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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

EQUIPPING CITYLIFE ADULTS TO NAVIGATE THE
FAITH FORMATION STAGES OF DOUBT AND SPIRITUAL DARKNESS

Written by

LYNN MORESI

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:


Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: September 5, 2014

EQUIPPING CITYLIFE ADULTS TO NAVIGATE THE
FAITH FORMATION STAGES OF DOUBT AND SPIRITUAL DARKNESS

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

LYNN MORESI
SEPTEMBER 2014

ABSTRACT

Equipping Citylife Adults to Navigate the Faith Formation Stages of Doubt and Spiritual Darkness

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Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2014

CityLife Church is an independent, Pentecostal, Mega Church, gathering in three locations across Melbourne, Australia. With a large Asian population, congregants are generally financially stable, well-educated and success-oriented. Fundamental Pentecostal teachings have created an expectation where supernatural engagement with the Holy Spirit is an anticipated outcome of faith in Christ. This concentration on the upbeat, outward expression of one's faith often leaves the community unprepared and ill equipped to navigate the inevitable faith formation stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. This doctoral project will equip adult members of CityLife Church, who traditionally struggle to acknowledge these stages, identify, understand, and navigate them through the development of an integrated strategy of pulpit teaching and small group engagement.

Proposing an integrated strategy of pulpit teaching and small group engagement, CityLife adults will understand that Christ-like maturity is a lifelong process, and that these challenging stages are vital to the process of transformation. The pulpit teaching and parallel small-group studies will enable believers to identify and normalize their own faith formation stage, and that of others within the community, promoting authentic relationships. Part One of this paper will examine the community context of CityLife Church.

Part Two will engage the biblical and theological foundations for this project. Key theological texts will be outlined, together with Scriptures supporting the necessity of stages of doubt and spiritual darkness in the maturing process. Part Three will present a ministry plan to address the need for CityLife adults to understand and navigate the challenging faith formation stages. Specific goals relating to the desired outcomes will be discussed, together with a project timeline, which will provide a clear framework for the strategy content.

Content Reader: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD

Words: 275

To my wonderful husband Greg who has faithfully and lovingly supported me through the painful journey of doubt, uncertainty and the “hiddenness of God.” You have always championed my cause and loved me well

To my beautiful children who never cease to encourage me and make me laugh, and to my Mum who has faithfully prayed for me every day of her life

To my treasured friends who have made the journey more bearable: Nicole, Shelly, Rellie, Esther and Tina – Wine, cheese, lemon tart, tears and laughter are definitely good for the soul

Finally, this paper is dedicated to all lovers of Jesus who have suddenly found themselves stranded in the dark unable to find their way back to the warm familiarity of God’s presence. Rest easy – it is our heavenly Father who leads us in this painful journey and His love will ultimately guide us to a more wonderful and expansive place in Him

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people have supported me throughout the completion of this project and given much needed advise and guidance: John Capper, Mark Conner, Sandra Rule, Kurt Fredrickson, Julia Speck, James Love, Janet Hagberg, my colleagues at Tabor Victoria and CityLife Church. Thank you for giving your time, encouragement and expertise.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the everyday rhythm of life, Christians will naturally encounter times of crises or personal tragedy. No one is exempt from the pain experienced from the loss of a loved one, the sudden breakdown of a relationship, a financial disaster, chronic illness, or any other personal heartbreak that drives one into a space of grief, suffering and uncertainty. Yet these times of great hardship can result in the committed follower of Christ experiencing the closeness of God as never before (2 Cor 1:3-4).¹ It is as if God gathers his injured children in his arms and comforts them in their pain. And for those in the midst of suffering, this encounter with their Heavenly Father can be both precious and reassuring: God is in control and his presence is tangible.

There can develop a strong conviction that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him,” and throughout centuries of Christian experience, personal testimonies have affirmed that truth (Ro 8:28). Bible texts taught from pulpits, popular devotional books and motivational conferences likewise assert that God draws close to those he loves in the midst of their pain and that, “[He] is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps 56:1). The popularity of the allegorical poem “Footprints in the Sand” reveals a culturally desirable picture of God, who not only walks alongside those undergoing hardship, but actually carries them in times of suffering.²

¹ All Scripture is quoted from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (London: Biblica Inc., 1973).

² A Google[®] search of the words “footprints in the sand” registered more than 2,230,000 results including copies of the poem printed on mugs, wall hangings, cards, plates, key rings and iPhone covers (accessed 23 December, 2013). Authorship of the poem is disputed.

However, that is not the whole story; nor is it the certain experience of every committed follower of Christ. Although God may have felt close and “an ever-present help in trouble” during past trials, for Christians who have chosen to surrender to a deeper, maturing relationship with God, the Scriptures suggest that there will come times of refinement when the sense of God’s loving presence may no longer be a felt reality (see Ps 44:17-19; Job 30:17, 20, 26; Jas 1: 2-4). Rather than feeling close to God, they will encounter a cold and distant emptiness; rather than sensing the overwhelming love of their heavenly Father, God will appear absent, hidden and mute (Ps 88:6, 14, 18). Martin Luther described this as *Deus Absconditus*, “God in hiding,”³ and he maintained that although it “pains us immeasurably, since we do not understand it. . . . [God] hides himself and disguises himself so that he may test us to see whether we will remain firm in faith and love toward him.”⁴

The great Spanish mystic and doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, Saint John of the Cross, wrote extensively on this stage of the Christian journey, calling it *La noche oscura del alma*, literally meaning “The darkness that obscures the soul’s sight” or as it has been commonly translated “The Dark Night of the Soul.”⁵ It is a time when “The soul is made to walk in darkness and pure faith.”⁶ Still, to those who have never heard of this “Dark Night” and have only ever known a warm and comforting connection with the

³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 38-44. Luther’s Works., Vol 7.*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 175.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society IV. Luther’s Works, Vol 47.* , ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 209.

⁵ Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans., Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhood Books, 2002).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

Spirit of God, this “hiding” can seem shocking, cruel, and something that could not ever be condoned by God, let alone orchestrated by his hand. Those who are led without understanding into this wilderness feel lost and unsure of everything they once held dear. Thirty-five year old “Simon,”⁷ a theology student and high school chaplain who attends CityLife Church, writes:

I don't understand what I've done? I just can't see where I've gone wrong. It's like God has just disappeared into thin air for no reason at all and hasn't left his forwarding address. It's like he's ignoring me . . . and then, as if the silence isn't bad enough, then come the doubts! Nothing seems certain any more. I used to know God – I used to know His ways – but now I doubt all that. I doubt so much of what I used to believe was true – I feel like my foundations are crumbling and I don't know who God is any more.⁸

And for believers in this stage of spiritual formation, that is exactly what is occurring. Faulty foundations are being exposed, long-held beliefs are being challenged, incorrect embedded theological concepts are being laid bare, and absolute certainty is slowly crumbling. Nevertheless, whilst this stage of growth can be scary and foreboding, it is a necessary and important facet of the maturing process, and if entered into with awareness that God is sovereignly superintending the entire course, one can learn to cooperate with, rather than rail against, God's loving work. Understanding that this affliction is normative within the refinement process prepares the heart for what would otherwise cause it to lose all hope.

⁷ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁸ Personal email from Tabor student who is working as a chaplain in a Christian school: *permission granted.*

Therein, however, lies the problem for the committed believer of CityLife Church where *Deus Absconditus* is a totally foreign concept and positive theology rules the day.⁹ In a denominational tradition that was founded on an irrefutable belief that supernatural engagement with the Holy Spirit is the normative evidence of being a committed Christian, it is important to address what one does when supernatural engagement can no longer be felt;¹⁰ what happens when “that which is central to Pentecostalism, namely encounter and experience” is no longer encountered or experienced.¹¹ When Pentecostal Christians who have lived their entire lives “embracing a spirituality that expects to touch God and to be touched by him” suddenly find that they can no longer sense his presence in their lives, it cannot be ignored.¹² Men and women who have been constantly told “to know God is to experience him”¹³ must reconcile the fact that God is seemingly absent from their hearts. When the reality and validity of prolonged stages of doubt and spiritual darkness are not acknowledgement within the CityLife community, believers are not equipped to navigate the wilderness journey to which they will inevitably be led.

⁹ Positive theology (also referred to as Cataphatic theology) is an expression of God in terms of what is thought to be known about the Divine. It comes from a place of certainty that focuses on the belief that humanity can know and understand God from Scripture, tradition, and personal experience. In contrast, Negative theology (also referred to as Apophatic theology), does not presume to know or describe God, but rather expresses God in terms of what God is not. It assumes that humanity can never truly grasp or understand the mystery of the Divine and as such does not make absolute statements about who God is.

¹⁰ Barry Chant, *Heart of Fire: The Story of Australian Pentecostalism* (Unley Park, SA: House of Tabor, 1984), 242-243.

¹¹ Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 22.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

A new pedagogical approach is desperately needed: one in which darkness and obscurity are acknowledged as places of new birth and positive growth, and where the perception of God's absence is demonstrated to be a sacred liminal space where one's faith is deepened and one's embedded theological inaccuracies are graciously and lovingly exposed. This doctoral project will, therefore, seek to equip adult members of CityLife Church, who traditionally struggle to acknowledge the validity of stages of doubt and spiritual darkness, to identify, understand, and navigate these historically recognized faith formation stages, through the development of an integrated strategy of pulpit teaching and small group engagement.

Part One of this paper, (comprising Chapters 1 and 2), will provide a discussion regarding the internal context of CityLife Church and the external community in which it is situated. Chapter 1 gives a snapshot of the City of Knox in Melbourne, Australia, where CityLife makes its home. It considers the influence of a highly consumerist, wealthy, middle-class culture on congregants who feel obligated to project an image of success and happiness. The impact of a large population of Asian immigrants will also be discussed in the light of their strong cultural pressure to deny any difficulties or challenges for fear that they would be judged harshly by their community. Finally, the location of the City of Knox, within the center of the "Bible Belt"¹⁴ of Melbourne, will provide a contextual justification for why CityLife congregants hold to the illusion that

¹⁴ The term "Bible Belt" has been used to describe an over representation of Christian evangelical churches within a specific geographical region. S. W. Tweedie, "Viewing the Bible Belt," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11, (1978).

they “live under the favor of God”¹⁵ and are therefore exempt from hardship and suffering.

Chapter 2 will examine the internal culture of CityLife Church and the way in which the history of the church, together with its strong Pentecostal beliefs have contributed to the inability of its members to acknowledge that seasons of spiritual darkness are a valid part of the Christian journey. The stated vision, mission and values of the church will be discussed, followed by an evaluation of the way in which these objectives focus on maintaining a productive, goal-oriented Christian experience that does not allow for doubt, failure, or hardship.

Part Two of this project, (comprising Chapters 3, 4 and 5), provides theological reflection surrounding the subject of stages of faith formation and the need to engage with seasons of doubt and spiritual darkness in order to mature in Christ. Chapter 3 will include a literature review of several key scholars in the area of faith formation stages and Pentecostal ecclesiology. Using these resources, this chapter will outline the way in which God works through formative stages to develop spiritual maturity in the lives of his children. An examination of the current ecclesiology of the Pentecostal Church will be discussed, with particular attention given to the erroneous belief that constant consolation from the Spirit is to be expected and experienced at all times. Finally,

¹⁵ The idea that God’s people are especially protected from harm, and are financially and physically blessed, is a concept that has gained enormous momentum in Pentecostal circles in recent years. The term “living in the favor of God” is heard frequently in the CityLife pulpit and Life Group meetings and is a phrase that assumes Christians, because of their faith in Christ, are somehow exempt from the suffering and hardship in the world today and can live lives of “favor” and privilege. See Duane Vander Kloek, "God's Favor," <http://www.walkingbyfaith.tv/journal/single-article/108/> (accessed September, 2013).

alternative theological foundations will be proposed, which offer greater opportunity for holistic ministry by embracing all faith formation stages with greater integrity.

Chapter 4 will examine the theology of CityLife Church, and the way in which there is a need to shift away from a concentration on the certainty of the externals of faith, to a more authentic expression of community. Some ecclesiological rituals from the Roman Catholic Church will be considered as possible sources for enriching the current Pentecostal tradition. The sociological impact of social media in sustaining a culture of impersonal communication will be exposed, and the belief that it is possible for CityLife to become a community of grace and transformation will be discussed.

Building on a foundation of Scripture, Chapter 5 will outline the biblical framework for the stages of faith formation and highlight the need for followers of Christ to commit to a lifetime of growth and spiritual maturity. The fallacious belief that Christians can live without hardship will be assessed in the light of a more accurate examination of biblical teachings that advocate pain, doubt, and suffering as powerful “teachers.” Specific examples of the various stages of faith formation will be outlined from Scripture in order to validate the assertion that stages of doubt and spiritual darkness are essential to the believer’s maturing process. Finally, a theological foundation for navigating these challenging stages will be offered.

Part Three of this paper, (comprising Chapters 6 and 7), presents the proposed strategy for CityLife Church to move forward and become a community that engages with, rather than denies, the maturing stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. Chapter 6 will paint a picture of how CityLife adults will grow and mature as a result of

acknowledging the importance of these times of hardship. Building on strong theological foundations, a preferred future will see men and women confidently identifying and navigating their particular stage in the faith formation journey. Those experiencing stages of doubt or spiritual darkness will be understood and affirmed through the implementation of the strategy content. Finally, a description of the training and leadership personnel required to implement the strategy will ensure adequate support for the project.

Chapter 7 will outline the implementation of the proposed strategy. It will provide a suggested timeline that details what tasks need to be completed leading up to the launching of the teaching series. A description of the necessary training and development of the teaching team and small group leaders will ensure that all participants are equipped for the task. A list of resources and support personnel needed to undertake the project will be included along with an assessment plan that will evaluate the effectiveness of the project and determine whether or not the strategy goals have been met.

PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

THE COMMUNITY LANDSCAPE OF CITYLIFE CHURCH

Life is not lived in a vacuum; culture and physical environment greatly affect one's values, behavior, and choices. However, just as a fish is totally unaware that it is wet, Christ followers can likewise be oblivious to the enormous influence that environment has on the way they worship and live their Christian lives. As such, this chapter will seek to highlight several of the cultural, social, and ethnic influences that exist in the larger community around CityLife Church, and will reveal how these factors continue to greatly impact many CityLife adults in their refusal to acknowledge, or engage with, stages of spiritual darkness and doubt.

City Of Knox Profile

CityLife Church is situated in Knox, approximately 22-32 kilometers south-east of the center of business in the capital city of Melbourne.¹ Knox comprises eleven suburbs, with a population of more than 155,000 and an expectation that continued growth will result in an increased residential population of more than 162,000 by the year

¹ City of Knox, "City of Knox Community Profile," <http://profile.id.com.au/knox> (accessed September 3, 2013).

2020.² Knox is a comfortable, middle-class city where the stated “Future City Aspirations” include “Healthy, Connected Communities; Prosperous, Advancing Economy; Vibrant and Sustainable Built and Natural Environments; Culturally Rich and Active Communities; and Democratic and Engaged Communities.”³ Having celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the City in April 2013, Knox residents enjoy a stability of local government and an impressive community infrastructure including: reliable public transport; community centers and libraries; state-of-the-art sporting venues, beautifully maintained parks and gardens; modern shopping malls; hospitals and medical centers; kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities; police stations in every suburb; and regular community festivals and events.⁴

The average taxable income of families in the area reveals that the community is considered to be socioeconomically middle-class. Although there are a few suburbs within the City of Knox that are less affluent, on the whole, the majority of suburbs consist of large freestanding houses with at least three to four bedrooms, manicured gardens and an average of two or more motor vehicles per household. The majority of homes have a fast broadband internet connection and more than half the school-age children attend private schools.⁵

² Ibid.

³ City of Knox, "Knox Vision: Our City, Our Future," http://www.knox.vic.gov.au/Files/Attachment_A_Proposed_Knox_Vision_Our_City_Our_Future.pdf (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁴ City of Knox, "Knox @ 50 Final Report," <http://knox50.com.au/document/show/102> (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁵ City of Knox, "City of Knox Community Profile."

City Of Monash Profile

In considering the influence of the community on CityLife Church, one cannot ignore the fact that the church campus is situated just 1.2 kilometers from the border of the City of Monash, where a considerable percentage of congregants live and work. Like Knox, the City of Monash, (comprising fourteen suburbs) is a privileged city with a slightly higher economic profile than Knox and a substantially higher economic profile than the national average.⁶ The annual income provides a large percentage of Monash residents with an upper-middle-class socioeconomic status.⁷

Homes in the suburbs of Waverley and Wheelers Hill, (which extend almost to the edge of CityLife's land), are some of the largest and most affluent in the southeastern suburbs. A large shopping mall with designer boutiques and restaurants is located just four kilometers from the CityLife campus and is a popular place for congregants to meet together. The entire infrastructure provided by the Knox council is duplicated in Monash, however, as the residents of Monash pay higher council rates, the additional funding is reflected in a noticeably higher standard of community amenities.

Significant Asian Influence

One of the marked differences between the two bordering cities is the percentage of residents in Monash who identify themselves as Chinese. Surprisingly, only 7.6 percent of City of Knox residents record their ethnicity as Chinese, however, , 18.3

⁶ City of Monash, "City of Monash Economic Profile," <http://economy.id.com.au/monash> (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁷ Ibid.

percent of Monash residents indicate their ethnicity as Chinese, only 1 percent less than those who identify themselves as Australian.⁸

This elevated percentage of Asians in the area is mostly attributed to the affluent standard of living offered and to the ease of admission to a large number of prestigious private and public schools in the area. Education is an extremely high priority for Asian parents who, when settling in a new country, usually choose to locate their families near schools with impressive VCE⁹ and ATER¹⁰ scores and good access to universities and other educational facilities. These families are wealthy and highly driven to ensure that their children succeed academically and professionally.¹¹

Many of the schools in the area, particularly Glen Waverley Secondary College and Waverley Christian College, (which is associated with CityLife Church), report extremely high VCE scores, with a larger proportion of students from Asian immigrant families receiving the maximum scores possible.¹² A recent television documentary entitled “The Dragon Children: What’s behind the success of Chinese-Australian

⁸ City of Knox, "City of Knox Community Profile;" and City of Monash, "City of Monash Economic Profile."

⁹ The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is issued to students who successfully passed their final year twelve exams. A high score on the VCE will give students a greater opportunity to obtain a place at University.

¹⁰ The Australian Tertiary Entrance Rank (ATER) is the national ranking given to students based on the results from their VCE exams.

¹¹ The 2011 Wall Street Journal article by “Tiger Mother,” Amy Chua, perfectly captured the highly competitive, highly driven world of many Asian families in the CityLife community. Amy Chua, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," *The Wall Street Journal* (January 8, 2011).

