaving messages without concern for how (or whether) they are received or understood” (Matthews, 72). Communication without silence never leads to real communion because it never allows one to see and hear others. It is only the distracted noise of one soul in competition with the distracted noise of the other. Neither speaks from a place of silence or real knowing, and neither practices the silence needed to hear.



Noise erodes compassion in relation to the self and to the other. It aggregates a chronic fragmentation that not only prevents the hearing but the embracing, not only the listening but the loving. Silence is an essential discipline in the nurture of compassionate life together because it frees one to see oneself or others for the very first time and suffer with them.

Christians first receive this love from the Father. Thomas Merton affirms the need for this movement of the heart in his work on life with God: “My life is a listening, His is speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond. For this, my life must be silent. Hence, my silence is my redemption” (*Thoughts in Solitude* 74). Healing silence begins when the soul quiets itself before I AM and finds love there. The soul’s greatest need is this silence, not as an end in itself but as a means to be with the Beloved. The distracted soul never hears because it never bothers to listen. It starves itself of the mercy of the One who listens with the people of God. If silence is an act of compassion, then God’s silent presence with the soul is indispensable grace. Robbing the self of this gift robs the soul of life.

The desert fathers and mothers tell a story of Abba Moses:

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, “Come, for everyone is waiting for you.” So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water, and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, “What is this, Father?” The old man said to them, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.” When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him. (Muto 242)

Abba Moses extended grace because in silence he had come to know his own sin, his own brokenness. He expressed compassion not from a position of command (i.e., he must be compassionate because God commanded him). He expressed compassion from a place

of authenticity: He chose to suffer with his brother because he suffered as his brother. If noise prevents the nurture of compassion for self and others, if it prevents communion with the Beloved, by nature it must prevent any ministry of real grace. The ministry of compassion is born in silence with God as the soul experiences receiving and then offering love. The best theological education includes silence alongside all of its words.

Silence is not an end in itself but a space where the soul encounters God. Said another way, the real purpose of silence is not empty space that separates a person from community. Just the opposite is true. Silence prepares and leads the heart into love for all those God loves.

Ruth Haley Barton tells the story of her frustration in pursuing these disciplines in the midst of the noise and busyness of her ordinary family life: school, teenagers, errands to run, writing assignments. In one particularly difficult moment, she remembers the words of Julian of Norwich: "I look at God, I look at you, and I keep looking at God" (130). Silence was not just for her; it was not just something she did for God. Silence gave her eyes to see to the Beloved, and carrying that silence out into the world allowed her to see him hidden in the lives of others.

Silence nurtures compassion because silence opens individuals to what they could never see before: that this great God they love inhabits the souls of each and every one. They see that others are loved with them. In the midst of another's brokenness, they are loved. In the midst of another's self-hatred and blindness, they are loved. This vision moves God's people from the other as functionary to an I-We relationship, from simple object-resource to beloved. This transformation is not a simple change in belief. It is a radical change in how God's people see one another within the world.

Silence also nurtures compassion in Christian ministry. In *The Way of the Heart*,

Henri Nouwen reflects on how preaching, a traditionally wordy ministry, can lead the people of God into a silence suffused with the presence of God:

Our preaching, when it is good, is interesting or moving, and sometimes both. It stimulates the mind and heart and this leads to a new insight or new feeling. But there is another option.... If it is true that the word of Scripture should lead us into the silence of God, then we must be careful to use that word not simply as an interesting or motivating word, but as a word that creates the boundaries within which we can listen to the loving caring, gentle presence of God. (60-61)

At a certain level, Nouwen believes sermons function as rhetoric: a reasonable logic of intellect and emotion. He affirms these functions as right and good. The ministry of the written Word deserves careful attention, especially in a time when baseless popular theology captivates so many people in the pews. He contends, though, that Scripture must lead God's people into the silence of God where they immerse themselves in the love and care of their Beloved. Silence nurtures communion. Therefore, the ministry of the written Word, while informational, is at its heart relational. The practice of silence in reading, preparing, and speaking Scripture creates a space for the people to experience divine mercy. In ministry those who preach simply extend the compassion of God through their words. The message, however short or long, becomes an act of compassion for them. The one who speaks does not speak for God but with God.

In the same book, Nouwen also argues that silence guards the inner fire of the heart. More simply said, silence keeps God's people from making an easy escape from the inner life where the Spirit does her transforming work. This work is not easy. Sometimes it bites and digs into the soul. It always means dying. Running from the silence into the noise allows souls to ignore the Word speaking to them. It keeps them

from the fire that threatens to consume them. When God's people do not guard the inner fire, "nobody [finds] warmth and new strength" (*Way of the Heart* 55). Silence nurtures compassion because it forces God's people to sit in the inner places of their heart and allows the love of God to consume and transform them. People who live captive to the noise of this world are driven by it. It pushes and pulls and tears apart. Christians live from a silence that keeps their hearts beating with the heart of God, so that they love with him.

Silence is not anything new. It is not a novel discipline thrown together to cope with twenty-first-century life. Sixteenth-century Carmelite John of the Cross writes in "Sayings of Light and Love," "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul" (92). As a contemplative, John understood the role silence plays within the life of prayer in opening the heart to its Beloved. The noisy soul simply never hears the one Word the Father speaks in Jesus Christ. John of the Cross does not teach blind belief in meditative practice. It is a radical Christology fleshed out in "Ascent of Mount Carmel":

If I [the Father] have already told you all things my Word, my Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this?... You are making an appeal for locutions and revelations that are incomplete, but if you turn your eyes to him you will find them complete. For he is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered, manifested, and revealed to you.... (231)

Christ is everything. The people of God do not need the noise of more radio preachers, televangelists, and best-selling bands. They need the silence where they fall into the arms of their Beloved.

In *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, twentieth-century spiritual writer Merton reinforces what John says when he cites the seventh-century monk Isaac of Nineveh:

Many are avidly seeking but they alone find who remain in continual silence.... Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within. If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence like sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God himself.... (43)

Silence gives room for truth to spill into the lives of God's people. It is the light that opens their eyes to the wilderness within. Three great spiritual masters over thirteen hundred years bear witness to the power of silence: John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Isaac of Ninevah.

Outside of Catholicism Protestant voices also testify to the importance of silence. When asked why he meditated, twentieth-century Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer simply said, "Because I am a Christian" (qtd. in Foster 24). This modern Lutheran understood silence simply as part of the Christian experience. To be a Christian was to make this space to be with the Beloved.

Founder of Youth Specialties Mike Yaconelli does not use the word silence but wide-eyed listening. He says, "Christianity isn't so complicated, is it? All we need to do is listen to the whisper of God. We can find our hearing again. We can learn once again to hear the thin silence of God" (85). Questions about belief, social values, behaviors receive the most attention. Yaconelli, who just barely graduated from college after years of study, understood that while these are good things they miss the point. The Christian faith is about encountering Jesus. It is learning to hear God in the thin places of life. The practice of silence alone allows God's people to begin to recognize that voice in the everyday life of the world. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they

follow me” (John 10:27). Silence is the place the Beloved speaks; silence is the place God’s people hear; silence is the place they learn to hear his voice in the world around them.

This holy silence can be nurtured in a number of different ways, centering prayer among them. Centering prayer goes at least as far back as John Cassian in the fourth century, who was influenced by his time among the desert fathers and mothers. This way of prayer became “primary monastic practice for 10 centuries” (Jones 71). In the fourteenth century an anonymous monk in England wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* for those called to a contemplative vocation, building his work around this same way of prayer:

And so, you may ask, where precisely is the labour? The work consists in the treading down of the awareness of all the creatures that God ever made, and in keeping them under the cloud of forgetting.... Here is all the labour; for this, with the help of grace, is man’s work. And the other beyond this, the impulse of love. this is the work of God alone. (173-74)

You are to step above [the cloud of forgetting] stalwartly but lovingly, and with a devout, pleasing, impulsive love strive to pierce that darkness above you. You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love. Do not leave that work for anything that may happen. (131)

In two passages *Cloud* presses contemplatives to forget both the world and whatever ideas they may have concerning God. To forget the world is to release all its worries and concerns from the mind, to see past them into what is real: God. To pass into the cloud of unknowing also means abandoning specific ideas about God. *Cloud* recognizes at least two essential dictums for prayer: (1) God is infinite mystery, and (2) attempts to define that mystery are often attempts to control God. The spiritual masters do not believe belief is futile. *Cloud’s* author was, in fact, a Christian monk baptized into a Trinitarian faith.

What is known, though, leads into holy mystery. The Trinity may be described carefully, and has been, but its reality goes infinitely further than the human imagination.

Contemplatives are asked to allow God to be God and go in love where their intellect cannot, thus allowing the Beloved to draw them into their center, which is his own heart of love.

This silence is much more than being quiet. It is an active attentiveness to God that allows contemplatives to become accustomed to life from the center of their being in the Beloved. Tony Jones describes five steps into this way of prayer:

1. As you sit comfortably with your eyes closed, let yourself settle down. Let go of all the thoughts, tensions, and sensations you may feel and begin to rest in the love of God who dwells within.
2. Effortlessly, choose a word, a symbol of your intention to surrender to God's presence, and let the word be gently present within you. The word should be one syllable, if possible, and should communicate God's love to you.
3. When you become aware of thoughts or as internal sensations arise, take this as your signal to gently return to the word ... and rest in God's presence....
4. Just be in that stillness.... Use the one word as your only response to thoughts, questions, or anxieties that arise in your mind.
5. At the end of your prayer time ... take a couple of minutes to come out of the silence.... Slowly reciting the Lord's prayer is another gentle way to come out of the prayer. (74)

Jones cautions that the purpose of this prayer process is not to get something out of God, a word or specific experience. It is to find the soul's center within the Beloved. The fruit of this prayer path is the life of the Spirit in the heart.

John of the Cross speaks to this path as well:

The soul's center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest center in God, it will know, love, and enjoy God with all its might.... The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centers itself in him. ("Living Flame of Love" 645)

No discipline is a magic trick. It is not a mechanical process by which one forces God to give up religious goods. Prayer, like all spiritual disciplines, simply opens space in the heart for the work of grace through the Beloved. Centering prayer takes as its foundation the belonging of God's people in the heart of God and fixes itself on allowing the Beloved to draw it there again.

Icons also offer another way to enter into holy silence. In his book *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, Nouwen asserts, “[W]e are forever seeing” (12). From the moment the eyes open, the world pours in: reflections, computer screens, television programs, the faces of loved ones. Closed, the imagination creates its own world of daydreams, memories, thoughts, even nightmares. The people of God were created to see. For Nouwen, icons create a space where the soul deliberately chooses to fix itself on “the beauty of the Lord” (12). If the people of God must forever see, they must fix themselves on the object of their vision.

Because traditional iconographers follow specific rules within their own creative process, icons do not always appear as sweeping or breathtaking as other artistic masters. Nouwen explains that realism has never been their purpose:

An icon is like a window looking out upon eternity. Behind its two dimensional surface lies the garden of God, which is beyond dimension of size. Every time I entrust myself to these images, move beyond my curious questions about their origin, history, and artistic value, and let them speak to me in their own language, they draw me into closer communion with the God of love. (“Behold the Beauty of the Lord” 15)

An icon may tell a story, but its purpose is not to explain. Historical background on the work may be helpful, but that is not enough. To pray with eyes wide open through the use of an icon is to create space for the Spirit to speak into the heart as it peers into reality.



Like centering prayer it is an invitation to encounter the Beloved through silence practiced over centuries by God's people.

A final example of silence in prayer suffices to illustrate its positive application in the art of spiritual formation: *lectio divina*. Peterson argues that this way of prayer and reading Scripture "guards against depersonalizing the text into an affair of questions and answers, definitions and dogmas" (*Eat This Book* 90) by remembering that the people of God read to hear the Word, Jesus, speak. Peterson breaks down the prayer process into four essential steps: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. Through each of these steps, the one who prays is invited deeper into the text to hear the one who speaks through it. In *lectio*, the soul reads. Special care must be taken, though, because the soul reads less for information than transformation. Western Christians read Scripture as if they have been taught to read newspapers and text papers: quickly and for the facts. This reading puts readers in control of all the words on the page. Readers take what they want, leave the rest, and then use that information however they want. This reading works in the world but far less within the vastness of Scripture. *Lectio* invites readers to read with their listening ears ready, to drink in every dash and tittle in thanksgiving to the Word who inspired them. Humility and love begin to allow the text to master the soul. The reader is not in control even here, at this early stage. They allow the story of God to draw them into the heart of God.

After reading, the one praying enters into *meditatio*. Through meditation on Scripture, the prayer passes through the words into the story itself. It is a creative process through which the soul feels the heat of Sinai's burning bush, smells the straw of Bethlehem's manger, and hears the voice of Jesus speak. This praying is not escape. It is

coming alive to the story of God with all the senses in order to notice the Spirit's movement through it. At this point a soul may wonder, "Where is the Spirit prompting me? How do I see God at work? What tugs on my heart." As with icons, understanding helps. Spending some time getting to know the story helps, but understanding is not the point. The point is to enter the story and let the Spirit begin speaking to the reader's spirit.

Seeing the Spirit's movement through the story, the reader prays. This movement is called *oratio*. Whether or not words are used, it is offering to God the prayer coming alive through the act of meditation. Silence allows the one who prays to begin receiving that prayer born in the heart of God, heard in the words of Scripture. Again, this praying puts the soul in a position of humility and love, rather than control. Prayer is not what the soul demands in exchange for its faith, but what the Spirit has spoken to it in the deep places of its center.

All of these lead to *contemplatio*. Peterson provides a beautiful image to understand contemplation, the Word "conceived and born in us" (*Eat This Book* 114). Having entered into the silence, the soul receives the work of grace in it to embody and en flesh the Word in its common, everyday life. In all these ways reading fills its true purpose: transformation in the Word who inspired their writing.

Centering prayer, icon, and *lectio divina* are each ways God's people create holy silence in their lives and places where compassion takes its root. Silence, more than being quiet, draws Christians into the heart of God, where their hearts beat with his heart. The people of God have known about this need from the beginning. Only in this noisy world have God's people forgotten their need to be silent and know he is God.

## Spiritual Disciplines and the Role of Solitude

Solitude makes little sense to the networked world. Landlines, smart phones, Twitter feeds, Facebook updates, e-mails, and texts constantly pull people back out into a roaring sea of relationship, and most would rather drown than face the loneliness within. Community is what many churches now sell religious consumers. I typed “Christian community” into Amazon’s search engine, and 70,551 results appeared. Typing “Christian solitude” resulted in only 794 hits. This number amounts to just barely over 1 percent of the former. Solitude makes little sense in this networked world.

In 2006 The Learning Channel cooperated with Christ in the Desert Monastery to produce *The Monastery*, a forty-day, real-life social experiment in which four ordinary men lived and worked and worshiped alongside the monks of this community. In episode four they were invited to visit Brother Xavier, who, after thirty years of life in community, was allowed to pursue life on the grounds as a hermit. The two who came struggled to understand why anyone would withdraw to life alone in a desert to pray and believed he must be asocial, an introvert who could not handle life with people. Pressed several times Brother Xavier responds to their questions, saying he came to die. Pressed again he says, “I am preparing for death” (“Episode Four”). The two men, like many, did not understand. They did not hear what he said when asked what makes a good hermit: loving God and loving people.

Brother Xavier was not interested in escape from others around him. He went to the hermitage in love of God and others to learn to die. He did not go to wait for his body to die. He went to learn to let go of everything to which he clung in this world in order for everything in him to be free to love others. This path is the way of nothing proposed

by John of the Cross. To detach the heart from all the things it is fixed upon in order that all may be given in love to Jesus and all those he loves. The cure for loneliness is not ever more people. The cure for loneliness is a solitude that teaches the art of letting go.

Nothing the spiritual masters say diminishes the pain of loneliness. It drowns the soul in deepening darkness: "Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted. It is the most terrible poverty" (Rokach 70). The answer may appear to be community, but loneliness cannot be solved by the addition of more people. At its heart, it is not a problem of mathematics. Loneliness is a disease of the soul that robs it of belonging and love. Solitude, then, is much more than being alone. It must be if it is to have any hope of applying a cure. Belcher defines solitude as "the process of withdrawal and quiet for the purpose of entering into a deeper relationship with God" (33). Rather than escape from relationship, solitude frees the soul for deeper community. It is relationship reordered by love, where the one who prays finds the belonging for which his or her soul aches. Solitude frees the soul from its need to find belonging somewhere out there in the world by finding belonging in the arms of the Beloved.

Of course Western culture perpetuates the very loneliness it seeks to assuage. It "naively [relies] on materialistic criterion to gauge well being," encouraging and rewarding competition (Rokach 71). While not evil in and of themselves, these values tend to undermine the compassionate relationship that facilitates belonging. The very systems society creates in order to achieve success, and the values it rewards along the way, alienate its members one from another as seen in the stratification of American culture by socioeconomic status. The further one moves from winner status at the top, the further one moves from connectedness and belonging. Socioeconomic winners are

rewarded with connection that amplifies their influence and voice, while socioeconomic losers, such as migrant workers or the poor, may find themselves shunned even by their families. People tend to keep to their classes: poor in the ghettos and the wealthy in their gated communities. The system, while not bad in and of itself, has tended to nurture this soul sickness it purports to alleviate.

Ami Rokach goes further yet, arguing that because culture associates loneliness with “[the] marginal,... the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the handicapped, and the criminals,... [the] unwanted, unloved and alienated” (71), most bury feelings of loneliness, driving the sickness deeper into their hearts and lives. Because culture does not affirm negative emotions such as loneliness, people cannot seek help in fighting it. That shame becomes a barrier to healing and the exercise of compassion for self and others.

Kathleen E. Jenkins found this dynamic at work within congregational contexts and the divorced. Specifically she says that the American church has tended to become “a largely private and therapeutic endeavor” (279). This individualistic approach to life together with God has created unspoken rules on what may and may not be named. Because divorce remains taboo in many contexts, divorcees often suffer in silence, alone among the people of God, unable to tell their own stories. They are not given permission to grieve or experience their loneliness because of the shame attached. In the case of divorce, the fear attached vulnerability is often exasperated by the tendencies of small communities to trade in gossip (283), which is yet another barrier to the work of compassion.

The deeper, underlying reality is that loneliness as a spiritual force keeps people from intimacy with God. To be alone with God is to encounter God as he is and as the self is. True solitude cuts the spirit off from its many escapes and forces the soul to plant itself within the light of God to be there with him. In cutting the self off from God, loneliness prevents the soul from experiencing the compassion of God for it. What it does not know, it cannot offer others.

The lack of solitude reinforces “the inane notion that action is the only reality” (Belcher 110). Silence and solitude are generally useless to the world of stuff and things; therefore, withdrawal into them makes a statement about reality. Solitude demarcates a space in the life of the soul where it sits with God not in defiance of created order but seeing it in an entirely new way, as home of the Beloved. Solitude is not something to be actualized for profit but something that reveals the glory and splendor of the Creator. Lack of solitude, detachment, keeps the soul enslaved to a world driven by action and success.

Belcher identifies eight character traits of driven personalities:

1. They are gratified only by accomplishments.
2. They are preoccupied with the symbols of success and accomplishment.
3. They are caught up in the uncontrolled pursuit of expansion.
4. They tend to have a limited regard for integrity.
5. They often possess limited or undeveloped people skills.
6. They frequently experience a high degree of anger.
7. They are abnormally busy. (113)

In a world devoid of solitude, action, accomplishment, and success is all left to the soul. Because the soul has not learned to detach itself from the compulsions of the world in which it lives, it is entirely captive to them. Solitude teaches the soul to die and embrace life set in perspective by the compassion and grace of Jesus.

As cure for the soul solitude draws the soul into the arms of the Beloved. Mystic

John of the Cross talks about solitude as the place where the soul builds its nest:

She lived in solitude,  
and now in solitude has built her nest;  
and in solitude he guides her,  
he alone, who also bears  
in solitude the wound of love. ("Spiritual Canticle" 607)

Solitude is not primarily an act of withdrawal. It is an act of embrace. Solitude is space created for rest with the Beloved, a place the soul experiences the compassion of God.

Transformation begins here, where mercy heals the broken heart. To be clear John of the Cross never intends to mean that the Bridegroom somehow erases suffering from the life of his beloved. Instead each wound, in solitude with him, becomes a wound of love. As he applies compassion to the broken places of the heart and soul, they ache, not so much for self as for him and for those who are also broken. The experience of compassion is itself the ground from which all other compassion rises.

In solitude the soul experiences the mercy of God and confronts the self. For centuries monastics have found this solitude within the boundaries of their cells:

Staying in one's cell is a reality check, a test to see whether my life and my image of God make sense, whether my love for God is genuine. In my cell I no longer have the possibility of diverting myself, of seeking refuge in activities, of sailing off into daydreams. I have to take a stand. Then God presses in on me. God challenges everything that I have thought up about him and about my life. (Gruen 34)

Solitude invites pilgrims to rest within the embrace of the Beloved as they sift through their hearts together. It is the place where the Son invites the soul to know and love oneself with him. The soul must honestly know and love its deep and broken places with Christ. Solitude allows the self to experience self-compassion rooted in the experienced compassion of God.

This experience also deepens compassion for others. Confronting the self means seeing one for who one is in the deepest places. It means the soul can no longer escape the reality of its own broken, human nature. Receiving the compassion of God for itself, the soul recognizes this same brokenness in others and offers to others the very compassion it received.

Solitude encourages two movements of compassion towards embrace of the Beloved and self. It also encompasses a movement away from the world. Thomas Dubay argues that only “the free can love, and only the completely free can love unreservedly” (131). The positive act of drawing towards God is mirrored by a deliberate choice to draw away from attachments in the world, inordinate loves that pull on the heart and displace love of God. Withdrawal invites the soul to reshape itself around the Beloved rather than the things to which it normally clings: a job, a relationship, the objects that clutter homes. Detachment through solitude allows the spirit to define itself apart all the attachments it normally keeps close at hand. Said another way, it allows the soul to discover its truest, deepest self as beloved to the Bridegroom. In this sense, solitude frees the soul to love. It releases the soul from captivity all those things that hold it captive in the world. A free heart is a heart free to love.

Freed for love from the things of this world within the embrace of the Beloved, the soul’s relationships with others change. Solitude frees the soul to love others.

Nouwen contends that compassion for others begins in solitude:

If you would ask the Desert Fathers why solitude gives birth to compassion, they would say, “Because it makes us die to our neighbor.” At first this answer seems quite disturbing to a modern mind. But when we give it a closer look we can see that in order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbors means to



stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and this to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other. (*Way of the Heart* 34-35)

Detachment allows this death of the soul's need to establish self-worth through comparison. The soul no longer needs to find its identity in others because its identity rests in the arms of its Beloved. Any soul captive to its attachment to others may appear to offer compassion, but the compassion it offers is really nothing more than a life. As long as it remains attached to others, as long as its identity sits in others, any compassion it extends only serves the self. This compassion is self-seeking affirmation. It is not free to love at all. It is nothing more than compulsive need. At the same time this very sort of soul reinforces its own identity by measuring itself against others. The soul must be liberated from this compulsion and fix itself on the Beloved before it can move past these toxic ways of living with the other and see the other not as source or competitor but as one like them, made for love.

Christian tradition has honored this way from the beginning. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah goes alone to Horeb where the LORD meets him in "sheer silence" (v. 12); in Matthew 4 the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for forty days "to be tempted by the devil" (v. 1) and afterwards angels "waited on him" (v. 11). Paul, after his conversion, "spent... three years, in solitude in the Arabian desert" (*Life with God Bible* 327). John received the book of Revelation while exiled to Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 1:9). Song of Solomon 2:10 sings, "My beloved speaks to me and says, 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away....'" While a "deeply sensual book" (*Life with God Bible* 963), God's people have also interpreted the language in light of God's relationship to them as the Bride of Christ. Ambrose comments on this

particular verse: “[A]rise from the pleasures of the world, arise from earthly things and come to me.... Come over the world, come to me, because I have overcome the world” (*Ancient Christian Commentary* 320). Solitude as spiritual discipline begins within the pages of Scripture. It forms God’s people throughout both testaments into the life of the early Church. Life with God meant periods of solitude. Israel’s forty years in the wilderness itself can be understood as an act of corporate solitude, a time when the people lived apart from the world around them.

Benedict of Nursia, born about AD 480, created a rule for holy communities rooted in the “monastic tradition he had himself received, and distilled it into a way of life accessible to ordinary people” (Introduction). Since the sixth century this rule has continued in use without interruption. Because its central focus is community life within the monastery, it includes instructions on how to receive those who wish to take orders:

If, therefore, the new comer persevere in knocking at our day, and continues for four or five days patiently to endure both the difficulties offered to him upon his entrance, and still persist in his petition, he should be allowed to enter.... If he promises stability and perseverance, at the end of two months, let the whole Rule be read to him.... (88-89)

While community sits at the heart of Benedict’s rule and reserves life alone for a very few spiritual elite who have already come through life together, this community life is withdrawn from the world at large. When one enters the monastery, one leaves the world. It is a deliberate community that exists in antithesis to the world around it where alone and together the people of God meet with God. Commitment to this solitude is taken so seriously that those who enter take a vow of stability, that is to remain in their monastery till death. They are not to leave unless on business for the monastery.

About eight hundred years later, Julian of Norwich began life as an anchorite in a church opposite a friary. Anchorites lived as religious hermits in an enclosed cell attached to a larger faith community, such as a church or cathedral. Bishops often recited the office of the dead as the anchorite entered the cell. Anchorites themselves would recite the words of Psalm 132: “This is my resting place forever, here shall I dwell for I have chosen it.” While many of these cells had no doors, other parishes allowed the anchorites to move freely on church grounds. They generally received food, water, and Eucharist through small windows that also allowed them to offer counsel to those in search of God. In this sense their solitude served the community at large (Cahill). Julian of Norwich experienced a series of revelations she explores in both a short and long form, recorded for all those who “desire to be Christ’s lovers” (*Showings* 125). Solitude, for Julian, was not an escape from fourteenth-century Britain. It was solidarity with Christ for his Church. Through solitude she experienced the compassion of God and offered it to those who came in search of spiritual counsel.

Just about four hundred years following, in the eighteenth century, another lover of God found strength through solitude: Gerhard Tersteegen. Solitude attracted him from a young age. By twenty-two he had taken to weaving ribbon. Simple work, he could do it entirely alone and only be bothered when he needed to leave for supplies or food, which he cooked himself. He wrote of this time, “How happy I was when I found myself living all alone! I often thought no king in the whole world could be as fully contented as I was” (qtd. in Harvey 15). He spent this solitude praying, singing hymns, and spiritual reading. Within three years, though, his spiritual mentor advised he take on a spiritual companion with whom he could live. At first resistant, Tersteegen relented, and so Henry Sommer

entered his life. They lived in solitude together over the next forty-four years, falling into a rhythm of shared work as well as private prayer. Through community and solitude, this man who spent life pursuing solitude became known as a “guide of souls” (27). People came from all over to listen, and “[e]verything he said was full of grace and power, . . . deep and comprehensive” (108). A tavern keeper is recorded to have said that when he passed by Tersteegen’s home “a great awe comes over me of some holy presence” (53). Just as with Julian, withdrawal does not serve as escape from the world but compassionate entrance into it.

In the twentieth century, Bonhoeffer wrote on Christian faith, warning others against life without solitude:

Let him who cannot be alone be aware of community. . . . Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give account to God. You cannot escape from yourself. . . . (77)

The spiritual life necessitates solitude because alone believers encounter the God who made them. Alone the soul wrestles with the Spirit who transforms it. Solitude simply embodies what is real about life with God. This way of faith is not to the exclusion of community, which he also admonishes. To be Christian is to live, to some measure, alone with the alone. Spiritual wholeness demands it.

All of these spiritual masters bear witness to solitude, from its beginning in among the Hebrews to twentieth-century Germany, from Catholics, to Pietists, to Protestants. Over and over, the Church has affirmed the practice of solitude, often in affirmation of community. However abnormal for today’s church of busyness and program, it is a well-tested cure for the harried soul.

These adventures into solitude can be pursued any number of ways. The first may be a corporate retreat, especially if it includes time for personal reflection and prayer. Remember, the object is not to be all alone; the object of withdrawal is retreat from the world and its demands for fellowship with the Beloved. Well-crafted corporate retreats accomplish this goal at both community and personal levels. An example of this sort of solitude might include Walk to Emmaus (“Journey with Christ”) and similar retreat programs that quite deliberately remove one from ceaseless demands of the ordinary world to be with God and his people. This retreat, while emphasizing community, allows time for personal work as well.

Another option might be a personal retreat. The time designated for this discipline varies and may run from a simple overnight to an entire week. Often local monasteries or retreat centers will host individuals in search of time alone with God. A simple campground may suffice as well. The retreatant should prepare in advance for the work they wish to accomplish. This preparation includes drawing up a schedule, at least in outline, of how each day unfolds. The purpose here is not regimentation but to prevent the time from drifting into purposelessness. The individual may wish to take a resource along, such as a well-chosen devotional or spiritual master. Some books have been written with the idea of personal retreat in mind, including Jean Maalouf’s *Practicing the Presence of God: A Retreat with Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection*. Perhaps the time is best served with music sheets and a guitar or the simple practice of silence. The object is not what is done so much as deliberate withdrawal from the everyday world for time spent with the Beloved.

During the regular work week, someone might set a particular time each day or week for solitude. Some prefer the early morning hours, others the afternoon or evening. The time is not so important as the commitment to practice solitude. Resources are ubiquitous: devotionals, music, Scripture, inspirational books, and DVDs. Mountains of materials have been produced to orient the soul towards the Father in time alone with him. The resource, again, is not as important as is the solitude. The object is not to complete a study guide or book but to allow that material to draw one closer to the heart of God.

In years past the Sabbath was a time set apart for God and not just the single hour between eleven and twelve. Life with God was celebrated corporately in worship and personally within the home. Shopping centers, grocery stores, and gas stations all closed. Regular chores were not done. Men and women both chose to withdraw from the normal demands of life to enjoy time with God and one another.

Solitude may be as simple as the time spent in a long commute, alone in the car, playing worship music, listening to Scriptures playing through the audio system. For over two years I drove forty-five minutes between home and my place of work, and that drive became a holy space where I could be alone with God. The intention matters more than time and place.

The object of solitude is time spent alone with the alone. It is the withdrawal of the heart from the busyness of the world into the hush of God. It is that time and place where the soul finds its rest in the embrace of its Beloved. In time this practice transforms normal places of living. Practitioners carry that embrace within the soul until it experiences a habitual practice of the presence of God.

## Deep Listening and Compassion for the Other

While not commonly listed among the spiritual disciplines, deep listening opens the soul to the wholly other. It is, therefore, both precursor to and requisite of compassion. In the act of listening, the soul discovers a shared humanity that conceives compassion within the heart. At the same time, compassion deepens listening as it refuses the demands to assert the self against others.

Scharmer names at least four kinds of listening: downloading, factual listening, emphatic listening, and generative listening. These are important because they help the soul become more aware of how it chooses to listen either in superficially or deep ways. The first, downloading, cannot really be called listening. Downloading unreflectively listens for cue words that reinforce what someone already knows. It reconfirms “habitual judgments” (11) by refusing to engage the other as a person worthy of any understanding. Downloading can be illustrated by reflecting on a favorite story from Scripture. See the words *David*, *giant*, and *stone* many people who have been reading Scripture a long time will stop. They will see the words, but the words lose all their meaning because readers believe they already know what the words mean. They are not looking for understanding. They simply rehearse the meaning they have already decided matters. In conversation this listening might happen another way. A conservative evangelical might begin listening to an evangelist and hear words such as *saved*, *grace*, *sin*, *hell*, *cross*, and *Christ* and leave quite happy never having truly listened to what was said. All he or she heard were the cue words and the rehearsed meanings tradition says are important. In the same way, that same person might hear a Roman Catholic use the words *union*, *contemplation*, and *mystic* and react very negatively for no other reason than that these words have no

meaning in his or her own faith life. Downloading is not really listening. People who download hear words and react from a rehearsed meaning or emotional program.

Factual listening begins a listening process, however basic. It acknowledges the other, to some extent, by acknowledging difference. This kind of listening is the basis for “good science” (Scharmer 12). It tends to remain object rather than person centered. In the earlier example of the one who reads the story of David slaying Goliath, the reader might notice a new detail or find out some bit of historical background that either challenges or deepens an earlier reading of the same story. Perhaps he or she questions the ethics of a savage war given the emphasis of Christ on the value of all people. At this level the listener is not transformed and does not establish a strong connection to others who still remain outside, or external, to the soul.

Individuals move deeper into listening when factual listening becomes emphatic listening. This sort of listening might be described as “*I-in-you*: what I tune in to and sense from within my heart wide open” (original emphasis; Scharmer 11). In this stage of listening, practitioners move from the center of selfness into the center of another being. They have opened not simply their minds but their hearts “to connect directly with another person or living system” (12). Scharmer argues that when this listening happens “we feel a profound switch; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else’s eyes” (12). This stage of listening is so very important because it releases listeners not simply from rehearsed judgments but actually draws them into the lives of others. Practitioners begin to suffer with the one to whom they listen, which is the root meaning of compassion, suffering with others. Suddenly listeners are outside themselves, their own worldview and passions. Free from those



preoccupations, their minds and hearts are able to receive and embrace the life of another without prejudice or judgment.

When time, open minds, open hearts, and open wills allow, Scharmer believes the listeners move into generative listening or presencing. Deep listening may also serve as another synonym, though presencing gets at the heart of the matter most closely.

Presencing is the “*I-in-now*” (original emphasis; 11). When the hearts and minds of listeners are open, they are fully present not simply to themselves but to one another.

They not only hear the words (downloading), understand difference (factual listening), move outside themselves to experience the world through another (emphatic listening), but can listen fully aware of the movement of their own inner lives, as well as the inner life of the other. The most important aspect of generative listening is that it leaves the practitioners changed. They “have connected to a deeper source—to the source of who [they] really are and to a sense of why [they] are here—a connection that links [them] with a profound field of coming into being, with your emerging authentic Self” (13).

Merton uses similar language to distinguish the false from the true self. The false self is the self presented to the world in reaction against it. It clings to its own prejudices and biases with complete unawareness that it is doing so. Others are often perceived as threats to integrity and identity. Ultimately the false self does not know who it is as the beloved of God and so is not free to love, much less suffer, with another. Only the true self, freed from the false identities through growing self-awareness and love, can love. Generative listeners only come to this deep listening after taking hold of their own inner lives, what Scharmer calls the blind spot. This listening costs listeners something of themselves, but what a gift it offers those around them.

In John 4, Jesus was left by the disciples near the village of Sychar where he met a Samaritan woman. After asking if she might draw him some water, she immediately reacted, downloading rather than listening: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9). She does not reply to his question. She hardly heard it at all. Her mind filtered what she already knew: She was a Samaritan; he was a Jew; Samaritans and Jews hated one another; his request made no sense. This last movement of nonsense began her mind moving towards factual listening, or listening for what may be different from what she already thought she knew about Jews and Samaritans. Jesus persisted in the conversation, telling her that if she knew who asked for water she would “have asked him, and he would have given [her] living water” (John 4:10). These words initiate a brief conversation in which Jesus revealed that she has been married five times and that the man with whom she lived was not her husband. Fully engaged, the woman recognized him as a prophet. She saw factual difference and asked another question about where to worship. Jesus refused to answer either as a Jew or as a Samaritan:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:21b-24)

Jesus moved the conversation beyond simple facts to invite her into his world, a kingdom he ushered in through his own life, death, and resurrection. He invited her to see the world through his eyes, emphatic listening. Of course, he had been listening emphatically since the conversation’s beginning. He had already chosen to enter her world not simply

as a Samaritan but as a shamed woman who came to the well during the heat of the day alone.

The woman agreed, believing that one day the Messiah would come. At this point Jesus revealed that he was the one sent by God. Suddenly, she was fully present to her whole self, her heart and life, and to the mystery of this Jesus she met by the well. She began to see herself as she was and Jesus as he was. She raced back to her village, saying, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29). The Beloved used the simple act of listening to draw another into love.

This story might be contrasted against life without deep listening, which refuses to risk relationship and deepens difference:

[Because] we do not take time to listen to and reflect on our inner selves.... showing compassion to others is a struggle and we are more comfortable repeating glib responses and maintaining a safe distance rather than risking attempts to connect. (Kim and Flaskerud 932)

The refusal to listen to one another creates and reinforces relational difference rooted in fear of the other, preventing the work of compassion from even taking root in the soul. A choice not to listen becomes the choice to refuse love. As long as the other remains distant, at best benign and at worst an enemy, the soul never need know them as they truly are, stripped of the identities the false self lays over them.

Choosing not to listen reinforces the false self, or Scharmer’s blind spot. Lynn G. Underwood interviewed Trappist monks in an effort to research the experience of compassionate love. She describes an analytic approach on how these men made decisions “on how best to express compassionate love in situations” (294). This approach was typified by what one monk said in particular: “I ask in each situation, how much of

me is in this? If there is too much of me, then how I can shift towards the other?" (294). To move towards deep listening, listeners must move away from the self and self-perspective. If listeners refuse to do as this monk suggests by checking the inner life, they remain captive to it and the false self that resists the other. Real listening forces the soul to confront its own darkness even as it is invited into the life of the other.

Refusal to listen builds barriers to relationship and encourages judgment. Michael L. Butterworth wrote a fascinating article on the phenomena of faith night baseball, a minor or major league baseball game driven by Christian faith themes. The special events are often depicted by baseball managers as promotional, a way to create interest and revenue in the home team. Local churches and Christian religious leaders see them as a means to evangelize non-Christians, or at least to create excitement in the local church. At such events local ballplayers may share their personal testimonies or Christian bands may play. Sometimes free Christian collector cards with Bible characters are handed out instead of ballplayer cards. Participants may be asked to stand to join in a round of *God Bless America*. From the view of both promoters and evangelical Christians, this event is a marvelous deal, but critics see it as dangerous:

[T]hrough Christian performance and testimonials, as well as Christian-based corporate sponsorship, these events threaten to undermine baseball's pluralism by making the ballpark the latest venue for selling Christ.... Such concerns are directed toward conservative Christianity's commitment to absolute divisions between good and evil, and saved and unsaved, which provides the grounds for constructing a world in which non-believers are marked as lost souls at best and mortal enemies at worst....

[Fundamentalism] depends on a variation of an "us" versus "them" logic that makes it an exemplar of anti-democratic discourse. (313-17)

While the article itself is not concerned with listening as an act or precursor to compassion, it underlines what happens when well-meaning Christians fail to listen to those whom they target for conversion. A religious culture that has closed itself from those who are not just like them create a black and white worldview that demands an inner and outer circle of belonging, or of belonging and not belonging. In this worldview those who do not belong are at best pitied and at worst utterly despised. In either case the humanity of the other is not recognized, at least to its fullest. In some way the lost are less human than are the chosen elect. This hubris actually builds walls against the very people it purports to save. Faith nights allow no listening to stories of hurt or rejection or of vital, and different, faith experiences. Faith nights evangelize through monologue rather than dialogue or what he calls “ambush evangelism” (321). This forced hearing allows none of the compassion of Christ and much more closely resembles the captive audience found throughout the marketing world than the Jesus who befriends a Samaritan woman by the village well. Feeling ambushed in what they believed was a safe place, some non-Christians will become more resistant to the gospel than before they arrived.

Finally, this refusal to listen to one another leads to a totalitarian speech, very similar to the monologue previously described. It is characterized by several qualities:

- Dialogue only takes place among those of my group, which functions to reinforce the view that we have the truth.... [T]here is not intention to be moved by the Other or to alter one’s position.
- A transformation of anxiety into hostility toward, fear of, or hatred of the Other, which happens to be any person or group that is perceived to dispute or call into question the absolutized claims of the group.
- Only those who accept this worldview are fully human or fully persons—all others are less than, lacking in some fundamental way. (LaMothe 469-70)

Quite interestingly, Ryan LaMothe believes that this way of being in the world intensifies in heterogeneous contexts where anxiety surrounding growing complexity leads people to “take shelter in the certainty of the totalitarian ... and concomitant security of ideological enclaves” (471). Retreat from engagement, while an attractive option for those seeking escape from the pressures of an ever-changing world, prevents the work of compassion that demands a suffering with the other. It reinforces all the movements of the soul toward the self and away from the other.

All these researched dynamics erode people’s ability to listen and to care for others. They divide; they keep the soul captive to the self and afraid of others; they build barriers against those the soul imagines it loves. They inhibit the practice of compassion that demands a willingness to listen with an open mind, open heart, and open will.

Listening nurtures the experience and practice of compassion in at least five important ways. In the midst of Underwood’s dialogue with the monks, compassion meant “to experience, be present, to the situation of the other,... allowing an action or attitude to emerge, rather than settling on a solution to the problem immediately” (293). This sentiment echoes Scharmer’s generative listening. It is a choice to be fully present to self and others, releasing the soul from the inner need to control or dictate what emerges from dialogue. This position respects the other’s humanity as both real, vital, and valuable. It understands something of value in the other that the self lacks, such as different perspectives, experiences, and understandings. Its open will allows the possibility and eventuality of change. This stands in stark contrast to a faith night event, which refuses to engage or be changed by the other. The former, an act of compassion, places listeners in direct relationship to the other, while the latter sees them as something

different from themselves. The first is a belonging built on shared humanity: the second a belonging built on ideological homogeneity.

Listening, as an act of compassion, also serves “to help another become fully themselves” (Underwood 293). If monologue, or ambush evangelism, is little more than convincing the other to be like oneself, compassionate listening strives for the opposite, which is to help the other become more fully itself again. Compassion abandons the need to control or manipulate. It views the other as valuable and important.

This perspective of value in the other through listening nurtures both humility and an openness to mystery:

In humility, there is a fundamental openness to the mystery and discovery of the other as a unique subject created in the image and likeness of God. And it is this habit of humility that creates a space in our hearts and minds to engage and compassionately meet the Other. (LaMothe 477)

In this sense humility and wonder act as both requisite to and product of the deep listening. It allows the other space in the heart of the listener and, at the same time, allows the soul to come to a deeper sense of its limitations and shared humanity.

Listening demands prioritizing the person over personal judgment. James H. Zahniser and Craig A. Boyd argue that in order to practice Christian compassion people must elevate “compassion for the person above articulating a judgment on the issues of homosexuality” (216). In choosing to listen compassionately one to another, even to those far beyond one’s own daily experiences, one must choose not simply to see and connect to the person but to raise that person above the judgments one holds over them. Deep listening, as an act of compassion, frees the soul for this work.

Listening allows one to see Christ in and hear Christ through others, even the enemy. Father Thomas Keating tells about his early life in his own Trappist monastery.

Life was austere for the young Keating who had come to commit his whole life to the pursuit of God, and among the Trappists the pursuit of God means silence. The greater the silence, the greater is the pursuit of God. To that end he spent every free moment in the chapel, kneeling on the floor. His growing callouses became a mark of his progress, or at least he thought. About that time, though, another young man entered the monastery with the same fervent zeal, except this young man asked for a special dispensation. Rather than kneel in the chapel during those extended hours of prayer, the abbot granted him permission to sit. Keating took an immediate dislike to the man, especially when he discovered that no matter how much he hurried this monastic brother managed to beat him to the chapel most of the time and then had the gall to sit silently, smiling all the while. Contemplative prayer such as Keating practiced has a way of revealing the secrets of the heart, and it did. He soon became aware that these feelings had nothing to do with holiness at all but with envy of this one for whom contemplation seemed to come so easily:

After three or four years of struggling with these feelings, I was thrown into a situation where I could speak with my brother monk. I discovered he had the same problems I had in trying to find enough free time for prayer and that his periods of consoled prayer alternated with very heavy seas. We sympathized with each other... and in time we became friends.  
(144)

This simple story may summarize the relationship between compassion and listening.

Listening opens the soul to share in common humanity with the other. It facilitates the experience and practice of compassion and is itself an act of compassion. Listening is not about the words. The words are just sounds. The meaning those words carry and the relationship shared over them matter most. To live in vital Christian community, the people of God must learn the art of listening to one another and those they wish to love.



Without care, without listening the heart calcifies. Relationships decay. Listening keeps the soul oriented outwards, towards the care and love of the other. Life for the one who listens is not wrapped up in the dungeon of the self but in community with those they love with God.

David G. Benner provides some direction on how to listen to others. Because he writes primarily for soul friends and spiritual directors, Benner takes some time to develop how listening can happen, especially among those within the community of faith. The five principles he outlines for listeners can be summarized as follows:

- Making space,
- Offering the gift of genuine presence,
- Attending to the Presence,
- Offering the gift of dialog,
- Choosing to mediate grace. (45-59)

Each of these commitments to the other plays an important role in choosing to practice compassion through listening. Each is an effort to connect in relationship to others in a deep, meaningful way.

Making space for another is much more than setting an appointment or emptying a chair of clutter. Making space for others is about “cultivating a place of quiet within [ourselves where another can find] gifts of presence, stillness, safety, and love” (Benner 46-47). Hospitality requires deep soul work, an “intimacy that God offers me ... [that] also longs for me to host him—to invite him into my inner garden and meet him there” (47). In this sense this gracious space the soul offers others is simply an extension of the space already extended to the soul by the Beloved. Preparing the heart to receive others in

this deliberate way orients the heart towards each of the remaining gifts Benner describes. The soul must enter into relationship with this space already prepared, committed to receiving others as its guests there. If not, the soul will not be able to listen wholly or receive others in such a way that allows them to feel at ease and safe.

The gift of genuine presence in the soul is utterly attentive to the other. One is there, alert and awake. In today's multitasking world, this task proves difficult. Constant distractions everywhere and always pull at attention, directing it away from the sacrament of the present moment. More than simple attention, full presence offers the gift of the soul's genuine self: "Sacred companions do not play a role" (Benner 51). When the soul does not offer its true self to others, its presence has been withheld. Genuine presence and real conversation require offering self. Without self the soul has already become absent. Listening means risking the transformation that sometimes happens in allowing others to speak deeply into the inner life.

Third, those who share together must attend to the Presence. Spiritual conversation does not begin in the human heart. It begins, ends, and continues in the heart of God. Attending to the Presence keeps individuals attentive to what the Spirit and unfolds in their lives and the lives of others. In listening to others, the soul may hear the voice of God speak and likewise offer that voice in return. Rooted in this attentiveness is the belief that Christ-with-me is also Christ-in-the-other. Presence allows the soul to recognize the other as a person of holy worth.

Presence flows into the fourth of Benner's gifts: the gift of dialog. He says that in "dialog, I meet you as a person, not an object" (55). Most listening, and speaking, objectifies others as functional means to an end. It asks how this or that person serves the

self. Functional conversation has no interest in others as those with whom the soul shares a common humanity and redemption. The gift of dialogue acknowledges the gift of others to the soul, which is themselves. This gift cannot be taken; it can only be received. The gift of dialogue reinforces the need of the soul for the other and pierces the illusion of a privatized faith system dependent on me, myself, and I.

Finally, Benner suggests that real listening offers real grace. Deep listening mediates grace:

Genuine dialog is a sacred activity, because it is God's presence that enables us to meet another person in this deep, safe and intimate manner.... If I bring anything of value to the meeting, it is that I mediate divine grace. This is the core of Christian soul care. (57)

What the soul offers in relationship is much more than itself. It is the very presence, the very grace, of the Beloved. The soul does not listen to or love others itself; it listens and loves with the Spirit who indwells both the listener and the speaker. Listening acts as compassion within the world not simply because it chooses to recognize others but because it communicates the compassion of Christ for each and every one. Intention is also important. Entering relationships with others with the intention of offering this grace with Christ prepares the soul to receive others within a spirit of loving care, to hear what is said as Christ hears it. This mediation of grace does not put the listener in a position above the other but in gracious service to them. As Christ emptied himself, as he took the basin and the towel to wash the disciples feet, the soul listens to mediate grace not from a place of judgment or privilege but from a place of compassionate service as those who themselves have received unmerited grace.

Benner designed his model around one-on-one relationships, although its principles could be applied to relationships at large. Bishop Sally Dyck writes on a

wonderfully Methodist institution called holy conferencing, which she describes as how “we confer with each other in order to find our way forward as disciples of Jesus in the world today” (2). Conference has been part of Methodist experience from the beginning. While celebrating the personal experience of faith, Wesley always rooted faith within the context of human community. This tradition continues most visibly in the United Methodist Church at annual conference where clergy and laity gather to worship and to make decisions regarding ministry within its boundaries. Dyck’s pamphlet describes what she believes to be eight specific dynamics that allow members not simply to make decisions but to do so in a way that reflects the holy.

- Every person is a child of God.
- Listen before speaking.
- Strive to understand from another’s point of view.
- Strive to reflect accurately the view of others.
- Disagree without being disagreeable.
- Speak about issues; do not defame people.
- Pray, in silence or aloud, before decisions.
- Let prayer interrupt your busyness.

Taken together these steps facilitate listening in larger gatherings around what might be controversial issues. Like Benner’s model, they orient the self towards others in such a way that the soul opens itself to receive and hear others rather than simply react against what might threaten preconceived ideas. Among this list the first, sixth, and last can play essential roles in learning the art of compassionate listening. The first and sixth, taken together, reinforce shared humanity. Others like the self are children of God with all the meaning those words bring. They are God’s image bearers in this world. The last, allowing prayer to interrupt busyness, forces the soul back to this position of shared humanity, the constant pull of love’s tide drawing it back towards common ground in the heart of God.

Seeds for Change has proposed another method implemented to nurture listening in large groups—consensus. Seeds for Change believes that consensus decision making “is a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group.... [A] consensus group is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports” (“Consensus Decision Making” 1). It presupposes the value of others and embraces the limitation of any one individual alone. Conditions for consensus include a common goal, commitment to reaching consensus, trust and openness, sufficient time for making decisions, a clear process, and active participation. In contrast against more traditional parliamentary procedures that create winners and losers by nature of their process, the consensus model allows each member to participate positively in problem solving without feeling marginalized.

The object is not necessarily agreement. Members in the group may disagree without forming obstructionist voting blocks. At the highest level one reaches consensus that is active agreement and support. Decision makers not only agree but choose to participate in the work. One may also agree with reservations. In this case a participant has some concerns but allows the proposal to move on without her or him. Decision makers may also stand aside, an outright refusal to support the proposal while refusing to obstruct. A veto ends the proposal full stop and are only used “if serious concerns are unresolved” (5). These varying levels of agreement allow participants to remain involved in the process and to understand the difference between agreement on an issue and an agreement to work for the good of the community as a whole.

Larger groups may be broken into smaller units where the question will be discussed and ideas brought together by spokespeople. After working together to

dialogue several solutions, those ideas then go back to the small groups for discussion. Following conversation, the decision comes back to the larger group for either affirmation or rejection.

Seeds for Change does caution against ever going against a block when the participant is simply unwilling to work through the process. A block brings the entire group to a standstill. More than simple rejection, it is an impossibility to live with the outcome of a decision (5).

These methods facilitate deep listening that nurtures compassion. They are not ends in themselves. Compassion does not happen because any one, two, or three steps are followed. They simply create space for the soul and others to meet in the light of grace as those who share a common humanity born in the heart of God.

### **Small Group Ministry and the Work of Compassion**

Jesus, in talking about life together in Christian community, told the people that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20b). The promise of his enduring presence permeates all four Gospel narratives, even up to and including his ascension. He said in the very last verse of Matthew, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 29:20b). His presence within and through the community of faith is fundamental to the redemption story. Redemption has never been about the single soul, alone, but about the restoration of life with God in community with his people. Matthew 18:20b is not about the number of people that happen to show up at a particular prayer meeting or Bible study but about the intimacy shared in the Spirit of the one who gathers those there together.

Luke records this intimate life in Acts 2:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Early believers, or followers of the way, are not strangers to one another's suffering.

They make no effort to disguise vulnerability or simply escape the hurt. These brothers and sisters knew one another. They understood the struggles each faced, and they responded as each could. These people knew something about life in community with one another.

They received this life in their baptism by the Holy Spirit. They understood what Stephen Seamands describes about life in relationship to one another:

But trinitarian personhood also means that we will never be able to complete that journey on our own. Since to be a person is to be in relationship with others, involvement in a small group of fellow Christians who are committed to us and to our journey together is indispensable to our spiritual and emotional growth. (44)

Made in the image of a Trinitarian God, or a God that exists in constant self-emptying relationship with others, self-emptying relationship becomes part of the human spiritual journey as well. Drawn into relationship with the Trinity through the work of Christ, the Spirit makes all one. The Apostle's Creed refers to this unity with its words surrounding the communion of the saints. Community is simple spiritual reality. In Christ, one does not choose community with brothers and sisters. One is in community with them by virtue of their fellowship with Christ. To refuse those relationships is to refuse the embrace of Christ, in whom all rest. Small group ministry simply recognizes and embodies this spiritual reality.

The great spiritual masters understood that reality. They knew that birth in Christ was, in fact, birth into the body of Christ. Benedict begins his rule by listing several sorts of monks, including the Gyrovagi and Sarabites. The Gyrovagi “drift about all their lives from one province to another, and stay for two or three days as guests, first in one monastery, then in another...” (8). The Sarabites “have never been tried under a Rule of by the experience of a Master” (7). Of particular interest is that Benedict does not identify these pseudo-religious groups doctrinally. He never questions the Catholicity of their stated beliefs. He attacks the unhealthy ways in which they choose to be among the people of God, refusing steadfast community and its guidance. He praises only two kinds of monastics: the cenobites, who lived within Christian community under the rule of an abbot, and the anchorites, who, after spending many years within community, have prepared themselves to “struggle hand to hand against the flesh and evil thoughts” (7). In his mind even solitaries depended on spiritual community for strength.

John of the Cross believed community to be central to the formation of Carmelite brothers and sisters:

[Y]ou have not come to the monastery for any other reason than to be worked and tried in virtue; you are like the stone that must be chiseled and fashioned before being set in the building.

Thus you should understand that those who are in the monastery are craftsmen placed there by God to mortify you by working and chiseling at you. Some will chisel with words, telling you what you would rather not hear; others by deed, doing against you what you would rather not endure; others by their temperament, being in their person and in their actions a bother and annoyance to you; and others by their thoughts, neither esteeming nor feeling love for you.

You ought to suffer these mortifications and annoyances with inner patience, being silent for love of God and understanding that you did not enter the religious life for any other reason than for others to work you in this way, and so you become worthy of heaven. If this was not your reason for entering the religious state, you should not have done so, but should



have remained in the world to seek your comfort, honor, reputation, and ease. (“Special Counsels” 726)

John understands the difficulty of life in community, even community among those whose lives have been wholly offered to God in community. He goes further. Formation does not happen in spite of these difficulties but, in part, because of them. This suffering, great and small, becomes the means through which Christians dies to themselves and this world. He goes as far as to call the bothersome brothers “craftsmen” (726). In this sense perfect community is not necessary for formation. Grace moves through all things and people.

Community, especially small groups, are an important part of the Methodist tradition. Wesley, in reflecting on the spiritual journey, says, “It is a blessed thing to have fellow travellers to the New Jerusalem. If you do not find any you must make them, for none can travel this road alone” (qtd. in Tracey, Cockerill, Demaray, and Harper 127). In Wesley’s mind community was not secondary but essential. He built directly into early Methodist organization structures called societies, classes, and bands where individuals practiced transparency, vulnerability, and grace, where souls found discernment among those on the journey with them. Wesley himself observed, “[M]embers began to ‘bear one another’s burdens,’ and to ‘care for each other’” (qtd. Collins 183). The deliberate practice of community became a place where grace nurtured compassion. Small group ministry is central not simply to Scripture and Christian tradition but to the Methodist tradition in particular.

Small groups continue to be popular today. Roger Walton found 37 percent of all English churchgoers in 2001 belonged “to a small group for prayer or Bible study” (100). Only 1 percent of his respondents reported that their church did not offer some form of

small group ministry. According to his research, four in ten Americans belonged to a small group in 1996. This small group movement has given birth to the small group church, a “new cultural [form] of church apparent in contemporary society” (100). Small groups provide participants a place to know others and be known by them.

Steven W. Manskar reinforces his belief that small group ministry is “particularly important to this ‘post-modern’ age if the church is to reach youth and young adults ... [who] are seeking community where they have opportunities to experience genuine faith” (3). It is a tool fit for a time when people living in a fragmented society desperately seek meaning through connection and relationship. The benefits are not limited to the individual participant.

Walton continues in his article to argue that small group participants “attend worship more often, feel a stronger connection to the church, and give more time and money to the enterprise than those who do not belong to a small group” (100). He also found that “small groups in churches enhance racial-ethnic diversity, promote congregational growth and have positive effects on members’ beliefs and practices” (100). The health of individuals within the groups system strengthens the church as a whole. Somehow the small group context allows dynamics that larger organized groups do not. A church whose members embrace small groups are more likely to achieve overall health and growth.

Walton is realistic about the potential obstacles small groups present in forming a healthy church. Among these obstacles, he believes that a small group may become resistant to “the dominant church culture, [creating] alternative understandings. . . [undermining] congregational life..... [concentrating] on seemingly sinister traits of

certain movements,... and controlling the live of others” (105). In this case the small group stops contributing to church health and becomes a force that fosters division and argument. Somehow in the formation of this small group, identification with the small group has become more important than identification with the group at large. Moreover, identification with the small group means antagonism with the group at large.

Walton also warns that small groups may not “lead to better Bible knowledge,... assert the value of denominational traditions,... [or] engage in theological arguments over truth claims” (106). In other words participants may remain profoundly stuck in whatever theological ideas they first believed. Apart from thoughtful challenge by other group members rooted in their own pursuit of theological study, members never break free from old prejudices. A Bible study remains little more than the ignorance of one person reinforcing the ignorance of another. Often times assumptions are based on popular theology rather than on the deeply rooted traditions of the church at large, which somehow escape the attention of everyday Christians out in the world. The net effect is that participants do not grow up. The small group ministry produces little or no real growth spiritually, mentally, or emotionally.

Quite surprisingly, Walton also asserts that some “small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others” (107), which entirely undermines the goal of nurturing compassionate relationship. He backs this statement with statistics, showing that only 51 percent of small group participants believed their participation “made them more likely to help their neighbors” (109). Only 23 percent of small group participants became “more involved in justice issues on an international level; and only a few thought it got them more involved in local issues

(18%)” (109). These statistics do not undermine the usefulness of small groups. They do make quite clear the importance of going about small ministry in both a deliberate and thoughtful way.

In thinking about what makes a small group work, Tom Albin argues that it must always be voluntary. Forced participation becomes a means for control, manipulation, which prevents members from embracing their true selves in Christ. In his words small group ministry is “not the church telling me I have to do this or else” (qtd. in Stafford and Albin 44). Instead seekers respond “to the call of God when [they are] ready” (44). The voluntary nature of small group ministry also preserves personal freedom, which is essential to the practice of compassion. Compassion must be freely given.

Sarah Edmunds and George Brown provide very helpful insights for effective small groups. They list six important skills of a group leader: asking questions, listening, responding, explaining, opening and closing, and preparing. Of particular interest for this research are the last two listed: opening/closing and preparing. Edmunds and Brown argue that the start of any small group session “sets the tone for the rest of that learning session and it can influence subsequent meetings” (719). Because of the importance of the opening, they suggest time be taken to REST before each session begins:

- R—Establish *rapport* with the group and between members of the group.
- E—Discuss *expectations* of the roles of tutors and students.
- S—Outline the *structure* of the course and of the small group session.
- T—Set a brief, but *relevant task* and provide feedback on the groups’ achievement of the task and their interaction. (original emphasis, 719)

REST establishes a safe space for the work, spiritual or otherwise, of the group. Clear expectations and understanding help alleviate anxieties that may otherwise prevent group learning and relationships. REST is an act of compassion of the instructor or group leader

for the group members. Like a compass, it orients group members to the purpose to which they have been called together.

Closure is just as important for Edmunds and Brown. They suggest each session end with a summary of what has happened: key points, unanswered questions, insights. It is a time to tie everything together for the group at large, so everyone leaves knowing what has been accomplished or understood or explored during that time. It is also a place where the group leader may affirm the participation of each person.

Given the importance of opening and closing, preparation is key, which Edmunds and Browns breaks into three specific questions each group leader must ask herself or himself:

- What do I want students to learn?
- How do I want them to learn it?
- How will I find out whether they have learnt it? (719)

While basic, these questions form the basis of each small group session: content, action surrounding content, and the question of how a leader evaluates if the purpose has been achieved. The second may be critical in the area of spiritual formation, especially when leaders ask how deeply their pedagogy affirms the spiritual realities they want to bring alive in their small group participants. Conversation may not be the best ways to lead others into the appreciation of silence, at least to a point.

They also recommend the small group leader spend some time evaluating both the small group process and whatever resulted from that process. While they offer different ideas about how to reflect on group dynamics, the thrust of each is to maintain awareness about what unfolds in time together. Care should be taken to make certain that the process and product align with the purpose.

Small groups are a furnace for love. They force participants to confront themselves, their biases, their hidden sins as they struggle to love the other. They draw the self outward towards God and neighbor; they demand something from the self.

In small groups the soul experiences love, where it comes to know itself as the beloved of God. Within small group ministry, a soul can learn not only to offer compassion to others but to itself, which is why this particular discipline forms the church for life in love together. Relationship is simply part of being human.

### **Exploratory Qualitative Inquiry Method**

This particular research utilized the exploratory qualitative method because it allows “the researcher . . . [to] focus on learning the meaning of the problem or issue from the participants’ description of their personal experience, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the research” (Mosby 51). This approach allows each participant the freedom to give her or his own experience, meaning apart from the researcher. As described in Family Health International’s own brochure, this method “seeks to explore phenomena,... [using] semi-structured methods... [in order to describe] variation [and] explain relationships,... individual experiences,... [and] group norms” (3). Data comes back in the form of text, most often gathered for coding by the researcher.

This research model works very well with emergent properties such as compassion. An emergent property is nothing more than the “spontaneous outcome of ongoing processes” (Gharajedaghi 46) a result of interactivity and interconnectedness that cannot be divided from the whole. Rather than the sum result of a series of processes (A to B to C to D), it is sum of interactive relationships that must continue for it to remain. Health provides a positive example. Health does not exist on its own. It is the sum of

many interactive properties. These emergent properties “cannot be measured directly ... [and] do not yield to casual explanations” (45).

Compassion is one of the properties. It cannot be measured quantitatively; it cannot be chosen like a product from the shelf of the supermarket. Compassion is the result of interior, interactive properties. People do not possess compassion; they become compassionate people as the life in them gives birth to this new orientation. In the case of this research, some of these interactive components include the practice of the means of grace, the compassion of God for the soul, and the soul’s compassion for self. The transformation of the whole self allows the birth of this new, emergent quality.

### **Summary**

Scripture abjures God’s people to abide in his love. They have no other work than to keep this single command, which calls them to embrace him heart, mind, soul, and body and to embrace all those he loves with him. Far too often the Church exchanges this life for the ways of this world, ways rooted in control, manipulation, and the other as object. The world transforms a faith rooted in the self-emptying love of Father, Son, and Spirit into a consumer’s religion for self. Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience have all shown not only the depth of this problem and the damage it does but have also provided time-tested disciplines developed for the nurture of compassion. Silence, solitude, and deep listening each lend themselves to drawing the soul out from the self towards self-emptying love.

The object of this research was to explore how a self-selected group from among God’s people at New Hope and Epsilon United Methodist Churches understand, experience, and incarnate the compassion of Christ and how that compassion may be

nurtured in them through the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. Its purpose was not simply to measure how much time is spent in silence or how many hours in solitude, so it required a qualitative approach sensitive to the movements of the soul. This approach attempted to practice the listening it espoused. This research intended a complete change of heart through the work of the Spirit.

Essential to the learning process was not only my instruction but the support each participant offered one another in group participation. Experiential learning, as this research showed, was key to internalizing the abiding presence of Christ. This project provided a space for the transformation of each soul in Christ together.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem and Purpose

The tremendous challenge the church faces today is not declining membership, tightening finances, or an unwilling clergy. It is not the lack of feeling in personal devotion or boredom in acts of Christian worship. It is failure to abide in the loving awareness of God as the people of God and, failing to do this, harboring growing indifference not only toward the Beloved but towards all those he gives his followers to love with him. This selfish indifference turns the soul back in on itself, so that the soul remains utterly untransformed. The people of God look no different from the world because in their hearts, they are no different from it.

Scripture repeatedly exhorts the people to embrace compassion not as affective experience but as a total reorientation of the heart towards others. Whether the Torah's great Shemah prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the love story of Song of Solomon, the Great Commandments of Christ recorded in Matthew 22:37-40, the words of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, or the letter of First John, rebellion against holy love is rebellion against the Trinity whose heart is holy love.

This research has already shown the real and destructive force of indifference within the world, ranging from a compassion-resistant capitalism that reduces workers to mere functionaries and consumers to profits gained or lost. Ecological awareness, economic and social justice, recognition of one another's humanity are each subordinated to efficiency and success in the marketplace. This decision of indifference perpetuates not only an unquenchable consumerism but feeds a need for ever cheaper, even enslaved,

labor. People become a simple commodity, treated as either factory cogs or profits. Little effort is taken to become aware how decisions made might ripple out into the hidden world around them. While young adults have more information available to them than generations before them, this advantage has not altered a voracious felt need to consume with little thought to how their behavior affects themselves, those around them, or the natural limits of resources.

This commodification, or indifference to others, has reinforced a culture of sexism that many women actively celebrate. From childhood women read magazines and see commercials that train them to think of themselves simply in terms of their sexuality. Sexually objectified, they become objects to satisfy the sexual drive of men rather than recognized persons made in God's own image.

Indifference has infected American politics and created a culture of hostility that disallows work for the common good. While the public complains about political gridlock, voters are themselves responsible for it. Partisan voters elect partisan politicians who serve with partisanship. Elected leaders who veer from this program are destroyed by the interest groups who invest in them and the voters who elect them.