¹² Jewel Topsfield, "Victoria's Top Students: Acknowledging Our VCE High Achievers," *The National Age* (December 18, 2012); Jewel Topsfield, "High Achievers Reflect on Life Skills Gained Through VCE," *The National Age* (December 12, 2012); Jewel Topsfield, "Achieving VCE Excellence After a Turbulent Final Year," *The National Age* (December 18, 2012).

Students” states that “Australia is one of the few developed countries where children of migrants outperform their locally-born counterparts.”¹³

Situated in the State’s Bible-Belt

Heading southeast from the capital city towards CityLife Church, one drives through what has been termed the “Bible Belt” of Melbourne. Philip Hughes, comments:

The Bible belt starts around Camberwell and extends out to . . . Waverley and Mulgrave. These are places with the highest number of churches and church attendance in Melbourne. Christians in this area also tend to take their religion much more seriously than the average Anglican or Catholic. Christians who live in the Bible belt are more likely to have an evangelical style. They go to church, actively recruit and practice their religion a lot more. Very high numbers attend Baptist and Pentecostal type churches in those areas.¹⁴

Situated within this Bible belt are the two largest mega-churches in the state of Victoria;¹⁵ three of the main theological colleges in the country;¹⁶ and more than forty non-government Christian schools.¹⁷ The cities of Knox and Monash lie within this Bible belt, and are amongst the most “Christianized” in Victoria with almost 60 percent of Knox residents identifying themselves as Christian, which is significantly higher than the “greater Melbourne” average.¹⁸ As such, CityLife Church congregates in a community

¹³ SBS Australia, "The Dragon Children: What's Behind the Success of Chinese-Australian Students," (2011).

¹⁴ Philip Hughes quoted by Luke Williams, "How the Evangelicals Converted Rob Hulls," *Crikey Independent Media* (October 2009).

¹⁵ CityLife Church – Independent Pentecostal (10,000 members) and Crossway Baptist – Charismatic Baptist (5,000 members).

¹⁶ Tabor Victoria (EAST alliance), Melbourne School of Theology, and Harvest Bible College.

¹⁷ Victorian Government, "Non-Government Schools Guide," <http://www.privateschoolsguide.com> (accessed August, 2012).

¹⁸ City of Knox, "City of Knox Community Profile."

that is decidedly “churched” and one that is especially accepting of Christian values and beliefs.

Implications of Community Context for CityLife Church

The observations above, although not completely true of all residents, nonetheless provide a reasonably accurate profile for the community in which CityLife Church is situated. It could be said, therefore, that CityLife is positioned in an affluent, middle-to-upper-middle-class socioeconomic setting, which has a high emphasis on education and economic success, coupled with a strong conservative Christian influence from the wider community landscape. This combination of influences creates an environment where admitting that one is struggling with his/her faith, or being honest about one’s inability to engage with the presence of God, becomes an extremely difficult admission to make.

The Asian Community’s Need to “Save Face”¹⁹

With such a high Chinese population in the larger community, it is not surprising that the CityLife congregation consists of more than 50 percent Asian attendees.²⁰ This strong Asian influence creates an attitude that celebrates discipline and an expectation that Christians should work hard at their faith. There exists an underlying cultural pressure to project a positive exterior of accomplishment and success not only in matters of education, finances, and work, but also in areas of faith. Being seen to be a “good

¹⁹ The term “save face” is a particularly strong social value in Asian cultures. It means to avoid humiliation or embarrassment at all costs. Maintaining a strong sense of dignity and a good reputation is just as important as avoiding scandal. Alida Brill, "Saving Face," <http://www.psychologytoday.com> (accessed January 22, 2014).

²⁰ The partnership database at CityLife Church is updated monthly by pastoral staff and reflects an Asian, (including Chinese, Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Korean) partnership of approximately 56 percent as of November 8, 2013.

Christian” is extremely important, and doubts or spiritual struggles are often viewed as a failure in personal discipline and self-control. Silvia,²¹ a 52-year-old Life Group leader of Chinese descent writes:

We Asians are all about doing things right and avoiding mistakes at all costs. Saving face is important and we do not like people to see our faults or shortcomings. James 5:16 tells us to “confess out faults to one another” but we find it so hard to do that. We are unable to admit that we have doubts or that we are questioning our faith. People would judge us and criticize us for not being disciplined enough in our quiet time or for not being a strong enough Christian. If I was to admit to my family or my Life Group that I was finding it hard to pray or that I had stopped reading the Bible, they would judge me and criticize me behind my back. They would definitely not trust me to be a leader.²²

Many who have been raised with these unreal expectations of what it means to be a “good Christian” commonly express the same fear of being shunned or marginalized by other church members if they were to expose their true feelings. There exists an unspoken code of behavior that does not allow for any admission of need or personal lack: “Saving face” remains a strong value in Chinese culture and by extension, within the culture of CityLife Church. To admit that one’s faith is anything less than ideal is to admit failure, which is harshly judged in a performance-based environment. As such, Christ followers from Asian families, who unexpectedly find themselves led by the Spirit into stages of spiritual darkness, are often forced to navigate the pain and uncertainty of this journey alone. Unable to openly voice their fear that God has abandoned them, they struggle to make sense of what they are experiencing without any framework to process their feelings of loss, grief, and shame. Hiding behind a mask of control and self-righteousness can often become a life-time practice for those who never feel safe enough to honestly

²¹ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

²² Personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

express their doubts or openly discuss their feelings of inadequacy. After sharing on the faith formation stages at a CityLife celebration meeting, a very old Chinese gentleman grasped both my hands and with tears in his eyes said “Thank you for telling me what I did not know. God is in this darkness! God is in this darkness! God is in this darkness! Now I can look for Him and not feel ashamed.”²³

The desire to save face runs deep within the culture of many Christ-followers who call CityLife their spiritual home. The fear of being perceived to be less than perfect in their faith journey places unrealistic pressures on their relationship with God and others. Breaking down years of conditioning takes a genuine work of the Spirit, which can only occur within an environment of love, grace, acceptance, and authenticity.

The False Security of an Affluent Lifestyle

For those who have lived in a world of plenty and have merely needed to ask in order to receive, it is extremely difficult for them to envisage any circumstance where their requests and desires would not be met. When every want has always been automatically purchased, it is hard for people to imagine why their appeal for help or attention would be inexplicably refused. And when economic success has automatically flowed from human effort and determination, it is a challenge to discover that one’s hard work does not always result in financial reward. In short, when men and women live in an environment of affluence, financial security, and educational opportunity, there is often an unrealistic expectation that things will go well for them, that they will get what they want, and that they will achieve what they desire. It is a confidence born from

²³ Private conversation with elderly Chinese gentleman after sharing a message on the stages of faith at CityLife Church on December 4, 2011.

advantage and privilege, and it is one of the strong community influences impacting CityLife adults.

Whilst this sense of entitlement does create a culture where men and women claim a great confidence in God's desire to meet their every need (often mistakenly referred to as faith); it is actually a false confidence based on their economic and materialistic privilege, rather than as a result of God supposedly rewarding them for their commitment.

Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton observe: "Those who have much, want to believe it is a direct result of God's blessing for faithfulness. A physician stated that he believed his house and cars and booming practice were the results of God's rewarding him for his godliness. This wonderful Christian had been tainted by his own materialistic existence. . . . Wealth is not an automatic reward for faithfulness."²⁴ However, when there is a deep-seated belief that a comfortable lifestyle is the byproduct of faithful Christian service, and that God's love and approval is rooted in his desire to bless materialistically, it is hard to accept the perceived withdrawal of God's presence or the refusal of God to immediately solve one's problems or take away one's pain.

When followers of Christ are constantly surrounded by the comforts afforded them through material success, they can become accustomed to having what they want or need as soon as they ask. No wonder so many CityLife adults are confused and perplexed when they are led into stages of spiritual darkness, where the God whom they believed wanted only blessing and comfort, is now perceived to have abandoned them and

²⁴ Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith: Experiencing Healing from Painful Spiritual Abuse* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 44.

removed the sense of blessing from their lives. Twenty-two year old Tania,²⁵ a CityLife youth leader writes,

God has always been there for me and I have always known his blessing in my life. I know what it is to live in God's favor and to experience his blessing. He has always met my every need and given me a great job and a great family and I have always been grateful for that. So I know it sounds terrible, but I don't understand why he is letting all this happen to me now when I haven't done anything wrong. I have always trusted him and he has never let me down until now. It doesn't seem fair when I've always done the right thing. Some of my friends have backslidden but I've never done that, but still for some reason he just doesn't seem to be listening to my prayers anymore? It feels like he's just stopped blessing me and moved on to someone else but I don't know why.²⁶

For those who have lived privileged lives, navigating stages of *Deus Absconditus* are particularly challenging. When encountering difficulty, it is easy to resort to what has produced results in the past: work harder, pray longer, put in more hours in the study, phone the bank or rearrange some assets, and with God's blessing, and great personal effort, there can develop an expectation that everything will sort itself out. However, in this season of brokenness, such practices no longer work.

God is leading his children into the wilderness where they are no longer able to rely on their own resources to sustain them and where they are forced to face the realization that they are not in control of their own spiritual destiny. God is revealing "the deep, perhaps unconscious belief that they are in some way making their own spiritual life work" and he is exposing the deception by which they have come to believe that their

²⁵ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity

²⁶ Personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

privileged life is a mark of God's blessing and reward for their faithful service.²⁷ This is a particularly challenging time for those who have never known real deprivation in their lives: "They were habituated as beginners in their earlier life to look to a spiritual feeling as the criterion for spirituality," and now that they no longer feel blessed, they do not know how to engage with their faith or how to relate to this unknown God who no longer appears to give them what they ask.²⁸

Thus, for many CityLife adults who have always known comfort and ease, this place of uncertainty, discomfort, and lack of control can be particularly challenging. Having assumed that financial blessing and ease of life is a sign of God's blessing, the harsh realization that God will at times lead into the wilderness can be extremely difficult to comprehend. Open, honest dialogue is desperately needed where one can begin to understand that these stages of questioning and insecurity are not punishment from God, but are actually places of growth and pathways to a deeper union with the Spirit.

Living in the Unrealistic "Christian Bubble"²⁹

Living in a Bible-belt community can have the unfortunate effect of creating an unrealistic Christian bubble where everyone talks the same, thinks the same, and assumes

²⁷ John H Coe, "Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28:4 (2000): 299.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁹ This term is widely used in Christian journals and texts to describe a protected Christian environment where Christ-followers can view the world outside the Church, but are safe inside the "bubble" where everyone holds the same Christian beliefs, behaviors, and values. See Hannah Proudler, "Reshaping the Christian Bubble," *Relevant Magazine* (November 2007); Hannah Kang, "Bursting the Christian Bubble," *Sojourners Magazine* (October 2007); Matthew Lee Anderson, *The End of Our Exploring: A Book about Questioning and the Confidence of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 189-198.

that their view is the only correct opinion. When travelling around the suburbs surrounding CityLife Church, one passes church after church, Christian School after Christian School, and Bible College after Bible College. It would not be hard to imagine why so many CityLife congregation members have a strong sense of Christian identity and a dogmatic certainty in what they believe. However, true faith only grows and deepens as it is challenged, and being absolutely certain of something without having ever truly tested it, is blind confidence, rather than genuine assurance. James,³⁰ a nineteen-year-old pastoral intern at CityLife Church made this startling confession in a Spiritual Formation essay,

Personally, I have found this subject very confronting. I was raised in a Christian home, grew up in CityLife, went to Waverley Christian College and now I'm working at the Church. . . . I have never had to think about some of these things, I have just always accepted what everyone around me said. I have never met a gay person and I haven't got any non-Christian friends. I don't know anyone that smokes and none of my friends are having sex--(that I know of anyway!) I haven't had to face any of these things so I've never really thought about them. But now that I am being forced to think about it, I am feeling really confused. . . . I don't know what I believe any more and I don't know if what I do believe will work in the real world. I don't think I even know what the real world looks like.³¹

Living in this type of bubble can produce Christians who have a surface faith that is largely socialized and more a product of strong environmental influence than genuine personal exploration. In this false atmosphere Christians are protected from the outside world and all its associated dangers. Thoughtful engagement with faith-challenging issues rarely occurs as there is rarely anyone to challenge the status quo. It is a safe place, but unrealistic. And for the Christ-follower who is being led into a stage of testing and

³⁰ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

³¹ Excerpt from student essay, "Theological and Spiritual Formation" class at CityLife Church, 2010: *permission granted*.

refinement, the bubble becomes a place of great dislocation and confusion. When questions arise, rather than being encouraged to wrestle with their doubts, those who are struggling to conform are often treated as rebellious dissidents and dissuaded from seeking out answers. Matthew Lee Anderson, in writing about his own experience in “the bubble that surrounded [his] beautiful little campus, keeping out the forces of evil and Britney Spears,”³² observes,

Many of our parents get a little nervous if we start asking questions too seriously – as though questions themselves will inevitably lead us outside the Christian faith. . . . But part of the nature of education is to ask deeper and deeper questions and view the answers we discover in new and surprising ways. A platitude cuts off that process, and when handed to students who are honestly struggling with the intellectual foundations of their faith, it tends to make them feel isolated and frustrated.³³

In such a large mega church, situated within a community that exhibits a highly visible Christian presence, it is not surprising that many CityLife congregants likewise find themselves living in a Christian bubble and speaking in Christian platitudes. As such, an intentional effort must be made to step outside the four walls of the church in order to engage in open, honest dialogue with those who have questions, to listen with compassion to those who are different, and to encourage those for whom God’s felt presence is no longer a reality.

³² Anderson, *The End of Our Exploring*, 190.

³³ *Ibid.*, 194.

CHAPTER 2

THE MINISTRY CONTEXT OF CITYLIFE CHURCH

Just as there are many external influences from the wider community that greatly impact the culture of CityLife Church, so there are significant internal factors that have shaped the values, vision, mission, and identity of those who worship within the four walls of the CityLife campus. Nancy Ammerman, *et al* explain that a church culture reveals “who we are and all the ways in which we reinforce and recreate who we are. A culture involves the congregation’s history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals and worldview. . . . Understanding a congregation requires understanding that it is a unique gathering of people with a cultural identity all its own.”¹

CityLife is indeed a “unique gathering of people” with a distinctive multicultural identity² and a worldview that reflects a rare juxtaposition between its historical roots in the Pentecostal holiness tradition, and a more recent tacit approval of the contemporary

¹ Nancy T. Ammerman et al, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 78.

² There are over 110 nationalities represented in the church membership. Mark Conner, *Pass the Baton: Successful Leadership Transition* (Rowville, AU: Conner Ministries, Inc., 2010), 29.

Prosperity Gospel.³ This uneasy blend of conservatism and hyper faith; legalism and seeker-friendly grace; together with the opposites of Aussie-larrikinism and Asian traditionalism; makes for a cultural melting pot of great diversity. However, one place where these incongruous approaches find common ground is in their failure or inability, to understand, acknowledge, or engage with stages of spiritual darkness or doubt.

Historical Foundations: Pentecostal Holiness Movement

Originally called “Waverley Mission” and later “Waverley Christian Fellowship,” the small group of eight families who began meeting in a tiny suburban shop front in 1967 could never have envisioned the remarkable church that grew from such small beginnings.⁴ The church has shifted and changed over the past forty-six years under the leadership of three consecutive senior ministers: Richard Holland (1967 to 1986); Kevin Conner (1987 to 1995); and Mark Conner (1995 to present), all of whom have stamped their distinctive styles and set their particular priorities on the church community.

Under the leadership of Richard Holland, and later under Kevin Conner, there was a foundational influence from the Pentecostal Holiness Movement that strongly impacted the teaching, direction, and values of the church. Many of the characteristics of the Holiness Movement can still be seen today in the underlying attitudes of CityLife adults toward their faith and the ideals of their Christian walk. For many, the values of holiness and outward piety, reliance upon the supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit, an

³ “The prosperity gospel is a widely popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial mastery that dominates not only much of the American religious scene but some of the largest churches around the globe.” Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3. See also Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴ Conner, Mark Conner, *Pass the Baton*, 25.

unwavering belief in the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, and a mistrust of other denominations and faith traditions, are so ingrained in the spiritual psyche of the church that it is difficult to escape their influence or to introduce a concept that might be perceived to be threatening those values.

Striving for Inward Holiness and Outward Piety

Thomas Russell writes, “Holiness people stress the Bible’s command, ‘Be holy as I am holy.’ They believe that Holiness comes from separating oneself from the evil world, which constantly attempts to lure the devout away from this holy life. Holiness people believe that holy actions should replace unholy ones and they constantly strive to carry these out.”⁵ A strong emphasis on outward piety and one’s continual striving towards complete discipline of the body and mind was particularly noticeable in the early years of Waverley Christian Fellowship. Church members were to refrain from drinking alcohol, smoking, attending movies, dancing, or any behavior that could be deemed “worldly.” Women were not permitted to wear makeup or jewelry and were required to wear a “skirt or dress of modest length.”⁶ Pants and shorts were forbidden. Russell comments, “Divorce is discouraged and marriage is stressed. Males are heads of families and having as many children as possible is encouraged.”⁷

⁵ Thomas A. Russell, *Comparative Christianity: A Student's Guide to a Religion and its Diverse Traditions* (Boca Rotan, FL: Universal Publishers, 2010), 121.

⁶ A notice sent home with a child in grade prep at Waverley Christian College in 1994 stated that any parent attending the church school to assist with reading to the children “must be suitably attired. We request that women wear a dress or skirt of modest length, (no slacks) and no excessive makeup or jewelry should be displayed.” Waverley Christian College, “Letter to Parents” (May 1994).

⁷ Russell, *Comparative Christianity*, 121.

During the period that Kevin Conner pastored the church, he authored several books taking a hard line against what was perceived to be the sin of worldliness. Titles such as “To Drink Or Not To Drink,”⁸ “To Smoke Or Not To Smoke,”⁹ and “Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage,”¹⁰ all addressed issues of morality and what was deemed to be acceptable Christian behavior. The basic premise was “Do Not Drink,” “Do Not Smoke,” and “Do Not Get Divorced.”

This concentration on the externals of one’s Christian faith, whilst creating a strong moral conscience, had the less desirable effect of building an underlying culture of performance and a subsequent lack of authenticity amongst the church congregation. Brian Birkett, a pastoral leader at CityLife Church for over twenty-four years, observes, “Legalism crept into the church through a merit mentality. The performance culture stimulated an unwillingness to admit need and deal with issues. The qualities of authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability lost their prominence.”¹¹

Keeping up the appearance of holiness was paramount during these early years, especially for anyone in positions of leadership. It was expected that leaders had exemplary spiritual lives that were free from doubt or uncertainty and that they were an example of godly living to those who followed them.¹² Unfortunately, holiness often

⁸ Kevin Conner, *To Drink Or Not To Drink* (Portland, OR: City Bible Publishing, 2003).

⁹ Kevin Conner, *To Smoke Or Not To Smoke* (Portland, OR: City Bible Publishing, 2003).