Step by step all these cultural currents have found their way into the church, which is easily illustrated by an incident that took place during this research when I was asked by a representative from my annual conference to read *A Second Resurrection: Leading Your Congregation to New Life*. The book, by Bill Easum, sounded intriguing. Christ came to offer his people new life. I quickly realized, though, Easum has far less interest in new life than new congregants.

Spiritually alive churches, no matter what their form or where they are planted, always grow. That is the nature of the beast. That is the kind of

church God honors. That is what the church was put on earth to do—spread the good news. When a church faithfully does that, it grows. Period. . . . If not, it's spiritually dead, no matter how well it takes care of its members.  
(11)

Easum conflates spiritual vitality with numerical growth. He makes this mistake to the point that he refuses to believe any circumstance can prevent a church from numerical growth if it is spiritually vital. The corollary of his statement is that failing churches are spiritually dead. While Easum's passion for the church and its survival in a changing world are both very positive, a capitalist spirit has infected his ecclesiology. He has displaced healing or wholeness for more bodies in the pews and bucks in the plate. If his words are taken seriously, that a faithful church always grows, then a growing church is always faithful. These are not brothers and sisters. They are religious customers he attracts through careful marketing and programming within the church.

The purpose of this ministry project was to explore how a self-select group from among God's people at New Hope and Epsilon United Methodist understand, experience, and incarnate the compassion of Christ and how that compassion may be nurtured in them through the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. Compassion cannot be commanded. As a disposition of the heart, it must be nurtured through the experience of God's own mercy. The means of grace provide places for participants to experience that compassion for themselves before embodying that compassion for the world.

Compassion is not fundamentally an orthodoxy. Believing God is compassionate does not transform the heart. Compassion cannot be reduced to how well one understands the phenomena of compassion psychologically or sociologically. Understanding, as an act of the intellect, frees the soul to consider what the compassionate life might mean or how

one might pursue it. It may even allow one to move more deeply into that life of compassion, but the knowledge alone remains bits of trivia if not driven deeper into the heart and life. Compassion is not fundamentally an orthodoxy.

Compassion is also not fundamentally an orthopraxy. It is not primarily what one does. One does not become compassionate by following a list of rules defining how to be compassionate in the world today. Compassion must be incarnate; it must be embodied. However, these outward realities only point towards what is most real.

In its deepest center, compassion is fundamentally about orthopathy, the right heart. It is a willingness to suffer in love with another. It is a disposition of the heart beautifully expressed in the self-emptying of Christ for his people in bits of bread and a common cup. The mercy and compassion of God spills out everywhere in a fallen, broken creation. This mercy is the compassion that must take hold of every disciple's life. The intellect allows for understanding. The incarnation allows the expression, but the heart must change.

The nurture of compassion must be pursued experientially through an indirect means of grace. Jamshid Gharajedaghi calls qualities such as compassion an emergent property or a "product of the interactions, not the sum of actions" (45). Said another way, compassion cannot be reduced to a simple multistep process. It is not deciding to fly from one point to another and discovering layovers in two or three points in between. It is not a linear, mechanical experience. Emergent properties are dynamic. They come alive only in very specific states of being. They might also be compared to the various states of water: vapor, liquid, and solid. Water exists in each of those states but only within specific

limits. Ice gives way to liquid water at 32 degrees Fahrenheit; at high temperatures, liquid water will always give way to steam.

The object, then, is not to manufacture compassion as a static product but to nurture an inner life that gives way to the experience and embodiment of compassion. These means of grace, then, are not ends in themselves but greenhouses for the soul. These are places where the beloved of God till the ground of their beings and raise their arms to the ever-streaming light of God. Compassion only follows the spiritual work that creates the inner life of God in his people.

### **Research Questions**

Two essential dynamics underlie the research questions:

- Understanding the inner life of each participant before, during, and after the ministry project, and
- Understanding how this inner life impacts the outer life in relationship to compassion.

This dual purpose presupposes that as an emergent property compassion is, at its very heart, an expression of what has already been born within the inner life. This inner experience demands an approach that allows research participants freedom to reflect thoughtfully on what their participation means for them in regards to their lives with God and with each other. Molded around these considerations, the following questions are both qualitative and exploratory. They not only grant the participants a fuller voice in expressing their inner experience but also provide rich data for later mining.

The first of these questions, how do participants experience, understand, and incarnate the compassion of Christ prior to the intervention, explored through the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, created a baseline for later comparison. Before leading the people into experiences of silence, solitude, and deep

listening, I needed to understand how each already experienced, understood, and incarnated the compassion of Christ. The effectiveness of the ministry project could not be ascertained without this key step. This question also provided data on compassion on how any similar population might already experience, understand, and incarnate compassion as well.

The second research question, how do participants experience silence, solitude, and deep listening both as disciplines and as fertile ground for the compassionate life following the intervention, was dual pronged. It questioned first how the participants experienced the disciplines themselves, whether exciting, boring, easy, hard, or engaging. The second goes further by asking how the participants experienced the disciplines as a fertile ground for the compassionate life as places of spiritual transformation. The question was central to the research. As the project unfolded, these questions were answered through the use of spiritual life journals. I needed to understand how each participant understood the experience, especially as places of spiritual change. This question was also explored in the postintervention focus group, allowing some time for the participants to reflect more thoughtfully on their participation in the project.

The third question, how do participants understand this experience of compassion and embody it for themselves and others following the intervention, asked the participants to reflect on their experiences and how those experiences changed not only their understanding but also their practice of compassion. From their perspective, it sought what actual changes took place. Spiritual life journals ascertained their responses as did the focus group.

The fourth question, what changes did I observe in how participants embody compassion for themselves and others following the intervention, was intended to understand change from a third person's perspective. The first person perspective, while absolutely vital, can sometimes be biased, especially when related to understanding the self. Using a researcher's log, I took careful note to observe the behaviors of participants over time, always asking, "What does this behavior mean in light of the project? Does it indicate growth of some sort?"

This research was not about the practice of spiritual devotion but real, transformative change within the hearts of participants. The disciplines mean to lead the participants to the life that abides in the compassion and love of Christ. The data gathered through the aforementioned tools were then compared against the participants' own spiritual autobiographies to gauge what interior changes they experienced.

### **Population and Participants**

The population for the research into the nurture of compassion was selected as a matter of purpose, which is the good of the faith communities I serve. This population of largely rural United Methodists is also fairly representative of other small town and country churches in the West Michigan Annual Conference: a blue collar agrarian orientation. Because small group meetings were held in a United Methodist congregation between the participating churches, its pastor and pastor's spouse were also invited to participate. I selected this location because the people of Epsilon and New Hope were not accustomed to meeting together. This third location sits equidistant between them, which means that no one was asked to travel more than any other.

Following announcements made in the worship service and administrative board meetings, participants self-selected into the group. Limited criteria applied in allowing the full participation of congregants. Because participants of the research reflection team were each familiar with the research and proposed project, they were disallowed from acts as participants. Their involvement would slant results. Participation was also limited to congregants from the churches I served, as well as the ministry couple who served the congregation where the participants met for small group. Participation was encouraged among men and women, members and nonmembers of the congregations. This approach maximized the total possible number of participants. Participants were each expected to take part in as much of the intervention as possible and signed a covenant to that effect.

### **Design of the Study**

This exploratory inquiry research looked at how a self-selected group from among God's people at New Hope and Epsilon United Methodist Churches understand, experience, and incarnate the compassion of Christ and how that compassion might be nurtured in them through the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. Composed of three distinct phases before, during, and after the ministry project, qualitative tools were used all along the way, including interviews, journals, and a focus group. The ministry project combined small group sessions and a retreat to lead the participants into a deeper understanding and experience of graced disciplines intended to instill compassion through interior change.

The first phase of the research, preministry project, can itself be broken into two distinct parts: inviting participation and initial qualitative testing. This phase was not about change and demanded very little from the participants themselves. The research



reflection team and I promoted the small group study in both congregations, including a letter printed in both newsletters. After an initial informational meeting, I met with each participant to go through the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography meant to provide some initial understanding of how each one understood, experienced, and practiced compassion.

The second, or middle, phase comprised the intervention itself: four small group sessions followed by a retreat. These times together were intended not only as informational but experiential and transformational. One learns to pray by praying. While the participants completed spiritual life journals, I kept a log of my observations of the group and participants. This log was supplemented by participant observers who met with participants during small group sessions, as well as the retreat, facilitating conversation in triads, taking notes, and meeting with me following each of the four sessions.

The third, and final, phase took place following the bulk of the ministry intervention during and then after the retreat. This phase included a focus group, asking participants to reflect on what happened. It was their time to think on how the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening facilitated growth into the compassion of Christ. The final phase also included my work to take all the data that had been gathered and, working with ATLAS.ti, discern not only their responses to the practice of these disciplines but also how their understanding, experience, and practice of compassion changed, if at all.

The exploratory qualitative inquiry method suits this research well, providing a flexible model for understanding a given problem or topic from the perspective of the participants. It is especially ideal for work that involves intangibles (Family Health

International 1). Measures were then selected in alignment with the model: participants' observations, intense interviews, focus groups, and a my log. The data this research investigated needed to go inside the thinking and experience of the participant. A qualitative model was the only viable option for such an investigation. While quantitative tests have been created to measure empathy, each has key problems. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index has been criticized for measuring sympathy rather than empathy; the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire "does not account for cognitive components required for perspective taking" (Leitz, Gerdes, Sun, Geiger, Wagaman, and Segal 105). Hogan's Empathy Scale focuses on cognitive components of empathy with little regard for its affective facets (106). As a research problem, empathy has proven very difficult to handle quantitatively. Taken qualitatively the research freed participants to express much more fully their understanding, experience, and practice.

### **Instrumentation**

The research takes compassion's emergent quality very seriously. The project encompassed more than proving compassion's theological or biblical validity. The interior life of each participant needed shaping, allowing compassion space to grow and thrive. This understanding follows the model of discipleship very closely: embracing the life of the master in a way that transforms heart and life. Disciples who keep faith with their master live like him in this world. They allow the example of their master to form and to shape common, everyday living because this life is the spiritual furnace that forms and transforms hearts of disciples into the heart of their master. How disciples choose to live continually reinforces their own way of being.

Four distinct data-gathering tools tailored to this emergent property were used at various points over the duration of the project: the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, spiritual life journals, my researcher's log, and focus group questions. These tools reflected the qualitative nature of the research and allowed the participants various ways to address each of the four research questions.

This research measured the sample's demographics via the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography (see Appendix A). This demographic information included name, age, marital status, highest academic level attained, name of church attending, years spent with that church, and the total number of years spent in life with God. All of these demographics became possible lenses through which to interpret data as this information remains attached to the individuals throughout the process.

The preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography were researcher designed for this project. In addition to the demographic data, they ask a series of fourteen questions ranging in topics from why participants chose to join the project to their spiritual experiences to spiritual disciplines, sexuality, politics, and compassion. They were designed to get a full picture of each participant before the ministry project, asking how participants see their relationships with God, how they understand the practice of spiritual disciplines, and how they experience or embody compassion. Some topics may appear unrelated, such as politics or sexuality, but they are deliberate. Many of these participants grew up in the church and would likely have felt pressure to respond to questions surrounding compassion as their experience in the church has taught them with vague scriptural references and principles. The apparently unrelated questions were intended to come at compassion indirectly, eliciting a stronger response to the experience

or compassion of Christ in their own lives. These interviews were transcribed and then coded in coordination with ATLAS<sub>t</sub>i, a qualitative research program designed for textual statistical analysis and thematic coding. This data provided a baseline for each participant.

The researcher-designed spiritual life journals invited participants to reflect on the content of small group meetings as well as on their own experience in three to four questions. They each began with a pertinent quote and instructions simply to be present to themselves as they thought. These questions were exploratory and open ended. Though they were asked to share this information in triads, each included instructions to return them to me. Like the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, these journals were analyzed with ATLAS<sub>t</sub>i. This time, though, the purpose was to discern what was happening as each participant went through the ministry project (see Appendix A).

The researcher-designed final focus group was comprised of just ten questions. It was a final opportunity for participants to reflect together on their experience of the compassion of Christ, as well as on the spiritual disciplines. It also asked how this project shaped their own practice of compassion. This instrument, like the two preceding ones, was analyzed via ATLAS<sub>t</sub>i for the purpose of understanding what changed, if anything, over the entirety of the ministry project (see Appendix E).

My log provided a place for me to think about what I saw unfolding as the project went on, as well as a tool for recording my own reflections. Most importantly it allowed me to record what changes I saw in the practice of compassion among participants. This information was crucial, especially in comparison with the participants' own self-reporting.

## Expert Review

The spiritual autobiography was first reviewed by members of the research reflection team, which included members of the congregation who did not participate in the ministry projects, as well as an experienced spiritual director. It was then rewritten in light of their careful notes with special attention paid to understanding and focus.

This revision was then submitted to Dr. Chris Keisling, professor of Christian Discipleship at Asbury Theological Seminary, for expert review. While he suggested no changes, it returned to the research reflection team for minor work primarily related to soliciting greater participation and clearer understanding for local members.

Feedback from the research reflection team led to several positive changes that assisted with clarity and focus. These changes included a reorganization of the questions. Autobiographical information was collected last rather than first. The initial energy of the interview could then be focused on questions of compassion and spiritual journeys. The questions focusing on spiritual disciplines, gender roles, and political values appeared to be confuse some of the research team members.

The first of these was largely polished, striking the phrase “corporate prayer” for “prayer with others.” In that same subset of questions, silence, solitude, and listening were each listed separately, rather than together, allowing a greater focus on each. The questions regarding gender roles was very difficult.

Early versions of this question made people feel uncomfortable, especially when the word *sexuality* was used. The question was simplified and focused on role through the use of the phrase “gender role.” The dual focus on the arenas of family and church was maintained but separated into two questions.

The question on political values proved difficult. Some members of the research reflection team struggled to connect their faith to politics: others struggled to connect faith to the politics of political opponents. The language was simplified and included a request for specific examples of how faith shaped their political values.

Questions surrounding the spiritual journey and experience of compassion both tested very strongly. Research reflection team members very quickly opened up and shared the stories that mattered to them. Almost no changes were made to those items other than moving them to the top where they would benefit the research most.

### **Variables**

Independent variables this research introduced included the practice of described graced disciplines, participation in small group meetings, and assigned reading. These were the discipling forces each of the participants applied in successfully completing the ministry project. Taken together they were intended to lead the participants into a greater experience of God's compassion for them and so into greater compassion for others.

The dependent variables include the changes individual experienced and their practices of Christ's compassion. The independent variables, while important, only serve the greater purpose of divine intimacy. The qualitative instruments measured these changes.

Intervening variables are dynamics or forces that may also explain the results of an otherwise controlled experiment. The desirability factor is a simple example. Participants may conform to the disciplines and report positively in order to please me as their pastor. Books they have chosen to read on this topic outside of the small group may change their perspective. Relational dynamics among congregants or the congregations

may enhance or erode relationships within the group, especially as the congregations move towards cooperative ministry as Grace Life Parish.

Unpredictable factors were varied and many. This research took place in Northern Michigan, just south of the Mackinaw Bridge. Winter weather was a concern, and so the project began after January and February, which are normally the worst of the winter months. My reappointment was also a possibility within the United Methodist Church, meaning the research had to be completed before 1 July, in the event I was transferred. The commitment of the participants was a very large question mark: therefore, I developed a covenant each participant signed, a promise to themselves they would do what was asked of them (see Appendix B). My wife and I were approved by an adoption agency, which could result in a call at any time to be at an area hospital about a child. Not all of these variables could be controlled, but I made efforts to mitigate their impact.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are central concerns to all research. The first, reliability, has to do with consistency within research. Tested, reliable qualitative research presents a social experiment, which, if repeated, yields similar results. Validity deals with measurement. Specifically, it checks if the research measures what it proposed to measure in the first place, accounting for all the variables. It also determines whether factors from within or without the study somehow contaminated the results, especially something not repeatable in future iterations of the project.

This research relied on several factors to maintain reliability. The first was the use of multiple sources of data: spiritual journals, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group. These data-gathering tools create various points from which to explore their

understanding, experience, and practice of compassion, as well as the means of grace. Because each of these instruments was tagged with unique identities, I could check internal consistency of responses, as well as responses across the group. In addition was my log, which provided a perspective one step removed from the group at large. This log compared my observations against the recorded experiences of participants. Initial interviews were conducted one-on-one; spiritual journals were written alone. This process helped prevent cross-contamination. While the small group was an important furnace for the nurture of compassion, this research needed each participant's own reflection on that experience. The reliability of this research has also been backed up by centuries of Christian faith and practice. The wisdom of the Church says these disciplines invite the practitioner into greater depths of love for God and others.

The validity of the research was controlled by aligning research questions to the proposed purpose in direct line to the stated problem. The research design, the proposed small group sessions and retreat, the interview, focus group, and spiritual journals were each geared towards answering the problem this research suggested exists within the Church today. The preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, spiritual life journals, and focus group were all reviewed by an expert to ascertain their internal alignment. The coding was performed in concert with a well-respected research program called ATLAS.ti.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began after participants signed up for the formation group. All those who committed themselves to the ministry project were invited to set aside a date and time to meet with me within the next eleven days. During that one-on-one



opportunity, I had each participant complete the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography with me (see Appendix A). This interview was recorded and transferred to a computer before being uploaded to Google Drive. When all the interviews were complete, the audio files were sent to a transcriptionist to be completed and returned to me before the beginning of the ministry project's retreat. A typed copy of the survey was sent to the transcriptionist to aid his work. Each recording began by providing the interview date, participant's name, facilitator's name, and participant's designated research number. This process was meant to assist the transcriptionist, as well as clearly connect the audio file to its specific research participant.

Three related points of data collection followed this initial interview: the spiritual life journals (see Appendix A). The first of these instruments was distributed at the second small group gathering. Four questions long, I asked that participants take some time to read and respond to these items on paper for our next time together. They were then collected for research purposes, with notes from participant observers.

The second set of the three spiritual life journal was another four questions, released at the third session. Again, participants were asked to take some time to read and respond to these on paper for our next time together. They were then collected for research purposes, with notes from participant observers.

The last Spiritual Life Journal followed a different format. It was handed out in the fourth session. Participants were asked to submit them electronically if possible. Those submissions not completed electronically were simply transcribed from the participants handwritten notes or emails into a consistent electronic format. It was returned before the beginning of the retreat.

The focus group, or fourth data gathering tool, was held on the first day of the retreat. Ten questions long, the conversation was recorded in its entirety. I also made notes throughout. The audio file was sent to the transcriptionist, along with a copy of the survey for reference. The audio recording began with the date, facilitator's name, and each participant's name. Participants were asked to identify themselves by name before speaking to aid the transcription process. Transcription was completed within three weeks (see Appendix D).

My log, which was simply comprised of my own observations, was completed following each preintervention interview, small group session, and retreat. While no specific questions were asked or length of response specified, it was expected to be representative of my own observations following each of those events. Because they were completed electronically, no transcription was necessary.

### **Data Analysis**

This research relied on five data-gathering instruments outside of my log: a preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography, three spiritual life journals, and postintervention focus group. These qualitative tools allowed each participant a full voice in exploring the understanding and experience throughout the ministry project. This research relied primarily on that rich textual data. In this sense, the analysis of each of these five pieces followed a similar path.

I read the interviews and journals once transcribed. This initial reading provided an overall sense of the data's direction. I then coded and interpreted the data with the assistance of ATLAS.ti, a "program that enables you to organize your text, graphic, audio, and visual data files along your coding, memos, and findings, into a project" (Creswell

242). This well-respected research tool has the added benefit of running both on Mac's OS X as well as Apple's iPad. Creswell explains the general steps utilized in conjunction with ATLAS.ti.

Word processing files are converted into a text file or imported directly into the computer program. The word processing file will be a transcribed interview, a set of field notes, or other text, such as a scanned document:

1. Select a computer program to use. The program should have the features of storing the data, organizing the data, assigning labels or codes, and searching data.
2. Enter a file into the program and give it a name.
3. Go through the file and make sentences or paragraphs of ideas that pertain to what the participant is saying in the text.
4. Provide a code label for the blocked text. Continue this process of marking text and providing code labels for the entire text file.
5. After blocking and assigning labels to the text, search for all text matching each code, and print out a file of these text passages.
6. Collapse these code labels into a few broad themes, or categories, and include evidence for each category. (Creswell 241)

This general process was applied to each of the instruments but for different purposes.

The preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography were coded with an eye towards several key focal points. Some of these include demographics and their relationship to the experience, understanding, and practice of compassion, participants own spiritual journey and how they experience the compassion of Christ, how they understand and/or practice spiritual disciplines, as well as how they understand the object of the spiritual life. While not an exhaustive list, these questions clearly illustrate the function of this data-gathering tool: to get a good sense of each participant's inner life before the ministry project. This identifying data can also be compared to later instruments in understanding how each individual does or does not progress.

The three spiritual life journal entries were completed in the midst of the project itself, and each takes a slightly different focus: silence, solitude, deep listening, and their experience of compassion within the context of spiritual disciplines. I coded this data with the objective of grasping how their understanding, experience, and practice of the spiritual disciplines and compassion might be changing. Questions, doubts, or tension expressed by the participants were carefully explored.

The postintervention focus group allowed the participants as a whole to reflect on their journey together and to articulate what they believed they experienced from the first small group to the final retreat. As with the spiritual life journals, the focus group discussion was coded with special attention paid to emerging questions, doubts, tensions, and points of change in the participant inner experiences.

The last of the data-gathering tools, my log, was not coded. In fact, its data was not so much analyzed in isolation as used in conjunction with other measuring tools. It recorded my own observations from beginning to end. The log provided a point of comparison and contrast to other data, a record of field notes on what I saw unfold over each interview, small group gathering, and retreat.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Several steps were taken to maintain the ethical credibility of this ministry project. A research reflection team was assembled. This team of people included one member from New Hope United Methodist Church, two members from Epsilon United Methodist Church, the Grand Traverse district superintendent, and my spiritual director. Each played a unique role within the group as a whole. One member currently works with Capella University and mentors doctoral students. Another has lifelong training and

experience in the field of spiritual formation, and another has roots in a Christian faith tradition that emphasizes the observance of silence. As a group they provided oversight not only to ensure the success of the ministry project for the good of the churches but to prevent any possible harm.

No participant was paid or coerced to participate in the project. No participant is related to me. The participants were self-selected congregants from the Epsilon and New Hope United Methodist congregations who participated because of their own interest in the subject of compassion.

Only the research reflection team and I saw the raw data, including the preintervention interviews and spiritual autobiography, three spiritual life journals, and final postintervention focus group. Participants were aware that recordings would be made, that any data collected via the recordings or data-gathering tools would be used in analysis, and that any identifying factors would be removed. Once the project was completed, all raw data was destroyed.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Problem and Purpose**

This research addressed the failure of God's people to abide in the loving awareness of their Abba Father. Failing to abide in his presence, they harbor growing indifference not only to the Beloved but toward all those he gives them to love with him. This selfish indifference turns the soul back in on itself. It leaves the Church utterly unchanged and untransformed. The people of God look no different from the world because, in their hearts, they are no different from it.

I explored how a self-select group from New Hope and Epsilon United Methodist Churches understand, experience, and incarnate the compassion of Christ and how that compassion might be nurtured through spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. Rather than simply demanding acts of compassion from a position of moral or biblical authority, I believed that the compassion of Christ must be experienced before it is embodied and that ancient disciplines provide the best means for inner transformation. In short, prayer invited participants to change not only their minds but also their hearts and lives as sons and daughters of the One who "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7) for the world.

#### **Participants**

Nine individual participants signed up for this ministry project. Three of nine participants completed each of the small group sessions and retreat; two of the nine completed all but one small group session; another two completed all the small group sessions but were not present for the overnight retreat; and, two missed both a single

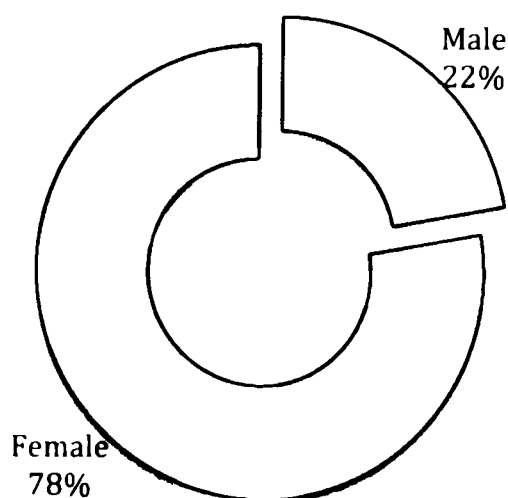
session and the overnight retreat. Participants ranged in age from 41.92 years to 59.4 years, for a median age of 55.04 years. On average, they came to Christ at the age of 15.8, or a median of age of just 12. Participant 8 had followed Christ 50.67 years at the time of the ministry project, while participant 9 had followed Christ just 14.5 years. Median years as a follower of Christ among participants was 42. Forty-two years also separated the participant with the longest affiliation with their congregation from the shortest. The median time participants had affiliated with their communities of faith at the time of this ministry project was just 10 years (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1. Participant Demographics (N=9)**

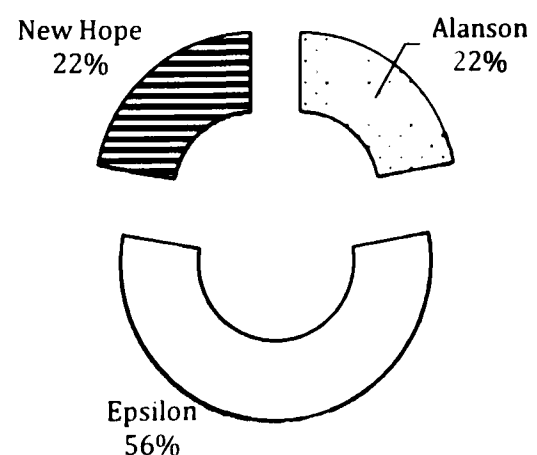
| Participant                                  | <u>1</u> | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | <u>4</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>6</u> | <u>7</u> | <u>8</u> | <u>9</u> |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Age  | 49.37    | 59.46    | 53.90    | 56.21    | 55.04    | 41.92    | 56.48    | 58.67    | 53.23    |
| Years Affiliated with Congregation           | 11       | 6        | 3        | 11       | 44       | 10       | 2        | 22       | 3        |
| Years Self Described as a Follower of Christ | 44       | 50       | 34       | 47       | 42       | 29.92    | 30       | 50.67    | 14.50    |
| Age began following Christ                   | 5.37     | 9.46     | 19.90    | 9.21     | 13.04    | 12.00    | 26.48    | 8.00     | 38.73    |

Female participants outnumbered male seven to two. Five participants came from Epsilon, two from New Hope, and two from Alanson (See Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

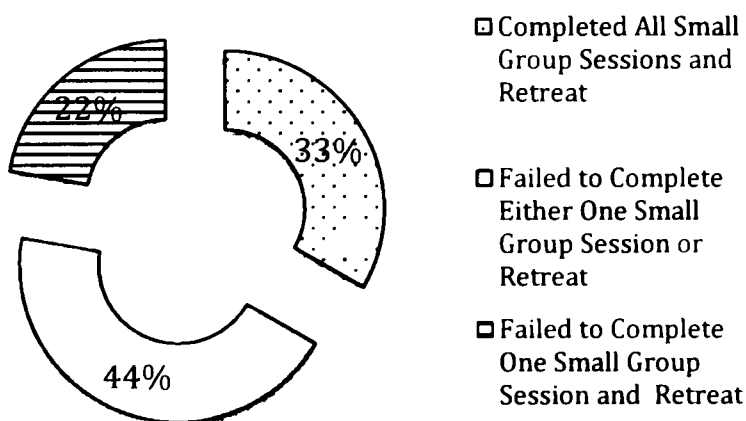
**Table 4.1. Gender make-up of participants (N=9)**



**Table 4.2. Congregational affiliation of participants (N=9)**



Of the male participants, one missed a single session, and the other a single small group session and the retreat. Both Alanson’s and New Hope’s participants did not attend the retreat; New Hope’s participants and three of Epsilon’s participants missed just one small group session. Overall, each of the nine participants completed small group sessions 1, 2, and 4. Session three and the retreat was completed by five of the nine participants. Seven of nine participants completed all sessions or missed only one.



**Table 4.3. Participant participation levels (N=9)**

**Research Question #1**

Research question #1 asked how the participants experienced, understood, and incarnated the compassion of Christ prior to the intervention. This question provided a snapshot of each participant’s life in relation to compassion at levels of experience, understanding, and lived practice before the disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. It included both their positive and negative experience of gender roles. This query explored how they, as individuals, experienced compassion within the world, often from those closest to them. Findings flow from their responses to the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiographies.



Experience explores compassion as intuition or lived phenomena. Verbal articulation of understanding is less important than how the participants perceived compassion within the framework of their own lives. These incidents range from compassion experienced for others, compassion experienced from others, and even an instance of compassion experienced for themselves.

Participants primarily experienced compassion in three fundamental ways: emotion, act, and connection. Participant 4 described growing up in a devout Roman Catholic family where she was raised to believe herself God's elect. Roman Catholicism was the true Church, and only baptized Catholics would live into eternity with Christ. The remainder of the world, even fellow Christians, were damned. She reflected thoughtfully about the time when she first questioned this exclusive Catholic claim:

...I remember going to school every day and I was in second grade and I was thinking of kids who were younger than me, that God loved them and that they were innocent. God wouldn't send these kids to Hell, but they didn't go to my church. But I just believed that that wouldn't happen, that God wouldn't do that. And I was raised upper-middle class and people that I played with, some had dirt floors. They were very poor and I believe God loved them.

She experienced compassion at an emotional level, loving others with the God who loves them. This points towards a nascent compassion in as much as it began to draw her towards a sense of shared humanity.

Participant 2 relayed a similar experience of compassion for his spouse:

I experience quite a bit with [her] because sometimes when [she is] in a lot of pain or unable to walk, I feel compassion for [her] knowing that [she is] hurting. I have a lot of compassion and I ask Christ to ease that.

Compassion moves his heart before his hands; it is the motivation of their action. It is the impetus for acts of care.

Both of these participants experience compassion at the level of emotion. That feeling then became a catalyst for change, either in perspective or behavior. The work of compassion on the inner state, then, has value in as much as it pushes the people of God towards new ways of being and acting.

Participants also received compassion affectively. Participant 1 described the loss of her spouse to death and went on to talk about her experience of compassion from others:

They were just loving me and giving me support and making me feel like it's going to be alright when I was thinking, "Now what happens? Mom's gone, Dad's gone, Ray's gone. What do you have for me Lord? Where are you going to use me?"

The focus of her reflected experience is emotional support, the feeling of being loved by others in loss. She received the compassion of the congregation affectively.

Participant 7 described the loss of Buster Brown, a pet she cherished for many years. After his loss the veterinary sent a card:

[It had] some little paws on it. That meant an incredible amount to me. I don't know if they considered it to be compassionate or not because it may have been a business thing, "Okay, we just do this for everybody that's had a pet put down." But to me, it was compassionate.

The simple act of sending a card communicated a sense of care, of compassion, by another for her. Without that sense of care, it would only have been a card or another piece of junk mail. The quality of emotion wrapped the moment in an experience of compassion.

Participant 9 talked about receiving news that an anonymous donor would purchase all the books for a seminary program his wife was preparing to enter, a commitment amounting to thousands of dollars. Looking back on that moment, he said,

“She started weeping a little bit. I was like being a bit more pragmatic about it, thinking oh thank God.... I tend to be a bit more pragmatic about things than she is.” The act of compassion evoked emotional response, weeping for the care received by another. Compassion may only be received for what they are when experienced as compassion at an emotional level. This affective quality extended into participants’ lives with God.

Participant 4, in speaking about her relationship to the Father, said, “I just remember God reaching out to me. It was very palliative. I mean I felt that. That was very compassionate of him.” Her experience of God is itself the experience of God’s love. Six of the nine participants each reflected on their experience of God affectively during the preintervention interview. God’s compassion was not an abstract idea to be believed but an inner experience they felt within the confines of their hearts. Compassion was a fundamentally emotional experience. It was also fundamentally act.

Participant 1 spoke about a friend whose child committed suicide and the long phone conversations they shared. Afterward she said, “That was a time of compassion for me to really concentrate on giving compassion to someone else.” Compassion meant acting in specifically caring ways. Participant 2 talked about receiving compassion as a child from his grandmother: “[Grandmother] was very loving. She was always there for an answer for me. I have to say just spending time with her in the basement [transmitted care]....” The act of shared presence communicated love. Participant 6 reflected on her growing roles with an agency that serves the disabled

When I first started working with the Disability Network. Then I started going to the schools to do the presentations. The disability presentations and then I also talk about my disability that I have. And then I notice that when I start talking about the access for everyone, everybody’s like, eyes on me, because when I started doing that, that was something that I really wanted to do.

Each of the participants in describing her or his experience of compassion spoke about some specific act through which each received or offered compassion to another, whether she or he described compassion in largely affective or nonaffective ways. Compassion encompassed action of some sort.

A striking example of this observation comes from participant 5 who described her final moments with her father:

And as far as feel goes, I think of sitting with my father and giving him his last breathing treatment. Just being near, being so devoted to doing that. To be sure he got the right amount of vapor and oxygen. And in the quietness and calmness of it, not realizing during the middle of the treatment, he really had passed away. Looking back on it, I think, wow, his dentures fell out of place in his mouth and I noticed there was some water dripping on his shirt. And I was calling to my sister to come and help me lift dad, to change his shirt. I look back and laughed. He was already gone. He didn't care his shirt was wet. But I was there to help him.

What she did was not easy. She knew her father lingered close to death, and this moment became her final act of compassion and love. Compassion, in the experience of each participant, was something with hands and with feet that reached out in specifically caring ways.

In the experience of these participants, compassion acted affectively in their hearts, came alive in action, and connected them to others in moments of care. This phenomena was nowhere more pronounced than in the story of participant 3. She talked about her early spiritual experiences and involvement in choir. So many threads of conversation kept winding her way back into that story that I just asked directly:

I'd like to go back to the choir. Choir was obviously a very powerful experience for you, coming in as a fourth-grader to sing in a choir. What

made it so powerful? A lot of people wouldn't have that experience. What made this such a powerful experience for you to be part of this choir that kept you in church and connected you to God?

The participant replied briefly but beautifully, and although she never mentions the word compassion one can hear it around, beneath, and above everything else.

I think it was because I really didn't consider myself a part of anything, but this brought me into community. This was my introduction to community.

This particular participant shared struggles in belonging anywhere at all, even in her own family. This act of shared community became the act of compassion that transformed her life. When she spoke about the role faith plays in politics, she spoke about the importance that all belong, whether homosexuals, bisexuals, transgendered, immigrants. Compassion entered her life in a moment of connection, and she continued to live compassionately by extending connection outward.

Participants 1, 3, and 8, perhaps more than any of the others, experienced compassion as a way of being within the world for others. It is more than connection in the moment, which all the participants experienced. It is an ongoing experience of community with the world and those in it. Even these participants, though, hesitated in talking not only about their own politics but also about the politics of others.

While three of the participants quickly registered outright disillusionment with the entire political process, others expressed a sense of internal tension. For example, participant 1 said that her faith informed her politics, especially surrounding the issue of life: "I absolutely don't agree with abortion and I know that is because the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'" In the very next breath, she added the following:

Yet the silly thing is, I do agree with us growing and having an army. I do agree in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force.

Marines. I know that that is faith based too because you think we were raised by people who have fought in the war and that that was something that was an honor. So that is something I honor, too.

She experienced some inner tension difficult for her to resolve. She understands life as sacred and at the same time supports militaristic platforms and has not been able to resolve the discomfort between what is held as sacred by her God and then by her culture. She felt this same tension when asked about how she saw faith forming the politics of those with different political values:

Well it always surprises me when people who have values against mine speak about their faith at all. I know that people who have opposing views to mine are also Christians. It just always surprises me because my political value would be God, family, and those kinds of things. So when someone whose politics is opposite mine I just automatically, "Oh they're not for God and family. Forget it."

In her head she understands that people may experience faith differently in relationship to politics, but her reaction is simply to diminish and marginalize. This behavior is no different from the untransformed world. Her moments of compassion have not so transformed her that she lives in loving community with all those in the world.

Participant 3, for whom belonging was very important, said about those who do not share her own political values:

I know faith can be used as a bludgeon in political issues and those who oppose my views are—I'm not likely to use faith as a bludgeon, whereas other people might; who don't see things the way I do. I'm not going to force them to believe the same thing I believe because we don't have to believe the same thing.

At the same time, she clearly expressed how faith introduced belonging as fundamental to her own political perspective; she also clearly expressed her assumption of how those with other political values use and abuse faith. Compassion shares in the humanity of the

other, the stranger, even in those who are the enemy. These particular participants at once appear to embrace compassion as a way of being within the world but still struggle to extend that compassion to their political opponents. Some participants are aware enough to articulate that tension.

Participant 9 described those with different political positions in only negative terms by saying, “No, they would say that about other people. ‘I can sit with them, but I can’t love them.’” If compassion encompasses the world in loving community, if it shares in the humanity of the other, then it must, by nature, share in the broken humanity of those around it. It cannot make assumptions about the motives or hearts of others.

Focusing on the formation of gender roles I hoped to understand how the participants experienced the compassion of others as men and women and how the families and churches of participants seen them primarily as their gender rather than a human being. Three of the nine, when asked how gender roles impacted their lives within church and family, could not identify anything. I could not identify anything specific to the contrary. This smaller group included two women and one man. The remaining six could either identify the influence of gender role formation within their families or within their churches. Sometimes gender role shaped experiences within both of these relationships, such as participant one.

An incredibly positive personality, a participant, as a girl, was expected to “care for [her] family because [she] was the daughter and girls can do those things. They can do all the bathing and dressing and all the things that your parents need as they age.” and she did until they died. She also described life within the local church as a female:

[G]irls were expected to be dressed up for church and were expected to ... know the Bible more. They were expected to have spent more time in the

Word and win the Bible Quizzes .... Girls were expected to work in the nursery and volunteer in the choir and all those kind of things for the programs.

Both of these experiences within her family and church left their mark on her life. She chose a career in nursing she said she would have never chosen for herself because of its emphasis on care for others. Despite growing disabilities she continues to dress as well as she can for God, whom she describes as her “lover.”

Participant 2 described expectations placed on him by his family by saying others expected him to be “strong during a crisis [and to see to what needed] to be done around the house, repairs or whatever.” Emphasis in his life was placed on objects rather than on relationships. Even in relationship he was expected to be the rock, the one to get things done when life was hard. This attitude has been reaffirmed within the church where he clearly connects his gender to his role as a trustee overseeing the physical property of the church.

Participant 4 talked about her own early experience in the Roman Catholic Church where she “always felt left out because ... girls didn’t get to participate like they do in other churches.... The boys were always more valued because they were the altar boys.” It was not until she attended a United Methodist Church that she felt that she could participate as fully in the church like her brothers. Only then did she discover her own value as a daughter of God.

While her family encouraged and loved her, they did not have the same expectations for her they placed on her brothers. Lower grades were acceptable for the girl; they simply expected her to marry. Her brothers would go away to school in the



sciences. Nursing, which became her chosen career path, was the only acceptable alternative to motherhood.

Participant 6, while believing she faced no expectations as a woman in her family, thought her gender dictated her allowed roles within the local church. Participant 7 reported facing expectations within her family to dress up, to be polite, as all young women were expected to be and felt pushed from leadership roles within at least one fairly conservative congregation. Participant 8 largely overcame the expectations of her mother through the efforts of her father, who always encouraged her not to conform to the role of “prim and proper” young lady. He would encourage whatever she wanted for herself.

Gender role formation actively shaped the life of at least six of the nine participants in ways they could easily identify. Some overcame those expectations; others conformed and found fulfillment in doing so. While participants did not identify most of these as either compassionate or otherwise, these cultural forces are felt within Christian community. Compassion demands the people of God transcend gender roles for shared and equal humanity.

Exploring their experience of compassion was not about how they defined compassion intellectually but how they understood it at the level of intuition. This question also began to open up how their own experience of compassion might begin to shape their compassion for others apart from moral obligation. Findings show that participants believe they have experienced compassion and extend compassion, even if imperfectly.

Participants defined compassion in much the same way that they experienced it with perhaps more emphasis on act than either affectivity or connection. Participant 2 typified this response when he defined compassion as “less suffering for [others].” Compassion acts as a verb, actively alleviating the suffering of others. This definition closely follows his own practical experience of applying compassion in relationship to others. This understanding also closely follows his own story growing up with the expectation to work and be strong for others as a man. Participants 3 and 6 echoed his sentiment. The former said very simply that compassion is “caring for the other.”

Participant 2, though, still connected act to the heart: Compassion is “feeling the pain of others.” In his mind, compassion, however practical, retains an affective quality. It possesses a certain level not simply of sympathy but of empathy. Compassion acts on experiencing the pain of the other. While participant 8 only appeared to go as far as the felt experience of sympathy, participant 9 went further towards empathy: “feeling someone else’s ... pain [or] troubles.” Interestingly, of the three who specifically cited feeling in their articulate definition of compassion, two are men.

Participant 8, while not emphasizing the feelings of empathy did speak to the importance of connection when she said, “Like this depth of feeling that you’ve opened up and are listening to someone. Or giving back, a word of love, maybe either through an action like something that you’ve done to help someone.” Compassion is itself more than feeling, even more than act. It opens self to other.

Participant 5 described this connectional compassion by saying,

I visually think of stepping up and walking beside someone. Just being there beside them in whatever that is.

This powerful word picture conveyed both shared feeling and shared circumstance—to join in the heart and life of the other. Unknowingly, she struck at the root meaning of the word itself—shared suffering.

Participant 7 named a special quality of compassion that she embraces in day-to-day living. When asked to define compassion, she said that compassion means “going out of your way.” Compassion costs one something of themselves. It demands something from the merciful for others. No one else so clearly names the cruciform nature of merciful love, even if she or he embodies in everyday life.

There is both consonance and dissonance between their experience of compassion and their cognitive understanding. Themes of act, affectivity, and connection are all present, though the first two probably more so than the last. While each participant understands that compassion involves the other, that compassion is impossible without connecting to another at some level, the quality of connection varies. For some, it is simply to act on another’s behalf in order to alleviate suffering. Affectivity tends towards sympathy rather than empathy. The participant feels bad for the other. This dynamic may several mentions of death and dying. It is a shared experience. Those who experience grief understand the pain of the other, but they are not necessarily sharing in the pain of the other so much as reexperiencing their own pain and reflecting that back on the bereaved.

Some participants clearly go beyond sympathy into true empathy. They are not reflecting on their own pain but the pain of the other. They want to feel what the other feels; some are even willing to experience the suffering of others with them in order to become Christ with skin on for the world. This embodiment is compassion beyond moral

mandate or good works, which represents the heart of compassion to suffer with Christ for the world. Prior to intervention the participants did not embrace this unitive love deeply across the fabric of their lives.

Each participant exercised compassion at some level prior to the intervention. Participant 6 exercises compassion through community service with the local branch of the Disability Network; participant 2 finds opportunity for compassion largely by caring for his spouse who suffers chronic illness. Participant found a place for compassion in sharing love with a stranger. Each of the participants embody these acts of compassion in ways that I was able to observe. The difference comes in how and why they practiced compassion in the ways they did.

Participants 1, 3, 7, and 9 all talked about a ministry of presence, expressing compassion by choosing to be present to others in their distress. Participants 3 and 7 speak about presence most clearly:

It's the ministry of presence. Being there. Not necessarily doing something for someone, but just being the calm presence in the room. The resource. The shoulder to cry on. The hand to hold. The one with a voice for prayer. (Participant 3)

But to sit with someone and just quietly, acceptingly help them through it, is probably a deeper compassion than the busyness. (Participant 7)

For these participants compassion could not be reduced to a specific action. Compassion encompasses a quality of presence, of choosing to be present to another. They choose to practice compassion rooted in relationship, at times choosing the action of inaction by simply sitting alongside those who suffer.

Participants, even those who valued presence, tended to speak of compassion as act. Participant 7 summed the sentiment well when she said, "If someone's suffering and

you're doing for them, that is compassion." The compassion they practiced tended to involve real-world action: advocating for others, helping others around, caring for the sick. It meant doing something to alleviate the suffering that those close to them experienced.

While many of the participants expressed an affective quality to compassion, the emotional dynamic varied. Participant 6 expressed an emotional quality which centered both on herself and others. When speaking about her work with the Disability Network, she not only talks about her impact on others but about experiencing their attention as someone who is often overlooked. The Disability Network mattered to participant 6; helping others with disabilities mattered to her. She helped raise funds for access projects across the county. The impact of her compassion is real, even today, but it is not entirely for others. Compassion meets an emotional need in her own life, to be seen and to be valued. It has grown her confidence and connected her to the larger community.

Participant 3 talked about the connection between compassion and dying:

In times of death or impending death, that's when I most see people at their most compassionate. Caring for the dying, caring for the loved ones of the dying. Community seems to rally. Community can be anywhere from the family and friends to the actual geographical community.

This sentiment echoes the experience of participant 1 who shared the story of how faith community gathered around her at her husband's passing. What kind of relationship the bereaved and community share appears meaningless in the face of death. Dying drew compassion for the grieving. While the research cannot identify with certainty why, I observed a sense that in the face of grief those in community remember their own loss, so

that what they experience is less the suffering of others as their own suffering. They experienced sympathy aches for the other, but ultimately did not share in the other's.

While several participants verbally identified empathy as important to the practice of compassion, self-reporting did not readily identify specific instances of compassion rooted in empathy rather than sympathy. Empathy requires imagination, the ability to put oneself in the place of the other and suffer with them. In most cases participants acted on behalf of those they already knew and loved rather than the other. Even in cases where they cared for the other, they did not speak to specific motives. Having worked with the participants before and after the project, I believe some of the participants possess this imagination to greater or lesser degrees. Participant 1 often spoke of church as "a soft place to land." Participant 3 advocated to alleviate the suffering of others; three other participants who work at a local hospital spoke about sharing the suffering of those for whom they care. They struggle, as I already noted, to embrace unitive love across the fabric of their lives.

Finally, compassion may be differentiated by the kind of connection participants shared with others. For some, who emphasized the compassionate act, connection is less important than addressing the suffering of the other. They exercise care in a kind way but do not necessarily open themselves to the other or receive the other fully. Connection was vital for others. Participant 8 summed this sentiment quite well when she said, "Like this depth of feeling that you've opened up and are listening to someone." This compassion transforms both the one who exercises compassion and the one who suffers. It changes the helper-victim relationship to a relationship of shared and common humanity.

## Research Question #2

Research question 2 asked how participants experienced silence, solitude, and deep listening both as disciplines and as fertile ground for the compassionate life following the intervention. This question explored how the participants experienced these graced disciplines as they practiced them during the project. Findings show that while participants faced obstacles entering silence most experienced positive benefits, including the nurture of compassion for others.

Participant 3 struggled with silence. She found quiet difficult; she felt inner distraction; and, by self-report, she felt no more compassion for others because of it. In her very first spiritual journal she wrote,

There is noise everywhere, even "white noise". After a while, you don't hear it, even though it's there. Our bodies seemed conditioned to work/rest amid noise

This response typified her perspective that people were not made for the quiet but for the noise that bubbles up in the world all around them. Noise is natural; silence is not. In the very same journal, she bluntly said, "I don't like silence." She never explained her discomfort. She gladly participated in small group sessions. The dynamic of corporate silence likely allowed her to experience the discipline in a deeper way. During shared silence she was surrounded by others while soft music played. She ultimately wrote in her final journal entry that silence and solitude meant very little her:

Silence and solitude have not really played any part in my ability to offer an open mind, open heart, or open will to others. It is by my relationship with Christ and with others, learning from my mistakes and from my successes in dealing with others that has enabled me to live, work, and relate to others with an open mind and open heart.

Perhaps here she came closest to revealing her own inner experience of silence and why she struggled so very much. She never experienced encounter with God in the quiet. Silence devoid of encounter can be experienced by practitioners as needless aridity.

Spiritual masters likely would have asked her to endure through the dryness by refocusing her effort from the felt experience of God's presence towards a simple offering to God. As participant 7 remarked during the ministry project, knowing, not experiencing, the presence of God is most central. John of the Cross called this a dark night, through which God purifies faith, hope, and love.

Personality traits may also play a role, a natural tendency towards sociability, even fear of being alone. Whichever was the case, she appeared much more at ease with corporate silence than she reported on her personal practice of silence alone. More instruction may have made her more comfortable in understating progress was being made, even when she could not see it. Of course, her response may also have revealed a fear or disquiet that required more one-on-one direction to explore and untangle. Despite her feelings, she remained active and positive during small group sessions.

With the exception of this participant, all others thought silence benefited them in some way. They encountered the presence of God in silence; they experienced greater peace in their lives; they were better able to listen for the voice of God. Several participants reported a direct link between their practice of silence and growing compassion in their own lives. Participant 1 articulated the experience of silence well when she said, "I love silence and spending time in silence with God. [It] makes me feel loved and desired by him." For her, silence became the space needed to feel the desire of the Bridegroom for his bride. My log reflects their self-reports:



There was also another shared insight among us as participant observers and researcher: a sense of collective excitement. No one there fought the silence. Period. They might fight distraction, but not silence. They hungered for its rest and eagerly shared their personal experiences. I cannot over-emphasize our shared surprise at the degree of each participant's investment.

Silence, at least corporately, extended the palpable presence of God into the world, and the response to it was immediate, almost effortless. It met a deep spiritual need in a profoundly deep way. Holding that space for and with them as spiritual director, the I facilitated a shared experience of God's presence.

Several participants also reported an inner experience of peace as they practiced silence. Participants called their time in quiet prayer "calming" and "peaceful." It "relaxed [their] inner mind." In the busyness and distraction of life in the world, silence became the place they escaped rush for tranquility that carried them throughout the day. It allowed relief from the everyday pressures that pushed on them throughout their lives, freeing them to respond to others in a more meaningful, reflective way.

During the retreat the group reported silence as "foundational" for listening. The nurture of inner quiet allowed them to become more present not only to God but others. They could listen without the distraction of inner dialogue keeping them from the moment. The experience of God in silence also became a catalyst for the care of others as expressed through listening, which was the object of this ministry project.

Participants 1, 2, and 6 directly attributed their practice of silence to greater compassion. The first described the change by saying, "I can say that I am much more patient and less judgmental. I look for opportunities to show Christ's love to others." What she generalized expressed itself very specifically as participants on retreat exchanged ideas about how they might begin to share this experience of compassion with

others in their own congregations, even begin to draw them into the practice of compassion themselves. Participant 6, who probably struggled most to articulate her own story in the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography very clearly articulated the benefit of silence and solitude:

The experience of solitude and silence is peaceful and I have found it easier to focus on God. It has helped me with working with people that are struggling with their disability. I had the opportunity to meet with a client that I haven't seen in a while and he told me that I was there when he found out that he had MS and then he found out that he had fibromyalgia and he thanked me for just being there just to talk and pray.

Silence grounded her in a way that freed her to become present to the suffering of another and share that moment with them in a sensitive way she could not before the intervention.

Other benefits named by the participants included a greater sense of joy, increased openness to others, a more generous patience, quiet focus throughout the day, and a feeling that silence slowed them down in the midst of an ever-increasing pace to life. Silence clearly benefited the participants. Even participant 3, who struggled most with silence, found herself going back to the sacred word she selected to quiet herself throughout the day.

Amid all the benefits were also various obstacles, especially entertainment, busyness, and the incessant inner noise that plagued them even when the world went silent. Participant 3 admitted that while “there is not enough of silence,... [she needs] something, TV, the radio, something going. [She needs] the noise if [she is] alone.” Entertainment, constant distraction, pulled so hard on her heart, she called it once both noise and need. Other participants talked about Netflix and even playing games as a distraction away from quiet with God.

Participant 8 articulated the common obstacle of busyness:

My centered prayer experience was little easier this week. I had less obligations and was able to set aside more time. This has been quite an adjustment to my usual daily routine. I realize how little time I spend in a personal relationship with God.

Solitude nurtures silence, and solitude demands time, attention. Taking time for silence meant participants were forced to take time away from the busyness of their lives, which was hard for them. The world pushed in on them, especially those who work outside the home. They shared a feeling that they needed to be elsewhere, doing something productive, when all silence demanded was their simple presence.

Most intrusive of all was the inner noise. As participants shared at the retreat silence was not the problem. The problem was “the sense of solitude,” or intention and attention to God. A recurring question, and admission, throughout the small group sessions was how to overcome incessant, mindless thoughts in the midst of their intention to love the Lord and fix their attention on him. Participant 7 struggled profoundly as she wanted nothing more than to lean into the presence of God. Her breakthrough came at the retreat, where I provided a small library of books for participants to read during their free time, which included Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*. A slim volume, it includes a record of his conversations and letters, focusing on his life with God. In it he talks about his struggle with distraction and continual commitment to remind himself that God is present. His only need was simply to remember the presence of Christ and gather himself in it. While she did not reference the specific passage, her words echoed what he says in the second conversation:

[I]n the beginning a persistent effort is needed to form the habit of continually talking with God and to refer all we do to Him but that after a little care His love brings us to it without any difficulty. (28)

The participant did not offer a solution to the larger group from Brother Lawrence. She only shared her struggle and found comfort in knowing that even spiritual masters struggled in the past as she does today. That simple knowledge gave her new energy not to give up but simply to wait on the Lord.

Participant 1 reported obstacles of anxiety. Attributing them to Satanic assault, she accepted them as they were and offered them to God in prayer:

I did experience anxiety when trying to enter into silence/solitude[,] but I thought it was Satan's way of causing chaos[,] so I just gave it up to the Lord and silence came and I was able to feel joy and peace. [sic]

Key to this approach is not willing the obstacle away by trying to force the heart into calm. She recognized her own inability to do what needed done and released herself into the grace of God, which is itself the object of silence. Rather than focusing on what distracted her heart, she turned her intention and attention to the Lord.

Community was also essential in overcoming obstacles in the practice of silence. Participants specifically talked about the commitment they made to the group to remain faithful, as well as encouragement in facing common problems. While often thought of in rather solitary terms, the corporate practice of silence and mutual sharing strengthened their resolve to bask in the loving presence of God despite aridity, distraction, and apparent failure. This observation is particularly interesting in a more extroverted, outwardly expressive religious tradition where silence has never been normative. Quiet during the small group sessions prepared the participants to receive each other in love and be received in love.

The single most mentioned help in overcoming obstacles to silence was nature. Participant 3, who struggled with silence elsewhere, spoke about “a symphony of silence—the sounds of nature around” her. Participant 5 admits to failing to reach her goal of thirty minutes spent in silence, preferring to spend that time listening to birds as they sang outdoors. Participant six went outside to be alone with God, listening for the sounds of nature. Nature somehow provided a context for quiet that allowed their souls to be gathered up in the heart of God. Nature became a hedge against the whirl of the world, allowing them to disconnect in ways that they found difficult to do themselves.

Participant 3 struggled with solitude as much as she struggled with silence, but she also identified what she believes to be the reason:

It’s refreshing every now and again to get away and to come back refreshed and rejuvenated, but I don’t think I could do it alone. I’ve gone on silent retreats but I was with a group.... It could also have something to do with being mugged. I don’t like to walk by myself.

Her struggle with aloneness goes back to a time when she was alone and attacked. This seared memory made the discipline of solitude difficult for her to embrace. Ultimately she noted that solitude did nothing to nurture compassion for others. Instead she insisted that only the presence of others helps.

Participant nine remarked in the preintervention interview and spiritual autobiography that he did not have a natural affinity for solitude. While not minding if he was alone, he would not “be alone every single day.” He is naturally social and active in the community around him. He reported trying to remain faithful to the practices of silence and solitude but did not think it made a remarkable impression on how he chose to relate others.

The primary obstacle to solitude articulated by participants, though, was simple anxiety, finding the willingness to let go of all the things in their lives to spend time alone with the Beloved. Participant 7 articulated this anxiety well:

Shutting down my “to do” list isn’t easy. There is an incredible amount of work to get done here and I am the only one here to do it. This is pressure I have placed on myself and it does sabotage my efforts to enter more deeply into solitude.

The participant found it hard to invest the self in something the world values so little. Setting aside time to be alone with the Father accomplishes nothing; it achieves nothing; it does not advance concrete goals for living. It is all about love relationship. Even when the participants manage to free themselves for the work of solitude, the world found ways to come crashing in: phone calls, e-mails, visits, which led one participant to turn off all their electronic devices before attempting solitude.

For other participants being alone presented no obstacles. For reasons related to work schedules, they spent most of their time alone. Participant 7 is married, but her husband spends the work week away, and this arrangement has become a way of life for her. She begrudges nothing in it. Still she struggled to be “intentional about solitude and staying in the present moment.” She understood solitude must be more than being alone. Silence must mean being alone with God.

Participants talked about this during the third session, calling it an attitude of the heart. They realized that God is always and everywhere present. The question is not going out to find him somewhere; it is opening the heart to receive him as and where we are. The importance of attitude was a crucial step for participants, an inner disposition or orientation of the soul.

Decision also became very important to the practice of solitude. Participants spoke about waking up earlier in the morning, going to bed later at night, walking the dog, or simply choosing to go away when they wished to practice the grace of solitude. They realized that solitude would never come to them without effort in the busyness of the world. Disciples must make a decision to make space for encounters with God.

Participant 5 expressed a benefit of solitude by saying that it “increased hunger for more ‘time in surrender.’” Rather than aridity, this participant experienced grace in time apart from the world and desired it. More importantly, she wanted to surrender herself to God in the midst of that grace. Surrender is an act of letting go of things held tightly, an expression of and prerequisite to peace.

Participant 1 wrote quite eloquently that in “the last forty days I have sought out and found true peace and oneness with the Lord. I have felt the weight and the ways of the world just fade away and that place of oneness with Christ was so evident and real.” Solitude became a place of encounter for the participants. It became a place where they could let go of the things to which they clung and fall into the embrace of the Beloved.

From this place of withdraw, most participants found seeds for compassion. At the small group session, participants reported that solitude allowed them to think more clearly about others by providing time and perspective. It is a “place from which the need for compassion is recognized” and the place from which “connection to all God has created” is realized. Participants reported that in solitude they experienced a love from God that spilled over into others areas of their lives.

The grace of deep listening is the least documented in part because of the project’s structure. It received no time until the fourth, and last, of the small group

sessions. At least three of the participants were able to identify specific points in their lives when they felt as if someone listened and the positive experience that followed from that. Participant 3 remembered a difficult time during which she went to her pastor for counsel. In a “situation [that] could have driven [her] from the church, [she] was surrounded with love and understanding.” These experiences meant a great deal to participants.

Participant 2 recorded that listening “to others in the faith, with their points of view, helped me to learn more ways to practice the peacefulness with God.” It allowed him to be more present in the moment and in caring relationship rather than become wrapped up in his own visceral reactions. Otherwise, data surrounding listening is scant. The participants responded much more quickly and articulately to the graces of silence and solitude than listening. They struggled to understand how listening might begin to transform relationships in conflict.

When asked at the focus group how these three disciplines impacted their lives, those present replied in four ways:

- Commitment to self and others.
- Challenge to extend the compassion we’ve received to others.
- New hope and greater appreciation. [They want] to bring these to a verbal,

expressed level for others.

- React less to others in hostility.

Participants 1 and 2 were not able to be present for health reasons but still completed the questionnaire. Together they outlined a felt experience of union with God and a desire to



share the experience of these disciplines with others. Overall, participants experienced silence and solitude positively when supported and encouraged by others. Data regarding listening remains limited, but the preceding disciplines have done work in preparing them to receive others graciously.

### **Research Question #3**

Research question #3 asked how participants understand their experience of compassion and embody it for themselves and others following the intervention. This question explored how the experience of compassion over weeks of silence and solitude internalized itself in the participants, if at all, and then how that experience shaped their own practice of the compassionate life. In answering this question, I looked at how the participants themselves spoke about compassion during and after the project.

The compassion these participants experienced was born within and flowed out of community. Participant 3 explained, “Faith community has helped me gain hold of my faith by reminding me that God forgives us because of His compassion for us and that He gave us one another to build each other up and keep each other strong.” Community provided her a place to remember and experience again the love of God for her, flowing out into the lives of others. Compassion is an inherently corporate experience for her. Other participants echoed this sentiment throughout the retreat. Asked how community may or may not have facilitated compassion, focus group participants replied by saying that community reinforced commitment to the practice of graced disciplines and to relationships within the group as a whole. Together they encouraged each other in the face of obstacles. At one point a participant made the observation that compassion frees others to be compassionate. Compassion creates a space where community members can

embrace vulnerability with others without the need for pretending or hiding behind a false self.

The experience of compassion then flowed out into community. As they experienced compassion in community, participants came to believe that experience must be shared. Compassion was not simply something for them; it was for others. I noted during the retreat that the “participants want to keep meeting.... They want to go further! They want to explore how they can share this experience in all four churches!” Informal conversation ranged from being present at each other’s worship services to baking Communion bread in small groups that could then be shared in each congregation. Several weeks following the intervention, one more meeting was held to continue sharing in the means of grace and to begin putting these ideas into motion.

Participants also came to understand that the experience of compassion and the compassionate life must be nurtured. Asked whether compassion just happens, and what kind of work it takes, if any at all, participants responded by saying that compassion

- Requires time.
- Must first be experienced before it can be practiced,
- Must be valued by the community as a whole, and
- Can be cultivated in community by saying, “No,” to busyness, supporting

small group ministries, and participating in vocal prayer.

The participants understand their experience of compassion as a deliberate journey into the mercy of God rather than as an accidental by-product to belief. The inner lives of God’s people shape them for either compassion or indifference. To assert compassion as a shared community value requires shared effort and points back towards the role of

community in compassion formation. Belonging to a community that fails to value compassion as a way of life becomes an obstacle to compassion formation in the life of the individual.

In reflecting on the nature of compassion the research reflection team discerned the emergent qualities of compassion to include:

- **Self-Presence**—The ability to discern self-motive, especially what is compassion and what is self-interest, even indifference.
- **Presence to Others**—The degree to which an individual is fully present to others around them.
- **Self-Compassion**—The practice of compassion for an individual's own brokenness.
- **With-ness**—A commitment to life in community.

Understanding each of these as emergent qualities to the compassionate life, participants have embodied compassion in new and growing ways. Participant 1 recognized how she has allowed “self-conscious shyness” to become an obstacle to care. Participant 6, without naming it directly, gained new appreciation for the person she is and what God can accomplish through a willing, compassionate heart. Both of these examples represent growing self-awareness, or presence to self, requisite for the nurture of compassion.

The majority of participants spoke in journals and the focus group about their presence to others. Some used the language of listening; others used the language of attention; at least one used the language of empathy. Whichever the case, most participants experienced a growing sense of presence to others around them, as well as a

desire to practice greater presence. Compassion meant becoming present to the suffering of the other with them.

While compassion for others seemed to take more of the participants' conversation time, they recognized the importance of experiencing the compassion of Christ for themselves. Compassion was not simply the journey outward; it was the journey inward. Participant 6, more than any other appeared to gain a palpable sense of compassion for herself as someone who has spent her life in a wheelchair and not always as perceived as abled as others.

All participants completed the project with a renewed sense of with-ness, a commitment to life in community. Solitude and silence was not for them but merely a space for them to experience the love they would take out into community. They left the project energized to become forces for good in their own communities of faith and for their sister churches as well.

#### **Research Question #4**

Research question 4 explored what changes I observed in how participants embodied compassion for themselves and others following the intervention. This question was more difficult to answer than the others. The data was entirely dependent on both my observations and those of participant observers. It is hard to gauge how much change can be expected after only this single intervention. Means of grace are not magical incantations; they do magically transform practitioners after so many hours, days, or weeks. The compassionate life unfolds itself over time in the lives of those committed the abiding in the life of Christ. Still, I observed change in most of the participants.

Participants 1 and 2, a married couple, already embodied the love of Christ for each other and their congregation. This ministry project provided them a way to deepen that experience of love. Both of their spiritual journals affirm a sense of God's presence throughout their practice of silence and solitude, which has strengthened their efforts to become catalysts for ministries of care in their own congregation. Going forward these disciplines will only continue to shape their lives in Christ.

Participant 4 benefited tremendously from the project. Her spiritual journals are brief, but she was very active in our conversations up through the retreat. This small group fell during a difficult time in her life. She was struggling to keep up at work, as well as care for her father. Silence, solitude, and small group ministry offered some sanctuary to the busyness of her life. In these means of grace nothing was expected from her except to be present. At the close of the retreat, she made time to see me and express her thanks for rest and renewal. She has returned to the congregation more energized and alive for ministry, more connected to others around her.

Participant 5 wrote that this process of silence and solitude made it easier for her to cope with others, to practice less judgment towards them. While a quiet individual, she serves as secretary to the administrative board when work does not keep her away. Because of her work schedule and her quiet nature, I struggled to observe these changes directly. The participant observer, though, made this observation:

It was clear based on the more open mind created, that the heart swelled immediately (there was a new glow in the faces, even if they did not speak there was nonverbal communication and acceptance),... and it carried to the next subject and grew with acceptance by others of their contribution extending to subsequent sessions. I observed some participants reaching out in new and extended ways... [Participant 5] offered to do more and more intense and in-depth ways with members of the group as well as in

[her church]—representing a minor unintentional contagion, which takes in some instances regardless. She is just doing many things quite naturally now and looking for extensions that she can pick up on in her life. For example... when she does something in other situations and is recognized for it (even just small recognition and no special appreciation) she does even more! It appears that when there is recognition (at almost any level) of the heart "opening" there is expansion to the real world with others, making it possible to take the next step to action in "will."

The participant observer saw in her not only a new spirit of engagement but a catalyst for compassion within the congregation. This new life represents a first step in a longer journey for her and her own faith community.