¹⁰ Kevin Conner, *Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage* (Portland, OR: City Bible Publishing, 1988).

¹¹ Brian Birkett, “The Development of Emotionally Healthy Disciples at Citylife Church” (diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, December 2009), 11.

¹² First Timothy 3:1-13 was regularly taught as a model for leadership and those who sought to lead were held accountable to the criteria outlined in this passage.

became more about what was seen on the outside rather than what was happening in the heart. This often led to “a tendency to pretend everything was fine, even though some people struggled.”¹³

The appropriate management of one’s family was a strong value for those in the Holiness Movement. Parents were placed under enormous pressure to ensure that their children were well dressed, well behaved, and well spoken. Children were to be “seen and not heard” and those who did not sit quietly in church or whose behavior was deemed to be troublesome or disrespectful were frowned upon. They were judged by the biblical criteria, which stated that a leader “must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him” (1 Tim 3:4). The message to children was clear: “be good so that people will not disapprove.”

Unfortunately, this preoccupation with one’s external behavior created a barrier to honest, transparent interaction with one another. Birkett writes, “Performance [was] sometimes valued over transparency [and] some congregants valued individuals for what they [did] or how they [met] external expectations.”¹⁴ Rather than honestly admit to struggling with life’s many challenges, problems were often hidden, doubts were denied, and times of spiritual darkness were endured in silent isolation.

Reliance upon the Supernatural Manifestations of the Holy Spirit

From its early beginnings in the Holiness Movement, CityLife Church has always fostered an absolute reliance upon the person and power of the Holy Spirit to work

¹³ Birkett, “The Development of Emotionally Healthy Disciples at CityLife Church,” 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

supernaturally in the life of a believer. The expectation that God will speak to those who are open to hear undergirds every activity, worship service, and corporate decision made within the church community. Holland's ministry is said to have been "characterized by . . . faith to believe God for the miraculous."¹⁵ When seeking a new direction, great emphasis was placed on "hearing the word of the Lord" to ensure that the Church was moving forward in the will of God. In the early-1970s, when faced with raising an insurmountable \$600,000 for a new church building, Holland waited on God for an answer; "As he prayed he sensed the Lord impressing on him very strongly 'The money is in the church!' So the vision was shared and the members of the church gave \$200,000, loaned \$200,000 interest-free and the remaining \$200,000 was loaned from the bank then paid off in three years."¹⁶ This sense of God being present and willing to speak and act supernaturally has always been a strong hallmark of CityLife's holiness roots. Members respond enthusiastically and with great faith when they believe God has spoken prophetically and the Holy Spirit has given supernatural direction.

In his book *Heart of Fire: The Story of Australian Pentecostalism*, Barry

Chant observes some of the attitudes of the early Pentecostal Holiness Movement:

From those very early days, when people prayed for hours on end and sought earnestly for an impartation of the Holy Spirit, there was a strong emphasis on the need to be baptized in the Spirit. . . . Pentecostal practice is insistent in nature. It is very hard to be a nominal member. You are expected to speak in tongues, to lift your hands in worship, to join in singing in the Spirit and so on. . . . The inner fire

¹⁵ Mark Conner, *Pass the Baton*, 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of the Spirit is the essence of Pentecost [and] the enabling of the Spirit remains a constant factor.¹⁷

As Chant rightly discerns, it is very difficult to be part of a Pentecostal church with strong Holiness roots and not fully engage with the outward forms of worship described above. It is expected that when believers come together there will be an outpouring of the Spirit of God and lives will be supernaturally impacted: healings will occur, words of knowledge and prophecy will be shared, miracles will take place, and people will personally encounter the power and presence of God. There is an unshakable belief that God will touch lives and speak directly. Holiness preacher A.B. Simpson sums up the Pentecostal expectation: “We have a supernatural God, a supernatural Bible, a supernatural life, supernatural resources and a supernatural hope.”¹⁸

However, whilst acknowledging that God can, and does, engage supernaturally with his children, it is equally important to acknowledge that this extreme level of emotional fervor cannot be maintained throughout one’s entire Christian journey. Chant asserts, “There are risks for new converts who may have come to the Lord on a wave of blessing . . . and who expect such miracles as their daily fare.”¹⁹ This same danger exists for those who have walked with God for many years and have developed an appetite for the sensory affections of the Spirit. Often the overemphasis on supernatural experience causes CityLife believers to equate personal feelings in worship as proof of God’s love and approval. Unfortunately, great disillusionment and discouragement occurs when they

¹⁷ Barry Chant, *Heart of Fire: The Story of Australian Pentecostalism* (Unley Park, SA: House of Tabor, 1984), 242-243.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

are inevitably drawn into times of spiritual darkness where the tangible sense of God's presence is no longer felt. St. John of the Cross describes this experience:

Through great effort, they struggle to acquire the sweetness of his presence, exhausting their energy and confounding their heads. When they can no longer find what they hunger for, they become discouraged. . . . Such souls give everything over to the pursuit of spiritual gratification and consolation . . . [but] if indulged, their spiritual gluttony and attachment to that sweetness would lead them into countless troubles. Justly, and with loving care, God denies them this kind of satisfaction . . . [for] those who are inclined toward gratification are generally lazy and reluctant to tread the rough road to Union. . . . A soul in search of sensory sweetness will naturally turn her face away from the bitterness of self-denial.²⁰

Such is the danger for those who have come to rely heavily on the supernatural manifestation of the Spirit to validate their Christian experience. There is a need for devoted followers of Christ to understand that God in his grace will ultimately lead them away from the joys of sensory affections and into a place of seeming barrenness in order to deepen and mature their faith. Their reliance on the blessings of God must ultimately be replaced by a reliance on the One from whom the blessings flow.

An Unwavering Belief in the Infallibility and Inerrancy of the Bible

One of the key tenets of the Holiness Movement was a dogmatic belief in the absolute authority of the Bible, and under Kevin Conner's leadership this value became even more firmly established in the culture of CityLife Church. Kevin's leadership "was characterized by excellent teaching, establishing order and structure, and equipping people in the Word of God."²¹ The term "Word of God" became synonymous with the Bible, and a deep reverence for the Scriptures as the inerrant, infallible compass by which

²⁰ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 54.

²¹ Mark Conner, *Pass the Baton*, 28.

believers should navigate their lives was a particularly strong teaching during this time.

Having authored more than fifty books on biblical theology and Pentecostal doctrine,²² Kevin's preaching was always expository in nature and firmly Scripture-centric. Congregation members were consistently reminded that one's faith was strengthened and Christian maturity was reached as a result of reading the Word of God and obeying what it said. Chant recalls the distinctive emphasis placed on the authority of Scripture within the Pentecostal Holiness Movement in which CityLife found its early beginnings,

Pentecostals universally declared the Bible to be the Word of God and preach it so. . . . From the days of Dowie, Lancaster and Wigglesworth, faith in the Word has been stressed. People have been taught that if a doctrine cannot be found in Scripture it must be rejected. Indeed, the only source book for many Pentecostal preachers is the Bible. . . . If the Bible says it, then that is enough.²³

This emphasis on the prominence of the Bible can still be seen today in the underlying attitudes of CityLife adults toward their faith. There is still a strong conviction that "the Bible is the authority in all matters that pertain to salvation and Christian living."²⁴ It is understood that there is no problem that cannot be solved by reading the Bible and putting into practice what it says. Often, Scripture verses are quoted verbatim as a type of superstitious talisman that will drive away doubt and feelings of uncertainty. When facing difficulties, people are told to read the Bible more, or to "stand on the

²² Kevin Conner, "Books by Kevin Conner," <http://kevinconner.org> (accessed August 21, 2014).

²³ Chant, *Heart of Fire*, 243-244.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

Word,” meaning to find a Bible passage and resolutely trust in the hope of that Scripture regardless of outward circumstances.²⁵

However, during stages of spiritual darkness, when even the light of Scripture is often snuffed out, CityLife congregation members can find themselves ill-equipped to navigate their faith journey without the external affirmation and comfort that the Bible had previously supplied. When Scripture texts are quoted and believed in, yet God does not provide the desired result, many immature Christians do not know where to turn.

Rejection of Other Denominations and Faith Traditions

One of the other distinctive hallmarks of the Pentecostal Holiness Movement is that of the claim to possess absolute truth. As part of a dogmatic belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, the preeminence of the power of the Holy Spirit, and a striving for holiness, there developed a corresponding rejection of all other denominations and faith traditions that did not believe or practice the same things. During the late-1980s Kevin Conner ran a series of Bible lectures that sought to expose the false teaching of the Catholic Church and to highlight the need for those of the Catholic tradition to repent and become true followers of Jesus. He wrote a book entitled *Only for Catholics who Believe, Love and Serve Our Lord Jesus Christ*,²⁶ which sought to lead Catholics to the truth about Jesus and how to have a genuine relationship with him. Over the duration of the teaching

²⁵ CityLife Church, “Session Three: The Foundation of God’s Word,” *LIFETRAX Participant’s Guide, Track 1 - Living The Christian Life* (Melbourne: CityLife Church, 2004), 37-50.

²⁶ Kevin Conner, *Only For Catholics Who Believe, Love And Serve Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Portland, OR: City Bible Publishing, 1988).

series, each of the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church was systematically debunked and the “correct” Bible-based principles were disclosed.

Unqualified certainty that “we are right and have absolute truth” became deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of early CityLife believers. There was a strong sense that fastidious adherence to the literal teachings of the Bible, together with the Holy Spirit’s supernatural stamp of approval, equaled right standing with God. As such, there developed a “bounded-set” mentality where those on the “inside” believed they were privileged and had all the answers, whilst those on the “outside” were considered worldly and in need of salvation.²⁷

These early days, where absolute certainty became the platform from which all other faith traditions were spurned, has bequeathed a legacy of suspicion and mistrust amongst contemporary CityLife believers toward anyone who looks or sounds a little different to their Pentecostal associates. Two-thousand years of Christian tradition and theological study have been cast aside in favor of a dogmatic adherence to a one-hundred-year-old Pentecostal doctrine. Chant states, “Many Pentecostal pastors have had little or no formal ministerial or theological training,” and “very few comprehensive theological works have been written by Pentecostals.”²⁸ And yet, there continue to be raised eyebrows amongst CityLife congregants when scholars from other denominations

²⁷ Frost and Hirsch explain that bounded-set churches are concerned with the maintenance of artificial barriers to keep believers in and unbelievers out. They write, “Bounded-set churches have all sorts of criteria to determine the acceptance or rejection of prospective members (smoking, drinking alcohol, living together outside marriage, differing view on Christ’s return). In a centered-set church it is recognized that we are all sinners, all struggling to be the best people we can be.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 48-49.

²⁸ Chant, *Heart of Fire*, 244.

are quoted in the pulpit or ancient Catholic disciplines are recommended as enriching to the Pentecostal tradition.

The narrow approach of the Pentecostal Holiness Movement has generated a closed mindset whereby CityLife believers have been reluctant to engage with the rich store of literature from other faith traditions. If a Spirit-filled, Pentecostal writer has not authored a book, then it is commonly judged to be an inferior work. This arrogant stance continues to rob men and women from accessing the enormous wealth of Christian literature that describe the stages of faith formation, and provide understanding, acknowledgment, and affirmation for those who have no framework within which to make sense of their dark night experience.

Historical Foundations: Leaning Towards the Prosperity Gospel

In February 1995, after eight years as senior minister of Waverley Christian Fellowship, Kevin Conner “passed the baton of leadership” to his son Mark Conner.²⁹ As a young man of thirty-four-years of age, Mark continued to build on the strong foundations that had been laid, but was also instrumental in ushering in a more contemporary approach to worship and church life. The Holiness Movement’s emphasis on the externals was lessened under Mark’s leadership and a more relaxed environment ensued. Birkett observes, “The performance mentality is less strong than it once was at CityLife, but still reappears in various ways.”³⁰

²⁹ Mark Conner, *Passing the Baton*, 28.

³⁰ Birkett, "The Development of Emotionally Healthy Disciples at CityLife Church," 12.

One of the shifts that occurred during the early years of his leadership was a move toward many of the tenets of the Prosperity Gospel.³¹ With only a handful of Pentecostal mega churches within Australia, there developed a common bond and friendship with other mega church leaders from Australia and around the world with whom Mark could relate.³² In general, these influential church leaders, who had built large successful churches, were strong proponents of the Prosperity Gospel.³³

There was also a notable influx of television programs and international speakers who began to move throughout Australia teaching an over-realized eschatology that was attractive to many who were tired of the strict disciplinarian ethic of the Holiness Movement. As such, over time, CityLife began to receive more and more prosperity teachers into the pulpit and a swing towards a “health and wealth” gospel began to develop. As Bowler writes, “The prosperity gospel guaranteed a special form of Christian power to reach into God’s treasure trove and pull out a miracle . . . [believers] reimagined their ability as good Christians . . . to leapfrog over any obstacles.”³⁴ The attraction of prosperity teaching, where one’s passionate belief enabled avoidance of life’s challenges,

³¹ “The prosperity gospel centers on four themes: faith, wealth, health and victory” Bowler, *Blessed*, 7.

³² In 1978 a group of Charismatic and Pentecostal pastors who had been meeting casually for some time, formalized their association by establishing the Australian Pentecostal Ministers Fellowship. This group later became known as the Australian Christian Churches alliance in 2000. Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Sydney: Brill, 2009), 167-168.

³³ Some of the Prosperity Gospel leaders with whom Mark developed a strong friendship and who were invited to minister at CityLife church were: Brian Houston from Hillsong Church (AUS); John Bevere from Messenger International (USA); Kong Hee from City Harvest Church (Singapore); Rodney Howard Browne from RMI (USA); Phil Pringle from 3C (AUS); Frank Demazio from City Bible Church (USA); Chris Hill from TD Jake’s The Potter’s House (USA); Jim Cobrae from The Rock Church (USA).

³⁴ Bowler, *Blessed*, 7.

was quickly embraced by CityLife members, many of whom were ready for a more user-friendly alternative to the harsh restraint taught by previous generations. A shift occurred whereby the CityLife community began to embrace beliefs such as: it is always God's will to heal, financial blessing is a reward for faithful Christian service, and there should be an unqualified honoring of, and submission to, senior leadership.

God's Will is Always to Heal

Bowler in her book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, writes, "The prosperity gospel promises divine health as a provision of the atonement, connecting Jesus' crucifixion with believer's physical healing. . . . Healing restores both mental and physical wholeness and aligns believers with God's divine intentions."³⁵ This understanding of healing as "God's divine intention" still permeates much of the thinking and teaching at CityLife today. The CityLife website reads, "We believe in the healing of the body by God's power as practiced in the early church (Acts 4:30; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 12:9; Jam 5:14)."³⁶ There are regular healing meetings where people are encouraged to "press into God" and to believe God for their healing. The idea that "God does not want any of his loved children to suffer" is a strong theme that permeates many sermons and worship services.

Brian Houston (senior minister of Hillsong Church and guest speaker at CityLife meetings) writes "If you are struggling with your health, know that it is the will of God to

³⁵ Ibid., 141-142.

³⁶ CityLifeChurch.com, "Statement of Faith," CityLife Church, <http://www.citylifechurch.com/info/statementoffaith.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2013).

see you whole and healthy. Health is one of the promises of God for our lives.”³⁷ The assumption that God’s will is always to heal, and that healing is the right and privilege of every believer as a result of the atonement, is regularly preached and reinforced from the pulpit. And the expectation that the supernatural power of God will manifest in the weekly church services is a deeply-cherished Pentecostal value.³⁸

Accompanying this belief that God always desires to heal, is the conviction that healing is directly related to the level and intensity of one’s faith. Often quoting Matthew 9:29, those seeking healing are told, “It shall be done to you according to your faith,” and are reminded that Jesus’s inability to perform healings in Nazareth was due to their lack of faith (Mk 6:5-6). Believers are encouraged to activate their faith and to refuse to accommodate any sense of doubt. Guy Duffield and Nathan VanCleave advise, “Healing is received by faith; and if faith wavers, healing will waver. . . . Faith will respond to the atmosphere with which it is surrounded. Listening to those who doubt will discourage faith.”³⁹ The concern with this teaching is that God does not always heal and, as such, disillusioned believers are forced to assume that it was their lack of faith that prevented God’s power from working in their lives.

³⁷ Brian Houston, *You Need More Money: Discovering God’s Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life* (Castle Hill, AU: Maximised Leadership, 1999), 31.

³⁸ Recently, during a time of worship in April, 2013, the leader stopped the congregation and stated “God’s presence is here now to bring healing to those women who have been unable to conceive.” The young man then spent several minutes interceding for those who had raised their hands to receive healing for infertility. Many women, together with their husbands, stood for prayer. To date, six months have passed and there have been no reports of any healings as a result of this prayer.

³⁹ Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983), 402.

The stark reality is that there are many more times that people do not receive healing, than when they do. Shane Clifton, a Pentecostal seminary lecturer, who became a quadriplegic at 39 years of age after a freak accident whilst playing with his young sons, has written extensively on the subject of healing theology in the Pentecostal Church. In a recent unpublished paper entitled “The Dark Side of Prayer for Healing: Toward a Theology of Well-Being”⁴⁰ he writes,

My first premise is that supernatural healing is rare, and that this rarity is almost never acknowledged by those of us who are Pentecostals. . . . At this point I am making an appeal for honesty . . . there is overwhelming evidence among people with disabilities, by the very fact of continued disability, that healing prayers are not normally answered, and that is not because God has it in for the disabled but, rather, because supernatural healing itself is rare – is miraculous – and injury, suffering, and disability are a part life.

Clifton’s comments have a ring of truth about them. Whilst desiring to hold on to their faith-filled declarations that God will miraculously heal, many CityLife believers have struggled to come to terms with the paradoxical reality of their unhealed bodies. Questions of “Why doesn’t God love me,” and “What have I done wrong,” invariably surface as people are unwilling to acknowledge that God often uses suffering as a valid pathway to maturing and refining our faith (2 Cor 12:7-10). Just because a prayer for healing is offered with the absolute certainty of a positive result, does not automatically ensure that God will comply. And, rather than being a sign of his seeming indifference, Christians at CityLife must come to understand that God’s grace is at work, seeking to labor with his children through the pain, not simply eliminating it.

⁴⁰ Shane Clifton, "The Dark Side of Prayer for Healing: Toward a Theology of Well-Being," (2013): 9.