Participant 6 showed dramatic change from the beginning of this project to its end. While social, participant 6 often deferred to the leadership of others and displayed little self-confidence in making things happen in ministry. Somehow these disciplines have nudged her to embrace greater self-confidence. She has become more active in leadership within her congregation, even launching a support group for the disabled and inquiring about a small group study surrounding the disabled and ministry. She has changed. She experienced the grace of Christ through silence and solitude and the feeling of being valued by others in her own congregation in community.

Participant 7 came to this ministry project with at least some understanding of silent prayer. She spends days alone in the country as her husband is away at work. Growing up in faith traditions more familiar with silence and solitude, she acclimated quickly. She never struggled against it; she only struggled with the busyness of her mind. Reflecting on her time during the project and after, there has been little change in the many ministries she participates in as a leader. This small group ministry seemed to provide her a place to be fed more deeply than she might elsewhere, a context for the

deep communion that feeds her soul. In this sense, it had more the effect it had for participants 1 and 2, strengthening an already existing spiritual foundation.

Participant 8 began this intervention tired. Work had kept her going so quickly she eventually had to resign positions just to keep up. Silence and solitude provided for her what it provided participant 4: rest from busyness. This rest gave her the energy she needed to embrace a more compassionate life. Whether in a formal or informal capacity, she exhibits more presence to the other. Exhaustion no longer keeps her from sharing that time, that moment, with whomever she happens to be standing before. I have experienced this presence myself since completion of the project. It has been especially visible in a renewed groundedness, which she embodies as a leader at her congregation's administrative board meetings.

The benefit to other participants is less obvious. Participant three not only struggled with the disciplines of silence and solitude, but also did not recognize any ways these they nurtured compassion in her life. She completed the project and may value its instruction later. Part of her struggle may be rooted in her strong extroversion. She finds all her energy in life with others and struggles in practices that keep her alone. Resistance may also be rooted in psychological woundedness going back to a mugging she experienced some years ago.

The same is true of participant 9. He expressed some growth in how he relates to others, more joy in helping others, but, because he attends a congregation outside of the communities of faith I serve, I struggle to say what changes he embodied for others.

Overall the project achieved its purpose to nurture compassion through the disciplines of silence, solitude, and deep listening. Compassion, though, is not a static

good, something one acquires and then simply retrains. It is an emergent quality, the product of interacting dynamics that must be tended throughout the life of practitioners. It ebbs and flows with self-presence, presence to others, self-compassion, and with-ness. This project served as one movement into the journey of Christlikeness by helping participants learn to abide in his presence.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Gathered data revealed several important dynamics for spiritual formation and the development of compassion important for the continuing work of the Church in both of these efforts:

1. Experience is central to formation. While instruction provided insight for participants as I introduced new spiritual disciplines, the experience and practice of these disciplines transformed them.
2. The practice of the presence of God in silence touches something incredibly human, often an unidentified need left unexpressed in in the world.
3. The natural world played an important role in helping participants reach a place of silence and of solitude.
4. Participants reacted physiologically to the rest of silence and of solitude.
5. Compassion formation encompasses a deliberate decision to practice the means of grace for the nurture of compassion's emergent qualities: self-presence, presence to others, self-compassion, and with-ness.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Major Findings

This research project explored the failure of God's people to abide in the loving awareness of God, and, failing to abide in his presence, harboring growing indifference not only to the Beloved but toward all those he gives them to love with him. This selfish indifference not only turns the soul in on itself but leaves the soul utterly untransformed. Ultimately, God's people look and are, in fact, no different from the world. Self-selected participants practiced silence, solitude, and deep listening as a means to rest in God and experience his love for them, freeing them to love others. Specifically the research examined how they understood, experienced, and embodied God's compassion and how that compassion might be deliberately nurtured through the spiritual discipline.

This purpose, and underlying problem, demanded a qualitative approach that focused primarily on the cultivation of experience and reflection on that experience by participants, participant observers, and me. This approach both allowed for insights I may not have uncovered through a quantitative process and introduced some variability in the quality of data. Some participants were simply more articulate in expressing their inner lives than others. Still, five major findings clearly present themselves:

1. Experience is central to formation. While instruction provided insight for participants as I introduced new spiritual disciplines, the experience and practice of these disciplines transformed them.

2. The practice of the presence of God in silence touches something incredibly human, often an unidentified need left unexpressed in in the world.

3. The role the natural world in solitude plays in life with God.
4. The response of the physical body to the rest of silence and solitude.
5. Compassion formation encompasses a deliberate decision to practice the means of grace for the nurture of compassion emergent qualities: self-presence, presence to others, self-compassion, and with-ness.

### **The Essential Formative Role of Experience to Transformation**

While modernism tends to emphasize the importance of affirming doctrinal belief, this research shows that formation for compassion hinges much more on lived experience than on either abstract argument or creedal confession. As participants spent time in their spiritual journals, they focused on how their practice of silence and solitude changed them. Instruction during small group sessions provided some understanding of the disciplines, but the inner change they experienced unfolded through the practice of silent prayer and encounter with God.

Both the participant observers and I saw this change plainly in corporate acts of silence. No matter how participants came to the gathering—tired, frustrated, or distracted—silence drew them into a quiet center that created an atmosphere of mutual care and rest. While some participants reported the racing thoughts that almost always afflict beginners, all, even participant 3, appeared to benefit from their shared practice. Almost each and every one of the participants reported at least some benefit from these disciplines as they practiced them alone within their homes. The instruction simply provided a structure for them to approach these means of grace with new eyes.

Deep listening made the least impact on them, and, in part, this failure goes back to this principal of experience. Participants began the practice silence, and to some degree

solitude, from the beginning of session one. This research focused on leading them into that experience of grace. I did not address deep listening until the last small group session before the retreat. While exposed to Scharmer's Theory U and how communities can move forward through a process of open minds, open hearts, and open wills, the content remained in the abstract rather than being poured into the concrete of life. Limiting deep listening to a single session without the practical emphasis was simply not enough to impact participants as deeply as did silence and solitude. This observation speaks to the importance of experience. The material, however good, must leap off the page into the heart and life of disciples before it becomes an agent for Christian formation.

Future research might achieve the necessary level of experience a number of ways. First, I could include a practical, guided listening component within each session. This exercise allows the ongoing practice of listening from the beginning of the project. Some guidance through each listening exercise will help participants through the Scharmer's U, even if they do not fully understand all its dynamics. For instance, the first time participants practice listening they might simply be encouraged to notice what is different in the perspective of their neighbor to help them move out of downloading.

The number of sessions could also be expanded, but the time spent on deep listening should reflect the purpose of the specific project and local culture. To move participants down Scharmer's U effectively, at least three sessions may be required to help them understand the process, as well as to experience it for themselves in practice. Two sessions might be sufficient if they committed to some intervening exercise. This act of presence builds on the practices of silence and of solitude and reinforces them and should follow development of self-presence.

The experience of the great spiritual masters, some of whom have already been referenced to in the literature review, advocated the practice of silence as a means to union with God affirm this finding, as does other current research. Both John of the Cross and Isaac of Nineveh assume silence as practice rather than simple understanding:

The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul. (John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love" 92)

If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence like sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God himself.... (Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* 43)

The spiritual masters understand the Christian faith as way, a new life that leads to ever deeper union with God. This project also reinforced the finding of Clemons' research on the role of silence and the spiritual life. Participants in his study "changed for the better" (65) through the practice of silence, resulting in a more peaceful faith community. Belief, while foundational, only leads into spiritual transformation when it provides vision to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

The finding affirms discipleship as clearly articulated in the project's theological framework. Life in Christ remains a way to be embraced by spiritual practitioners. Disciples develop a Christlike heart while walking with him. Models of discipleship that fail to engage experience abiding in Christ will struggle to produce whole heart change in the child of God.

Moses admonished Israel similarly after giving the law when he told them, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." (Deut. 30:19). The Israelites could not simply know the commands or believe the doctrine.

Practice of these commands made them come alive. The practice and experience of these means of grace transform, much more than mere belief.

The finding shapes ministry in at least three vital ways. At the most basic level, the people of God must reorient ministries around the purpose of transformation rather than simple learning. The church has fulfilled its responsibility to make disciples by offering countless messages on the meaning of key Greek words and phrases and near endless studies on stories churchgoers have already read a thousand times over. Before anything else, the church must remember the purpose of discipleship is invitation into the way of Christ.

Second, discipleship must be reshaped for emphasis on praxis. If the goal is transformation, the church must push people out of their heads into their hearts and lives. Anything that stays up in the head becomes a game. When the people of God stay in their heads they keep Christ at arms length. As long as God stays in their head, their inner lives remains unchanged. Their lives remains theirs. Praxis eats away at that division by opening the heart to the Holy Spirit. It breaks open the hard places in the ground of being. If transformation in Christ is the goal of discipleship, God's people must renew an emphasis on inviting the people of God in deliberate acts of discipleship rather than on repeating the mind games that only reinforce the false self.

The church, especially clergy, should look for opportunities to invite others into the practice of disciplines such as silence. Moments in a worship service might be taken for silence, especially following the breaking open of Scripture. Time might be made to become present to each other before board meetings. Disciplines should become a common part of the life of the local congregation. This corporate practice will encourage

practice alone and draw the people together in love. It will demand more than simply asking people to be quiet. The spiritual leader will need to be deliberate and offer a few words to frame the meaning surrounding silence. This need for greater practice across the life of the church was also emphasized by participants at the end of the project. They asked themselves how they could carry their experience into the life of the whole congregation.

### **Silence as a Deeply Human Experience**

Data from both the participants and my own observation point towards something deeply human about the need for silence within the human soul. After the practice of silence two different participants wrote:

- I love silence and spending time in silence with God makes me feel loved and desired by him. In silence I find a joy and peace.
- [I have experienced] an increased hunger for more ‘time in surrender’ and the realization of how much easier it is to resolve conflict in a christian (sic) manner after I've spent time in silent prayer.

My own observations affirmed the report of participants. After the first small group meeting, I noted the ease with which participants embraced silence:

First of four sessions today, and it was marvelous. They didn't resist the silence.... This atmosphere is one of delicate vulnerability.

The two participant observers said this project was “much more than expected” and “essential to the future work of the churches.” The second session followed much like the first. Afterward the researcher noted that there “[participants] eagerly shared their personal experiences [of silence]. I cannot over-emphasize our shared surprise at the degree of each participant’s investment.” This response was not expected. Given the

strong Evangelical culture, which tends towards words and wordiness. I expected more pushback, more resistance against silence as a means of grace. That expectation made their receptivity very pronounced. I believe this response points towards something deeply human surrounding silence.

Silence is not the lack of noise. It is simple and loving attention on the Beloved who prays in the people of God and for them. As I provided this theological context, participants quickly offered themselves to the Presence. While they suffered distraction, as do almost all beginners, silence became their sanctuary. Even participant 3, who struggled to connect silence to compassion, responded positively to corporate acts of silence. This evidence, taken alongside their expressed desire to take silence into their worship services, leads me to the conclusion that silence touched something deep within their hearts and lives. More than a simple tool, silence is something as natural to the soul as breath is to the body, something universal. Silence is not an artificial structure forced on the soul; it is the soul's natural home.

Because of this project's emphasis on silence as a means of grace, little attention was given in the literature review to this surprising ontological property, but as this project unfolded I noted various programs on mindfulness well outside the Christian tradition that incorporated some practice of meditative silence. On 20 July 2012, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* did a segment with Congressman Tim Ryan, a thirty-five-year-old Democrat from Ohio ("Mindfulness Goes Mainstream"). He believes his practice of meditation has allowed him to become more aware, or mindful, of the world around him. On 4 December, 2012, *Interfaith Voices*, hosted by Maureen Fiedler, explored the expanding role of mindfulness in the workplace as implemented by a Buddhist software

engineer employed at Google (“Finding Inner Peace at the Googleplex”). He has taught well over one thousand of his fellow employees both silence and meditation. On 8 August 2014, the same program explored how mindfulness has become vogue in everything from personal well-being to sex (“Mindfulness: From Sacred Buddhist Practice to Billion-Dollar Industry”). However, while one might critique another’s understanding of silence or meditation or mindfulness, its universality cannot be argued. The need for silence is a deeply human experience, especially in the midst of an ever noisier world.

This finding fits well into the project’s larger theological framework. God reveals himself to Elijah in the “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12) rather than in the noise of a thunderous wind, a great earthquake, or consuming fire. The people of God are forever being shaped in response to the Word spoken into their silence, whether the prophet Isaiah in the Temple or Mary in Nazareth. The “soul in silence waits” (Ps. 62:5) for God to speak his life into it. Silence, or loving attentiveness to God, has consistently been the place where God loves and forms his people, and if silence, not noise, is humanity’s natural state, the deliberate practice of silence becomes curative. Even in small spaces it touches the soul. This understanding also moves silence from arbitrary, biblical command to something much more organic and life-giving. Dissonance comes when approaching silence as more than means to an end, which this initial research suggests. Silence is not simply a means to holy encounter; it is the spirit in which the soul comes alive at rest in God.

It is not a worship style or prayer preference. Whatever the method used to quiet the soul, the soul has need of it. It creates space for encounter; it reorients the heart; it



draws people into the very present moment. Without silence, people are not really alive because they are not really embracing the moment with their Beloved.

This understanding should prompt questions about how the local church creates space for silence and is especially pertinent in the practice of prayer, worship, and discipleship. At the heart of this question is whether the local church only adds to the noise within the lives of those it touches or provides a place for the soul to rest. If noisy places are disconnected places, then silence provides space for relationships to grow.

One interesting possibility for ministry includes the development of device-free areas in a relatively public space. People carry laptops, tablets, smart phones, dumb phones, mp3 players, even radios. At the same time there is the experience of constant noise: advertisements, songs, television shows, and billboards. In coordination with other local groups a local congregation could design and help maintain what some people call a quiet zone, free from the noise that clutters daily living for the good of the community at large.

### **The Role of Creation in the Nurture of Silence and of Solitude**

Participants noted the important role nature played in prayer throughout their spiritual journals as well as in their spiritual autobiographies. Speaking about silence, participant eight reflects on holy encounter and the natural world:

[Encounter with God is] probably... most profound when I just stop and I just listen to the water in the creek or I just stop and feel the sun on your (sic) face, you (sic) just look at the world and it is all what God has made, and it is just amazing to me

Participant 5 echoed her sentiment when she recorded that while she failed to reach the thirty-minute goal for silence she encountered silence in nature, and other places:

I found myself wanting and able to be in silence with God outdoors in my yard with birds singing, in my car before facing a difficult situation, and in my office. I never sat in my "comfortable chair" all week.

Likewise, participant 6 said

I would always go outside the house to have alone time. Hearing the birds sing and other animal sounds for me is very peaceful I feel closer to God.

Participants 3 and 7 reinforce these sentiments in their own journals. Living in a particularly rural county, the participants find creation a natural way to encounter God in prayer. None of them identify the reasons why. Most have an affinity for country rather than urban living, but this observation remains important as it managed to have impact on so many of the participants, including the one participant who struggled the most with these means of grace.

Wilderness provided an ideal context for our spiritual work while on retreat by forcing solitude. While Lake Louise is not especially rustic, cell phone and Internet services were both limited. Even those participants who bothered with devices struggled to connect with the world outside the retreat center. Even today the natural world can still provide something of a wilderness, a distinct separation from the world at large, and from its insatiable pull on the human heart. Wilderness provided a respite from the noise of ringing phones, text messages, e-mails, tweets, and Facebook status updates. It was sanctuary from the distraction that drowned silence from the lives of participants. Wilderness provided a space where relationship with God rather than demands from the world defined them.

Escape also provided positive space for participants to enlarge their hearts and exercise creative imagination. Participants were no longer coming for a short while, only to leave for another meeting, or a family commitment, or a house project. This time apart was for them to share with each other in Christ. They spent time in open relationship they

had not before. Wilderness created a sanctuary for the participants to practice presence for themselves and one another.

Ilio Delio affirms these observations:

The problem of our own age is not just one of soul but one of space. The industrialization of society, the urbanization of cities, the rise of modern science, and the collapse of religion in culture, has caused the space of the soul to shrink considerably. We live in our own private worlds where the space of solitude is so small and narrow that we jealously covet it and grudgingly share it. We are so concerned not to lose the little space of soul that is our own that we often ignore it rather than dwell within it.... The crisis of our age is one of space; thus it is a crisis of soul. (27-28)

Wilderness provides space for the soul to expand and, therefore, to connect in meaningful ways with others. This experience is something that cannot be duplicated by simply isolating participants in a room without working cell or Internet service. The natural work opens the soul to something larger than its own self. Father Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen reinforces the essential role of solitude when he says that solitude “from the occupations and preoccupations of this world is a great means, and even, at least to certain point, an indispensable means for leading a serious interior life” (35). Spiritual masters across centuries agree that withdraw, especially withdraw into the wilderness, draws the human heart away from the world into the heart of God. Solitude relieves some of the pressure the soul feels to conform to the world rather than Christ.

Scripture also reflects this pull outward from centers of earthly power towards the wilderness. The ministry of John the Baptist, who announced the coming of the Messiah, took place in the wilderness. Jesus makes a special point of this fact in the Gospel of

Luke:

What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ....This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell

you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. (Luke 7:24b, 27-28)

The center of Jewish religious life is the Temple; it is Jerusalem. These are the seats of Jewish religious and civic authority and culture. Sending his messenger out into the wilderness is at once a repudiation of the establishment and an invitation to a way of life rooted in the God who first formed his people in the desert places.

As already alluded to in the literature review, solitude in the wilderness played a central role in the formation of Christ's own ministry. After his baptism the Spirit drove Christ into the wilderness where he was confronted by three temptations, each of which came back to power rooted within the world. The ability to feed masses of people in a desperately hungry world by turning stone into bread promises power. Mobs will follow their stomachs, as Scripture illustrates in the Gospel of John when the crowds try to make Jesus king by force before racing around the sea to find the miracle worker who fed them with just a few bits of bread. Jesus told them they were not interested in signs, those things that pointed to God, but in feeding their empty stomachs.

Likewise, Jesus was tempted to throw himself from the Temple and bow down in worship of the Evil One in exchange for power rooted in the world. The first, a miraculous spiritual display, would draw crowds to follow him; the second promised the power of many kingdoms. In the wilderness Christ chose to turn his back on power rooted within the world and instead chose another way. Withdrawal into the natural world affords the people of God the same opportunity for God's people to do the same today by deliberately choosing to leave the places where the world exercises its strongest pull on their lives. Nouwen who reflects on the temptations of Christ in *Way of the Heart* invites God's people to solitude in the wilderness with the Beloved:

Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. (25)

The participants' experience, the research unfolded in the literature review, especially Nouwen's, and Scripture are each in clear agreement.

This finding is a clear argument for the regular practice of individual and corporate retreat for those within the local church, not simply to go away for a day, but to spend a weekend away with each in the presence of God. The retreat leadership should also emphasize the decision to be apart with God by asking retreatants to limit use of all devices—computers, laptops, tablets, cellphones, and televisions—if not institute an all-out ban. Retreat is a decision to be with God in community away from the world. Retreat structure should facilitate that work.

This finding also invites God's people to think about how they can create green, quiet spaces for those in their larger community. Quiet zones have already been established in Central Park. While an annoyance for some, these are places where people can find respite from the noise that assaults them on a daily basis. A congregation might offer some of their own property or work with city officials to create this space elsewhere for spiritual, emotional, and psychological good of all citizens.

This encounter with God encourages church leaders to consider greening sanctuary space. Many evangelical church traditions emphasize written and spoken word to the near exclusion of what cannot be reduced to doctrinal statements. Ministry tends to focus on knowing or an inner-personal experience that has little need for beauty. Worship spaces tend towards the utilitarian with a focus on function: sound systems, screens,

seating, and accessibility. Natural surfaces, living plants, and sunlight begin to bring in the elements that open the human heart to God as already revealed in creation.

As church leaders green worship spaces, they can also green the building itself. When church leaders understand the value of creation as space for spiritual encounter, they begin to understand nature as God's own sanctuary. Creation is more than mere commodity: energy resource, tourism dollars, development space. God reveals himself to God's people in space, which is holy. Greening the building by reducing energy consumption not only saves the congregation financially but becomes a spiritual act of care with God for the creation for which he lived and died and will come again.

At a deeper level, this finding presses the congregation to embrace a stronger sense of the sacramental life. If the people of God encounter the Holy in the wilderness, if the wilderness reveals the Beloved to them, then the world cannot be devoid of God. It must be recognized as a place alive with the Holy. This sense of the sacramental means that the congregation may encounter God in the ordinary corners of their lives and they carry grace into those places. Care for their infant children, dishwashing, and work in the office are all opportunities for grace. Participating in the sacramental reality, the people of God choose to become present to the Presence and become that Presence for others.

### **Physiological Response to Silence and to Solitude**

Each small group session began with lengthening periods of silence. This corporate practice of silence facilitated real spiritual experience and reinforced their personal practice of silence alone. In at least one instance, while all eyes were closed, snoring erupted from one corner of the room. Tired from work, participant 8 was lulled to sleep by the rest and the quiet. According to both participant observers, who each sat with

the participants during deepening silence, more than one participant fell into rest through prayer.

The effect of rest and quiet on participants was much more pronounced on retreat. While structured, the retreat allowed for some time alone, away from the group. This design freed participants time for prayer, encounter with God, fellowship, showers, and reading, but both participants 4 and 8 used this time almost exclusively for sleep. After escaping the rush and whirl of the busy world, their bodies responded to rest and quiet with collapse.

These observations reveal more about the soul than about prayer. Prayer is the soul's natural state. The soul belongs at rest in the arms of the Beloved. Collapse points towards the extent to which the people of God succumb to the compulsions of the world to push past the body's natural limits and resist the call of God to Sabbath rest.

While not commented on directly in the literature review, various spiritual masters have commented on this physiological response. Father Thomas Keating addresses the question directly:

If you doze off, don't give it a second thought. A child in the arms of a parent drops off to sleep occasionally, but the parent isn't disturbed by that so long as the child is happily resting there and opens its eyes once in awhile. (35)

While Father Keating intends to affirm practitioners who fall asleep in the midst of centering prayer, the presence of this brief line reveals how real a concern sleep becomes for beginners. He goes on to recommend that individuals practice centering prayer at those times when they are most naturally awake and alert. The soul changes as it first abides in the love of God. It finds rest in prayer and sleep before carrying that rest into the world to become more alert in contemplation.

This research cannot definitively state what impact collapse may have had on either their experience of prayer or the development of compassion. Participants 4 and 8 reported very positive responses not only to silent prayer but also to its impact on their exercise of compassion. Visibly, both appeared more relaxed, less frazzled. I did not necessarily observe this same effect in participant 9, who fell asleep during deepening silence during one small group session. I struggle clearly state whatever progress he made was due to the spiritual disciplines. Further research would be necessary to explore this finding in light of current medical science.

This phenomena is most clearly seen in the disciples as Christ prayed in Gethsemane. In Matthew he pleaded with them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me” (Matt. 26:38). He knew what is about to happen there, and he asked for their prayers as he prepared to face it. When he returned, he found them sleeping. He abjured them a second time, and when he returned he found them sleeping, again. The third time he came back, he met Judas. As Christ invited his disciples to pray with him, he said, “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). Thrust into rest and quiet with God, the disciples slept. Like the participants, their bodies collapsed. The response of Jesus is not so much about judgment as recognition of human limitation.

Scripture connects rest to holiness in the Old Testament:

You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. (Exod. 31:14)

Rest sets the people of God apart from the world, in part because rest forces them to abandon the anxiety of busyness. Holiness is also wholeness in one’s humanity. One



enters rest for the sake of one's own humanity to remember oneself in God apart from the demands of the world.

Understanding the people's need for Sabbath calls the church to consider the rhythm of work and rest. Leaders in the local congregation must evaluate whether they contribute to soul weariness or alleviate it. Ministry done in a spirit of hurried anxiety is no more spiritually forming for the soul than work for the world. Ministry always flows from a position of rest in arms of the Beloved.

This finding also challenges the people of God to question how they might begin to carry rest into the world. The rhythm is not so much a swing between hurried activity and quiet rest as a Sabbath spirit that permeates the disciple's life in all things. It recognizes human limitation and trusts that the holy love of God will carry his people through all things.

Finally, the response of the body to Sabbath rest challenges models of pastoral leadership that compel clergy to live as if they had no bodies. Pressure from congregations, denominational leadership, even themselves, sometimes lead clergy to sin against themselves by neglecting rest. Denominational and congregational leaders should take the rest of their clergy leadership as seriously as they take their clergy's work.

### **Compassion, Its Formation and Emergent Qualities**

The question of nurture underlay all the work of this formation project, the mystery of the transformation of one's heart in the heart of God. All of its intention, research, and methods were intended to draw the people of God more deeply into the arms of their Beloved to find love there, and, in their own words, silence and solitude became a "place where the need for compassion" and their "connection to all God...

created” was recognized. These means of grace provided the space for the souls to grow in grace. A participant observer saw this movement unfold and noted that “It was clear based on the more open mind created, that the heart swelled immediately....” Spiritual disciplines do not function as ends in themselves. They simply open the soul to the Spirit’s work in and through God’s people. Participants in the focus group left this project feeling “[c]hallenge[d] to extend the compassion [they’d] received to others.” They found value in what they experienced and wanted to offer that experience to others.

At the same time they also recognized compassion was itself a decision. Asked whether compassion just happens, and what kind of work it takes, if any at all, participants responded by saying that compassion

- Requires time,
- Must first be experienced before it can be practiced,
- Must be valued by the community as a whole, and
- Can be cultivated in community by saying, “No.” to busyness, supporting

small group ministries, and participating in vocal prayer.

Each of these points recognizes the decision the individual must be exercised by the individual pursuing compassion formation, especially the first, the third, and fourth. They recognize that compassion takes time. It is not just one act among many or a quality that just happens one day. It involves a process of transformation over a lifetime to reorient the heart. A piece of that change is learning to say, “No.” to busyness in order to free oneself for community. This decision creates space for compassionate relationship and requires the self-presence to recognize how and where attention is fixed.

The third speaks to the corporate practice of compassion. Compassionate communities are formed by compassionate people. Participants believed that in order for compassionate communities to take shape the community must articulate and embrace the value of compassion. This insight speaks to the need for leaders to be deliberate in choosing how they nurture compassion across the community and clear in communicating its value. Compassion does not simply happen as an individual or as a community. A decision must be made to reorient the life of the community away from its own suffering to the suffering of others. Just this ministry project began introducing the question of compassion into conversations within the two churches. Participants asked themselves questions they had not proposed before the project began.

In the midst of this work, the research reflection team wrestled with a question raised by Gharajedaghi, who suggests that love is an emergent property or a property that can only express itself in the dynamic of their individual parts. In this sense love and other emergent properties “are not one time propositions” (46). Rather they are “spontaneous” and cannot be “stored or saved for future use” (46). If compassion were an emergent property, it must also possess consentient parts, which the research reflection team believed included the following:

- Self-presence—The ability to discern self-motive, especially what is compassion and what is self-interest, even indifference.
- Presence to others—The degree to which an individual is fully present to others around them.
- Self-compassion—The practice of compassion for an individual’s own brokenness.
- With-ness—A commitment to life in community.

The participant observers and I recognized these qualities in the lives of participants as they progressed through the project, as clearly outlined in the preceding chapter. These are qualities the practices of silence, solitude, and deep listening nurture.

Silence and solitude each contribute both to self-presence and to self-compassion. These disciplines are each a deliberate withdrawal from distraction for encounter with God. These places prevent the soul from hiding among the weeds of spiritual neglect and invite the soul to embrace love with the Beloved. This clarity, alongside deep listening, allows the soul greater presence to others and the ability to be with others in community. These underlying dynamics are essential to the formation of compassionate community and may be developed through means of grace outside those explored in this research. The end of this project is not the practice of silence or solitude, but the soul transformed in the compassionate heart of God. These other disciplines may include Brother Lawrence's practice of the presence, Thérèse of Lisieux's little way, Ignatius's spiritual exercises, Francis of Assisi's poverty, or in the community of life of German pietists. Spiritual disciplines are simply the tools that allow disciples to open themselves up to the life of God.

John of the Cross speaks to the importance both to process and to decision when he describes the beginner still held captive to the sin of spiritual anger:

Others, in becoming aware of their own imperfections, grow angry with themselves in an unhumble impatience. So impatient are they about these imperfections that they want to become saints in a day.... Their attitude is contrary to spiritual meekness and can only be remedied by the purgation of the dark night. Some, however, are so patient about their desire for advancement that God would prefer them a little less so. ("Dark Night of the Soul" 370-71)

John understood that spiritual growth necessitated an inner pilgrimage ever into the heart of God. He did not understand sanctification, or deepening in love, to be either birthright or haphazard circumstance. The disciple climbed the mountain of perfection through embrace of the Beloved until all the soul loved with him. Process, journey, and intention characterize vast swaths of the spiritual masters and their writing. The body of literature reflects grace development rather than instantaneous perfection.

This research tends to favor the developmental literature of John of the Cross rather than the instantaneous theories of B. T. Roberts. Compromise may be found in understanding spiritual growth, or growth in compassion, as a journey punctuated by liminalities or thresholds through which the soul passes. The presence of an emergent property would also suggest that this process is dynamic rather than static, meaning that the compassionate soul may become indifferent if no attention is paid to soul care.

Biblically Paul's life bears witness to spiritual growth as journey, which he characterizes to the Corinthians as a journey into love:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

Paul writes here as a mystic and as an apostle. He has experienced visions, performed miracles, evangelized, wrote letters, and organized many within the early Church, and all these things he says begin and end in love, even as love unfolds itself in the heart of the believer. He pressed the Hebrews to "run with perseverance the race that is set before"

the people of God. Spiritual growth as journey, as development, is exactly what unfolds in the life of Paul, who begins his life as a Jew under the training of Gamaliel, persecuting followers of the Way, even overseeing their deaths. This persecution was his beginning, which is followed by his experience on the road to Damascus, his time in the home of Judas before being healed by Annanias, discipleship under the guidance of Barnabas, until he said to Timothy that he was “already being poured out as libation” (2 Tim. 4:6b). Paul progressed through time. Damascus, Barnabas, and Paul’s visions are thresholds through which he passes, but only moments across a larger journey. Growth in holiness, which is growth in love, is pilgrimage with God through life, an ever deepening in the heart of God that demands attention. This research does not disqualify instantaneous sanctification but questions it as the ordinary means by which God’s people become holy, compassionate people.

Practically, this finding points to a need for pastors and other church leaders to evaluate how they speak about salvation, which is often seen as an end point. If the call of faith is to embrace the life of Christ, then the call of faith must be a call to compassion and, therefore, to journey. Justification only begins the larger spiritual journey.

This insight also reminds those same church leaders to be mindful about their own soul care. If compassion sits at the heart of the ministry of Christ, it sits at the heart of all ministry in his name. Care should be taken in tending the hearts of pastors for compassion formation.

Church leadership may also seriously consider how they deliberately choose to cultivate compassion as corporate value. This nurture may include teaching, spiritual exercises, and modeling. These intentions provide space for self-presence, self-

compassion, presence to others, and with-ness. These qualities might become markers for worship as well as small groups and life in community overall.

### **Implications of the Findings**

Compassion-oriented research is essential both for the church and for the globe. As a global community, citizens no longer have the luxury of pretending they live alone on the earth, that somehow their lives will leave no mark on others. The collective decisions of citizens, governments, and private interests actively impact the environment as well as the economic and social well-being of whole peoples. Indifference simply carries too high a cost for those alive today and those who might follow. Already rising sea levels are swallowing islands in the Pacific. People of the island nation of Samoa face growing instances of severe weather while people of the Tuvalu islands expect the entirety of their island home to disappear beneath the waves within fifty years (Torricc). The United Nations believes at least 12.7 million people suffer slavery, while other nongovernmental agencies push that number upwards towards thirty million (Costa). Ploughshares, an organization committed to peace, estimates At least 16,300 nuclear weapons in the world are controlled by just nine governments, with North Korea holding the most recent nuclear weapon tests (Kristensen and Norris; "Nuclear Weapons"). The refusal to embrace compassion as a global value amounts to global suicide.

This research may also be applied by pastors who face regular pressure to abandon compassion for cynicism and indifference. Silence, solitude, and deep listening provide pastors a way they, as individuals, can nurture a reservoir of holy love for the work of ministry, stemming high burnout among pastors. These disciplines will not only

nourish their souls but enrich their ministries within the local church and wider community.

Leaders within local congregations may choose to apply the disciplines of silence and solitude to nurture compassion as a community value: silent retreats, moments of silence in worship, formation groups, and compassion ministry projects. This research is a tool for congregational leaders serious about suffering with Christ for the world. All three disciplines till the soil of the soul in preparation for joining Christ in ministry out in community.

The project raises awareness for compassion within the world and the church's need for its deliberate nurture. Citizens of first world nations are not subject to the suffering experienced elsewhere in the world. Environmental crises, violence, and economic exploitation are muted in comparison to developing nations not restrained by a stable democratic government. It becomes very easy to believe the Western American experience is normative. This research makes that illusion and the illusion of one's own compassion more difficult to believe. In order to become agents for compassion, individuals not only need to become aware of its need but do the inner work compassion requires.