Financial Blessing is a Reward for Faithful Christian Service

Proponents of the Prosperity Gospel have a firm conviction that Christians should enjoy financial riches as a result of Christ's sacrifice. Paul's teaching that "[Christ] became poor so that by his becoming poor you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9) was interpreted literally by many at CityLife and applied to material wealth rather than spiritual riches.⁴¹ There developed a culture of advantage, where it was assumed that as Christians, material wealth was a natural right and byproduct of faithful service. Houston writes, "We have to become comfortable with wealth, and break the bondage, guilt and condemnation of impoverished thinking. Poverty is definitely not God's will for His people. In fact, all His promises talk of blessing and prosperity."⁴²

This aspect of the Prosperity Gospel was regularly reinforced from the pulpit. For many years, at every celebration service, CityLife congregants would listen to a five-to-ten-minute "offering talk" immediately before the collection buckets were passed. Most of these exhortations centered around various interpretations of Luke 6:38, in which Jesus states, "Give, and it will be given to you. . . . For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." The common theme was "the more you give, the more you will receive" and an attitude of superiority developed whereby people equated material wealth with God's reward for acting generously. Houston regularly stated that wealth "gives you

⁴¹ *The Holy Bible, New Century Version* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1991).

⁴² Houston, *You Need More Money*, 8.

the ability to have dominion and can release God's purpose in and through you."⁴³ He further claimed, "Prosperity is definitely a result of applying God's Word to your life."⁴⁴

This theology works well in upper-middle-class suburbs where affluent lifestyles can be justified by the reasoning that "I am blessed financially because I am a follower of Jesus." However, when those same believers lose their jobs, when the stock market crashes, when they are struck down with ill health or their investments fail, many are left wondering why God has suddenly stopped blessing them. Gary,⁴⁵ a 48-year-old businessman from CityLife Church writes:

I honestly thought God was punishing me for something. At first I was just mad at Him. . . . I was so angry that He would treat me and my family this way after all the money we had sown into the Kingdom. I couldn't understand why He would stand back with like His arms crossed and not help me. All I needed was one buyer and everything would be perfect. I had trusted my business to God and have always said "This is your business God!" and given away a lot of money to people who needed it. He had blessed us for many years but then He just stopped. . . . Clearly God didn't care about me or my family or he would have saved my business. . . . Now I've hit rock bottom and I'm trying to work out who God really is because He definitely isn't the God I used to know and trust. I thought he had promised us financial blessing, but . . . it's like He has disappeared into thin air now that things have turned sour.⁴⁶

Without an understanding that "God often tempers a faithful follower in the fires of loss and financial poverty" one is left feeling bereft and confused when their affluent lifestyle is bought to a halt.⁴⁷ The idea that God would possibly withdraw materialistic comforts in order to teach dependence on him is a foreign concept for those whose faith

⁴³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁴⁶ Personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

⁴⁷ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 45.

lies in the indulgent God of the Prosperity Gospel. There is a great need for CityLife adults to learn that it is often through the withdrawal of life's comforts that God is able to reach the deeper, more vulnerable parts of one's heart in order to bring true transformation. John Newton, writer of the hymn "Amazing Grace," observes, "Experience testifies that a long course of ease and prosperity without painful changes, has an unhappy tendency to make us cold and formal in our secret worship; but troubles rouse our spirits, and constrain us to call upon the Lord in good earnest, when we feel a need of that help which we only can have from him."⁴⁸

Honoring of, and Submission to, Those in Leadership

Barry Chant writes, "A friend once said to me, 'In our denomination we don't believe in the Pope. We just have a little pope in every church.' Something similar might be said at times of Pentecostal congregations. . . . Occasionally the areas of the authority of ministry and the authority of the man do overlap."⁴⁹ It needs to be said that Mark Conner himself is a particularly humble leader who regularly promotes others and has always been generous in his acknowledgment and recognition of those on his team. He has always been an inclusive leader who has welcomed critique and demonstrated grace and understanding in governance. However, during this period of change, another of the hallmarks of the Prosperity Gospel began to infiltrate the culture of CityLife via invited

⁴⁸ John Newton quoted in Thomas Harley, *Some Birds Sing in Winter: Finding Joy in the Depths of Affliction* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013), 339.

⁴⁹ Chant, *Heart of Fire*, 245.

guest speakers who preached the idea that congregation members should honor and revere their pastor and submit to “his” teaching without question.⁵⁰

During one weekend conference, guest speaker John Bevere was firm in his exhortation that CityLife members needed to show greater respect and honor toward their senior minister and respond obediently to his requests.⁵¹ Much of what he said that weekend is recorded in his book, *Honor’s Reward: How to Attract God’s Favor and Blessing*.⁵² He writes “In twenty-five years of ministry . . . I’ve noticed the believers who are the most fulfilled, peaceful, happy, prosperous, and successful are those who think highly of and give wholehearted love and devotion to those who lead them.”⁵³ He gave examples of people who had developed dishonoring attitudes toward their pastor and had reaped terrible consequences. He claimed that, “They became critical, and many suffered tragic results. Some divorced, some suffered terrible things with their children, some went through financial ruin.”⁵⁴

As a result of this teaching, a culture developed whereby honoring one’s leader became synonymous with blind obedience. Questioning of leadership was perceived as rebellious and, as such, doubt or uncertainty was viewed as disloyalty or a lack of honor.

⁵⁰ The term “he” was consistently used in regard to leadership. John Bevere, Kong Hee, Phil Pringle and Rodney Howard Browne were particularly vocal regarding this teaching when visiting CityLife Church. The author was also present at a meeting at Bayside 3C in 2009 where Browne shared this message of honoring the senior leaders. He then instigated an offering to bless and honor the senior pastors who were seeking to complete the building of their \$2-million private home.

⁵¹ April 21-22, 2006.

⁵² John Bevere, *Honor's Reward: How to Attract God's Favor and Blessing* (New York: Faith Works, Hachette Book Group, 2007).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

This unfortunately created an environment wherein thoughtful discourse was stunted and the honest expression of fear or doubt was frowned upon. Believers who were drawn into stages of uncertainty and spiritual darkness, where questioning and doubt are God's pathways to deeper union, were faced with the disturbing idea that their spiritual darkness was actually punishment from God because they dared to question their pastor's teaching.

Alongside the belief that "dishonoring" the pastor carried dire consequences, came the counter belief that those who maintained "a heart of love and honor toward [their pastor] are all very successful today!"⁵⁵ Bevere further asserts, "I've seen them prosper in ministry, in business, in life. Their marriages have stayed strong; their children have stayed in love with God and have prospered. They are living a rich and full life because they have walked in honor and integrity."⁵⁶ This teaching continues to create a "celebrity status" amongst pastors who are viewed as being spiritual giants who are capable of no wrong and must be honored and admired. Not only does this stunt healthy debate, but it also puts the leaders themselves in a situation where they feel unable to speak honestly of their own personal struggles. David⁵⁷, a 45-year-old network pastor from CityLife Church writes,

People look up to me. I can't just have a spiritual break down and say "I don't know if what I've been teaching all these years is true!!!" I would lose my job if I said anything like that. . . . And it's not that I don't believe it, it's just that I have questions that niggle at me and questions I'd like to talk about with someone. . . . I see the way people look at me and expect me to have all the answers. . . . They

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125-126.

⁵⁷ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

treat me like I'm special and think I have all the answers but I've hit the wall and don't know what to do. . . . We don't talk about this stuff, but we should!⁵⁸

Although the landscape of CityLife Church has changed over the past five years, these earlier Prosperity Gospel teachings still feed into much of the unspoken anxiety that surfaces when believers begin to encounter stages of doubt or spiritual darkness. When Christians are consistently told, "Good is from God. Don't ascribe the harmful and detrimental to God; He is the giver of good. God's desire is to reward you with His benefits here and now" it is hard to reconcile life in a prolonged spiritual desert.⁵⁹ The erroneous historical foundations of the Prosperity Gospel must be addressed and corrected before CityLife can begin to effectively engage with God's maturing process.

CityLife Church Today

CityLife Church looks very different today from its early beginnings. Moving from its first stages in the Holiness Movement, toward a more hyper-faith Prosperity Gospel in its formative years, CityLife has now shifted toward more of a middle ground where strong evangelical doctrine is expressed through a less overt Pentecostal demeanor.⁶⁰ With almost ten-thousand believers now calling CityLife their home church, the small beginnings in a shop front in suburban Glen Waverley have grown remarkably into the second largest church in Australia.

⁵⁸ Personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁰ It would be very rare to hear speaking in tongues at a CityLife meeting and preachers purporting a Prosperity Gospel are rarely invited to speak. The "offering talks" have been abolished and there is a far more balanced approach to giving.

As an independent church, CityLife is not subject to denominational restraints of a specific ruling body, but nonetheless holds to traditional Pentecostal doctrines. The “fivefold” tenets of Pentecostalism, “justification, sanctification, Spirit baptism, divine healing, and premillennial return of Jesus,” still form the fundamental doctrines of the church, however, they are presented in a less formal, but also less hyped-up style of worship.⁶¹ In a national newspaper article, Barney Zwartz of *The Age* wrote, “Churches, like CityLife are enormous, highly professional, outer-suburban congregations . . . they have kept the traditional 2000-year-old message of salvation in Christ, but modernized their worship and made it attractive to young Australians.”⁶²

In addition to weekly Celebration Meetings⁶³ more than 62 percent of CityLife attendees are also committed members of Life Groups.⁶⁴ These small groups, which meet weekly or fortnightly, are designed to provide a safe place to share one’s life and faith journey. Within a large church environment where personal interaction is often difficult, Life Groups give individuals a unique opportunity to speak openly about their struggles and gain support from other Christ followers who provide care, compassion and encouragement to those who are overwhelmed. Rather than being considered an optional “add-on” to Celebration meetings, Life Groups are deemed to be a core priority for CityLife members and this priority is stressed at every celebration meeting, leadership meeting and through regular emails to CityLife partners. Pastoral leaders have often

⁶¹ Steven Jack Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Nashville: CTP Press, 2010), 38.

⁶² Barney Zwartz, "The Hallelujah Chorus," *The Age* (December, 24, 2004).

⁶³ “Celebration Meetings” is the name given to CityLife’s weekly church worship services.

⁶⁴ There are currently more than five-hundred active Life Groups operating at CityLife Church.

described CityLife as a “Two-winged church” based on the concept that the body of the bird, (the congregation) is carried and balanced by the two wings of Celebration services, (corporate gatherings) and Life Group meetings (small group interaction).⁶⁵ Both wings are needed by the bird to fly effectively.

CityLife Church today is still deeply influenced by the issues listed above. The church consists largely of affluent, middle-class families who have often been sheltered from the outside world due to their proximity within the Bible Belt of Melbourne and their privileged societal opportunities. There are more than one-hundred nationalities represented at the church with a particularly high number of Asian families. And although the church would no longer outwardly promote the “health and wealth” teachings of the Prosperity Gospel, many of these beliefs still impact the hearts and minds of CityLife congregants today.⁶⁶

Mission Statement

The mission statement of CityLife Church is: “To raise up fervent followers of Jesus Christ who will reach out and impact communities, cities and nations for the kingdom of God.”⁶⁷ At its core, this mission statement addresses the need for CityLife

⁶⁵ This concept was first introduced to CityLife during Mark Conner’s early years as the senior leader. See William Beckham, “Chapter Two: The Two-Winged Church,” *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church* (Waco, TX: Touch Publications, 1995), 25-32.

⁶⁶ The worship songs at CityLife often reflect the values mentioned above. In a paper presented to the Pentecostal Bible College conference in 2000, Barry Chant criticised the music of the movement, which he claimed had a biblically and theologically shallow message, and focused on personal aspirations and blessing rather than the Gospel. Barry Chant, “Retuning the Church,” (Paper presented at the Pentecostal Charismatic Bible College’s Conference, Canberra, 2000).

⁶⁷ CityLife Church, "Our Mission And Core Values" <http://www.citylifechurch.com/info/missioncorevalues.aspx> (June, 2013).

Christians to be “fervent” in order for their fervency to have a miraculous impact on others and ultimately lead them to Christ. As Pentecostal believers, fervency and passion are considered the hallmarks of a committed follower of Jesus. Chant comments, “A strength of Pentecostalism is its fervor. . . . It reflects a movement in which the Spirit of God is seen as a live, vibrant Person who is very much at work among them. . . . All of this injects a note of excitement and anticipation into meetings. . . . A faith that leaves people unmoved is sterile.”⁶⁸

However, in an attempt to capture this passion and fervor in their mission statement, the CityLife leadership has inadvertently created a false belief that one’s Christian journey should always be upbeat, positive and fervent, leaving no room for the acknowledgement that God uses stages of doubt and spiritual darkness to grow and mature his children. This statement unintentionally marginalizes those who, although mature followers of Jesus, may be experiencing times of spiritual desolation where a sense of fervor cannot be roused. Unfortunately, the simple wording of the community’s mission statement sends a message that fervency and passion is good, and uncertainty and questioning is bad. When this mission statement is referred to during celebration meetings, leadership meetings and staff gatherings, it is particularly difficult for those believers who feel that their lack of fervency sets them at odds with the priorities of their church. Following a heads of department⁶⁹ meeting when the mission statement was being discussed, one of the leaders wrote the somewhat humorous email reply:

⁶⁸ Chant, *Heart of Fire*, 248-249.

⁶⁹ CityLife’s leadership structure consists of the senior leadership team (six members), with the next level of leadership being the heads of department (eighteen members).

Why do we have to be “fervent”? Why can’t we be “mature” or “devoted” or “committed” or something that doesn’t require us to be crazy, loud and obnoxious? Moslem extremists are “fervent”! Football maniacs are “fervent”! What happens if I don’t feel “fervent”? What happens if I’m going through a tough time? What happens if my dog just died or God decides to lead me into the desert for a while? How do I fit with that statement then? Surely we are striving for maturity rather than fervency? “Fervency” is a term I relate to early Christian enthusiasm, not mature Christian faith.⁷⁰

There is wisdom in this rather amusing reply. The CityLife mission statement is not theologically wrong, nor is its goal misguided, it is simply not inclusive of all stages of faith. Setting the mission statement of the church to “raising up fervent followers” does not acknowledge that there will be times when Christians will be anything but fervent. Nonetheless, during these dark times, the other half of the statement remains true. Regardless of the personal struggles and uncertainties of one’s faith, the goal of “reaching out and impacting communities, cities and nations for the Kingdom of God” still remains a high value and one with which every Christ follower seeks engagement.

Twelve Core Values

The twelve core values that undergird the mission statement outlined above and define the heart and priorities of the church can be found in Appendix A. The order and priority of these values reveal a continuing commitment to the Pentecostal ideals of the Bible as the ultimate authority in life, together with an expectation that the Holy Spirit will be manifested through the supernatural gifts of the Spirit and enable believers to directly engage with the person of Jesus Christ. These top three values highlight the historical roots of biblical inerrancy and Holy Spirit impartation that still strongly influence CityLife believers today. They also reveal a continued reliance upon absolute

⁷⁰ Personal email from CityLife leader: *permission granted.*

certainty and the affirmation of sensory affections, which makes it difficult to acknowledge and engage with the maturing stages of faith where God removes certainty and leaves the believer without any sense of his presence.

The fourth value of “discipleship” is described as helping people to mature in Christ. However, in reality, this value of discipleship is interpreted more as the believer’s ability to learn and engage with the teachings and doctrines of Christianity, rather than as a journeying through the stages of faith that will be experienced as they mature in Christ. The value of discipleship is outworked through the discipleship-training program called LifeTrax.⁷¹ The four foundational LifeTrax courses cover the basics of Christian doctrine, including Christian Life, Church Life, Personal Life, and Leader’s Life.⁷² The emphasis in these courses is on what each individual believer can “do” to stay “on track” in their Christian walk. None of the tracks currently address the ways in which God uses stages of spiritual darkness and doubt to mature one’s faith.

The challenge facing the committed follower of Christ at CityLife Church is not that the mission statement or core values are necessarily heretical or misplaced, but simply that they do not leave room for doubt and uncertainty. There is little space for expressing the mystery or paradox that will inevitably be encountered by believers as they are led into stages of maturity. The goals and values of the church are absorbed without question and become the strong foundations on which the CityLife believer builds their faith—until God begins to dismantle their immature framework. Thomas

⁷¹ LifeTrax is the discipleship-training program at CityLife. There are four training tracks that must be completed before a congregation member can apply for leadership. See CityLife Church, “LifeTrax” <http://www.citylifechurch.com/lifetrax/> (accessed August 21, 2014).

⁷² Ibid.

Keating writes, “These unquestioned assumptions become our world view, or the myth in which we live. In the night of sense, these presuppositions are challenged. . . . [God] shakes the ground on which we had felt secure and opens us to new ways of seeing reality.”⁷³

⁷³ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1992), 86.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project has been greatly influenced by the work of several scholars in three main areas of study; this chapter will examine six of these works. The first two authors have provided a basis for the conviction that specific stages of faith formation exist within the Christian journey and that stages of doubt and spiritual darkness are a valid and normative part of the maturing process. The next two texts offer insight into the great diversity that exists within Pentecostal ecclesiology and highlight some of the more consistent ecclesiological themes that prevent Pentecostal believers from recognizing or being equipped to face these challenging stages. The final two writers give insight into the actual emotional and spiritual experiences encountered by believers who have attempted to navigate these stages of doubt, uncertainty, darkness and silence. They have also provided practical steps to ensure that believers emerge from these stages with maturity and wisdom.

Stages of Faith Formation

The Critical Journey by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich¹

The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith is exactly as the title suggests, a text outlining the various formative stages that believers undergo in their faith journey towards maturity in Christ. Hagberg and Guelich outline six “very fluid”² and “cumulative”³ stages that the follower of Christ will likely encounter in their faith passage; each one describes a different set of characteristics that enable believers to discern where they are on the “critical journey.” The writers maintain, “Each of us will identify with some characteristic in all the stages at various times in our lives. . . . We submit, however, that each of us has a specific home stage (some report two home stages of equal intensity) where we operate most of the time and which best characterizes our life of faith.”⁴

In the first three stages of Hagberg and Guelich’s model, the believer’s faith journey is characterized by an adherence to a set of prescribed “external standards, whether by the Church, a specific spiritual leader, a book, or a set of principles.”⁵ Christians journeying through these stages will be largely influenced by what the authority figures in their life highlight as important. There is a strong emphasis on

¹ Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 2005).

² Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid. 11.

personal discipleship, evangelism and service within the church community. These stages can be clearly identified through the activities, programs, vision and values of the church.

“Stage 1: The Recognition of God,” basically covers the initial realization in a person’s life that God is real.⁶ It encompasses the conversion experience where one’s heart is committed to God for the first time. It is when “we recognize God to be God in our lives and we accept that someone bigger than us truly loves us.”⁷ “Stage 2: The Life of Discipleship” is about learning to be a Christian.⁸ New believers excitedly discover about Jesus and what it means to be a disciple. It is a time of “honeymoon” when everything about their newfound faith is fulfilling and rewarding. “Stage 3: The Productive Life” equips new believers to identify and use their spiritual gifts in the service of the Church.⁹ It is the stage where followers of Christ become established in a church community and commit to practice what they have learned in the first two stages.

These first three stages are predominantly about establishing new believers into the life of the Church community. They are about finding God, learning about God and serving God within the four walls of the local church. The focus of these stages is “more on the outside, the community of faith, nature, leadership, the display and use of the Spirit’s gifts, belonging and productivity.”¹⁰ However, whilst church structures and programs are geared toward these three stages as the final and most significant

⁶ Ibid., 31-50.

⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸ Ibid., 51-69.

⁹ Ibid., 71-89.

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

destination on the Christian journey, Hagberg and Guelich would suggest that those who reach stage three are merely at the early stages on the road to maturity in Christ.

Unfortunately, church activities, resources and teaching are largely framed by these three early stages of evangelism, discipleship and service, and it can be difficult for believers to envisage, let alone prepare for, future stages of spiritual darkness or impending feelings of doubt. This is where Hagberg and Guelich's text finds its most helpful application.

Describing and characterizing the later stages of the critical journey from stage four to stage six offers believers a framework for understanding why they are struggling with their faith after so many years of faithful Christian service. The authors articulate the “abrupt change”¹¹ that occurs from the first half of the Christian journey when those who have faithfully served Christ now find themselves in “a mode of questioning, exploring, falling apart, doubting, dancing around real issues, sinking into uncertainty, and indulging in self-centredness.”¹² They further observe that this stage of the Christian journey is often reached without any prior knowledge or understanding of what to expect, and without guidance or mentoring from those who have led during the first three stages of the journey. They write, “The sad truth is that many of these leaders have not been led through [stages four to six] themselves and have not allowed themselves to question deeply or to become whole. So many of those to whom we often look most naturally for help are inadequate guides for this part of the journey.”¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 94.

Stages four to six are summarized as follows: “Stage 4: The Journey Inward,”¹⁴ which describes the “deep and very personal inward journey”¹⁵ of an established believer who, from a place of certainty, is suddenly thrust into a stage of uncertainty and darkness. It is the stage described by the ancient mystics as “the dark night of the soul.”¹⁶ God is in hiding and he is calling his children to a deeper level of relationship that is not dependent on feelings of closeness or visible signs of his presence. They write:

Neither our faith nor God provides what we need to soothe us, heal us, or solve our problems. Our formula of faith, whatever that may have been, does not work any more, or so it appears. We are stumped, hurting, angry, betrayed, abandoned, unheard, or unloved. Many simply want to give up. Their life of faith may even seem to have been a fraud at worst, a mirage at best.¹⁷

Having had one’s faith stripped back to the bare bones, and being forced to face the truth that one’s reliance has been somewhat shallow and self-serving, the humbled heart then encounters “The Wall.”¹⁸ As the name suggests, the wall looms as a blockade on the path of one’s spiritual progress from stage four to stage five. Having begun the journey of the dark night of the soul, the last obstacle on the path toward a deeper union with God is the obliteration of the selfish ego. At the wall, the selfish will of the believer struggles to accept the difficult dealings of God as gracious and kind, and to release the anger and resentment directed at God for not acting as wanted and expected. Of this Hagberg and Guelich write, “The melting and molding with fire and wax are excellent

¹⁴ Ibid., 91-111.

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁸ Ibid., 113-130.

analogies of the Wall experience. Before the filling and using comes the time of melting and molding. Previously, we may have allowed God to melt an arm or leg, head or foot, but now we offer more of our body, mind, and soul for melting and molding.”¹⁹

“Stage 5: The Journey Outward” takes the surrendered heart into a space of openness and new freedom.²⁰ In this new place, “Our focus is now outward, but from a new, grounded center of ourselves. . . . We have been changed. . . . We are aware of our faults and have a fresh desire to be in God’s will rather than our own. We sense a looser grip on ourselves and a willingness to be conduits for God’s work in our lives and others’ lives.”²¹ Believers in this stage have a clear appreciation of the fact that God can use them most effectively as a result of their brokenness.²² Having pushed through the wall, those entering stage five are now at a place where any self-reliance or belief in one’s own ability to fathom the mysteries of God, is no longer a reality. Stripped bare before God, they now enter into meaningful relationships and ministry activities that may go unnoticed by others.²³ The drive for prominence and recognition is replaced by a desire to establish authentic interactions that reflect the love of God. Selfish ambition and the need for man’s approval have been destroyed. In stage five, “We are content to know that God is working through us and that we are in God’s hands.”²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

²⁰ Ibid., 131-149.

²¹ Ibid., 133.

²² Ibid., 135.

²³ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁴ Ibid., 147.

In Hagberg and Guelich's faith development model "Stage 6: The Life of Love," is the final stage.²⁵ It is where a believer "become[s] mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). There is total acceptance of one's true self and an unshakable security in the love and approval of God. Compassion flows freely from a heart that is no longer concerned with self-interest and personal prominence. A tangible encounter with Trinitarian love is experienced where the believer, "Being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that [they] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17-18).

Hagberg and Guelich's text offers a useful framework to educate and equip CityLife believers to acknowledge, identify and navigate the difficult faith formation stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. In a faith tradition that focuses primarily on stages one to three of the Christian journey, the teaching outlined by *The Critical Journey* offers believers a context beyond these early stages of faith. It affirms those who face times of doubt and reassures those who are in stages of uncertainty and spiritual darkness that they are experiencing a valid part of the journey toward Christian maturity. This text offers hope to those who might otherwise have considered themselves abandoned by God.

²⁵ Ibid., 151-160.

*Stages of Faith: James W. Fowler*²⁶

James Fowler's text provides a discussion of the stages of faith formation from the perspective of developmental psychology. Initially inspired by the work of writers such as Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, Fowler's research offers invaluable insight into the major development stages encountered over one's life journey.²⁷ Following interviews with almost six-hundred people from various religious and non-religious backgrounds, Fowler documented their experiences regarding what constituted faith and meaning in their lives. From this research, he established a six-stage pattern of faith development.

Stage one is called "Intuitive-Projective Faith."²⁸ Fowler describes this stage as being most typical of a child aged from around two-to-seven years. This is a stage where the child is largely driven by imagination rather than logical thought. They absorb the stories, experiences and moods gifted to them by the primary adults in their lives without logical examination or judgment. Although they are beginning to become "self-aware," they are predominantly influenced by the images and fantasies passed onto them by the significant others who care for them.

²⁶ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-134.

In stage two, which is called “Mythic-Literal Faith,”²⁹ Fowler describes the older child’s³⁰ journey toward operational, cognitive thinking. The stories and beliefs they have heard are now integrated into their own lives and become the framework of their experience. Fowler writes, “The Mythic-Literal girl or boy works hard and effectively at sorting out the real from the make-believe.”³¹ What they eventually believe to be true is usually one-dimensional and strongly rooted in a sense of “reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity.”³² In other words, there is an underlying sense of what is right and fair, and a belief that if they do the right thing, life will be fair to them and they will get the results they desire.

Stage three is called “Synthetic-Conventional Faith.”³³ In this stage, adolescents begin to move outside the experiences of the immediate family and develop the ability to assess their own thoughts and experiences. They begin to build their own “personal myth” in which they are the central character and construct an image of themselves and what they believe their life will become.³⁴ Although there is a genuine feeling that they have made their own choices, “A truer reading is that their values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them.”³⁵ Fowler uses the analogy of a fish that believes it knows everything about the water in which it swims,

²⁹ Ibid., 135-150.

³⁰ Approximately seven-to-twelve years of age.

³¹ Ibid., 135.

³² Ibid., 149.

³³ Ibid., 151-173.

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ Ibid., 154.

but has never jumped out of the aquarium to reflect on the water or the tank in which it is held. He writes, “A person in Stage 3 is aware of having values and normative images. He or she articulates them, defends them and feels deep emotional investments in them, but typically has not made the value system as a system, the object of reflection.”³⁶

Fowler’s description of this stage offers valuable insight into answering the question as to why CityLife believers find it difficult to recognize or acknowledge the existence of periods of spiritual darkness and doubt. He observes that, “For many adults [this stage] becomes a permanent place of equilibrium”³⁷ where beliefs and values are “deeply felt,” but “tacitly held,” without explicit reflection or intentional examination.³⁸ Rather than moving beyond the adolescent stage of Synthetic-Conventional Faith, adults choose to find comfort and security by staying in a stage where they are not faced with the deconstruction of their beliefs, or the challenge of their values.

Fowler states that many churches “can be accurately described as dominantly Synthetic-Conventional,” and that religious institutions “work best” if they are made up predominantly of people in this stage of faith.³⁹ He continues, “The Stage 3 individual’s faith system is conventional, in that it is seen as being everybody’s faith system or the faith system of the entire community. And it is synthetic in that it is nonanalytical; it comes as a sort of unified, global wholeness.”⁴⁰ As such, there exists a strong sense of

³⁶ Ibid., 162.

³⁷ Ibid., 172.

³⁸ Ibid., 173.

³⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

community, belonging and solidarity within this stage and it can be viewed as an act of betrayal or rejection if an individual dares to question the expectations and duties prescribed by the group. In fact, Fowler states that “many religious groups reinforce a conventionally held and maintained faith system, sanctifying one’s remaining in the dependence on external authority and derivative group identity of Stage 3.”⁴¹ This insight would account for the difficulty of many CityLife adults who, having found a “permanent place of equilibrium”⁴² at stage three, would be suspicious of a teaching that appeared to undermine the commonly-held belief that God wants them to be constantly happy, healthy and financially blessed. It also provides an indication as to why stages of questioning and doubt can be misjudged by believers at CityLife as indicators of unbelief and rebellion against the authority of the faith community.

Stage four is described by Fowler as “Individuative-Reflective Faith,”⁴³ and is said to occur in late adolescence or early adulthood. Providing that an individual is open and prepared to break away from the security of stage three, this stage will begin the challenging process of questioning, critiquing and reflecting on the previously held structures of faith. It is a time when the “fish leaps outside the fish tank and finds a place to stand in order to look at his own value ethos seriously.”⁴⁴ This is the stage to which this ministry proposal is addressed. It is a time of uncertainty, spiritual obscurity and insecurity. It is a liminal space where the accepted rules and beliefs are deconstructed

⁴¹ Ibid., 178.

⁴² Ibid., 172.

⁴³ Ibid., 174-183.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 177.

whilst a new belief structure is still being formed. Fowler describes the feelings of “loss, dislocation, grief and even guilt”⁴⁵ that are felt when “those who have previously enjoyed an unquestioning relation to the transcendent and to their fellow worshippers”⁴⁶ now find themselves questioning the very fabric of their faith. He further describes the “interruption of reliance on external sources of authority,”⁴⁷ which within the context of CityLife could be viewed as questioning and dishonoring of God-appointed leadership.⁴⁸

Fowlers fifth and sixth stages are called “Conjunctive Faith”⁴⁹ and “Universalizing Faith.”⁵⁰ These two faith stages represent the believer emerging from a time of critiquing, questioning and uncertainty to embrace mystery and paradox. Stage five “strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are ‘other.’”⁵¹ Whilst the individual deconstructed the images and symbols that had restricted them in stage four, in stage five they step out into a fresh reconstruction, bringing their non-negotiable beliefs forward into a more inclusive and open understanding of truth.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁸ Bevere, a regular guest speaker at CityLife church teaches the unquestioning submission and authority toward church leaders. In his book *“Honor’s Reward: How to Attract God’s Favor and Blessing,”* he proclaims the idea that questioning authority is an act of disobedience toward God. He writes, “To honor authority is to submit to authority,” and “when someone in authority mistreats us, if we honor them we will be rewarded.” Bevere, 41, 60. Unfortunately, the extreme nature of this teaching has been instrumental in creating a culture of reliance on authority and unwillingness to question or critique those who lead.

⁴⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 184-198.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 199-211.

⁵¹ Ibid., 198.

Stage six then builds on that field of open acceptance. Fowler maintains, “Stage 6 is exceedingly rare.”⁵² Having undergone extensive refinement, those in this stage “have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community. . . . The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us.”⁵³ This stage is referred to by Fowler as an embodiment of the Kingdom of God where individuals sacrifice their lives for the sake of universal love and justice.

Fowler’s text provides clear indication that stages of faith exist and offers useful descriptors of these stages from which to validate the important place of uncertainty and spiritual doubt in the faith development process. His observations regarding stages one to three offer a plausible explanation as to why some CityLife believers, having not progressed past the early stages of Synthetic-Conventional faith, might be unable or unwilling to acknowledge doubts or questions that might arise. Fowler’s discussion of stage four of the faith development journey has a clear correlation with the critiquing and deconstruction that occurs when followers of Christ enter the dark night of the soul. Although not written from a Christian perspective, each of Fowler’s six stages of faith development proves a helpful framework for navigating the Christian journey.

⁵² Ibid., 200.

⁵³ Ibid., 200-201.

Pentecostal Ecclesiology: The Struggle to Acknowledge the Validity of Faith Formation Stages of Doubt and Spiritual Darkness

Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter by Keith Warrington

Warrington's text on Pentecostal theology offers a comprehensive description of the vast theological landscape that exists within the Pentecostal tradition. He provides a helpful observation that "Pentecostal perspectives are not as distinct as they once were,"⁵⁴ and whilst doctrinal markers such as the incarnation, sanctification and justification remain solid in Pentecostal churches, there exists a wide range of "various nuances of belief"⁵⁵ that make it difficult to identify the core of Pentecostal theology. However, after considering the various views held by Pentecostal groups in different countries, cultures and communities, Warrington proposes that:

A more productive route in seeking to identify Pentecostal theology may be to recognize the central Pentecostal expectation of a radical experience of the Spirit, and in particular, as it relates to their identity as children of God, their perception of God, their worship and service, their mission and evangelism, their reading and application of the Bible and their relationships with other believers.⁵⁶

In other words, an active, open, "radical experience" of the Holy Spirit is the central theological marker common to all Pentecostal churches. He further asserts, "Pentecostal theology may be best identified as a theology of encounter – encounter of God, the Bible and the community."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

Warrington's observation is especially significant in light of the thesis being discussed in this ministry proposal. If, like other Pentecostal churches, CityLife believers embrace "a radical experience of the Spirit" as their focal theological tenet, then the suggestion that God would orchestrate stages of perceived absence, or lead a believer into periods of spiritual obscurity, would be outside their current concept of God. For a group of people who believe that "to know God is to experience him,"⁵⁸ there would be little comprehension that God would use stages of *Deus Absconditus*, to mature a believer and strengthen their faith.

Warrington makes several other insightful contributions that speak directly to the premise that CityLife believers traditionally struggle to acknowledge the validity of stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. He outlines a Pentecostal leadership structure that is theoretically founded on the priesthood of all believers, but in practice operates in a more hierarchical structure "with lines drawn between the leaders and the led."⁵⁹ He describes the growing clergy-laity divide that assumes that those in leadership "function with greater authority" than those sitting in the pews.⁶⁰ This culture discourages personal reflection or questioning by those who do not hold leadership or teaching positions, and it fails to "provide an opportunity for discourse or analysis."⁶¹ With a strong emphasis on experience and engagement with the Spirit being preached by respected pastors in the pulpit, and publically modeled by key leadership, it is understandable that some

⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁰ Ibid.,

⁶¹ Ibid., 152.

congregants may feel marginalized and confused when they find themselves grappling with doubts, questions and the perceived absence of God's presence. When respected leaders speak only of "strength, victory and charismatically enabled progress," it is easy for believers in the pew to conclude that something is wrong with their less-than-victorious faith journey.⁶²

Another helpful observation made by Warrington is that "the concept of suffering has largely been neglected by Pentecostals."⁶³ He describes a Pentecostal theology that recognizes God's approval to be demonstrated through freedom from pain, suffering and hardship: "Many believe that God has enabled believers to be supernaturally rescued from suffering (especially sickness) through prayer."⁶⁴ This belief leads to an over-realized eschatology where an expectation of blessing, abundance and freedom from pain prevents engagement with the faith formation stages of spiritual darkness or suffering. Warrington writes, "Rather than concentrate of the suffering of the cross, Pentecostals have preferred to move quickly to the glory associated with it. . . . Consequently, themes including victory through suffering, strength through weakness, light through darkness and salvation through death have been largely overlooked."⁶⁵ For CityLife believers who are led by the Spirit into wilderness experiences, there is little teaching or theological framework available to navigate these difficult faith stages. Instead of being taught that stages of doubt, uncertainty and suffering will be used by God to bring about Christ-like

⁶² Ibid., 129.

⁶³ Ibid., 303.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

maturity, there is an attitude of triumphalism and a “suspicion that it may be inappropriate or even illegitimate for believers who exist in relationship with a supernatural, omnipotent God” to undergo suffering.⁶⁶

Warrington’s extensive examination of Pentecostal theology provides a solid tool for understanding the culture and framework of CityLife Church. Through the explanation of various theological themes within the Pentecostal tradition, a clear picture can be drawn of the way in which these themes have prevented CityLife believers from acknowledging the validity of faith formation stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. A concentration on supernatural experience, together with a leadership model that discourages open dialogue, and an overarching failure to acknowledge that “a core role of the Spirit relates to the issue of suffering,” ultimately creates an environment from which believers can struggle to navigate stages of spiritual darkness or doubt.

Pentecostal Churches in Transition by Shane Clifton⁶⁷

Clifton’s academic text is based on his PhD dissertation, which offers valuable insight into the Pentecostal Church from a specific, Australian context. Currently serving as dean of the school of theology at a Pentecostal seminary⁶⁸ in Sydney, Clifton has studied and written extensively on Pentecostal theology and ecclesiology within the Australian context.⁶⁹ Although this book addresses the transitional ecclesiological shifts

⁶⁶ Ibid., 304.

⁶⁷ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*.

⁶⁸ Alphacrucis College is the nationally recognized ministerial training college for the Assemblies of God in Australia.

⁶⁹ “Australian Theology,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, edited by William A. Dyrness and

that have occurred specifically within the Assemblies of God denomination, this research is particularly applicable to CityLife Church, which has strong relational and associational ties to the Australian Assemblies of God,⁷⁰ and has traditionally adopted the same teaching and theological beliefs as its AOG Pentecostal contemporaries.⁷¹

Of particular relevance to the topic of this ministry project, is Clifton's observation that:

Pentecostal culture has a reputation (deserved or otherwise) for its reluctance to engage in the task of critical reflection, and this reluctance is particularly acute in Australia. One aspect of the present mood within Australian Pentecostal assemblies is the critique of criticism itself, associated with an insistence on positive thinking. This culture, derived from the fundamentalist response to the liberal takeover of institutions of higher learning, and expressed in "word of faith" and "prosperity" doctrines, presumes that negativity and criticism are antithetical to a flourishing life. There is no doubt that negative thinking can be self-perpetuating, as can a positive attitude, but the greater danger occurs when a particular culture confuses "negativity" with "criticism," and rejects critical thinking altogether.⁷²

In light of this observation by Clifton, it is not surprising that Citylife members, like their AOG counterparts, are reluctant to question or critique the church culture of

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*; "Free-Market Religion: a Pentecostal Approach to Economics," in *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, edited by Paul Oslington (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2013); "Ecumenism from the bottom up," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47:4 (Fall 2012): 544–56, are just a few of his seminal works.