Practitioners of silence and solitude may also be encouraged to find common ground for work alongside Christians outside their own tradition. A great deal of theology, practice, and polity divides the people of God. Whether issues surrounding the rights of congregations to self-determination, the inspiration of Scripture, or the sacrament of baptism, very important questions have created traditions, ranging from Roman Catholicism and orthodoxy to mainline Protestantism and the Evangelical



movement. Because it simply invites participants into encounter with God, silence for the work of compassion can become a meeting point. Silence sets the ego aside to become present to the Presence not only in oneself but others. An ecumenical small group committed to the corporate practice of silence may begin to build bridges for shared Christian ministry in the world.

Outside of the Church, silence for the work of compassion creates opportunity for interfaith dialog. Because silence does not argue, because it sets the ego aside, and because it is the soul's natural home, silence can be practiced with others who do not share faith in Christ. The decision of participants not to speak or to place demands on another opens opportunity for relationship. How each religious tradition understands the role of silence may be quite different, but the practice of silence becomes common ground for shared experience and the potential for shared work around social concerns. Silence refuses to name the Holy Mystery in order to encounter the Holy as he is, without construct, which opens a path towards conversation.

Compassion itself has the power to draw together a very diverse community. Whether as Christians learning to abide in the love of their Beloved, Buddhists on their journey towards enlightenment, or otherwise secular researchers such as Scharmer exploring new ways for people to live within the world, compassion holds the potential to become common ground for positive work in the world. Interfaith dialogue comes alongside shared acts of compassion, providing avenues for peace in regions embroiled in religious hatreds.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The single greatest limit for this research was time. The project limited itself to four small group sessions and a single weekend retreat that spanned not much more than forty days. While most participants self-reported a very positive response to the means of grace and growth in compassion, no instruments will measure how well they maintain these disciplines afterward or the degree to which these disciplines continue to make an impact on their lives. Compassionate people are not born overnight or in forty days. They are formed over a lifetime of inner work in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. For the purposes of this project, I limited the time frame, which also limits the available data. This limitation also impacted one specific aspect of the project as a whole.

While successful in both teaching several key spiritual disciplines and instilling a greater sense of compassion, time limited the practice and experience of deep listening to just the last small group meeting. Participants began experimenting with silence and varying degrees of solitude immediately, but I offered no deliberate instruction or practice of deep listening until the fourth session. Because of this design, deep listening made only a small impact on participants. There was not time enough either to provide instruction or to experience what it meant to listen or be heard. This research cannot say what might have resulted from more work here because I deliberately chose to limit the time frame in order to attract participants who might hesitate about committing to a longer process.

The second greatest limitation was the small number of participants and their participation in the project. Participants self-selected from three very small congregations and tended to reflect average participation rates for other small group ministries. This

limitation may call the project's generalizability into question. A second experiment would be necessary to explore the degree to which this project's small numbers skewed results.

The research itself would have been improved with greater consistency in the quality of data retrieved from the spiritual journals. While twenty-five of the twenty-seven journals were returned, not all the participants responded as fully as others to the questions. In at least one case, a respondent answered only one of the four questions. The tool gathered data, but more instruction or guidance might have resulted in information that was both deeper and wider.

The focus group did not yield the amount of data gathered in one-on-one interviews. While helpful for participants thinking about how to carry this experience back out into their congregations, each participant limited her or his their thoughts. Quieter participants shared less than others. Overall the personal interviews, while the more time consuming, produced the most usable data. They allowed for follow-up questions and diversions in ways that neither the spiritual journals nor focus group could not.

While the research revealed a universal sense to silence, not everyone will experience silence as holy encounter. Teenagers or young adults, whose brains are still developing and who remain strongly invested in personal ego, may experience silence as anything but a period of time without noise. The work of spiritual formation in silence requires some distance from the ego, the ability to say, "That is not me." In order to do stand apart from oneself, one has to have a developed ego to which to be present. An

older teenager or young adult might have this sense; but otherwise, silence may not be effective.

Geography will not likely play a key role in applying the research. Northern Michigan trends towards closure, insulation, and survivalism. People as a whole tend to mistrust anything coming from the small world around them. More religiously active or diverse areas would probably notice more, not less, success in the project's application.

Religious experience may play a key role. Participants unfamiliar with the means of grace or silence may be less willing to try contemplative prayer practices. This project included at least two participants raised in the Roman Catholic Church and another who already spent a great deal of time in prayer. Because contemplation, silence, and the spiritual masters are suspect in some evangelical and fundamental churches, practitioners may need to be creative in their application.

### **Unexpected Observations**

The single most surprising observation was the near total disinterest in this ministry project within both congregations. Despite weeks of promotion, I was only able to find five participants from Epsilon and two from New Hope. Participants 3 and 9, who came from Alanson United Methodist, volunteered, in part, as professional courtesy. Compassion and discipleship do not capture their imagination as a people. An important lay leader at one of the churches wrote in concern that “[the project] is part of a dissertation topic (and cerebral), how does it tie in to practical concerns about declining attendance and your Epsilon/New Hope time commitments?” Even after engaging her and explaining the centrality of discipleship to faith, and the importance of compassion to discipleship, she neither participated nor supported the project. She saw the problems of

her congregation as statistical rather than spiritual. The greatest force of discipleship is devoted to holding thirty-minute Bible classes for what few children worship with them. Most of what passes for adult discipleship are Bible studies that may or may not enhance biblical knowledge and do little to transform the heart. While very devoted to Christ and faith in him, people struggle to understand what this life means outside of religious belief, the promise of life after death, and commitment to several key moral ideas. People feel little urgency either to discipleship in general or to compassion specifically.

Meanwhile, most of the participants embraced silence, solitude, and compassion with enthusiasm. While prepared for a hard sell, they offered no resistance. Presence fed their soul. A participant observer who agreed to support the project with his own observations quickly noted that while he made the decision to do so as a favor to me, it quickly became an important experience for him. Participant three who struggled the most had a seminary education. I expected the opposite to be true. I became aware of a negative experience that made solitude uncomfortable, but I also expect personal traits are also at work. She responded well to corporate silence.

### **Recommendations**

Future research should expand both the instruction and the practice of deep listening. They are key to the practice of compassion in community. Researchers might consider the addition of more small group sessions or perhaps the inclusion of experiments in listening throughout the project, as the ministry project afforded silence and solitude. Experience is central to formation, and this formation for compassion should include listening.

Future research may also be done on Sabbath rest within the local church.

Researchers may specifically explore the degree to which the local congregation has become enslaved to the same forces that exhaust God's people within the world, as well as disciplines to practice the rest of God. Part of this ministry will include the practice of silence, but it will likely go past silence to explore the shape of worship services, administrative structures, and time spent in doing oriented activities rather than being oriented activities.

Were this material used again, it might also extend outward in at least two ways. First, it could include the creation of a group project by participants. This method reinforces the application of compassion and extends compassion outward into the larger community of faith. By coming up with their own project, participants also take their first step in living out compassion without direction from leadership.

Second, time could be found to continue the practice of group silence. Several participants have come to me affirming their corporate practice as important to their experience of compassion over the duration of the project. This practice would not necessarily require the instruction initially provided.

Time was a limiting factor. This research is a simple moment in time, a step in the journey. Longitudinal research would also be helpful to investigate how long participants continue the disciplines and what effect they have on the lives of participants.

Research may also be done exploring the various sorts of contemplative prayer practices: centering prayer, deepening prayer, prayer beads, breath prayer, *lectio divina*, labyrinths, singing bowls. A variety of contemplative prayer practices have been

developed over time. Research may reveal how different temperaments respond, and how each contributes to the work of compassion.

Other research might explore compassion as an emergent property, its constituent parts, and best practices for development. Such research could examine various disciplines, determining which ones prove most effective corporately and individually. It might also function over time, looking at what disciplines people maintain over time and what disciplines are dropped by practitioners.

Overall, this project has shown itself to be a first step in advancing disciplines that nurture compassion. It has interested those who would likely never consider silence before, but more steps are necessary to develop compassion across the parish at large. This effort might include further small group meetings, a special project and the inclusion of silence across church activities. It cannot have its full impact without commitment to further development.

### **Postscript**

This journey into compassion began at an early age, when God first impressed his love deep into my soul. I made a god of my religion, my Scripture, and my own religious reputation, but Brother Lawrence brought my heart home again:

I have entered the religious life solely for the love of God. I have tried to live only for Him; whether I am damned or saved, I desire always to live only for the love of God; I shall at least be able to say right to my death, that I have done my utmost to love him. (28)

My life with God was not a waiting game, fire insurance for a twenty-one year old, or basic instructions before leaving earth. I hope to live my life with God in response to the love already poured out over me. My journey brought me to this work, and this work lays a foundation for future ministry within and without the local church.

This ministry project deepened not only my understanding but my experience of compassion as something essential to the human soul created in the image of a Trinitarian God. Modern American ministry tends to erode Trinitarian ministry with an emphasis on counting: individuals attending services, percentage of attendees who have become members, average dollars donated by giving units. The gospel has been buried underneath American expectations for wealth and outward success, and only a few people have noticed. Only ministry carried out in the Spirit of the Christ can rightly be called Christian, and only ministry rooted in compassion can abide in his Spirit.

Some problems surrounding institutional ministry really rise from shared failure to do what must be done for the love of God. People are not spirits; they have bodies. Institution allows the people of God to function together as embodied spirits. In those cases holiness depends “not on changing our works but in doing for God what we ordinarily do for ourselves” (Brother Lawrence 38). At other times, the people of God, of which I am part, simply need to recognize they have reduced the kingdom to whatever the institution they have created or building they have erected. They have enslaved themselves to a master other than the Good Shepherd.

I am thankful for this journey and where it is already leading me. I am thankful to my beloved wife, Reverend Hillary Thurston-Cox, who gave me these last six years for this work, which belongs as much to her as it does to me. Her own decision to love in everything continues to inspire me. I am thankful to those who embodied this compassion for me and encouraged my research: Corrine Edstrom and Donna Verhey of Rose Lake Free Methodist Church, Father Francis Partridge of the Gaylord Diocese, John Kafer of New Hope United Methodist Church, District Superintendent Anita Hahn of the Grand



Traverse District, and Doctor Marilyn Harris and Grace Eberly of Epsilon United Methodist Church. Each contributed something of themselves not simply to this research project but to me as their brother in Christ.

This research gives me hope that others raising their voices for compassion in the world, whether Christian or Buddhists or social scientists. People are waking up to a world in desperate need of transformation in love, a total reorientation of the human heart. I was especially heartened to find examples of these leaders dialoging together and inviting others from their own communities to share that dialogue with them.

I am excited to see where this work leads me in work within and without the local parish. This research took place in the midst of a difficult appointment where I have been challenged to wonder what the exercise compassion means among a people bent inward on themselves and deathly afraid for their future as a congregation. Compassion is not a switch easily turned on or off. Sometimes my ego hurts, and I fail. Chris Keisling wrote so well in an e-mail to me

[G]enuine compassion is not engaged for the approval or affirmation of others - so maybe it will remain for only a few who find the motivation in following Christ and in experiencing His great companionship to practice solitude that leads to compassion.

Compassion, by its very nature, acts for love of the other rather than love of self or ego.

I have spent tens of thousands of words to say what the Elder in First John says in only seven, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This life is the life of Christ alive in his people. It is the only gospel worth keeping.

## APPENDIX A

### DATA GATHERING TOOLS

#### Preintervention Interview and Spiritual Autobiography

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Assigned Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking time to meet with me. Today we begin a journey with a simple conversation exploring how you as a disciple understand, experience, and embody the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Please share deeply from your heart. Whatever you share here remains entirely confidential and will only be utilized for the purposes of this research project. The questions I ask will range from simple autobiographical information to personal experiences. You may not understand how each fits together, and that's okay. Please answer as fully as you feel you can. You may also choose not to answer.

#### I. Life Experience and Understanding

##### A. Compassion

1. If compassion is suffering with others in their deep need, what experience of God or his people most immediately comes to mind?
  - a. How has that moment changed you, if at all?
  - b. In what ways have you chosen to act with compassion?

##### B. Reflect on your own spiritual journey. How did it begin? What one or two moments have been the most powerful or meaningful for you?

##### C. Gender Roles Expectations & Experiences

1. What expectations have been placed on you by your family because of your gender?
2. What expectations have been placed on you by your church because of your gender?
3. How have those expectations shaped your life?

##### D. Political Partisanship

1. How has faith shaped your political values? Please provide specific examples.
2. How do you see faith shaping the political values of those opposed to your own convictions, if at all?

##### E. Consumerism

1. Reflect a moment on how you spend your finances. Why do you make the spending decisions you do? Provide one or two examples?

F. A means of grace is a sacred space we create in our lives for the Spirit's work, such as prayer with others, fasting, worship, or retreat.

1. What two or three means of grace would you name as central to your own spiritual life? How have they changed you?

2. What role does silence play in your life with God and the faith community?

3. What role does solitude play in your life with God and the faith community?

4. What role does listening to others play in your life with God and the faith community?

G. What led you to participate in this small group focused on the compassionate life?

## II. Autobiographical Information:

A. Name:

B. Gender:

C. Date of Birth:

D. Single? Married? Divorced? Widowed? Remarried after a divorce? Remarried after death of spouse? Cohabiting?

E. Church Name:

F. Years with This Church:

G. Years a follower of Jesus Christ:

## Spiritual Life Journal 01

### **Session: 02, Silence and the Embrace of our Beloved**

Name:

What Jesus proposed to his disciples as the Way is his own example: the forgiveness of everything and everyone and the service of others in their needs.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”  
Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*

Please set aside thirty minutes for this time of holy reflection. This guide will provide you a space to think, and write, about questions we will explore together in our next meeting. Remember, I'm not looking for any one answer. I simply want you to reflect on your thoughts, your feelings, and your experiences.

1. “Dallas Willard quotes Blaise Pascal as saying that ‘all the unhappiness of man arises from the single fact that they cannot stay quietly in their room so they turn to diversions to distract themselves....’ He goes on to say that even when we attempt to rest, we are confused and ‘aim at rest through excitement’ —in other words, through more stimulation. How do you see evidence of this in our culture and in your own life?” (Barton 145-46)

2. “‘When we make room for silence, we make room for ourselves,... the unknown, the untamed, the wild, the shy, the unfathomable.’ How did silence make room for more parts of you to find expression?” (Barton 147)

3. “Were you able to just be yourself and be with God with what surfaced? How did you experience God with you (or not) during your times of silence? Are there any other questions or observations that surfaced?” (Barton 148)

4. Describe your experience of deepening silence and centering prayer up to this point, with special attention to the life of your soul. In what ways have these times crept (or not crept) into your ordinary life?

5. How can we pray for you as you practice silence?

## Spiritual Life Journal 02

### **Session: 03, Solitude, Letting Go of the World around Us to Embrace the Beloved**

Name:

If the deepest ground of my being is love, then in that very love and nowhere else will I find myself, the world, and my brother and sister in Christ. It is not a question of either-or but of all-in-one. It is not a matter of exclusivity and “purity” but of wholeness, wholeheartedness, unity, and of Meister Eckhart’s [equality] which finds the same ground of love in everything.

Thomas Merton, *Choosing to Love the World*

Please set aside thirty minutes for this time of holy reflection. This guide will provide you a space to think, and write, about questions we will explore together in our next meeting. Remember, I’m not looking for any one answer. I simply want you to reflect on your thoughts, your feelings, and your experiences.

1. “How, when and where were you able to practice solitude and silence this week?” (Barton 147)

2. “Did you notice any fear or anxiety about the experience of solitude itself? Were you aware of that fear actually sabotaging your efforts to enter more deeply into solitude and silence? Were you able to be with that fear in God’s presence? What happened?” (Barton 149)

3. “Take a moment to notice and share the changes that have already taken place in your relationships with others as you have stayed faithful to your practice to your practice of solitude and silence” (Barton 157). In what ways have you experienced a renewed presence of Christ in relationship with others?

4. “How are you experiencing solitude as being ‘for others’—making you safer and having more to give when you are with others in community?” (Barton 158). How has your heart grown in compassion with others if at all?

**DG.04**

**Spiritual Life Journal 03**

**Session: 04, Holy Listening, Becoming Present to the Suffering of Others**

Name:

God is a compassionate God. This means, first of all, that he is a God who has  
chosen to be God-with-us.

Donald P. McNeil, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen

Please set aside thirty minutes for this time of holy reflection. This guide will provide you a space to think, and write, about questions we will explore together in our next meeting. Remember, I'm not looking for any one answer. I simply want you to reflect on your thoughts, your feelings, and your experiences.

1. Reflect a moment on divisions that have infected your own church recently or in the past. How have you seen voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear at work in others or yourself?

2. Reflect on a time when another offered listening with an open mind, and open heart, and an open will. How did you experience that moment? How has that changed you? If you cannot think of a single time when this has happened, how might it change you?

3. In what ways have silence and solitude prepared you to offer an open mind, heart and will to others within and without the church?

Please return before our retreat via e-mail (pastor.xyz@abc.com) or via post. Typed answers are preferred to handwritten.

## APPENDIX B

### MISCELLANEOUS DOCUMENTS

#### **Preintervention Letter to Parishioners Regarding History of Compassion at their Churches**

The Nurture of Compassion:  
A Ministry Project Rooted in Ancient Spiritual Disciplines of Prayer  
Rev. Vaughn W. Thurston-Cox

Brother and Sister in Christ,

As you know I have spent the last several years working towards the completion of my doctor of ministry in spiritual formation, a degree designed to better equip me for ministry within the Church. The eight classes I have taken will be capped by something called a ministry project, which is simply a ministry program I design after research within the field of my choosing.

For me that field can be nothing other than the nurture of compassion among the people of God.

The love of God sits at the heart of God's redemptive work in us. We are saved by love for love. The elder writes in First John, "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them." Love, then, isn't secondary or simply for the mature Christian. It is for all those who claim relationship with the God whose life is love.

The purpose of my project is to develop the knowledge, behavior, and attitude of compassion through the practice of two spiritual disciplines of prayer grounded in silence. This is what I want most for our people. Nothing can overcome a people given over to the practice of holy love. But before I begin this project I must complete a brief history of both Epsilon and New Hope United Methodist Churches, and so I am hoping you can each take just a little time and complete the following questionnaire about your own time in these communities of faith. I am not asking for your names, so these surveys will remain anonymous. Each survey will begin requesting information about the church you are a part of and your time spent there.

Once complete, please return in the envelope provided.

Jesus be in Your Soul.

Rev. Vaughn W. Thurston-Cox

Name of Church:

Years Spent within Your Community of Faith:

1. Describe your most cherished memory about this faith community.
2. To the best of your ability and without any references, please define compassion.
3. Describe your own practice of compassion and specific ways you seek to nurture compassion within your life.
4. What is your experience of compassion in the lives of pastoral leadership over time? Its emphasis in their life and teaching? (Please be specific as you can be.)
5. What is your experience of compassion within your own faith community in practice and/or neglect over time? (Again, please be specific as you can. Stories welcome.)
6. Reflecting on these questions, what value do you believe your faith community has placed or places on compassion as central to the spiritual life on a scale of one to ten, with 1 being "None at all" and 10 being "Complete Importance"?



## Formation Covenant

### *Compassion: Suffering with Christ for the World*

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#### I. The Covenant

- A. I will attend every session, as I am willing.
- B. When we gather, my words will remain kind, necessary, and true.
- C. I will guard each one's dignity by keeping our conversations confidential.
- D. The researcher invites you to remember the members of this formation group in prayer. In particular he invites you to seek guidance in how you may better love each and every one.
- E. I will come to each formation gathering with an open mind, an open heart, and an open will.
- F. The researcher invites you to accept responsibility to contribute towards our shared conversation and corporate practice of the spiritual disciplines, and commit yourself to personal practice of these disciplines in your home when alone.
- G. The researcher invites you to complete each of the three spiritual life journals and submit them in writing to Pastor Vaughn Thurston-Cox by e-mail, post, or hand delivery.
- H. I understand that the sessions may be recorded for research, in which case what is said always remains confidential and may not be used for any other purpose than research for this ministry project.

#### II. Formation Meeting Times and Places

- A. Session 01, Compassion & the Means of Grace
  - 1. Date & Time: April 27, 2014, 4:00 P.M.
  - 2. Place: *Alanson United Methodist*
- B. Session 02, Silence & the Embrace of our Beloved
  - 1. Date & Time: May 7, 2014, 6:30 P.M.
  - 2. Place: *Alanson United Methodist*
- C. Session 03, Solitude, Letting Go of the World around Us to Embrace the Beloved
  - 1. Date & Time: May 18, 2014, 4:00 P.M.
  - 2. Place: *Alanson United Methodist*
- D. Session 04, Holy Listening, Becoming Present to the Suffering of Others
  - 1. Date & Time: May 28, 2014, 6:30 P.M.
  - 2. Place: *Alanson United Methodist*
- E. Overnight Retreat
  - 1. Dates & Time: June 7, 2014, 9:30 A.M. to June 8, 2014, 4:00 P.M.
  - 2. Place: *Lake Louise Christian Community*

#### III. Materials

- A. Notebook & Writing Instrument
- B. Bible of Your Choice.
- C. An open mind, open heart, and open will.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(A copy will be made and given to the participant for their records.)*

## Gathering Ourselves to Love Others

### Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace,  
 Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE;  
 Where there is injury, PARDON;  
 Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
 Where there is despair, HOPE;  
 Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
 Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,  
 grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, AS TO CONSOLE;  
 to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;  
 to be loved, AS TO LOVE.

For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,  
 it is in pardoning THAT WE ARE PARDONED,  
 and it is in dying THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.

AMEN.

### WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,  
 We are One in The Lord.  
 We are One in The Spirit,  
 We are One in The Lord.  
 And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)  
 And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
 By our Love,  
 Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,  
 We will work side by side.  
 We will work with each other,  
 We will work side by side.  
 And we'll guard each one's dignity  
 And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)  
 And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
 By our Love,  
 Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.  
We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
And together we'll spread the News  
that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
By our Love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
By our Love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

## Father Keating on Centering Prayer

Selection taken from *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Father Thomas Keating.

### *THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER* □

Centering Prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship with Christ... and to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else.

### *THE GUIDELINES* □

1. "Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. □"
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

### □ *EXPLANATION OF THE GUIDELINES*

1. "Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within" (see Chapter Five). □
  - a. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence and to yield to the divine action. □
  - b. The sacred word should be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable for us.
    - i. Examples: Lord, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother. □
    - ii. Other possibilities: Love, Peace, Shalom, Silence.
  - c. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period, for that would be to start thinking again. □
  - d. A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God's presence and action by turning inwardly toward God as if gazing **upon** him. **The** same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.

2. "Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within."
  - a. By "sitting comfortably" is meant relatively comfortably: not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during this time of prayer.
  - b. Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight. □
  - c. If we fall asleep, we continue the prayer for a few minutes upon awakening if we can spare the time.
  - d. Praying in this way after a main meal encourages drowsiness. Better to wait an hour at least before Centering Prayer. Praying in this way just before retiring may disturb one's sleep pattern. □
  - e. We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.
  - f. We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.
3. "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."
  - a. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries.
  - b. Thoughts are a normal part of Centering Prayer. \_
  - c. By "returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word," a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
  - d. During the course of our prayer, the sacred word may become vague or even disappear.
4. "At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for two or three minutes."
  - a. If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite the Our Father during the additional two or three minutes while the others listen.
  - b. The additional two or three minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external senses and enable us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life.

#### *SOME PRACTICAL POINTS* □

1. The minimum time for this prayer is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.
2. The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer, provided it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
3. The principal effects of Centering Prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of Centering Prayer itself
4. Physical symptoms:

- a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body, or a generalized restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
  - b. We may also notice heaviness or lightness in the extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness. □
  - c. In either case, we pay no attention, or we allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation and then return to the sacred word.
5. *Lectio divina* provides the conceptual background for the development of Centering Prayer.
  6. A support group praying and sharing together once a week helps maintain one's commitment to the prayer.

#### *EXTENDING THE EFFECTS OF CENTERING PRAYER INTO DAILY LIFE* □

1. Practice two periods of Centering Prayer daily. □
2. Read scriptures regularly and study the parts of this book that deal with the method.
3. Practice one or two of the specific practices for everyday life suggested in Chapter Twelve.
4. □Join a Centering Prayer Support Group or Follow-up Program (if available in your area). □
  - a. The group meeting encourages the members of the group to persevere in private. □
  - b. It also provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through tapes, readings, and discussion.

#### *POINTS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT* □

1. During the prayer period, various kinds of thoughts may be distinguished (see Chapters Six through Ten): □
  - a. Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
  - b. Thoughts that give rise to attractions or aversions.
  - c. Insights and psychological breakthroughs. □
  - d. Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or "This peace is just great!"
  - e. Thoughts that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.
2. During this prayer, we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as the following:
  - a. Repeating the sacred word continuously.
  - b. Having no thoughts.
  - c. □Making the mind a blank.
  - d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
  - e. Achieving a spiritual experience
3. What Centering Prayer is not:
  - a. It is not a technique.
  - b. It is not a relaxation exercise.

- c. It is not form self—hypnosis.
  - d. It is not a charismatic gift.
  - e. It is not a parapsychological phenomenon. □
  - f. It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God.
  - g. It is not discursive meditation or affective prayer.
4. What Centering Prayer is:
- a. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
  - b. It is an exercise of faith, hope, and love. □
  - c. It is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion.
  - d. It habituates us to the language of God which is silence.



## APPENDIX C

### MEANS OF GRACE ASSIGNMENTS

#### Assignment 01, The Deepening Silence

The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.

John of the Cross, *The Sayings of Light and Love*

As you spend this time in prayer, spend this time in prayer with the one who loves you best. The goal isn't to see how long you may remain silent or rack up as many moments in silence as possible. Your purpose is simply to be with God.

As distractions come, pay them no attention and refuse to chastise yourself for them. Remember the stillness, release the worry, and rest in the arms of your Beloved.

Find a comfortable position in which to pray, as free from the noise of the world as possible.

Be still and now that I am God.

[Silence for one minute.]

Be still and know that I Am.

[Silence for two minutes.]

Be still and know.

[Silence for three minutes.]

Be still.

[Silence for three and a half minutes.]

Be.

[Silence for four minutes.]

In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, amen.

## Assignment 02, Centering Prayer

Divine love is compassionate, tender, luminous,  
totally self-giving, seeking no reward, unifying everything.

Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*

As you spend this time in prayer these next days, spend this time in prayer with the one who loves you best. The goal isn't to see how long you may remain silent or rack up as many moments in silence as possible. Your purpose is simply to be with God.

As distractions come, pay them no attention and refuse to chastise yourself for them. Remember the stillness, release the worry, and rest in the arms of your Beloved.

Find a comfortable position in which to pray, as free from the noise of the world as possible. Close your eyes and breathe. Allow yourself to become fully rooted in that moment with God. Let go of the noise that keeps us from him and speak your sacred word.

Continue in this silence for ten minutes. If you ever find yourself distracted by thoughts or what might be going on around you, go back to that sacred word. Let that word of intention draw you back in the embrace of God.

As you prepare to leave the silence, take a word or phrase with you to hold onto throughout the day. It doesn't matter what it is. It may be your sacred word. It is a word that simply gathers your soul with God and wakes you to his loving presence in every time and space.

### Assignment 03, Centering Prayer

The perfection of the new birth is reached where  
there is no more selfishness, there is only love.  
Thomas Merton, *Choosing to Love the World*

As you spend this time in prayer these next days, spend this time in prayer with the one who loves you best. The goal isn't to see how long you may remain silent or rack up as many moments in silence as possible. Your purpose is simply to be with God.

As distractions come, pay them no attention and refuse to chastise yourself for them. Remember the stillness, release the worry, and rest in the arms of your Beloved.

Find a comfortable position in which to pray, as free from the noise of the world as possible. Close your eyes and breathe. Allow yourself to become fully rooted in that moment with God. Let go of the noise that keeps us from him and speak your sacred word.

Continue in this silence for fifteen minutes. If you ever find yourself distracted by thoughts or what might be going on around you, go back to that sacred word. Let that word of intention draw you back in the embrace of God.

As you prepare to leave the silence, take a word or phrase with you to hold onto throughout the day. It doesn't matter what it is. It may be your sacred word. It is a word that simply gathers your soul with God and wakes you to his loving presence in every time and space.

## Assignment 04, Centering Prayer

... Every time you meet another human being you have the opportunity to. It's a chance at holiness. For you will do one of two things.... Either you will build him up, or you will tear them down/ Either you will acknowledge that he is, or you will make him sorry that he is.... You will create or you will destroy.

Walter Wangerin Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*

As you spend this time in prayer these next days, spend this time in prayer with the one who loves you best. The goal isn't to see how long you may remain silent or rack up as many moments in silence as possible. Your purpose is simply to be with God.

As distractions come, pay them no attention and refuse to chastise yourself for them. Remember the stillness, release the worry, and rest in the arms of your Beloved.

Find a comfortable position in which to pray, as free from the noise of the world as possible. Close your eyes and breathe. Allow yourself to become fully rooted in that moment with God. Let go of the noise that keeps us from him and speak your sacred word.

Continue in this silence for fifteen minutes. If you ever find yourself distracted by thoughts or what might be going on around you, go back to that sacred word. Let that word of intention draw you back in the embrace of God.

As you prepare to leave the silence, take a word or phrase with you to hold onto throughout the day. It doesn't matter what it is. It may be your sacred word. It is a word that simply gathers your soul with God and wakes you to his loving presence in every time and space.

**APPENDIX D****RETREAT SCHEDULE**

Compassion: Suffering with Christ for the World  
 June 7, 2014 to June 8, 2014  
 Lake Louise Christian Community  
 Boyne City, Michigan

Daily ScheduleSaturday:

|       |                                |
|-------|--------------------------------|
| 9:00  | Registration                   |
| 9:30  | Gathering, Bread for the World |
| 12:00 | Lunch, Settle In, Tour         |
| 2:00  | Reflection on our Journey      |
| 5:30  | Dinner                         |
| 6:00  | Compassion Stories             |
| 7:00  | Free Time                      |
| 8:45  | Vespers & Great Silence        |

Sunday:

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| 7:45  | Morning Prayer & Breaking of the Great Silence |
| 8:20  | Breakfast                                      |
|       | Wash-Up  |
| 9:20  | Compassion & Community                         |
| 12:00 | Lunch  |
| 1:00  | Time for You and the Father of Mercies         |
| 2:00  | Reflecting on the Journey Together             |
| 3:15  | Service of Blessing with Eucharist             |
| 4:00  | Go in the Peace of Christ!                     |

## APPENDIX E

### RETREAT SESSIONS

#### The Gathering, Bread for the World

Session Title: The Gathering, Bread for the World

Objectives:

1. Orient participants around the purpose of our retreat, which is to explore and embrace compassion in embodied community.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 player with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain; Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection; Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)
- Ingredients for Communion Bread
  - 1 Package Dry Yeast
  - 2 Cups of Warm Water with a Pinch of White Sugar
  - 2 TBS of White Sugar
  - 3 Cups of White Bread Flour
  - 2 TSP of Salt
  - ½ Cup of Hot Water
  - 3/8 Stick of Butter
  - ½ Cup of Packed Brown Sugar
  - 1 TSP of Real Vanilla
  - 3 to 4 Cups of Whole Wheat Flour
  - A Little Cooking Oil
- Cooking Accessories
  - 2 Large Bowls
  - 1 Small to Medium Sized Bowl
  - Mixing Spatula
  - Towel (Large enough to cover the large bowl.)
  - Something to boil water.
  - Cutting board for kneading dough.
  - Extra flour for dusting cutting board.
  - Large Cutting Knife
  - Small Cutting Knife
  - Large Cookie Sheet
  - Any necessary measuring cups and/or spoons.
  - Timer

In Detail:*WELCOME*

I remember someone telling that every pastor has just one message, and once they find that sermon they repeat it and repeat it and repeat it. Over and over, again and again in a thousand different ways. And I believe them. That message is born in the deep places of our hearts, our greatest hope for the people we love with God. Mine is this: That we abide together in the love of Christ.

There is no greater need in our churches, our districts, and conferences than this command Jesus gives: *Abide in me as I abide in you.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* (John 15:4a, 9-10) But most often we refuse to believe what God has said. We get up early to pray; we spend hours pouring over Scripture; we keep every law; we go to two, three, four Bible studies and prayer meetings a week; we never miss a Sunday; we build buildings; we stuff them full of people, who then stuff our offering plates. We offer everything to God but the single thing he most desires: us. And the result is that in the midst of all this spiritual busyness, we as individuals as a community remain utterly unchanged. Completely un-transformed and un-transforming. The world doesn't need our religious business; the need our hearts broken by love at the feet of the Crucified.

What I have wanted for you these forty days is nothing more than a brief space to experience that compassion for yourselves. To remember what it really is that matters in this life with God. These spiritual disciplines, they're just the tools we use to create the space for that.

What I hope we can do this weekend is begin to push that experience of compassion outward into community, but before we do, I want to begin with our deepening prayer.

*DEEPENING PRAYER*

We begin our time together awakening to the presence of Christ, who is everywhere always present. We cannot meet God, one another, or even ourselves in holy encounter without taking this time to gather ourselves and wake up to what is the really real.