⁷⁰ Mark Conner served as the first Victorian president of Australian Christian Churches (ACC), which originally operated as an umbrella organization that sought to bring together a group of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches to present a unified public face to the media. This association had sprung from relationships formed over the years between leaders of various Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Australia. However, over time, "the ACC was abandoned as an ecumenical body, and in 2007, Brian Houston announced that the Assemblies of God in Australia had taken on the designation [Australian Christian Churches] as its trading name." Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*. Despite the disbandment of the original ACC alliance, Mark Conner and CityLife Church have maintained close ties with Houston and the Australian Assemblies of God.

⁷¹ Anecdotally, I have found that most people automatically assume that CityLife is an Assemblies of God Church and are surprised to discover that the church is an Independent Pentecostal fellowship.

⁷² Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 5.

which they are a part. There exists an emphasis from the pulpit and influential leaders that believers must stay upbeat and optimistic at all times and that to be anything other than positive, is to demonstrate an attitude of negativity and unbelief. However, when faced with prolonged stages of spiritual wilderness, where God seems to be absent and doubts about one's faith start to arise, there is a need for understanding and validation, rather than judgment or disapproval.

Clifton also highlights the "widespread appropriation of the prosperity message," which "is charged with laying the blame for poverty at the faithlessness of the poor."⁷³

He further observes that:

[The Pentecostal church in Australia] has too closely aligned the kingdom with financial prosperity, and with immediate individual blessing. It has forgotten that the kingdom is as much future as it is present, and that the challenge of that future requires the church in the present to "take up its cross and follow Jesus." If the ministry of the church is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus in proclaiming the kingdom of God, then the church must also be prepared to take the path of the suffering servant. This is unlikely to resonate with a message that links the influence of the kingdom to affluence.⁷⁴

This statement sheds light on the reluctance of CityLife believers to embrace a theology where suffering or hardship could be viewed as an indication of God's maturing work in their lives. An over-realized eschatology, where God's immediate presence is expected to bless those he loves with prosperity and affluence in the here and now, conversely places stages of doubt, darkness and God's hiddenness outside the realm of God's will and situates it firmly within the realm of demonic attack or personal disobedience. There exists an underlying belief amongst many Pentecostals, that "God's

⁷³ Ibid., 198.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 201-202.

intention is to prosper the righteous” and that this prosperity is an automatic consequence of faithfully following Jesus.⁷⁵ However, the flaws in this philosophy begin to appear when faithful, devoted followers of Jesus enter wilderness stages where their lives appear less than prosperous.

Finally, Clifton’s research offers valuable insight into the reluctance of Pentecostals to embrace a teaching that has ties to the Roman Catholic Church. He writes, “Throughout their history, Pentecostals had shared the protestant and free church assumption that the Catholic Church was corrupt, superstitious and virtually beyond redemption. Some even predicted that the antichrist would arise to take control of the Papal office.”⁷⁶ Unfortunately, this suspicion toward the Catholic Church and its writings still carries weight within CityLife Church today. As outlined earlier, during the early-1980s congregants sat under the teaching of Kevin Conner where he alleged that the Catholic Church was a pagan institution with corrupt leadership.⁷⁷ Although Conner’s view has now changed, there remains a remnant of mistrust inherent in CityLife adults who suspect that Catholic teachers are somehow less reliable or less biblically literate than their Pentecostal counterparts.⁷⁸ Sadly with the majority of spiritual formation

⁷⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 143-144.

⁷⁷ I personally attended several meetings in the early-1980s where Kevin Conner spoke of the spiritual dangers of associating with the Roman Catholic Church. Since that time, however, I have had personal conversations with him where he has acknowledged a change of viewpoint and a new positive affirmation of his Catholic brothers and sisters.

⁷⁸ During a MinistryTrax teaching session in March 2007, I was lecturing on the creeds of Christianity when one of the student-interns asked, “Why do we believe in a creed that talks about the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,’ when we don’t even believe that Catholics know Jesus?” Whilst totally misunderstanding the meaning of the word “catholic” within this context, the student revealed a prejudice that was surprisingly held by others in the room. The author is unaware of these young interns

teaching having been developed over centuries of Catholic scholarship, there is reluctance for CityLife adults to accept the validity of faith formation stages which they wrongly assume are not based on biblical foundations.

Navigating the Faith Formation Stages of Doubt and Spiritual Darkness

Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross⁷⁹

A Spanish, Carmelite priest and doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, St. John of the Cross, wrote this ancient poem and its corresponding commentary in the sixteenth century. Together with friend and mentor, Saint Teresa of Avilla, John was dedicated to bringing about reform in the Carmelite order. In 1577, John was charged with disobeying Church ordinances and taken prisoner for nine months before escaping his captives in 1578. During his nine months in captivity he underwent terrible torture and severe isolation. His poem “Songs of the Soul: One Dark Night” describes in part his sense of uncertainty and loss when he felt abandoned by God, but also includes the sense of joy and love that the soul experiences when it comes through the dark night and is united with its creator. The spiritual treatise called *Dark Night of the Soul*, was written as an explanation and commentary of the poem.⁸⁰

This ancient text is an invaluable resource to equip CityLife adults to navigate the faith formation stages of spiritual darkness and doubt. John captures accurately the sense

being exposed to past teaching on the Catholic Church and yet they held an unfounded judgment against Catholic congregants and erroneously assumed this was consistent with the views of CityLife leadership.

⁷⁹ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-9.

of loss, uncertainty and grief that believers encounter when they are led into a time of purging on the path to maturity. His text validates the experience of *Deus Absconditus* and places it firmly within the realm of the faithful Christian journey:

Early in her spiritual life, the soul could not help but wallow like a happy baby in the juicy feelings evoked by spiritual practices. In the night of sense, these juices dry up and the soul is left baffled and bereft. This is a good thing. It means that God sees that we have grown strong enough to endure a light burden of aridity. He has removed us from the spiritual breast and set us down on our own tender feet. Many souls lose faith at this point. They conclude that they must not be suited to the spiritual life and they give up. They have mistaken a state of purity for an impoverished one.⁸¹

Descriptions such as this provide hope and context for those who might otherwise believe that their faith was failing. In a Pentecostal culture, where positive theology rules the day, this narrative provides encouragement to those who are struggling to understand the spiritual darkness in which they are walking. John beautifully articulates the experience of the dark night of the soul, and provides language for those who have no traditional framework within which to describe their uncertain journey. He validates the experience and affirms those who would question God's goodness, explaining that the dark night is an indication of God's blessing and commitment to their spiritual growth. He writes:

Accustomed to feeling and conceiving of the Beloved her own way, [the soul] does not realize that the darkness is a blessing. . . . She feels miserable and unworthy, convinced that God has abandoned her, afraid she may herself be turning against him. In her despair, the soul does not recognize that God is teaching her in a secret way now, a way with which the faculties of sense and reason cannot interfere.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., 18.

⁸² Ibid., 20.

Finally, this text offers invaluable guidance and wisdom regarding how to navigate this challenging stage. John warns believers against the fruitless efforts of trying to escape the dark night through excessive use of the spiritual disciplines: “Whatever the soul tries to do of her own accord during this time is of no use but serves only as an obstacle to inner peace. This peace – so delicate and subtle - does its work in stillness and in solitude. It is far removed from all those earlier spiritual delights, which were palpable and sensual.”⁸³ This advice stands in stark contrast to that which would normally be given at CityLife Church where this faith formation stage is not recognized or acknowledged. Rather than suggesting “stillness and solitude” as the pathway to peace, those within the Pentecostal tradition would likely recommend more Bible reading, more prayer, more fasting and more spiritual activity.⁸⁴ Rather than “surrender into peace and quietude” as John suggests, CityLife leaders would more likely suggest that believers “be vigilant, self-controlled and alert because the enemy is looking for a way to undermine [their] lives.”⁸⁵ Within a culture where stages of doubt and spiritual darkness are commonly believed to be demonically fueled or rooted in disobedience, this text offers grace, understanding, acknowledgment and hope to those who feel unsure of how to navigate the dark night.

⁸³ Ibid., 64-65.

⁸⁴ Arlene Walsh observes that for Pentecostals, “perseverance, Bible reading, prayer, fasting, and other spiritual practices are all a part of recovering from episodes of suffering.” Arlene Sanchez Walsh, “Suffering and the Problem of Evil,” *Patheos Religious Library: Holiness and the Pentecostal* (2014), <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Pentecostal/Beliefs/Suffering-and-the-Problem-of-Evil.html> (accessed March 30, 2014).

⁸⁵ This is the advice given in regard to “overcoming obstacles that hinder us moving forward in our life in Christ.” CityLife, 79-93.

The Dark Night of the Soul by Gerald G. May

Gerald May's text on the dark night of the soul offers practical steps for navigating a stage of spiritual formation that is largely ignored or rejected by the Pentecostal Church. As a psychiatrist, May brings medical expertise and practical research together with many years of lecturing as a professor in the area of spiritual formation. As the title suggests, May explores the connection between Saint John of the Cross's concept of the dark night of the soul and spiritual growth. His aim is to make John's work more accessible to the twenty-first-century believer. He writes, "The dark night of the soul can illuminate our modern experience, but today's knowledge can also illuminate the dark night of the soul."⁸⁶

May's text is built on the premise that "the dark night of the soul is a profoundly good thing. It is an ongoing spiritual process in which we are liberated from attachments and compulsions and empowered to live and love more freely."⁸⁷ Drawing on the wisdom and advice from John's poem and commentary, May offers hope to those going through a dark night experience: "The dark night is nothing other than the story of a love affair; a romance between God and the human soul that liberates us to love one another."⁸⁸ May maintains that this experience is a necessary part of the maturing process, "The means by which we find our heart's desire, our freedom for love."⁸⁹ Time and again, May emphasizes the conviction that although the dark night may appear to be "mysterious and

⁸⁶ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

unknown, [it is] by no means sinister or evil. It is instead profoundly sacred and precious beyond all imagining.”⁹⁰

One of the most helpful aspects of May’s book is his ability to help readers to identify the characteristics of the dark night so as to affirm the validity of their experience. For CityLife congregants, this is an important function. As a community that struggles to acknowledge the maturing role of questioning, doubt or suffering in the life of a committed Christian, May’s description of the dark night, together with his explanation of what is accomplished through the dark night, provide needed validation of the process. He expounds:

It feels as though the foundations of faith are being shaken. For people who are deeply in love with God, the loss of a habitual sense of God’s presence can seem like a greater abandonment than the loss of human love. People are likely to feel it is somehow their fault; they wonder where they went so wrong to cause the divine Lover to disappear. And when this loss is accompanied by lassitude and emptiness in prayer and other spiritual practices and lack of motivation for them, a person may easily wonder, “Do I even believe in anything any more? Do I even care? It can be almost impossible to believe - or even to consider - that what’s really going on is a graceful process of liberation, a letting go of old, limiting habits to make room for fresh openness to love.”⁹¹

May reminds believers that they can easily become attached to the feelings of pleasure and love that are received from God rather than simply loving God for who God is. It is the process of the dark night that enables believers to relinquish their attachments to feelings and encounter God in a more complete way.⁹² But most importantly, May helps Pentecostal believers to understand that this process is positive, holy and necessary.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 92-93.

⁹² Ibid., 93.

He helps those who have traditionally believed the tangible experience of God's presence is the ultimate seal of God's approval, to understand that God's perceived absence is sometimes an even greater indication of the deep maturing work of the Holy Spirit in a believers' life.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen observes “From its beginning, Pentecostalism has been characterized by variety, and therefore any kind of classification are at best generalizations.”¹ Shane Clifton further asserts, “Contemplation by Pentecostals on the nature of the church is made complex by the ecclesial diversity within the movement. . . . Understanding of the nature and structure of the church differ among the numerous Pentecostal affiliations.”² Whilst a strict characterization of ecclesiological practices within Pentecostalism is a challenge, a close examination of the beliefs, structures, activities and traditional teachings undertaken within the Pentecostal Church, and in particular the community at CityLife Church, reveal a clear picture of its true priorities.

These ecclesiological foundations reveal a community of believers needing to shift from a culture of preserving outward appearances, toward a place of authenticity and transparency, where honesty is valued above performance. Letting go of the pressure to maintain a constant upbeat Christian life will open the way for engagement with a more

¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 69.

² Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 7.

contemplative lifestyle. Drawing from Roman Catholic tradition, Pentecostal believers introduced to the ancient spiritual disciplines will encounter less extroverted ways of engaging with the Spirit, providing a contrastingly different space within which to experience deep, personal prayer. Finally, this place of authentic Christian community will allow for honesty within relationships where the church is known as a people-centered, rather than a consumer-driven community, resulting in genuine transformation and spiritual growth.

Pentecostal Ecclesiology

With such a diversity of thought surrounding what constitutes Pentecostal ecclesiology, it is easy to conclude that any kind of concrete portrayal is impossible. However, within the immense fabric of Pentecostal ecclesiology lie four key threads from which all expressions of twenty-first-century Pentecostal faith and church community can be woven.³ They are the threads of: the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the operation of the gifts; the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible; the urgency of the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20); and the expectation of God's favor and blessing.

Holy Spirit Baptism and the Operation of the Gifts

Perhaps no single doctrine characterizes the Pentecostal Church as distinctly as baptism in the Holy Spirit with the accompanying evidence of speaking in tongues.

Simon Chan notes, "To call the church Pentecostal is to recognize the definitiveness of

³ The early tenets of Pentecostal doctrine included an emphasis on the premillennialist position of the second coming of Christ. However, in time, "Talk of the second coming trickled to a halt in the Pentecostal mainline" and this emphasis is rarely encountered in Pentecostal churches today. *Ibid.*, 66, 166.

the Pentecost event, i.e. of the baptism in the Spirit, in shaping the church's identity."⁴ Pentecostals were birthed amidst supernatural encounters with the Holy Spirit where many of the events of Acts 2 became an everyday reality.⁵ The Good News Hall, opened by Janet Lancaster in Melbourne on New Year's Eve 1909, marked the beginning of the Pentecostal Church in Australia. Supernatural revival meetings continued throughout the day and the night for over six weeks.⁶ During those early days, and into the hundred years that followed, speaking in tongues became the most recognizable characteristic of the Pentecostal Church and the defining evidence that a believer had been baptized in the Holy Spirit.⁷ Although recent research suggests that *glossolalia* is now considered by many Pentecostals to be just "one of" the evidences of Spirit baptism, rather than "the" evidence,⁸ there nonetheless remains an unwavering belief that a person who is baptized in the Holy Spirit will demonstrate some kind of outward manifestation of the supernatural gifts.⁹

It is this engagement with the Holy Spirit in a tangible, supernatural way that has been the hallmark of Pentecostal ecclesiology across the globe. Kärkkäinen observes, "The focus of Pentecostal spirituality is experiencing God mystically as supernatural. . . .

⁴ Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Ecclesiology: An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2011), 74.

⁵ Chant, *Heart of Fire*, 34-56.

⁶ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ Angelo Cettolin, "Pentecostal Spirituality in Australia," *Pentecostal Charismatic Bible Colleges Webjournal*, <http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/PCBC/200801/01-pentecostal-spirituality-in-australia/> (accessed August 23, 2014).

⁹ *Ibid.*

The worship service is an interesting mixture of spontaneity; exercise of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, prophesying, prayer for healing; and attentiveness to the mystical encounter with God.”¹⁰ In Pentecostal churches, one expects to encounter God. There is a belief that when committed, fervent followers of Jesus come together, the Holy Spirit is present and there exists a corporate anointing where God’s presence can be experienced supernaturally. Kenneth Archer notes, “The essence of Pentecostalism is its persistent emphasis upon the supernatural within the community.”¹¹ Pentecostals believe in a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus that is experienced through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit corporately and individually. Jesus is alive; therefore those who know and follow him should encounter his supernatural presence in the midst of their daily lives.¹²

The Infallibility and Inerrancy of the Bible

As stated in Chapter 2, another of the hallmarks of Pentecostal ecclesiology is the belief that the Bible is “the inspired, infallible and inerrant” Word of God.¹³ The preaching of “The Word” in Pentecostal churches holds almost as much weight as the operation of the Holy Spirit. An early article in the Assemblies of God constitution closed its instruction by stating, “The clear teachings of the inspired Word of God are the sole

¹⁰ Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 70-71.

¹¹ K.J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (1996).

¹² See Simon Chan, "Jesus as Spirit-Baptizer: Its significance for Pentecostal Ecclesiology," in *Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: The Church and the Fivefold Gospel*, ed. John Christopher Thomas, (Nashville: CTP Press, 2010), 139-156.

¹³ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 190.

basis of our faith.”¹⁴ The prominence of the Bible in the Pentecostal Church lends itself to the use of terms such as “biblically strong” or a “high view of Scripture” as accolades for those who are perceived to have exceptional biblical accuracy.¹⁵

Clifton notes that within Pentecostal churches “the Scriptures stand as the primary witness to the contours of Christian faith, and as the principle authority grounding church doctrine.”¹⁶ The reading and interpretation of Scripture within the Pentecostal Church follows the evangelical doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration whereby the Bible is believed to be the inspired and inerrant word of God written supernaturally by the hand of men under the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Senior minister of 3C mega churches in Australia Phil Pringle writes, “The Bible opens heaven’s gates and reveals the gates of hell. It rewards all who heed it, and condemns outright those who spurn it. . . . Thousands of miracles happen all around the world every day, to people who claim Bible promises for themselves.”¹⁸ Pentecostals are taught to expect God to speak directly to their needs and to provide supernatural guidance as they read the Bible.¹⁹ There is a certainty that the Bible is God’s inerrant, personal message to the believer and a conviction that its words can be applied to one’s life with faith and confidence. Stephen Fogarty writes, “The Bible

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵ Craig D Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 11.

¹⁶ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 9.

¹⁷ Allert, *A High View of Scripture*, 11.

¹⁸ Phil Pringle, *Faith: Moving the Heart and the Hand of God* (Dee Why, AU: PaX Ministries 2013), Introduction, Kindle ebook.

¹⁹ S.A. Ellington, "Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 (1996).

for Pentecostals has been a source and confirmation of experiences of God. They believe that the truth of Scripture is not to be objectively proved, but rather subjectively experienced.”²⁰

This combination of absolute certainty in the reliability of the Bible, together with an over spiritualizing and allegorizing of the Scriptures in preaching and personal application,²¹ has created a reliance on the Bible as a source of spiritual comfort, consolation and divine guidance. Pentecostal believers rely heavily on the Bible to speak to them in times of need and to provide them with the comfort and confidence they need to make life decisions. CityLife congregants are told, “If you have ever read the Bible and felt like the words just leaped off the page with incredible relevance, then you know what it is to experience the Holy Spirit casting light on the truth of the Word so that you can actively apply that truth to your life.”²²

The Urgency of the Great Commission

Twenty-first-century Pentecostals have a high value of evangelism; “They take seriously the commissions of Jesus to his disciples where he commanded them to evangelize the world and assume it also applies to them.”²³ There is a consistent message from the pulpit and associated programs to share one’s faith with those who do not know

²⁰ Stephen Fogarty, "Toward a Pentecostal Hermeneutic," *Pentecostal Charismatic Bible Colleges Webjournal*, <http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/PCBC/vol5-no2/toward-a-pentecostal-hermeneutic/> (accessed August 23, 2014).

²¹ Ibid.

²² CityLife, *Life Trax*, 44.

²³ Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 246.

Jesus.²⁴ Track One of the LIFETRAX program states, “The key purpose of the church here on earth is the ministry to the world (“Outreach”). While both ministry to the Lord and to the saints can be performed in heaven one day, ministry to the world is limited in time and space. The call to preach the gospel to all nations is at the end of all four gospels and the church is God’s strategy for winning the world for him.”²⁵ Although historically the emphasis of the Australian Pentecostal Church has been more on personal holiness; over time, there has developed a fresh emphasis on the need to actively engage with those outside the four walls of the church and the priority of evangelism has been lifted.²⁶

There is a constant encouragement to “share your faith” which is largely fuelled by the fear that only those who trust in Jesus will go to heaven. Warrington writes, “The thought that unbelievers will blame them on the Day of Judgment [for not telling them about Jesus] is one that has haunted countless Pentecostals.”²⁷ Personal responsibility for witnessing to family, friends and work colleagues is stressed and congregation members are encouraged to bring people to church so that they can hear the Gospel-message preached.²⁸ As Land explains, “This evangelistic approach is built on the premise that church members are inviting friends who are not yet Christians to accompany them to

²⁴ CityLife church allocates an entire preaching series to the subject of personal evangelism each calendar year. The most recent series ran from January 2014 to April 2014 and was called “On Mission.” Alongside the pulpit ministry are supporting outreach activities, “invite-a-friend” nights and “Alpha” courses.

²⁵ CityLife, *Life Trax*, 131.

²⁶ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 154-155.

²⁷ Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 249.

²⁸ Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 82.

church . . . in order to hear the gospel.”²⁹ In Pentecostal churches, this seeker-sensitive approach has the added element of Holy Spirit engagement. Pentecostals maintain that bringing an unbeliever to church will place them in a Spirit-filled environment where they will encounter the undeniable power of the Holy Spirit and will hopefully respond by opening their heart to Jesus. A.M. Lord asserts, “Experience, enlightened and empowered by the Spirit, is still at the heart of Pentecostal missiology.”³⁰

The Expectation of God’s Favor and Blessing

There is no doubt that Pentecostals assume God always wants to bless them. Houston writes, “Throughout the Bible, God consistently promised to bless his people. ‘Blessed (happy, fortunate, to be envied) is the man who fears (reveres and worships) the Lord’ (Ps. 112:1).”³¹ Having been exposed to teaching from the perspective of the prosperity gospel, CityLife Pentecostals generally believe that God’s children are entitled not only to spiritual healing, but also to physical health and material wealth.³² This abundance is viewed “as a manifestation of God’s blessing to his people” and it is assumed that “wealth, health and happiness for all believers in this life is theirs to claim.”³³ Whilst it is true that God is described in the Bible as a loving Father,

²⁹ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 172-173.

³⁰ A.M. Lord, "The Holy Spirit and Contextualization," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4:2 (2001): 205.

³¹ Brian Houston, *For This I Was Born: Aligning Your Vision to God's Cause* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 168.

³² For a complete explanation of the three-fold prosperity message, see PY Cho, *Salvation, Health and Prosperity: Our Threefold Blessing in Christ* (Altamonte Springs: Creation House, 1987).

³³ Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 238.

Pentecostals take the analogy to the extreme asserting that like an earthly father, God demonstrates his love to his children through the provision of material possessions, and anyone who is not blessed is somehow at fault for not appropriating the blessing. Phil Pringle writes,

Imagine if your son went off to his friends with a bicycle that had no seat, had buckled wheels, flat tires, a broken bell, and a twisted frame, and he told his friends that you had given it to him for his birthday. You'd be highly embarrassed, especially when the parents of the other saw it. You would feel ashamed, and you should, if you had given him a bicycle like that. This is how some Christians think God provides for them. With broken-down, secondhand things that don't work. God is a good God and not short of supply. . . . The trouble in provision is not with God: it's with us. If we can correct our thinking and enlarge our thinking, we will enjoy the abundance of God's quality provision.³⁴

A Shift Toward a Community of Authentic Believers

Within most flawed teaching lies some kernel of truth, and in the case of the four threads of Pentecostal ecclesiology listed above, this is certainly true. As the body of Christ, the Church desperately needs the operation of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill the Great Commission to which all believers are called. There is indeed a great urgency for those who do not know Christ to experience the transforming power of the Spirit in their lives. And the immeasurable value of the Bible in the life of the believer is beyond repute. It is also true that God loves his children and that he desires only the best for those he loves. Whilst these ideas are true in essence, taken to their extreme, as has often been the case at CityLife church, they risk becoming doctrines that bring condemnation, misunderstanding, disappointment and discouragement. The pressure to maintain a constant spiritual high and live an abundant life that is free from financial, emotional or

³⁴ Pringle, *Faith*, Kindle ebook.

health issues can create a culture of dishonesty and concealment. Rather than share openly about one's struggles, doubts or spiritual dryness, believers in hyper-faith cultures often tend to hide their struggles for fear of being judged less spiritual or less committed. In his 2009 Doctor of Ministry project, Brian Birkett made the following observations regarding CityLife Church,

The author of this paper observed a tendency [amongst CityLife believers] to pretend everything was fine even though some people struggled. . . . Some congregants tried to impress and please church leadership through individual performance. . . . The performance culture stimulated an unwillingness to admit need and deal with issues. The qualities of authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability lost their prominence. . . . Authenticity was sometimes hidden, and performance was sometimes valued over transparency. Some congregants valued individuals for what they do or how they met external expectations.³⁵

In their righteous attempt to emphasize the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, CityLife leaders have at times inadvertently swung the pendulum too far, resulting in an over-realized eschatology that refuses to openly acknowledge sin, failure, weakness and suffering as part of the everyday fabric of the Christian life.³⁶ For those who find themselves battling difficult life circumstances, the persistent promise of health, wealth and happiness becomes an unwelcome reminder of their perceived personal failure in sustaining a victorious life.³⁷ In order for these men and women to experience love, acceptance and affirmation, the false expectations of living a perfect Christian life must be lifted from their shoulders. CityLife leadership must seek to create a new community of authentic believers where there is openness and honesty about one's sin and mistakes;

³⁵ Birkett, "The Development of Emotionally Healthy Disciples at Citylife Church," 11-12.

³⁶ Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Salem, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 76.

³⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006), Kindle ebook.

where there is love and acceptance of one another's weaknesses; where the pharisaical tendency toward self-righteousness is avoided; where believers live by the Spirit rather than the law; where there is an acknowledgment that all believers are called to share in the sufferings of Christ; and where leadership is modeled through servanthood and humility.

Where there is Openness and Honesty about one's Sin and Mistakes

James encourages followers of Jesus to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (Js 5:16). Members of the community of Jesus Christ are called to live lives of openness and honesty before God and one another. Hiding one's faults often has the effect of strengthening their hold on one's life and creating an identity veiled in hypocrisy and lies.³⁸ Contrastingly, opening up honestly to one another "makes deep fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations."³⁹ As communities allow transparency between one another, they relinquish the need to pretend and are able to engage truthfully without hiding their struggles and fears. In this place of vulnerability, believers are free to remove their masks and receive healing and guidance from one another, knowing that they are not alone in their personal struggles.

³⁸ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), 182.

³⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 188.

Where there is Love and Acceptance of one Another's Weaknesses

In writing to the church in Rome, Paul exhorts the believers to “accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters” (Ro 14:1). He encourages the church community to be patient and understanding with those who have differing views, emphasizing the fact that each person is ultimately responsible only to God and not to the opinions or standards of others. He continues, “You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. . . . Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Ro 14:10-12). When the church begins to acknowledge that each believer embodies a completely unique set of life experiences they are able to extend grace to those whose journey is different to their own, or whose behavior does not appear to meet their standards. In this environment, where “love covers over a multitude of sins,” (1 Pt 4:8), those who are more mature in the faith are able to encourage and mentor those who are weakened by doubt or uncertainty. Rather than passing judgment on one another, there develops a culture of “mutual edification,” (Ro 14:19) where the body of Christ works together to build one another up and extend love and grace to those who struggle.

Where the Pharisaical Tendency toward Self-righteousness is Avoided

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ most critical words were directed not toward those who were obvious sinners, but toward the scribes and Pharisees who were so sure of their own righteousness. He cautioned people not to follow their example where “everything they do is done for people to see,” (Mt 23:5) whilst in private “they do not practice what they preach” (Mt 23:3). As a community that claims to follow Christ, the

church must heed Jesus' harsh rebuke toward the religious leaders of his day and seek to remain humble and penitent before God and others. All believers have been saved by grace, not because of their own good works (Eph 2:8-9), so any attempt to spiritually categorize or compare one as more holy than another is to behave as the hypocrites of Jesus' day. When there exists an attitude of humility and an acknowledgement that "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Ro 3:10), there subsequently develops a community of love, acceptance and authenticity where each person can find value and acceptance.

Where Believers Live by the Spirit Rather than the Letter of the Law

Hugh Mackay observes that within Australian culture people prefer certainty to uncertainty, and structure to ambiguity or mystery.⁴⁰ Very little seems to have changed since Paul wrote to the community of believers in Galatia two thousand years ago. Having encountered the power and mystery of the Holy Spirit, Paul laments the fact that they have now returned to the structure and certainty of their own religious rules: "Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (Gal 3:3).

As a community of Christ followers, there must be a degree of relinquishment of control in order to allow the mystery and uncertainty of the Spirit to lead. The black-and-white letters on the pages of the Bible must be read through the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Again, Paul reminds the early Christians that they are "not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). As believers humbly

⁴⁰ Hugh Mackay, *The Good Life: What Makes A Life Worth Living?* (Sydney, Australia: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2014), 69-80.

acknowledge that the interpretation of “biblical truth” is indeed subjective,⁴¹ they are able to cease from using the text to bring judgment and condemnation, and instead surrender to the Holy Spirit who guides into all truth (Jn 16:13). When the grace of the Spirit overrides legalism there emerges a culture of acceptance and understanding where congregants can live authentically without fear of rejection.

Where there is an Acknowledgment that all Believers Are Called to Share in the Sufferings of Christ

Jesus warned his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (Jn 16:33), and Paul was told by God that, “He must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). Peter likewise cautioned his fellow believers that they should “not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Pt 4:12-13). Suffering and spiritual hardship are described as normative occurrences in the Christian journey and affirmed by New Testament writers as valid instruments used by God in the maturing process (Ro 5:3-4).

Christian communities are therefore called to create safe places where those who are struggling to meet the false expectation of a “victorious Christian believer” can find the support and understanding they need to persevere through difficult times.⁴² Rather than hide their pain and pretend that they are living a “powerful, supernatural life,” those who are undergoing a dark night experience can find hope and encouragement within an authentic Christian community that acknowledges the positive role of suffering in their

⁴¹ Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, Kindle ebook.

⁴² Pringle, *Faith*, Kindle ebook.

lives.⁴³ Instead of feeling shame and judgment because they do not appear to be living “a winning life,”⁴⁴ they will instead be comforted and assured that God is at work in their lives “to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:13).

Where Leadership Is Modeled through Servanthood and Humility

Jesus set the perfect example for Christian leadership. He refused to pursue the approval and praise of people (Jn 5:41), but chose the path of humility and sacrifice (Mk 10:45). He rebuked the religious leaders of his day because, “They love[d] the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love[d] to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (Mt 23: 6-7). Jesus knew that power and status were a dangerous combination that could cause leaders to become egocentric, self-serving and inauthentic. He therefore told his followers to remember, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Mt 23:11-12).

Congregation members look to their leaders as examples to follow in their Christian walk. However, when a leader portrays the arrogant appearance of a life without problems where one is healthy, wealthy and happy all the time, it is easy for believers in the pew to feel discouraged about their own less-than-perfect lives. There is a need for leaders to show a greater transparency in the pulpit and in their Life Groups; to be honest about their dark night experiences and to normalize the existence of doubt and uncertainty in the life of a committed Christ follower. Laying aside their need for

⁴³ Charles G. Trumbull, *Victory In Christ* (London: Jawbone Digital, 2012), Kindle ebook.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

approval, leaders who refuse to perpetuate the perfect-Christian persona give congregation members the same freedom to stop pretending. Rather than seeking the “praise of men” (Jn 12:43), they choose to identify with the joys and suffering of those they lead. Like Jesus, they choose to take on the nature of a servant and humble themselves rather than seeking prominence, celebrity or prestige (Phil 2:7-8).

A Shift toward *Lectio Divina*, Contemplative Prayer, Silence and Solitude: Drawing from Roman Catholic Ecclesiology

A blogger recently posted an article under the following heading: “Beware of the Vacuum: Don’t Give Up Something Unless You Replace It.”⁴⁵ She went on to explain that trying to stop a bad habit without finding something else to replace it will usually result in failure.⁴⁶ This same principle applies in regard to stepping away from an extroverted, hyped-up expression of faith in favor of practicing a more authentic, contemplative engagement with God. As Pentecostal Christians begin to comprehend that the expectation of a perfect life is a false promise, they will need to find new pathways to engage with God and different ways to honestly express their faith challenges.

When the walls of self-protection come down and believers are truthful about their doubts and spiritual dryness, they may find themselves caught in a liminal space where, having let go of their past practices, they discover they have no sense of how to

⁴⁵ Sheila Wray Gregoire, "Beware of the Vacuum: Don't Give Up Something Unless You Replace It," *To Love, Honour and Vacuum*.(blog), <https://tolovehonorandvacuum.com/2014/01/beware-vacuum-dont-give-something-unless-replace/> (accessed March 15, 2014).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

move forward in their faith journey. Peter,⁴⁷ a thirty-six year old Life Group leader at CityLife Church writes,

So I don't know what to do now! I know that what I've believed in the past is baby-Christian thinking and I know I can't expect God to keep spoon feeding me for the rest of my life so how do I move forward? If the old methods won't work any more, what is the new method I need? The believe-it-and-claim-it prayers just don't work anymore and they make me feel empty and selfish but I don't know what comes next. How do I pray now? How do I read the Bible now? I don't even know how to pray for people in my Life Group anymore. . . . If I can't rely on any of the teachings I've always believed in then what can I believe? . . . I feel adrift on a sea of uncertainty. I know God is there, I just don't know how to find him these days.⁴⁸

When walking through the dark night of the soul, Pentecostal believers like Peter often find that their current faith tradition lacks the spiritual framework to sustain and uphold their hearts. It is in this circumstance that the Pentecostal Church, and CityLife in particular, can draw strength from some of the faith practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Formed over years of persecution and hardship, the ancient spiritual disciplines of the Catholic Church offer to sustain the believer through the dark night of uncertainty and doubt commonly denied by the Pentecostal Church. Phillis Tickle writes,

We Protestants first set our course by denying all those [Catholic] tools and objects, principles and treasures that had informed and shaped us . . . we threw them aside, judging them to be proofs and evidences of a dangerously less grace-filled time. . . . [But now] we begin to suspect that in our common beginnings there were some truths and some habits of formation that nourished them and whose loss has diminished us.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁴⁸ Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

⁴⁹ Phillis Tickle in Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices For Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 7.

Pentecostal Christians seeking to express their faith in a more authentic manner, will benefit greatly from the “habits of formation” previously rejected by their denomination.⁵⁰ Spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina*, silence and solitude, and contemplative prayer, provide much needed navigation tools for Pentecostal believers like Peter who find themselves “adrift on a sea of uncertainty.”

*Lectio Divina*⁵¹

When Pentecostal believers come to the realization that they have dogmatically interpreted the biblical text in a “purely subjective and arbitrary way” there often develops a need to find new ways to engage with Scripture.⁵² Twenty-seven year old Megan⁵³ writes,

The impossibility of interpreting the Bible as I have in the past has finally caught up with me. I sit staring at the pages unable to read with conviction anything upon which my eyes settle. I no longer hold any measure of confidence in my ability to exegete the passage without allowing old fundamentalist teachings to infiltrate my study. . . . I wonder will my spirit ever leap with joy as it has in the past or have the pages of God’s Word closed to me forever?⁵⁴

The ancient discipline of *lectio divina* offers hope for people like Megan.

Practiced by followers of Christ for more than 1,500 years, *lectio divina* is a Latin phrase

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Lectio Divina* is a Latin phrase translated as “divine reading” or “sacred reading.” Richard Peace, *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God through Scripture* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1998), 11.

⁵² Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, Kindle ebook.

⁵³ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁵⁴ Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

translated as “sacred reading.”⁵⁵ This approach to reading Scripture has less to do with the formal study of the text and more to do with letting the text speak to the reader in the present moment. Tony Jones writes, “The initial preparation for practicing *lectio* is to purposefully shed the common methods most of us use in our every reading.”⁵⁶ For this reason, *lectio divina* is particularly useful for believers traveling through stages of doubt and uncertainty where old ways of connecting with God no longer bring consolation.

The four steps to this type of Scripture reading are: *lectio*, meaning reading; *meditationem*, meaning to meditate on the feelings and emotions that surface through the reading; *oratio*, meaning to ask God for illumination of the text; and *contemplatio*, meaning to move to a silent and spiritual place beyond words where “time and eternity almost touch.”⁵⁷ *Lectio divina* relies on the reader having an open heart and an active imagination so that one can “enter” the text and fully engage with the feelings, emotions and senses that the Holy Spirit brings to the surface. It is a subjective way of reading Scripture and “not a method of Bible Study. It is done purely and simply to come to know God, to be brought before his Word, to listen. . . . Done properly, *lectio divina* is a form of reading that leads to prayer.”⁵⁸ For Pentecostals who are struggling to engage with their previously narrow approach to reading the Scriptures, this discipline offers a fresh and accessible medium by which to encounter the Spirit of God through the biblical text.

⁵⁵ R. Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 54.

⁵⁶ Jones, *The Sacred Way*, 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 49, 52-53. These four steps were formally articulated by French, Carthusian priest Guigo II (ca. 1115-ca.1198).

⁵⁸ Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 47.