The light of the this candle represents the living presence of God here in, among and between us.

This time we share in prayer isn't about success or failure. It is simply waking up to the presence of the living Christ and gathering ourselves in his love for us.

[Light the candle. As it is lit, someone prays. . . .]

GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT; AND THERE WAS LIGHT.  
AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD.  
THIS VERY DAY OUR GOD HAS ACTED! LET US REJOICE!  
ALLELUIA! GOD'S NAME BE PRAISED! (*Upper Room Worshipbook*, 8)

[Formation leader leads the group into deepening silence.]

BE STILL AND NOW THAT I AM GOD.

[Silence for two minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM.

[Silence for three minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW.

[Silence for four minutes.]

BE STILL.

[Silence for four and half minutes.]

BE.

[Silence for five minutes.]

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT, AMEN.

*BREAD MAKING: BECOMING THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST FOR THE WORLD*

As we get started, I want to hand out these. Everyone should have something, and there is something for everyone.

[Distribute ingredients and cooking accessories.]

Communion has always been very close to my heart. I prefer the older word that Scripture uses: Eucharist. It means "Thanksgiving." It is a celebration of our life in Christ together! And I could share oodles of stories that take me back to the bread and juice, but I want to hear yours.

- What are your Communion stories?
- What times do you especially remember? Or were especially meaningful?
- How has Eucharist shaped your faith?



One of the neat things about Eucharist is that this celebration goes back to the beginning. It goes back all the way to Jesus. There has never been a time when God's people didn't share bits of broken bread and common cup. In fact, there's a small book that written about the same time as the New Testament called the *Didache*. I'd describe simply as a summary of life with Christ in among the people of God. There was no such thing as private faith. To be a Christian meant you lived in faith community, and this books summarized how an early believer did that. There were even folks at that time that considered this small volume as important as the Scripture we read today.

And this is what it says we ought to pray every time we break bread:

We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you be the glory forever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. To you is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. (The Didache)

I love this prayer. It speaks so deeply to me about the life we share in Christ. Jesus calls this his body, and who is the body? [We are.] Christ gathers across all time and space, young and old, Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists. Africans, Americans, and Asians. He gathers us to make us one load. He gives thanks over our lives and breaks us to feed the world over and over, again and again. Compassion in community.

So I'd like to make some today, and periodically we'll be asking questions. This recipe comes from Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, which I've come to really enjoy. In fact, I made this for our college students at Ferris State University when I served there.

We need just three things to start: a large bowl, 2 cups of warm water, a pinch of white sugar, and spatula.

[Mix together as these are brought forward. Let stand ten minutes.]

Dialog questions:

- The pinch of sugar is very small. Why is it important? What happens if it's withheld?
- Have you ever felt the grace you offer is so unimportant you withheld it from God's people? When and how? What was the result?

Now, let's mix in our 2 TBS of white sugar, 3 cups of flour, and 2 TSP of salt. We'll need the towel to cover it!

[Mix and let stand 30 minutes.]

Continuing our conversation: [About fifteen minutes in boil the water. Cool ½ cup of this water for use.]

- Why do we really withhold? What are the real reasons we refuse to share what love's been given us?
- What do you think this does to your soul? To the soul of the Church?
- Does it really matter in our life with God?

Coming back to our bread making. In a small bowl we're going to pour our ½ cup of hot water and add to that our 3/8 stick of butter, ½ cup of packed brown sugar, and 1 TSP of real vanilla. Let this cool and add to the larger bowl. Then add 3 to 4 cups of whole wheat flour. Mix again. Turn out onto cutting board and rest ten minutes.

Back to our conversations:

[Pick up where we left off. If completed, ask the following questions:]

- Does community and compassion just happen? What kind of work does it take?

Going back to the bread. Knead for ten minutes. [Ask participants to take turns. Conversation can continue during this time.]

[Cover and let rise in a lightly oiled bowl until it has doubled in volume. Punch down and knead lightly for two to three minutes before turning out onto cutting board.]

[Cut into three equal parts and shape into loaves. Place on a greased cooking sheet about three inches apart. Cover and let rise about thirty minutes.]

[Uncover. Cut in a cross. Bake in pre-heated oven for about twenty minutes.]

Notes:

- Some of this activity may trail into lunch.
- Prepare kitchen staff for this, so that the oven is pre-heated and the loaves not left to burn!

### *BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

Join me in blessing one another for the work of holy love in the world.

### PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace,  
 Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE;  
 Where there is injury, PARDON;  
 Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
 Where there is despair, HOPE;

Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,  
grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, AS TO CONSOLE;  
to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;  
to be loved, AS TO LOVE.  
For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,  
it is in pardoning THAT WE ARE PARDONED,  
and it is in dying THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.  
AMEN.

WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,  
We are One in The Lord.  
We are One in The Spirit,  
We are One in The Lord.  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
By our Love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,  
We will work side by side.  
We will work with each other,  
We will work side by side.  
And we'll guard each one's dignity  
And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)

We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
And together we'll spread the News  
that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

## Reflecting on Our Journey

Session Title: Reflecting on Our Journey

Objectives:

1. To help the participants reflect in their journey to this point, especially on obstacles, insights, the role of community, the spiritual disciplines, and what they take with them.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 player with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain: Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection; Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)

In Detail:

*SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER*

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"-- he said to the one who was paralyzed-- "I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today." (Luke 5:17-26)

[Silence for five minutes.]

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT, AMEN.

*TAKING TIME TO REFLECT ON THE JOURNEY*

As we prepare to talk about compassion within community I'd like to take at least one step back and talk in groups about our journey to this point. And we'll walk through these questions in bunches, so we'll be moving between the smaller and larger group.

Questions in Series One:

There are always obstacles in the journey with God, especially when that journey pushes us outside our everyday habits and ways of living. These forty days have asked a lot from all of you.

- What obstacles have you faced over these last forty days or so? And in what ways have they frustrated either your participation or your growth in compassion?
- How did faith community either help or hamper efforts to overcome these obstacles?
- In what ways could those obstacles be seen as opportunities to abide in the compassion of Christ?

First share in small groups, then together.

Questions in Series Two:

- How have you experienced these three spiritual disciplines: silence, solitude, and deep listening?
- How have they changed or touched your life in community with others?
- What are the most important insights or practices you will take from this journey?

First share in small groups, then together.

Questions in Series Three:

- How has this journey drawn you closer to or further from faith community?
- How has your perspective on life in faith in community changed, if at all?
- In what ways are you now seeking to embody the compassion of Christ in community for others that you may not have before?
- How might compassion be a work of community rather than just a single individual?

First share in small groups, then together.

Before we go, I want to give each of you a marvelous little book I discovered on compassion that will help us as we go forward called *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of Saint Francis*. Before we meet tomorrow at 9:20, I'd like you to read the Introduction and Chapter Nine: Community. Neither is incredibly long or difficult. There won't be a test, but I do think it will help you as we dream about how we form compassionate communities of faith here in Northern Michigan.

And THANK YOU for sharing your story. It is an honor for me to receive that as your gift for us.

*BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

## Compassion Stories

Session Title: Compassion Stories

Objectives:

1. To offer participants the opportunity to hear real life stories of those already embracing a ministry of compassion in their life and work, providing them insights into what that life might mean for them.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.

In Detail:

### *COMPASSION STORIES*

Compassion isn't theoretical. It isn't just a theological statement we check off our list of "To-be-Believed". It's the way we live with Christ in community with others. In the words of the elder in First John, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." (1 John 3:16) The people here with us this evening are living into that life with Jesus, and I've invited them here to tell their stories. So let's welcome them tonight!

There will be a chance later for questions, but first, why not begin with your name, what it is you do, and how you began this journey into the compassionate life.

Secondly, we'd just like you to reflect on life in community. It's hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it. We live in a broken world, and we bring our brokenness into community. What obstacles have you faced in living in compassionate community? How have you faced those obstacles?

Thirdly, we know the compassion is a day-to-day commitment. It's something we choose to embrace each day. How do you deepen your love and nourish those deep reservoirs of love?

Finally, we'd like you think about your life with God. What is your favorite compassion story, whether something you witnessed, experienced, or practiced? And how did that moment change you?

Questions from the floor.

Thank you each for coming!



A reminder to return here for our vespers service at 8:45. We will be celebrating a Great Silence afterward, which means our last words will be our words of prayer in worship tonight, and we will not speak again until tomorrow morning's worship service.

*BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

## Compassion and Community

Session Title: Compassion and Community

Objectives:

1. To provide a space to explore compassion within community and how retreatants might begin to suffer with Christ for the World.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of Saint Francis* but Illia Delio

In Detail:

*SUFFERING WITH CHRIST FOR THE WORLD!*

This is why we're here. This is why we began this whole journey together. There is no such thing as compassion without community; and there is most certainly no community without compassion. We do not become a compassionate people for ourselves. We become a compassionate people to suffer with Christ for the world.

I want to begin this short time together by looking at *Compassion* and just ask your response to what Illia says in the introduction:

We long for oneness of heart, mind and soul, but we fear the demands of unity. Sometimes I think we choose to be alone because its safe. To be comfortable in isolation in our greatest poverty. (Delio, *xvi*)

Your initial thoughts?

[Follow-up.]

- What are the demands of unity?
- Why is it we're afraid?
- What has isolation done to our communities of faith?

What about this whole business of compassion and community she talks about in chapter nine? How did your heart respond to what she said?

And what about her first question: Who do you belong to and who belongs to you? (114)

Let's bring these questions into our own life as triads.

- How can we take this compassionate life back to our communities of faith?

- How do we choose to live compassionately in them when they don't understand and say all sorts of things about us?
- How do we invite them into this deliberate life with us?

[First share in triads and then in a large group.]

*BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

Following lunch I'm giving you a large two hour block to spend some time here on the retreat grounds reading, journaling, praying. It'd be real easy to give up that time to pack or make phone calls. Please don't. Take that time and relish it, and reflect on the things we've talked about here and how you can take those back to your church as a catalyst for compassion.

We'll meet back here at 3:15 for worship with Eucharist.

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

## APPENDIX F

### RETREAT WORSHIP SERVICES

#### Vespers Service, Day One

(Leader)

(CONGREGATION)

#### SHEMA PRAYER

HEAR, O ISRAEL: THE LORD IS OUR GOD, THE LORD ALONE. YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

#### OPENING

May God Almighty grant us a quiet night and peace at the last.

AMEN.

It is good to give thanks to you, O God.

TO SING PRAISE TO YOUR NAME, O MOST HIGH:

To Herald your love in the morning,

YOUR TRUTH AT THE CLOSE OF THE DAY.

#### EVENING HYMN

*As the Deer*

As the deer pants for the water,  
so my soul longs after you.  
You alone are my heart's desire,  
and I long to worship you.

You alone are my strength, my shield;  
to you alone may spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart's desire,  
and I long to worship you. (*Repeat.*)

#### PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Let us pray.

DEAR GOD, THANK YOU FOR ALL THAT IS GOOD,  
FOR OUR CREATION AND OUR HUMANITY,  
FOR THE STEWARDSHIP YOU HAVE GIVEN US OF THIS PLANET EARTH,  
FOR THE GIFTS OF LIFE AND OF ONE ANOTHER,  
FOR YOUR LOVE WHICH IS UNBOUNDED AND ETERNAL.  
O THOU, MOST HOLY AND BELOVED,  
MY COMPANION, MY GUIDE UPON THE WAY,  
MY BRIGHT EVENING STAR.

WE REPENT OF THE WRONGS WE HAVE DONE.

*(Silence)*

We have wounded your love.

O GOD, HEAL US.

We stumble in the darkness.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD, TRANSFIGURE US.

We forget that we are your home.

SPIRIT OF GOD, DWELL IN US.

Eternal Spirit, living God,

in whom we live and move and have our being,

all that we are, have been and shall be is known to you,

to the very secret of our hearts

and all that rises to trouble us.

LIVING FLAME, BURN INTO US

CLEANSING WIND, BLOW THROUGH US,

FOUNTAIN OF WATER, WELL UP WITHIN US,

THAT WE MAY LOVE AND PRAISE IN DEED AND IN TRUTH.

*(Silence)*

#### PSALM

Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD! Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the LORD. May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.  
(Psalm 134:1-3)

Amen.

#### SCRIPTURE

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say

to me continually, "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (Psalm 42:1-11)

*(Silence)*

Amen.

CANTICLE OF SIMEON

Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised;

FOR THESE EYES OF MINE HAVE SEEN THE SAVIOR,

whom you have prepared for all the world to see:

A LIGHT TO ENLIGHTEN THE NATIONS, AND THE GLORY OF YOUR PEOPLE ISRAEL.

Glory to God the Father, and to the Son, and the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever.

AMEN.

Morning Prayers, Day Two

(Leader)

(CONGREGATION)

SHEMA PRAYER

HEAR, O ISRAEL: THE LORD IS OUR GOD, THE LORD ALONE. YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

GREETING

God said: Let there be light; and there was light.  
AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD.  
This very day our God has acted! Let us rejoice!  
ALLELUIA! GOD'S NAME BE PRAISED!

MORNING HYMN

*Morning has Broken*

Morning has broken, like the first morning  
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird  
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning  
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning  
Born of the one light, Eden saw play  
Praise with elation, praise every morning  
God's recreation of the new day

PRAYER

Let us pray together.

NEW EVERY MORNING IS YOUR LOVE, GREAT GOD OF LIGHT, AND ALL DAY LONG YOU ARE WORKING FOR GOOD IN THE WORLD. STIR UP IN US DESIRE TO SERVE YOU, TO LIVE PEACEFULLY WITH OUR NEIGHBORS AND ALL YOUR CREATION, AND TO DEVOTE EACH DAY TO YOUR SON, OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.

*(Silence)*

PSALM

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land,

which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down. let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Psalm 95:1-7)

AMEN.

### SCRIPTURE

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy. make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

The Word of Life.  
THANKS BE TO GOD.

*(Silence)*

Amen.

### MORNING HYMN

#### *Shine, Jesus Shine*

Shine Jesus shine;  
Fill this land with the Father's glory.  
Blaze, Spirit blaze,  
Set our hearts on fire.  
Flow, river flow.  
Flood the nations with grace and mercy.  
Send forth Your word,  
Lord, and let there be light.

Lord, the Light or Your Love is shining.  
In the midst of the darkness shining.  
Jesus light of the world shine upon us.  
Set us free by the truth You now bring us.  
Shine on us. Shine on us.



Shine Jesus shine;  
 Fill this land with the Father's glory.  
 Blaze, Spirit blaze,  
 Set our hearts on fire.  
 Flow, river flow,  
 Flood the nations with grace and mercy.  
 Send forth Your word,  
 Lord, and let there be light.

Lord we come to Your awesome presence.  
 From the shadows into Your radiance.  
 By the blood we may enter Your brightness.  
 Search us, try us, consume all our darkness.  
 Shine on us. Shine on us.

Shine Jesus shine;  
 Fill this land with the Father's glory.  
 Blaze, Spirit blaze,  
 Set our hearts on fire.  
 Flow, river flow,  
 Flood the nations with grace and mercy.  
 Send forth Your word,  
 Lord, and let there be light.

As we gaze on Your kindly brightness,  
 So our faces display Your likeness.  
 Ever changing from glory to glory,  
 Mirrored here may our lives tell Your story.  
 Shine on us. Shine on us.

Shine Jesus shine;  
 Fill this land with the Father's glory.  
 Blaze, Spirit blaze,  
 Set our hearts on fire.  
 Flow, river flow,  
 Flood the nations with grace and mercy.  
 Send forth Your word,  
 Lord, and let there be light.

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

#### Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. AMEN.

Service of Blessing with Eucharist:  
A Celebration of Word and Table

Gathering Ourselves to Worship:

*\*Greeting*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.  
 AND ALSO WITH YOU.  
 The risen Christ is with us.  
 PRAISE THE LORD.

*\*Hymn of Gathering*

*Love Divine, All Love's Excelling* (UMH, 384)

*\*Opening Prayer*

O, GOD,  
 YOU HAVE CREATED THE UNIVERSE WITH SUCH SPLENDOR  
 THAT ALL OF IT RISES UP TO PRAISE YOU.  
 WE, THE PEOPLE YOU HAVE CALLED TO BE YOUR OWN,  
 JOIN WITH SUN AND MOON, STARS AND MOUNTAINS,  
 IN SINGING HYMNS OF GLORY TO YOUR WONDERFUL NAME.  
 THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD,  
 WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT,  
 ONE GOD FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN.

*Musical Response*

*Lord, I Want to be a Christian* (UMH, 402)

Gathering Ourselves to Listen:

*Prayer for Illumination*

Let us pray:  
 God of Light, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
 that as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with  
 joy what you say to us today. Amen.

*First Reading*

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is  
 my love among maidens. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is  
 my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and  
 his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and  
 his intention toward me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with  
 apples; for I am faint with love. O that his left hand were under my head, and  
 that his right hand embraced me! <sup>7</sup> I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by  
 the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!

The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. (Song of Solomon 2:1-13)

The Word of Life.  
THANKS BE TO GOD.

### *Psalm*

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long. (NRSV, Psalm 23:1-6)

### *\*Gospel Reading*

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you

also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:1-15)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
PRAISE TO THE LIVING WORD!

*Homily*

Rev. Vaughn Thurston-Cox

*Silence Reflection in Response to the Word*

Gathering Ourselves to Celebrate & Go Out:

*Confession*

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and one another.

GOD OF ALL MERCY,  
WE CONFESS THAT WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU.  
OPPOSING YOUR WILL IN OUR LIVES.  
WE HAVE DENIED YOUR GOODNESS IN EACH OTHER.  
WE REPENT OF THE EVIL THAT ENSLAVES US,  
THE EVIL WE HAVE DONE ON OUR BEHALF.  
FORGIVE, RESTORE, AND STRENGTHEN US  
THROUGH OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST,  
THAT WE MAY ABIDE IN YOUR LOVE  
AND SERVE ONLY YOUR WILL. AMEN.

*Declaration of Pardon*

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.  
IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, YOU ARE FORGIVEN.  
GLORY TO GOD. AMEN.

*Passing the Peace of Christ*

Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love.

*The Great Thanksgiving*

The Lord be with you.  
AND ALSO WITH YOU.  
Lift up your hearts.  
WE LIFT THEM UP TO THE LORD.  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.  
IT IS RIGHT TO GIVE OUR THANKS AND PRAISE.

Blessed are you, God of all creation,  
Source of all mercies,  
Fount of love beyond all measure,

It is fitting and right to give you thanks and praise,  
 and to adore you with grateful hearts and voices.  
 For wondrously you have created heaven and earth,  
 hovering in gracious care over all that you have made.  
 You formed us in your image of love in the world.  
 Yet even more wondrously, when we distorted your image  
 you called us back again and again,  
 forgiving us,  
 delivering us from captivity to sin and death,  
 feeding, healing, reconciling, making covenant,  
 and setting before us the way that leads to life.  
 Therefore, with your people in all ages, in communion with the saints,  
 and with the whole company of heaven,  
 we join the glad song of unceasing prayer:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY LORD, GOD OF POWER AND MIGHT;  
 HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE FULL OF YOUR GLORY.  
 HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST.  
 BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD.  
 HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!

Holy are you, and blessed be your name, gracious God,  
 for you gave us Jesus, who emptied himself that we might be filled,  
 who suffered and died that we might live.  
 He fed the hungry, healed the afflicted,  
 and ate with the scorned and forgotten of the world.  
 He washed his disciples' feet and gave a holy meal  
 as a feast for his ever-present love.

On the night he gave himself for us and for the world,  
 at the table with those who would desert and deny him,  
 he took bread, gave it to his disciples, saying:  
 "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.  
 Do this in remembrance of me."  
 When the supper had ended, he took the cup, gave thanks to you,  
 gave it to his disciples, saying:  
 "Drink from this, all of you;  
 for this is my blood of the new covenant,  
 poured out for you and for the many, for the forgiveness of sins.  
 Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Therefore, remembering Christ's life of ministry and service, his suffering,  
 death, and resurrection, his ascending to glory and his abiding presence  
 through the power of your Holy Spirit, we come in praise and thanksgiving  
 with these gifts of your love, as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us gathered here in Christ's name,  
and upon these gifts, that they may be for us his body and blood,  
and so feed us with his grace that, in union with Christ,  
we may become a living offering to you.

Transform us into the image and likeness of Christ,  
that we may faithfully serve others in his name,  
and look forward to the final feast  
in which all shall be gathered as one at your table,  
and all manner of things shall be well.

Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all  
honor and glory and blessing is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever.

*The Lord's Prayer*

Let us pray:

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN,  
HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME,  
YOUR KINGDOM COME,  
YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH,  
AS IN HEAVEN.  
GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD.  
FORGIVE US OUR SINS  
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US.  
SAVE US FROM THE TIME OF TRIAL  
AND DELIVER US FROM EVIL.  
FOR THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY ARE YOURS  
NOW AND FOREVER.

*Breaking the Bread*

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body,  
for we all partake of the one loaf.  
The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.

*Giving of the Bread and the Cup*

*Prayer after Receiving*

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have  
given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of  
your Spirit, to give ourselves for others. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Hymn of Blessing*

*We are Called (The Faith We Sing, 2172)*

*Benediction*

May the grace of Christ attend us, the love of God surround us, and the Holy Spirit keep us, now and forever. AMEN.

## APPENDIX G

### SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

Session Number: 01

Session Title: Compassion & the Means of Grace

Note: At this point ALL Spiritual Biographies will be complete.

Objectives:

1. Participants will understand . . .
  - a. share an experience of silence with participants and process that together.
  - b. the researcher's own interest in compassion as essential to the spiritual life, as well as his belief that the people of God suffer the very same spiritual conditions that prevent its expression within the world.
  - c. name and understand obstacles we face in the nurture of Christ's life in us.
  - d. prepare to overcome obstacles that keep us from the experience and embodiment of God's compassion in and through us.
2. Formation group leader will deliberately nurture opportunities for participants to form holy, if temporary, community.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks (Ringbinders) and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 player with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain; Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection; Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)
- Communionware researcher purchased while in Scotland.
- Song & prayer sheet.
- Prayer Assignment: Assignment 01. The Deepening Silence

Lesson Plan:

*AWAKENING TO THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST*

We begin our time together awakening to the presence of Christ, who is everywhere always present. We cannot meet God, one another, or even ourselves in holy love without taking this time to gather ourselves and wake up to what is the really real.

The light of the this candle represents the living presence of God here in, among and between us.

As we remember the presence of Christ. I will invite you into a prayer of deepening silence, beginning with the words, "Be still and know that I am God." As we are silent together, do not try thinking of nothing. Simply remember the presence of the living



Christ. If you are distracted, simply let the thought go, and go back to that presence. We will deepen the silence as I shorten our prayer, “Be still and know that I Am. . . . Be still and know. . . . Be still. . . .”

Remember, this isn’t about success or failure. It is simply waking up to the presence of the living Christ and gathering ourselves in his love for us.

[Light the candle. As it is lit, someone prays. . . .]

GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT; AND THERE WAS LIGHT.  
AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD.  
THIS VERY DAY OUR GOD HAS ACTED! LET US REJOICE!  
ALLELUIA! GOD’S NAME BE PRAISED! (*Upper Room Worshipbook*, 8)

[Formation leader leads the group into deepening silence.]

BE STILL AND NOW THAT I AM GOD.

[Silence for one minute.]

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM.

[Silence for two minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW.

[Silence for three minutes.]

BE STILL.

[Silence for three and a half minutes.]

BE.

[Silence for four minutes.]

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT, AMEN.

Our time together will be far less about what we manage to stick in our heads than the transformation of our hearts in compassion and grace. This slowing down, this quiet prayer, begins to open our gathered souls to receive the life and presence of Jesus.

- Is this way of praying a new experience for you? What made this comfortable or uncomfortable?
- What distracted you from the presence of Christ? And how did you deal with that distraction?

- How did you experience the presence of Christ? And what does that mean for you?

I call this a deepening prayer, a way of praying that leads the soul to a quiet place with God. We will begin each of our small group session this way to commit ourselves to becoming more and more present to God, ourselves, and others. This also leads into why we're here, so don't let go of this experience too quickly. Keep hold of it and keep letting it shape our time here.

### *OUR STORIES*

I want to begin our time together by telling you my story, At twenty-three I spent a semester studying at Aberdeen University in Scotland. Besides the weekend trips spent hiking the slopes of Ben Vrackie or the streets of Edinburgh, I'd committed ten days for retreat at an abbey just off Scotland's Western coast. Iona had been the home of Columba, an early Celtic missionary who brought faith to the wilds of the Western Islands. In later years a community formed, and afterward a monastery. Destroyed by Protestants, everything was left in ruin until the early twentieth century. when Rev. George MacLeod organized its rebuilding. With the help of others, the old Benedictine monastery became the Iona Community, a Christian community committed to faith and its practice in the world.

Those were a marvelous ten days! Waves crashed against the cliff side; worship in the old church was amazing. It was the very thing I needed to close my time overseas.

At one point we were split into groups. No one knew each other. There were Mennonites from Indiana, a British family with some connection to Egypt. And, we were asked to find an object that somehow reflected our life with God in that time and in that place. Some people went to their rooms; others went wandering outside. I went Community's little shop. The moment he'd asked the question, I knew the answer. And it was this: a cup and plate I'd seen on their shop's shelf. Together they said everything that could be said.

Ever since I was a child the cup and the bread had been an anchor in my life with God. They spoke in the concrete world what words couldn't, of a God whose love is so profound they embrace my dying, so that I might embrace their life. A God whose love emptied itself of all things for us.

And when I drink from this cup, and eat from this bread, I do more than remember. I receive his life in me. Just as those bits of bread become part of my body, his life lodges itself in my heart. My deep places. And I, we, become the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, in ministry to all the world. The grace of God for me, embodies itself through me for all those he loves.

In that time and that place, and this time and this place, I am called to be a means of grace for the world. To freely offer others the compassion of Christ as it has been freely offered me.

Five years later I began serving God's people and discovered how often we fail. Not only do I fail in embodying the compassion of Christ for the world, but so does the church. I watched one man, so embittered from thirteen years of pastoral ministry, become angry at everyone, his family, his friends, even the church he used to love. I listened as the church my wife and I were sent to serve together viciously attacked her for sinning against God by serving as their pastor. My wife watched one family driven from another church for encouraging young children to dance. I stepped into the foyer one Sunday after service to find one church leader verbally assaulting a newcomer to the congregation I served alone. And when someone needed me to give compassion a voice, I didn't. At least loudly enough.

The fact is that the very things that hold compassion hostage in the world, hold it hostage here in the church, among the very people whose God commands just two things: To love him with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength. And to love our neighbors as ourselves. We fail for all sorts of reasons.

This project was born out of my call and my belief that as God's people we have failed to embody the compassion of Christ for the world. We have failed to see it as essential to the spiritual life. We have given it a secondary status which betrays Christ, whose life is all an act of love. This is why I've spent years on this work, because I believe it is vital to our life together today.

This is my story. Reflect for just a minute in your own life.

- Why does compassion matter to you?
- What do you hope the Spirit accomplishes in you during this time?

#### HOPE IN THE PARABLE OF SOILS

As we think about our stories and our hope that the compassion of Christ comes alive in us, I'd like you to turn with me to Luke 8:4-15:

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening

they may not understand.’ “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

This is something first century people would've understood. They lived with the land. And some of us have also. Walking through this step-by-step

- What is the farmer wants to do? And why?
- [Plant seeds for a harvest.]
- Where is the life?
- [The seed.]
- Do all the seeds bear life? Why or why not?
- [No. The condition of the soil varies. Some soil hasn't prepared itself to receive the seed of life.]

Jesus tells us that each of these soils represents the condition of the human heart, and that the seeds the farmer scatters is the Word of God. And who is the Word? [Jesus.] So what the farmer scatters is the life of God meant to come alive in the hearts of people.

- What condition of the heart, what obstacles, keep the life of God from coming alive in us?
- What obstacles prevent us from becoming a people of compassion and mercy?

If there is any hope for us to live compassionately, we must remember this: it isn't our work to do. It's the Spirit's. We don't become compassionate people by simply doing compassionate things. We become a compassionate people as we learn to abide in the compassion of Christ for us. And that means we need to work the soil in our hearts. We need to create space in our souls that break up the hardness of our hearts, that deepen our capacity for love, and that uproot everything that chokes out love. We need tools designed for soul work.

### *THE MEANS OF GRACE*

These tools, or means of grace, include: silence, solitude, and deep listening.

- What do these words mean to you?
- What about means of grace?

A means of grace opens our hearts to the heart of God. There is nothing magical or mechanical about them. You don't put in five minutes of silent prayer to get five unites of grace. They are simply places we meet with the Father for love. They are ways we create space in our little tiny hearts for the infinite and holy.

Silence isn't simply quiet. It's not just going shutting out the noise that bombards us from every side. It is learning to quiet the inner noise to be with the Beloved. It is escaping our own distraction to love and be loved by our Abba Father. It is the stillness we talked about in deepening prayer: to be still and know he is God. It's the quiet of lovers in each others' arms when words only distract.

And solitude isn't just be alone. Being alone is just alone. Solitude mean we choose to be alone with the Alone. We can think of all those time in Scripture when God's people, even Jesus, withdraws from the world to be with God. It is a choice to free ourselves from all the ways the world shapes us to be shaped in the hands of God. In solitude we learn the art of compassion, because we are free from the all the forces that work against it. We learn to love others for their own sakes, rather than what they do for us.

Deep listening. Deep listening is an act of compassion we extend to others. It is a listening that lowers our incessant need to control or to be right, to dominate. It is really about freeing us to listen to the heart of another person.

Those are our tools, our means of grace to work the soil in each of our souls. This is a process. And I believe that if we commit ourselves to it, we will find that God's faithful. He'll meet us where we are.

### *BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

These obstacles we talked about today are real. The great spiritual masters from Jesus onward have warned the people of God about them. And John of the Cross had a special word for everyone on this journey of prayer and compassion, "Those who fall alone remain alone in their fall, and they value their soul little since they entrust it to themselves alone" (*The Savings of Light and Love*). We are here to help one another. I invite you to gather in triads and pray over the obstacles we face both alone and together if we're to embody the compassionate love of our Jesus. After these prayers we will pray together in word and song. [See attachment.]

### PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace,  
 Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE;  
 Where there is injury, PARDON;  
 Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
 Where there is despair, HOPE;  
 Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
 Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,  
grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, AS TO CONSOLE;  
to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;  
to be loved, AS TO LOVE.  
For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Amen.

WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,  
We are One in The Lord.  
We are One in The Spirit,  
We are One in The Lord.  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
By our Love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,  
We will work side by side.  
We will work with each other,  
We will work side by side.  
And we'll guard each one's dignity  
And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)

We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
And together we'll spread the News  
that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen. (Numbers 6:24-26)

*ASSIGNMENT*

Between now and our next meeting, I want to invite you to spend each day in the exercise we began with this morning. Don't rush. Try not to become discouraged. This is simply time for you to be with the Beloved. [See attachment.]

## Silence and The Embrace of our Beloved

Session Number: 02

Session Title: Silence & the Embrace of our Beloved

### Objectives:

1. Participants will
  - a. share a second experience of deepening silence.
  - b. share their experience of silence since our last meeting.
  - c. explore the role of silence in the story of God with us as revealed in Scripture and the lives of spiritual masters.
  - d. explore the practice of centering prayer as practiced by Father Thomas Keating.
2. The formation group leader will deliberately review cautions to the spiritual discipline of centering prayer.
3. The formation group leader will nurture opportunities for participants to form holy, if temporary, community.

### Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 player with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain; Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection; Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)
- Song & prayer sheet. (Copies. Participants should retain theirs.)
- Prayer Assignments: Assignment 03, The Deepening Silence; Assignment 03, Centering Prayer
- Journal Assignment 01 (Email submission preferred.)
- Notes on Centering Prayer by Father Thomas Keating

### In Detail:

#### *AWAKENING TO THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST*

We begin our time together awakening to the presence of Christ, who is everywhere always present. We cannot meet God, one another, or even ourselves in holy encounter without taking this time to gather ourselves and wake up to what is the really real.

As a reminder, the light of the this candle represents the living presence of God here in, among and between us.

I invite you into a prayer of deepening silence, beginning with the words, "Be still and know that I am God." As we are silent together, do not try thinking about nothing. Simply remember the presence of the living Christ. If you are distracted, simply let the



thought go, and go back to that presence. We will deepen the silence as I shorten our prayer, “Be still and know that I Am. . . . Be still and know. . . . Be still. . . .”

Remember, this isn't about success or failure. It is simply waking up to the presence of the living Christ and gathering ourselves in his love for us.

[Light the candle. As it is lit, someone prays. . . .]

God said: Let there be light; and there was light.  
 And God saw that the light was good.  
 This very day our God has acted! Let us rejoice!  
 Alleluia! God's name be praised! (*Upper Room Worshipbook*, 8)

[Formation leader leads the group into deepening silence.]

Be still and now that I am God.

[Silence for one and a half minutes.]

Be still and know that I Am.

[Silence for two and a half minutes.]

Be still and know.

[Silence for three and a half minutes.]

Be still.

[Silence for four minutes.]

Be.

[Silence for four and half minutes.]

In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. amen.

### *Sharing our Story*

Over the last ten days I invited you into a deepening prayer designed to wake us up to the presence of God in this moment. This may be a new means of grace for some of you; for others it may be something you've been familiar with for some time. Whichever is the case, it is valuable to share those experiences, if for no other reason than to encourage one another to holy love of God and neighbor.

We'll do this in triads, and I want you to practice holy listening. Be present to the others sharing with you. Listen with all yourself, and do not interrupt. Do not rush to question whether something may be right or wrong; resist the temptation to top their story with your own. None of us are in competition. We gather in journey together.

Consider these questions. You may not have time for them all. That's okay. Simply be certain to allow time for each person to answer at least one:

- Share three to five words describing your time in silence with Christ since our last session.
- What has it meant for you to experience the simple, loving embrace of our Beloved?
- How has it changed you? Are you any more aware of the God in the midst of your life?
- How can this group encourage you to rest in the embrace of the God through the grace of silence?

[Allow ten to twenty minutes for discussion.]

As we gather back together, I want to ask for two to three words from each group that stand out for you:

God is with us in all of these.

*Silence in Scripture & among the Spiritual Masters*

Join me in First Kings 19:9-13:

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts: for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his

mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Before this story, Elijah has enjoyed great success. He has called down the fire of God on Mount Carmel and had 450 of his priests killed there. He rushes to escape after a messenger comes from the queen Jezebel, that she will have him hunted down and killed for what he’s done. Utterly broken and alone, he retreats into the desert to die. And it’s in the wilderness God calls him to the this cave on Horeb to be silent and wait as he passes by.

Three great signs pass on the mountain. What are they? (The wind, an earthquake, and the fire.) What qualities do these signs share? In what does God make himself present to Elijah? How might silence cure Elijah’s broken soul?

Silence becomes the grace through which God speaks to his wounded prophet. It’s the space that allows Elijah to make himself present to I AM in a full, meaningful way. Without the silence, Elijah remains full of the inner noise that eats away at his soul to hear the one who calls his name. Outside of the silence, God is present to him; inside the silence, he becomes present to God.

- Why do we run from his presence?
- What holds us back from falling into rest with him?
- Why do you think we must learn to rest there?

The great spiritual masters have each affirmed silence as a means of grace for the soul, a place where we encounter God:

The fifteenth century cleric Thomas à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, “which many consider the greatest spiritual classic after the Bible” (11). In it he says,

It is in silence and in repose that the devout Christian makes progress; the hidden truths of Scripture are revealed to him, and so, night after night, he finds himself bathed in salutary tears. (56)

The silence is the place God reveals himself.

One of my favorite spiritual guides, Brother Lawrence, was a seventh century Carmelite lay brother. He didn’t come into the monastery until he was thirty, after failing as both a soldier and menial servant who broke nearly everything. He’d spend the next fifty plus years of his life praying and leading others into prayer. He says:

As for time formally set aside for prayer, it is only a continuation of this same exercise. Sometimes I think of myself a block of stone before a sculptor, ready to be sculpted into a statue, presenting myself thus to God and I Beg him to form His perfect image in my soul and make me entirely like himself. (56)

Silent as stone to be formed by the Master's hands.

Twentieth century German Dietrich Bonhoffer died serving God's people in a concentration camp. He didn't have to be there. He left America for Germany after war broke out. He says in *Life Together*:

Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word and coming from God's Word with a blessing. (79)

It is attention to the presence of God and the intention to both offer and receive life with God.

The Quaker Richard Foster, a leading author in the field of spiritual formation still writing today says in *Sanctuary for the Soul*,

In silence we behold the Lord. Words are not needed for there to be communion. Most of all we rest in God's "wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence" (77).

But my favorite is from the sixteenth century saint, John of the Cross,

The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul. (92)

We are given one Word, who is Jesus, and he is the Word we need echoing within the chambers of our heart and soul. We have no other need: not visions, not speaking in tongues, not seven more translations of the Bible. We need Jesus.

I want each of us to understand that this isn't something someone made up. Silence isn't some strange idea invented to oppress God's people. In our noisy North American culture, silence is simply something we've forgotten. It's something we thought we didn't need, because it doesn't produce anything. We don't have anything for all this hard work, and that's kind of the point. It isn't about getting something for ourselves. It's about being with and experiencing the love of our Beloved. It is the place we encounter and are transformed by the Holy.

### *Centering Prayer*

John of the Cross defines silent prayer like this as "nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love" (*Dark Night of the Soul*), and this is all centering prayer is really about. It is a graced discipline that open the heart, soul, mind, and body to holy love. It is not simply a way to escape stress or learn control over our breathing. It is not emptying our minds of everything; it is filling it with the utmost awareness of God. It isn't a cosmic leer we pull to make our selves better, more compassionate, people.

Because compassion isn't something we do. It isn't God's list of nice do-goodness. That's what we've reduced it to, but that isn't what compassion is. Compassion isn't so much what we do as who we are with God and neighbor. It is a re-orientation of the heart from an inward clinging to self towards an outward focus on the love of God and all those God loves. Compassion doesn't start somewhere out there; it begins in the transformed heart.

So, as we talk about this, I want you to remember this isn't about what we do or how many times we do it. This isn't a competition. It's just being with God, and allowing the awareness of that presence to wake us up to the holy love in everything.

Centering prayer requires some preparation. It demands space, time, and a sacred word. Selecting a specific time and place begins to push back at all the distractions around us. It is an act of faith, hope, and love on our part to say to ourselves, "My life with the Beloved matters, and I will choose this life with God each and every moment." Choosing a time and place begins to open ourselves to the Spirit.

The sacred word. I like what Father Thomas Keating says about the sacred word:

The sacred word . . . is sacred not because of its meaning, but because of its intent. It expresses your intention to open yourself to God . . . who dwells within you. . . . [It] is a sign or arrow pointing in the direction you want to wake. . . . a way of renewing your intention to open yourself to God and to accept Him as He is. (*Open Heart, Open Mind*, 40)

It isn't a mantra or some magic incantation. It is a simple word that expresses our heart's deep desire to be with him. For me that word is "Beloved." That word captures the cry of my heart for the one who longs for me and his people.

What might be some simple words that come to your mind? That cry out to God?

After you have selected your time, your place, and your sacred word, find a comfortable position. For some people it might be an armchair or sofa. Some people prefer sitting criss-cross. I want you to be comfortable, because this is about resting in the embrace of our Jesus. It's hard to do that if you're all a ball of nerves.

And then simply breathe. Deep breathes in and out. As you breathe begin letting go of all the distractions that hold you hostage to the moment. Just live in the moment with God. Breathing is important because it roots us in the present moment. We can't breathe yesterday or tomorrow or an hour from now. We breathe only in air just this moment. And as you breathe lift up your sacred word, your intention to God.

[Try breathing together.]

This exercise may very well feel like death. The minute you sit and close your eyes everything under the surface bubbles up: your anxieties, your worries, the pressures of the day. All the things that keep us looking everywhere but towards the face of God. It feels like dying, because it is. In these moments of silence we are dying to vast worlds of distraction to live in the loving presence of God, because this is the only necessary thing. When we live with him in that presence in those small spaces, we will begin to realize that presence follows us everywhere. No. It doesn't. It was always there. Centering prayer wakes us up to a world we never saw before. God's love is everywhere active, because God is everywhere present.

There are some practical ways to gather yourself in this presence throughout the day. The first is to take a word or phrase you received in prayer with God and carry with you throughout the day. Be deliberate to recall that word or words, and let them carry you back into the presence of God.

Join God in compassionate love for yourself and others, which nothing more than embracing the presence of God in the moment. Each and every moment the heart of God breaks for his people. Embracing that compassion with God draws us back into his presence.

But, before we close, I want to ask something.

- How will you carry that presence out of the silence? How will you keep your center?

[A sacred word? A sacred action? Triggered prayers? Breath prayers?]

### *Reminders*

Please, please, please remember this isn't a competition. This isn't depositing some good works into some cosmic bank account. Learn to simply be with God in the moment. That's what we do. And allow God to do what we can't.

I have this selection from Father Thomas Keating's book that you may find helpful over the week.

Any questions.

### *Blessing One Another*

Join me in blessing one another for the work of holy love in the world.

### PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE:

Where there is injury, PARDON;  
 Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
 Where there is despair, HOPE;  
 Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
 Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,

grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, AS TO  
 CONSOLE;

to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;

to be loved, AS TO LOVE.

For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,

it is in pardoning THAT WE ARE PARDONED,

and it is in dying THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.

AMEN.

WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)

And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

By our Love,

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other.

We will work side by side.

We will work with each other,

We will work side by side.

And we'll guard each one's dignity

And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

And together we'll spread the News  
 that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

<sup>24</sup> The LORD bless you and keep you; <sup>25</sup> the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen. (NRSV, Numbers 6:24-26)

### *Assignment*

Between now and our next meeting, I want you to move towards this Centering Prayer practice until we meet again.

I also have a brief journal for you to look at and complete between now and then. We'll begin our next conversation with these questions. Take your time with them. The only right answer is the one that comes from your heart and soul.



## Solitude, Letting Go of the World around Us to Embrace the Beloved

Session Number: 03

Session Title: Solitude. Letting Go of the World around Us to Embrace the Beloved

Objectives:

1. Participants will
  - a. share a third experience of deepening silence.
  - b. share reflections of their time in centering prayer using Spiritual Journal Assignment 01 as a guide. The journal will then be turned into the researcher.
  - c. explore the role of solitude in the story of God with us as revealed in Scripture.
  - d. explore and practice the graced discipline of solitude.
2. The formation group leader will nurture opportunities for participants to form holy, if temporary, community.

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 payer with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain: Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection; Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)
- Song & prayer sheet. (Copies. Participants should retains theirs.)
- Prayer Assignments: Assignment 03, Centering Prayer
- Journal Assignment 01
- Journal Assignment 02
- Picture of Christ in the Desert.
- Video: *The Monastery*. Episode 04.

In Detail:

### *AWAKENING TO THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST*

We begin our time together awakening to the presence of Christ, who is everywhere always present. We cannot meet God, one another, or even ourselves in holy encounter without taking this time to gather ourselves and wake up to what is the really real.

The light of the this candle represents the living presence of God here in, among and between us.

This time we share in prayer isn't about success or failure. It is simply waking up to the presence of the living Christ and gathering ourselves in his love for us.

[Light the candle. As it is lit, someone prays. . . .]

GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT; AND THERE WAS LIGHT.  
 AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD.  
 THIS VERY DAY OUR GOD HAS ACTED! LET US REJOICE!  
 ALLELUIA! GOD'S NAME BE PRAISED! (*Upper Room Worshipbook*, 8)

[Formation leader leads the group into deepening silence.]

BE STILL AND NOW THAT I AM GOD.

[Silence for two minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM.

[Silence for three minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW.

[Silence for four minutes.]

BE STILL.

[Silence for four and half minutes.]

BE.

[Silence for five minutes.]

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT, AMEN.

### *SHARING OUR STORY*

Since our last meeting I invited you into the grace discipline of centering prayer, a kind of prayer that is meant to bring our souls to stillness with God and create a holy space for the Spirit to transform our hearts in love with the Beloved. I want us to take some time reflecting on that silence. You've completed your spiritual journals. As you are willing share those reflections in triads. Take your time. Listen to one another. Be fully present to them. None of us are in competition for each other's attention or God's love. Afterward I'll collect your written reflections.

- "Dallas Willard quotes Blaise Pascal as saying that 'all the unhappiness of man arises from the single fact that they cannot stay quietly in their room so they turn to diversions to distract themselves.' . . . He goes on to say that even when we attempt to rest, we are confused and 'aim at rest through excitement' –in other

words, through more stimulation. How do you see evidence of this in our culture and in your own life?" (Barton 145-146)

- " 'When we make room for silence, we make room for ourselves . . . the unknown, the untamed, the wild, the shy, the unfathomable.' How did silence make room for more parts of you to find expression?" (Barton 147)
- "Were you able to just be yourself and be with God with what surfaced? How did you experience God with you (or not) during your times of silence? Are there any other questions or observations that surfaced?" (Barton 148)
- Describe your experience of Deepening Silence and Centering Prayer up to this point, with special attention to the life of your soul. In what ways have these times crept (or not crept) into your ordinary life?
- How can we pray for you as you practice silence?

[Allow twenty to thirty minutes for discussion.]

As we gather back together, I want to ask for two to three words from each group that stand out for you:

God is with us in all of these.

### *SOLITUDE IN SCRIPTURE*

Father Aelred Wall founded the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in 1964. It's located in a canyon surrounded by miles and miles and miles of New Mexican wilderness, at the dead end of a thirteen mile dirt road. While it is a small community of Benedictines, they worked with the History Channel on a project simply called *The Monastery*. Five men were invited to spend forty days living with the monks as one of them, under the rule of the abbot and the Rule of Saint Benedict. Of the five, only one actively embraced the Christian faith. I'd describe the remaining four as skeptical at best and outright antagonistic at worst.

Later into the project the abbot invites them to visit Brother Xavier, a member of their community who keeps the Rule alone as a hermit, and had done so for about 27 years. This means for 27 years he lived, prayed, worshiped, and slept alone. The two who come to see Brother Xavier are just utterly confused why anyone would choose to live this way. But I'll let you see for yourself. Keep in mind that one of these pilgrims left witchcraft to

follow Christ and has come to the monastery to prepare for Christian ministry. [View 30:07 to 32:40]

So tell me, who is the one preparing for ministry? The skeptic?

I think it's telling that it's almost impossible to figure out who's who here. There's something in American culture that resists alone-ness. And I think Warren, our young Episcopal priest to be, says it well. [View 32:40 to 33:10]

- Why is it we resist solitude? And why is it we think what Brother Xavier says sounds so strange?

As we prepare to talk about solitude, let's turn to John 6:1-15:

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:1-15)

The first fourteen verses unfold pretty much like we might expect them to. The crowds are following Jesus after seeing him heal so many. In fact, just one chapter earlier John tells the story of Jesus healing the lame who'd been lame for thirty-eight years! It was the near the Passover, when the Jews celebrated the night God freed them from slavery in Egypt. Jesus looks out over the crowd and asks his disciples how they'd feed so many. Some of the disciples stammer, but Andrew finds a boy who shares what he has: five small barley loaves and two fish. Jesus has everyone sit with him, and from that small meal Jesus feeds 5,000. There was so much, the disciples fill twelve baskets full with bread. And this is where things become interesting.

- What do the people say when they see what has happened?

Now, if you're an oppressed, hungry people eager to beat down our enemies, and you come across someone who can heal with a touch and conjure food from thin air, what might you be thinking? You might be thinking, "This is it! We can't be killed! We can't starve! We're sacking the Romans next week!" And this is exactly what happens. They get it in their heads to make Jesus their king.

- But what does Jesus do? And what sense does it make?
- Would it make sense if I said he, like Brother Xavier, went to die? Why? Why not?

When our Jesus retreats to the mountain he goes alone, and I believe he goes alone to die. Solitude is like a little death, cutting our connection to everything in the world and everyone in it to be alone with God. To die to the world's insatiable pull on our lives, to its obsessive activity. To die to our neighbor. Are you beginning to understand Brother Xavier? The goal of all great spiritual practices is to die before you die, and that's what solitude forces on the soul.

Divide into groups. Have each group answer the following and put onto posters. After they're done, have them present to the group:

1. What are obstacles to solitude?
2. What are creative ways to find solitude?
3. How does solitude nurture compassion in the life of the soul?

When discussion is wrapping up, share these.

- In times of solitude, we became useless to the world. Solitude produces nothing. It is useless, and that's part of the point. In solitude we escape whatever role the world tries to force our souls within. Solitude is our radical witness that the world has no power over us. We belong to God, and in him we live and move and have all our being. This insistence begins to free our hearts and minds from forces that keep us from loving our neighbor.
- In the same vein, our attachment to the world weakens. Solitude forces us to die to the things we cling to in the world, again freeing us for greater love.
- Solitude also forces us to die to our neighbor. It sounds strange, I know. It sounds like the opposite of compassion. But the fact is that most of us expect our parents, our spouses, our children and friends and church, to be God for us. We expect them to always be kind, to always love, to always forgive. We expect them to love us unconditionally. Do you what who are among the most dangerous pastors? The ones who need the love of their congregation. When we place these expectations on our neighbors, we are really expecting them to give us what only God can

give. And this is lethal to compassion, because if I expect only what God offers me then I will become disappointed, bitter, angry. If I'm to live compassionately with my neighbor, I need to release them to be broken with me. I need to let them live with me as someone created, not the Creator. I cannot love them unconditionally until I release them from the prison of my conditions. This leads into what might be most important.

- Finally, in solitude we are alone with the Alone. There is nothing and no one to distract us from the single thing we spend our lives to escape: ourselves. The fact is that we spend most of our energy trying to keep ourselves from hearing everything going on inside us. If I were to guess one of the scariest things you've confronted in silence is yourself. Your insecurities. Your fears. Your failures. With silence, solitude is like a prison that forces us to confront the people we are, not the people we pretend to be. The people we wish we were. And this becomes an essential seed for compassion.

Solitude, real solitude isn't easy, because we are so connected: televisions, radios, cellphones, internet, emails, texts, tweets, landlines, jobs, pets, housework, children. It is very hard to cut away at the things that demand our attention. Find the time. Find the space for the Spirit to work.

I don't know what your life is like. I can't say, "This will work for you." I can only say that this is something all of us desperately need. Take a moment to think about time and space without all the things that keep us connected. At least twenty minutes where you can be alone with God. In the morning. In the evening. At lunch time. What do you need to do to guard that time and make it work? What do you need to turn off and unplug and get away from?

A word from Nouwen,

When we are filled with God's merciful presence, we can do nothing other than minister because our whole being witnesses to the light that has come into the darkness (37).

### *BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

As we prepare for the benediction, I'd just prod you to think about the small spaces as well. Places where you find yourself alone and can turn your heart Godward, if only for a few minutes.

Join me in blessing one another for the work of holy love in the world.

### PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace,  
Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE;

Where there is injury, PARDON;  
Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
Where there is despair, HOPE:  
Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,

grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled. AS TO  
CONSOLE;

to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;

to be loved, AS TO LOVE.

For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,

it is in pardoning THAT WE ARE PARDONED.

and it is in dying THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.

AMEN.

WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)

And they'll know we are Christians by our love,

By our Love,

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,

We will work side by side.

We will work with each other,

We will work side by side.

And we'll guard each one's dignity

And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

And together we'll spread the News  
that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you. and give you  
peace. Amen. (Numbers 6:24-26)

### *ASSIGNMENT*

Between now and our next meeting, I'd like you to continue in centering prayer.

I also have a brief journal for you to complete between now and then. This will give a  
place to start our next conversation Take your time with them. And remember the only  
right answer is the one that comes from your heart and soul.



## Holy Listening, Becoming Present to the Suffering of Others

Session Number: 04

Session Title: Holy Listening, Becoming Present to the Suffering of Others

Objectives:

1. The formation group leader will lead participants
  - a. to share a fourth experience of deepening silence.
  - b. to explore forces that actively erodes listening (and so compassion) in our relationship with others
2. The formation group leader will also
  - a. nurture opportunities for participants to form holy, if temporary, community.
  - b. and set holy listening within the context of both silence and solitude

Needed Supplies:

- Bibles of participants' choice.
- Notebooks and pens.
- Candle & matches.
- MP3 player with speaker. (*PRAYERscapes: Spirit Rain; Conversations with God: A Windham Hill Collection: Renovare: Music to Renew & Restore the Soul*)
- Journal Assignment 02
- Song & prayer sheet. (Copies. Participants should retain theirs.)
- Prayer Assignments: Assignment 04, Centering Prayer
- Journal Assignment 02 (Email submission preferred.)
- Pictures for exercise in judgment.

In Detail:

*AWAKENING TO THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST*

We begin our time together awakening to the presence of Christ, who is everywhere always present. We cannot meet God, one another, or even ourselves in holy encounter without taking this time to gather ourselves and wake up to what is the really real.

The light of the this candle represents the living presence of God here in, among and between us.

This time we share in prayer isn't about success or failure. It is simply waking up to the presence of the living Christ and gathering ourselves in his love for us.

[Light the candle. As it is lit, someone prays. . . .]

**GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT, AND THERE WAS LIGHT.**

AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD.  
 THIS VERY DAY OUR GOD HAS ACTED! LET US REJOICE!  
 ALLELUIA! GOD'S NAME BE PRAISED! (*Upper Room Worshipbook*, 8)

[Formation leader leads the group into deepening silence.]

BE STILL AND NOW THAT I AM GOD.

[Silence for two minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM.

[Silence for three minutes.]

BE STILL AND KNOW.

[Silence for four minutes.]

BE STILL.

[Silence for four and half minutes.]

BE.

[Silence for five minutes.]

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT. AMEN.

### *SHARING OUR STORY*

Since our last meeting, I invited you to reflect on your experience of solitude, and I'd like to share those reflections today. Remember. I'm not looking for any one, right answer. I am simply asking for you to share what you've experienced as you practiced the disciplines of silence and solitude. Take your time. Listen to one another. Be fully present to them. None of us are in competition for each other's attention or God's love. Afterward I'll collect your written reflections.

- "How, when and where were you able to practice solitude and silence this week?" (Barton 147)
- "Did you notice any fear or anxiety about the experience of solitude itself? Were you aware of that fear actually sabotaging your efforts to enter more deeply into solitude and silence? Were you able to be with that fear in God's presence? What happened?" (Barton 149)

- “Take a moment to notice and share the changes that have already take place in your relationships with others as you have stayed faithful to your practice to your practice of solitude and silence” (Barton 157). In what ways have you experienced a renewed presence of Christ in relationship with others?
- “How are you experiencing solitude as being ‘for others’ - making you safer and having more to give when you are with others in community?” (Barton 158) How has your heart grown in compassion with others if at all?

[Allow twenty to thirty minutes for discussion.]

As we gather back together, I want to ask for two to three words from each group that stand out for you:

God is with us in all of these.

*AN INTRODUCTION TO VOICE OF JUDGMENT, CYNICISM, AND FEAR*

Judgment. Cynicism. Fear.

- What do these words mean to you?
- What do they have to do with compassion?

The voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear undermine the compassionate life. Compassion is about learning to suffer with one another, while judgment, cynicism, and fear are about self-preservation. It is about me staying safe behind my own wall of belief and experience. If I don't have to deal with anyone else in a meaningful way, I never have to risk vulnerability.

I'd like to play a little game I like to call PPR-I: Pastor Parish Relations- Improv! I have, here, a set of cards. On each is the description of one character in the game. Each of you will get one, and I want you to commit to the role. Don't share all the information on it right away. I'll introduce you and set the scene. And I want you to watch to see how judgment, cynicism, and fear might be work.

Pass out cards with the following:

- District Superintendent Sam “Smoothover” Smith: Middle aged white male. Always comes to meetings with a copy of the *Discipline*. Dyed in the wool United Methodist.  
Useful Information: UMC Book of Discipline, Paragraph 303.

Ordination to this ministry is a gift from God to the church. In ordination, the church affirms and continues the apostolic ministry through persons empowered by the Holy Spirit. As such, those who are ordained make a commitment to conscious living of the whole gospel and to the proclamation of that gospel to the end that the world may be saved.

The UMC does NOT limit ministry to men, but to all who are called.

- Pastor Jesse “Just in Ministry” Johnson: Single woman of about 26. Has just graduated from seminary, where she graduated with a specialty in preaching, to serve Ipswich United Methodist. This is her first appointment.

Useful Information: She has come from a church led by a man who was always very supportive of her decision to pursue ministry. While interested in one day having children, she hasn’t yet found “Mr. Right”.

- Amy “Angry” Addison: Ipswich’s lay leader. Energetic wife and mother who opposes Jesse’s continued appointment as unbiblical. She’s fighting for her church.

Useful Information: Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:11-15)

Shouldn’t Jesse be happy with the body she has, get married, and just be a mom’?

- Concerned Chris Curtis: Ipswich’s ppr chair. He supports Jesse, and even enjoys her sermons, but he’s concerned that it may be time for her to step aside and let a man do the job in order to preserve the peace of the church.

Useful Information: Since Jesse’s arrival one quarter of their eighty person congregation walked out the door. On the other hand he knows that over one hundred years ago their church came into existence after a revival led by a woman.

- Other Members:
  - Robert, Relative of a family member who has left the congregation for the Southern Baptists.

Useful Information: (As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup> women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup> If there is anything they desire to

know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. . . . (1 Corinthians 14:33-35)

He isn't very impressed by the district superintendent or the United Methodist Church in general. He figures that one day they'll find a way to force the conference to give them their property and just walk away.

Shouldn't Jesse see that women aren't made for ministry. They lack the emotional, intellectual, and physical strength. They are physically made for childbearing and child caring. They depend on men to be strong. When a woman takes the place where a man should be, it interrupts God's ordained order and drives men from the church. Who wants to listen to what a woman has to say? What's next? Stay at home dad's?

- Aleshia, Friend of Amy Addison.

Useful Information: Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach . . . . (NIV, 1 Timothy 3:2)

Aleshia wonders how any single person can be a pastor, much less a woman who can never have a wife, because she'd be the wife!

- Bill, Member of a family split of Jesse's ongoing ministry there.
- Almeda, Just wants the problem to go away.
- Bob, Long time United Methodist. Once served other congregations as a local pastor.

Useful Information: Junia, a woman, is listed by Paul in Romans 16:7 as an apostle.

- David, Has a daughter of sixteen inspired by Jesse to pursue ministry.

Useful Information: Has always seen spiritual gifts in his daughter and is delighted that they will finally find express in the ministry of the church.

Circumstance: Ipswich is a traditional, rural United Methodist Church. Since Jesse's arrival last July the church has lost several key members. While most affirm the goodness of her heart, the genuineness of her grace, and her ability to teach, a group quickly rose to opposition to her appointment as a woman in ministry. Despite the controversy, some continue to support and love her, while others are growing concerned she may need to go just to keep the church from falling to pieces.

At the end of this fifteen to twenty minute exercise the district superintendent should make a decision about her appointment with the support of her ppr.

[Note: The facilitator needs to encourage each person to embody the passion of their characters. This exercise will fail if participants cannot put their full energies into the scenario.]

Thank you for your very energetic performances! Haza!

The voice of judgment speaks in absolute, certain terms, and there no sense in which the world might anything except what it already believes it is. the voice of judgment is really the voice of a closed mind.

The Flat Earth Society is an excellent example of the closed mind, or the voice of judgment. This society was founded in 1956 to defend their belief that the earth is flat. Not round. Flat. When NASA began sending people into space and even landed on the moon, they called it a hoax. And they are still in existence today. One of my seminary professor met a flat-earther who argued it must be true because Scripture says in Job 37:2-3, "Listen, listen to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. Under the whole heaven he lets it loose, and his lightning to the corners of the earth." And so according to Scripture the earth has corners, and you can find this expression here, in Isaiah, and Revelation. Spheres do not have corners; therefore the world cannot be round.

A flat-earther can see all the evidence everyone else sees: they can travel around the globe; they can read pick up satellite signals from space; but they will never face the truth. They will never deal with reality, because they've already closed their minds to any reality but the one they say MUST exist.

- How is the voice of judgment, the closed mind, at work in our ppr meeting?

The voice of judgment can only be silenced through the open mind, which is nothing more than learning to see things as they are rather than how I know they must be. It is being able to experience people as they are, rather than how my own biases say they must be.

The open mind cannot be afraid of questions, but it invites questions: Well, I Thought things were this way, but maybe they are that way. I thought Scripture said this, but maybe it says that. I've always believed those kinds of people were bad, but maybe they're like me.

Are you beginning to understand the open mind, and how it might be the first step in learning to practice compassion and deep listening?

- How would the open mind have changed that ppr meeting?

Next is the voice of cynicism, or the closed heart. The closed heart very simply refuses to experience the world through any heart but its own. It says, "My life experience is normative; all others are normative only in so far as they reflect them." It does not affirm or value the experiences of others. It will not walk a mile in anyone else's shoes. It assumes nothing good in another, and so it can never be compassionate. It can never look into the eyes of its enemy and find itself there.

I remember while in seminary talking with other guys about the role of women within the Church. We did this in our dorm rooms, far away from the women we studied with. And for most of us, this was all very theoretical. It was all exegesis, academia, grammar, tradition, politics, and practicality. Most of them had an open mind that allowed a number of varying perspectives, but there wasn't a lot of empathy. There wasn't always the realization that this conversation had huge ramifications for our sisters in ministry. This wasn't theoretical for them; it cut to the heart of their calling. We didn't have the right to that conversation. Not really, because most of our hearts were closed. We didn't have the compassion to talk about the role of women except in a clinical, meaningless way.

- How did the closed heart keep people from listening? How did it prevent resolution?

The open heart allows us to listen empathetically. To listen with our whole selves engaged. It respects and honors the other by respecting and honoring their experience as a human being. Really it is remembering that we are all children of God.

- How could an open heart have helped this ppr meeting?

Finally, the voice of fear. This doesn't need a lot of explanation, because it's something we all experience. Fear of change. Fear of what the other. Fear of loss of control. Fear of what we don't understand. Fear drives us to cling to what is comfortable, what we know, and how we do things. It's the what-might-happen-if factor.

- What did fear do in Ipswich?
- How did fear stifle compassion and deep listening?

The voice of fear is silenced by the open will, by which I simply mean a willingness to let go. To let go of our own agendas, our need to control, dominate, and manipulate. The open will opens itself to what might happen if it works cooperatively with the other.

- How would an open will have changed this?

#### SHARING SILENCE, SOLITUDE WITH THE THREATENING OTHER

Silence and solitude They are acts of attention and intention. Said another way, these means of grace fix our hearts and all its energy on this life with God.

They are not ends in themselves. Nothing you've done here makes the Lord love you any more or any less. Nothing you've done here has earned you rewards in heaven that will make you any more special. The early church, the desert fathers and mothers, the monastics, the Quakers, the Great Tradition of the Church offers us silence and solitude as ways to free ourselves from attachment to busyness of the world and everything in it for the sake of holy love.

This is why it isn't enough to simply be alone or just to shut up for a few minutes. These are spaces we go to be with God, and allow God to be with us for his sake, for our sake, and the sake of the world.

The more we allow these disciplines to take hold of our lives, the more present we become to the compassionate presence of God who is present to us. Does this make sense?

Silence and solitude aren't simply grace for us. They are grace for the world, because we carry in us that attention to the compassion of God, that awareness of his loving presence. The more present we become to God and ourselves, the more present we can become to others who share in God's presence with us.

This is what holy listening is about. It begins with God: it continues in me: and then it goes out into the world. It is a listening with the whole self, knowing that we, NOT I, are loved by God in that very moment in time and space.

The single most important gift we as Christians offer the world is that Presence. Do you remember the words of the elder:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.  
(1 John 4:16-17)

The single most important revelation of God in this world is not Scripture; it is the people who abide in the One who inspired it.

Judgment, cynicism, and fear actively oppose compassion because they keep us at war with each other. We cannot live compassionately with one another until we learn to practice the open mind, the open heart, and the open will. The open mind is the mind willing to step back from its own understanding and see things from a new perspective. The open heart empathizes with others; it allows us to experience the world from a new place, to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. The open heart understands that we share a common humanity. The open will lets go of what it clings to. It lets go to take hold of something new with others.

I want to take just a little time to talk about these two questions in groups:



- How have the voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear kept your churches or families in turmoil?
- And how might you practice an open mind, open heart, or open will in these?

*BLESSING ONE ANOTHER*

Join me in blessing one another for the work of holy love in the world.

PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace,  
 Where there is hatred, LET US SOW LOVE;  
 Where there is injury, PARDON;  
 Where there is doubt, FAITH;  
 Where there is despair, HOPE;  
 Where there is darkness, LIGHT;  
 Where there is sadness, JOY.

O Divine Master,  
 grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, AS TO  
 CONSOLE;  
 to be understood, AS TO UNDERSTAND;  
 to be loved, AS TO LOVE.  
 For it is in giving THAT WE RECEIVE,  
 it is in pardoning THAT WE ARE PARDONED,  
 and it is in dying THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.  
 AMEN.

WE ARE ONE IN THE SPIRIT

We are One in The Spirit,  
 We are One in The Lord.  
 We are One in The Spirit,  
 We are One in The Lord.  
 And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

(Chorus)  
 And they'll know we are Christians by our love,  
 By our Love,  
 Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,  
 We will work side by side.  
 We will work with each other,  
 We will work side by side.  
 And we'll guard each one's dignity  
 And save each one's pride.

(Chorus)

We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand in hand.  
We will walk with each other.  
We will walk hand in hand.  
And together we'll spread the News  
that God is in our land.

(Chorus)

All praise to the father from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus his only son  
And all praise to the spirit  
Who makes all things one.

(Chorus)

[Final blessing by the Formation Leader]

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

*ASSIGNMENT*

Between now and retreat, please continue with out practice of centering prayer.

I also have a last spiritual journal for you to complete between now and our retreat.

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