Silence and Solitude

In the noise-filled pews of the Pentecostal Church it is often hard to find a place of stillness. The sound of music, preaching and loud prayers is constantly emanating from the platform. Even communion times are filled with the sound of the band playing and the pastor's exhortation.⁵⁹ Whilst this noise-charged atmosphere appeals to those in the early stages of the faith journey where "fervency" and "passion" are demonstrated through loud corporate declarations, for those who have entered a stage of spiritual darkness, there is a great desire to withdraw from the crowd to be silent and still.⁶⁰

Tony,⁶¹ a thirty-one year old life group leader at CityLife Church writes,

I wish I could go back to loving church when I thought everything was fantastic and the music was amazing. Now I just want the noise to stop. I feel like I can't even hear myself think. . . . I just want to scream BE QUIET and let me hear myself think. . . . I don't understand why they have to yell all the time, do they think God can't hear them? . . . I reckon the only place I can really feel God these days is when I go camping in the bush and it's quiet all around and I'm totally alone. . . . I used to love the action and the vibe of church but now I find it exhausting and fake.⁶²

As believers begin the process of dismantling their embedded theological beliefs, there develops an increasing need for times of interior silence to reflect on the journey. It is as though everything is drawn inward and quietness and solitude offer comfort to the battered heart and overactive mind. The Spirit of God calls out to those who are searching for fresh clarity and says, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

⁵⁹ Dennis L. Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 40.

⁶⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 52-85.

⁶¹ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁶² Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

Roman Catholics have long understood that “without a foundation in solitude, a spiritual life is like a house built on sand – shallowly grounded and easily eroded.”⁶³ As such, the ancient spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude have always been viewed as two of the pillars of Catholic monasticism and ones that would greatly enrich the lives of Pentecostal believers. Ammonas, one of the ancient Desert Fathers states, “My beloved, I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God . . . you must know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that is was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that they mysteries of God were known to them.”⁶⁴ As Pentecostal believers quiet the constant noise around them and begin to engage with the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude, they too will know what it is to hear the gentle whisper of God’s “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12), rather than the deafening noise of the crowd.

Contemplative Prayer

Pentecostal prayer traditionally consists of personal requests for God’s intervention and blessing in one’s life. Phil Pringle states, “Need and desire are the motivation for prayer. When we have a need, we pray. When we have a desire, we pray. . . . The basis for faith in prayer is God loves me, God is a good God, and it is God’s will to answer prayer.”⁶⁵ Contrastingly, the Catholic tradition of contemplative prayer rests on letting go of personal desires and the relinquishment of personal needs in order to

⁶³ Wilkie Au SJ, *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 53.

⁶⁴ Father Ammonas quoted in Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 1996), 19.

⁶⁵ Pringle, *Faith*, Kindle ebook.

encounter the beauty of God's presence. Richard Rohr suggests that the purpose of contemplative prayer "is not to get anywhere. We Western people are goal-oriented consumers, and we can't imagine doing anything that won't get us something. But with full deliberation, we need to understand our exploration is not an effort to get anywhere."⁶⁶

When Pentecostal believers are faced with the perceived silence of God and there appears to be no immediate blessing as a result of their petition, there can develop a sense of disillusionment with prayer.⁶⁷ Old ways of praying can seem empty, forced and artificial. There is a need to engage with God from a new place of humility and meekness rather than a place of entitlement and presumption. Cheryl,⁶⁸ a sixty-five year old grandmother and CityLife congregation member writes,

I got sick of praying and claiming and believing for things only to be disappointed. In hindsight I think I was set up for failure with all the word of faith teaching I've heard over the years. I don't think God is waiting to give me a car or a new house or a new husband! . . . I've learnt that prayer is not really about me at all. It's really about God. I've stopped praying me-prayers and I've started just sitting silently in God's presence and for the first time in years, I actually feel peaceful and loved.⁶⁹

Contemplative prayer shifts the emphasis from human need to the mystery of God's presence. It positions the believer humbly before God and allows God to set the agenda. It acknowledges that human effort is worthless. It relinquishes the need to be in control and surrenders the mind, will and emotions to a greater, more loving power.

⁶⁶ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 2003), 28-29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-47.

⁶⁸ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁶⁹ Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted.*

Gary⁷⁰ explains, “I have given up trying to pray. Now I just sit with God. I look at him, and he looks at me, and I say ‘Well I’m here Lord,’ and he says ‘Yes, and I’m glad!’”⁷¹

Debunking the Cultural Myth of a Perfect Life

In *The Good Life*, Mackay describes the “utopia complex,” which has infiltrated Australian culture.⁷² This complex has conditioned people to believe that their lives should always be perfect. He writes, “Being twenty-first-century Westerners living with unprecedented material prosperity, mobility, convenience and comfort, who would dare say we’re not entitled to the best of everything?”⁷³ He describes the way in which social media and advertising has convinced people that “life should proceed from one thrilling gratification to the next.”⁷⁴ Unfortunately, this exaggerated sense of reality cannot be sustained, and in the long run, the unrelenting need to live an exciting and perfect life “distracts people from what is most important to wellbeing: the quality of their relationships.”⁷⁵ This is where a shift toward authenticity, honesty and simplicity within the church is needed. Rather than perpetuating the deception of the utopian complex, the church can offer a contrasting worldview where people are valued above image, achievements or possessions; where men and women can openly share their

⁷⁰ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁷¹ Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

⁷² Mackay, *The Good Life*, 3-40.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

disappointments, doubts and uncertainties without fear of rejection; and where authentic relationships are formed through face-to-face friendships.

The damaging role of social networking in preserving the illusion of the perfect life cannot be underestimated. The two largest social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, are contributors to the increased obsession with maintaining a perfect outward appearance, where photos are enhanced and ordinary experiences are glamorized.⁷⁶

Mark Sayers observes,

Despite what millions of social networking Web site users will tell you, the network is not about catching up with friends or blogging, but rather about social status within the new media environment. . . . [It] is a way for people in a media-saturated environment to position themselves and to establish identity. In a media environment in which marketing is king . . . people have become marketers of their own personal image and “brand.” . . . It is as if they are now products and must market, advertise, and sell themselves. But if they are now brands and products, what happens when they go out of style? . . . What does this sort of worldview say to those who are not attractive or do not fit the mold?⁷⁷

This obsession with outward appearance stands in stark contrast to the teaching of Jesus who condemned the religious leaders for keeping the outside of their lives attractive, while their hearts remained wicked (Mt 23:27). Maintaining a false facade of perfection alienates people from one another and also from God. Followers of Christ are called to create open, honest communities where the pretense of the perfect life can be discarded in exchange for authentic relationships. A culture of impersonal communication where people can hide behind manufactured images of their lives must be replaced with

⁷⁶ Nigel Brookson, "Top 10 Social Networking Sites," <http://www.thinkingit.com.au/blog/top-10-social-networking-sites> (accessed May 14, 2014).

⁷⁷ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble With Paris: Following Jesus in a World of Plastic Promises* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 35-36.

genuine, loving, face-to-face relationships where each person is valued as an image bearer of Christ.

Becoming a Community of Grace and Transformation

Where there exists a threat of rejection or fear of condemnation most people will not freely disclose their lives to one another. And if there is a risk of being hurt, most people will put up walls of protection to hide their vulnerabilities.⁷⁸ Herein lies the challenge for the Christian Church, which has historically been perceived to be a place of judgment and condemnation rather than a sanctuary of acceptance and grace.⁷⁹ If the Church is indeed called to be a place of transformation, healing and growth, there must be a shift toward a culture of grace and unconditional love that covers faults, failures and shortcomings and allows people to be totally themselves (Jn 13:35; 1 Jn 4:7). There must develop an acceptance of one another's struggles and weaknesses and a freedom for each believer to confidently share their journey without fear of criticism.

The Church must become a place where saving faith is viewed as an expedition into maturity, rather than a once-of conversion experience. The false belief that consolation from the Spirit is an indicator of God's approval must be replaced by an honest acknowledgement that God sometimes hides himself from those he loves.

⁷⁸ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 197-199.

⁷⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons's research into attitudes about present-day Christianity revealed the three most common perceptions about the Church are that they are anti-homosexual, hypocritical and judgmental. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 27. Philip Yancey likewise observes, "Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers." Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997).

Finally, there is a need for a clear understanding that suffering, doubt and uncertainty are often used by God to bring about deep spiritual maturity in the lives of faithful followers of Jesus.

A Community Where Saving Faith Is Seen as a Journey not a Destination

Where there exists a strong value of evangelism and “reaching lost people for Christ,”⁸⁰ there is often a corresponding belief that the moment of conversion is the pinnacle of the Christian journey and everything else that follows is consolidating that decision.⁸¹ New believers are celebrated by the Church and they are immediately encouraged to enroll in courses that teach “Living the Christian Life” in order to understand the decision they have made.⁸² There is an appreciation that “newborn babies” must be cared for and nurtured until they are able to feed and nourish themselves in the Lord. However, once the courses have been completed and the disciplines of prayer, Bible reading and corporate worship are established, it is expected that new believers will simply continue to “appropriate truth” for themselves and enjoy the benefits of being blessed.⁸³ There is an assumption that if believers consistently apply the faith principles outlined in the Bible and do not doubt in God’s desire to bless them, they will experience a “victorious life” and live happily ever after.⁸⁴ And whilst there is some

⁸⁰ Phil Pringle, *Dead for Nothing: What The Cross Has Done For You* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House Publishers, 2007), 132.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸² CityLife, *Life Trax*.

⁸³ Pringle, *Dead for Nothing*, iv.

⁸⁴ Trumbull, *Victory in Christ*, Kindle ebook. See also Pringle, *Faith*, Kindle ebook.

truth in that teaching, it is only one part of the whole story and fails to address the ongoing journey of faith in the years that follow conversion.

There is a need for the Church to acknowledge that the born-again experience is merely the start of a long Christian journey into maturity and as such, there must be greater teaching and support for those who have been walking the road for many years. For those who have surrendered to the maturing work of the Spirit, there will come a time when God in his great love will “wean them from the breasts of personal pleasure, through pure aridity and inner darkness. He will remove all the gratuities and childish attachments [to God] and help them acquire the virtues by very different means.”⁸⁵ However, for many believers who have only ever been taught to progress in the warm glow of the born-again experience, this stage of spiritual aridity can come as a great shock. When surrounded by a culture of positive faith affirmations, it can prove a great challenge to be honest and transparent about one’s dry spiritual state. Tania,⁸⁶ a twenty-eight year old youth leader at CityLife Church writes,

I’m at a point now where I’ve isolated myself from church, and discussing with my friends how I feel. I tried to explain - I said I was wrestling with God, I wanted to know what He wanted of me in life and what I wanted of Him. They didn’t understand. . . . My friends all say I should just choose to be happy and push aside my feelings and “believe, believe believe!” but if I do that I will know the incongruity of that will kill me. . . . When you spoke at church you said this is a normal part of the Christian life, but no one else seems to be saying that. . . . If it’s true, why don’t people tell you this is coming when you do discipleship classes and how come no one talks about it around here? . . . I feel like a total failure and I just want to hide.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 57.

⁸⁶ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁸⁷ Personal email from CityLife leader: *permission granted*.

For men and women like Tania there is a great need for faith to be presented not only in terms of victorious living as a newly born-again believer, but also in terms of holding onto God in later stages of the journey when the path becomes dark and uncertain.

A Community Where Walking in the Spirit is not Measured by Feelings of Consolation

If the Church is to become a community of transformation and grace, there needs to be an acknowledgment that feelings of closeness to God are not a measure of one's holiness or devotion. As long as people erroneously believe that feeling God's overwhelming love is an indicator of his approval, they will feel ashamed to admit to an inability to sense God's supernatural, loving presence. Rather than confess to feeling that "all spiritual blessing is over and God has abandoned [them],"⁸⁸ Pentecostal believers journeying through the dark night of the soul will often hide their emotions for fear that others will judge them to be living a life of defeat.⁸⁹

Thankfully, the biblical writers were not afraid to openly share their feelings of frustration and offer a model of transparency that is vital to those who struggle to share honestly about their journeys (Ecc 2:17; 1 Kings 19:4; I Sm 16:14-23; Neh 2:3; Pss 32:3-4; 38:6-8, Job 1-42. Paul openly recorded his feelings of being "hard pressed on every side" and "perplexed," (1 Cor 4:8) together with his disappointment in God's silence regarding his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7-9). If the Church is to make an important shift toward truly authentic relationships where believers can be honest about their wilderness experiences, there must be a freedom to admit that God does not always feel

⁸⁸ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 67.

⁸⁹ Pringle, *Faith*, Kindle ebook.

close. There must also be recognition that the absence of the sense of God's presence is often an indication that God is lovingly leading the believer on the pathway to maturity.

A Community where it is Acknowledged that Suffering Develops Character

Richard Rohr writes, "Historic cultures saw grief as a time of incubation, transformation, and necessary hibernation. Yet this sacred space is the very space we avoid. When we avoid darkness, we avoid tension, spiritual creativity and finally transformation. We actually avoid God, who works in the darkness."⁹⁰ Acknowledging that God does some of his most profound and life-changing work through stages of darkness is a key to the Church becoming a place of transformation and grace. As long as the Pentecostal Church continues to perpetuate the myth that God wants believers to be continuously happy, healthy and wealthy, congregants will feel ashamed of their doubts, hide their struggles and bury their true feelings.⁹¹ Alternatively, others who believe that personal happiness is a result of living a devoted Christian life, will be disappointed and disillusioned when they encounter personal suffering.⁹² They may believe that God no longer cares about them or that he is punishing them in some way.⁹³ However, "true believers know that those who walked with Christ were beset by pain, poverty, tragedy, poor health, beatings, and other hardships that stretched their faith and built their faith."⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 46-47.

⁹¹ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 150.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁹³ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 138.

⁹⁴ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 65-66.

The “toxic belief” that a life committed to Christ will protect believers from problems and pain will ultimately work against the transformative work of the Spirit.⁹⁵ By refusing to acknowledge that God purifies and cleanses his followers in the “dark fire” of affliction, believers are prevented from fully engaging with the process of refinement.⁹⁶ Rather than cooperating with the Spirit, they instead fight against it not believing that God could possibly be found in the pain. In order for the Church to become a place of transformation and grace, there must be an appreciation that suffering, doubt and uncertainty are often used by God to bring about deep spiritual maturity in the lives of faithful followers of Jesus.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ John of the Cross, 44.

CHAPTER 5

A THEOLOGY OF THE STAGES OF FAITH FORMATION

A cursory glance at nature reveals the fact that all living things grow. God's creation is continuously progressing through the established stages of birth, growth and ultimately death (Gn 1:11-12). Growth is an accepted part of life and the various stages of development in the natural world are easily recognized and acknowledged. A seed falls to the ground and dies; it becomes a shoot; then a stalk of wheat; and ultimately produces grain. A frog lays tiny eggs; the eggs hatch into tadpoles; the tadpoles grow legs and ultimately jump from the water to begin the process once again. Even Christ submitted himself to God's created order of growth on earth and was incarnated as a tiny helpless baby, born of a woman. Like every other human being, Jesus grew and developed physically and emotionally: he lived as a toddler, a child, an adolescent, a teenager, a young adult and finally a grown man (Lk 2:52). Submitting to the physical stages of maturity, Christ grew until he finally fulfilled the purpose for which he came to earth.¹

¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 154.

God has likewise designed spiritual life to echo these stages of physical growth.² In writing to the Ephesian believers, Paul encourages them to move beyond the early stages of spiritual maturity where he describes them as “children” (4:14), and suggests that they “grow up” (4:15) into “mature adulthood” (4:13). In 1 Corinthians he again draws a parallel between stages of physical growth and stages of spiritual development. He writes, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” (1 Cor 13:11). Peter likewise describes spiritual maturity in terms of growth stages when he tells believers to drink “pure spiritual milk” in the same way as “newborn infants” so that they might “grow up into salvation” (1 Pt 2:2).

Throughout the pages of Scripture, there is a consistent theme of men and women of faith progressing through stages of spiritual growth. This chapter examines the theological foundations supporting this theme and affirms the belief that Christ-like maturity is the goal of every believer. The premise that deep growth and maturity is most often formed through stages of sacrifice, suffering and spiritual darkness will also be examined and examples of biblical characters who have progressed through these difficult stages will be outlined. The specific formation stage of the “dark night of the soul” will be examined including the experiences of doubt, questioning, the silence of God and spiritual darkness commonly endured by believers during this time. Finally, some biblical approaches to successfully navigating this stage will be proposed including both personal and community-based actions.

² Paul’s principle of the natural preceding the spiritual has application here, (1 Cor 15:46). The idea that God designed the earthly and physical as an example of what would likewise occur in the spiritual realm affirms the belief that stages of maturity occur in both the natural and the supernatural realm.

Christ-like Maturity is the Goal of Every Believer

God has designed Christians to grow and mature in their faith in the same way that God has designed humankind to grow and mature in their physical lives. Oswald Sanders writes, “The New Testament knows three types of Christians – the spiritually mature, the spiritually immature, and the spiritually decadent. It is tragically possible for the believer either to fall short of maturity or to fall back from it. . . . The Holy Spirit is one with Father and Son in their purpose to lead us ‘on to maturity.’”³ Whilst reaching maturity in Christ is the goal of every believer, that goal can only be realized when a believer acknowledges and perseveres through the necessary stages of spiritual growth. Kenneth Boa adds, “As in Nature, so also in the spiritual life – there are spurts of growth followed by periods of relative dormancy. There are no experiential shortcuts on the path to maturity in Christ.”⁴

Being Born Again is Only the Starting Point of the Journey

Accepting Christ as Lord and Savior for the first is a defining moment, however, it is not the final goal in the Christian life. In writing to the Church at Philippi, Paul encouraged believers to remember that the good work that God began in their lives would be carried “on to completion” in the years that followed (Phil 1: 6). He reminded them to keep growing and developing and to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the maturing process. Paul prays that they would not stay in their current state but that their “love

³ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity: Principles of Spiritual Growth For Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 215-216.

⁴ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (GrandRapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 119.

[might] abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight” (Phil 1:9). His desire is that these new believers would continue to mature in Christ and that they would develop “the fruit of righteousness” (Phil 1:11) in their lives.

Too often an enormous amount of teaching and resources are exhausted on bringing people to a point of conversion with far less attention being given to the long and sometimes difficult journey that lies ahead. Paul is commending Philippian believers for their enthusiastic commitment to Christ in these beginning stages of their faith, but assuring them that they still have a long way to go. Frank Gaebelin writes, “It was God who had produced their transformed lives by the work of regeneration, [and] God would continue this work until Christ’s return. . . . God not only initiates salvation, but continues it and guarantees its consummation. . . . Paul is asserting that God will bring his work to completion.”⁵ Followers of Jesus are reminded that conversion is the start of a journey of growth and Christ-like maturity is the ultimate goal.

Progression from Immaturity to Maturity⁶

A clear indication that the spiritual life consists of stages of growth can be seen from John’s writings in 1 John 2:12-14. John is writing to a group of believers who are under threat from false teachers (1 Jn 2:19; 4:1) and he exhorts them to stay true to the teachings of Christ that they had previously heard and believed (1 Jn 2:1-10). He refers to three distinct stages of progress in the Christian life and gives an exhortation to each

⁵ Frank E Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 105.

⁶ 1 John 2:12-14 uses the terms “little children,” “young men” and “fathers” to describe this maturation process.

specific group.⁷ He speaks first to the “little children,” then to the “fathers,” and lastly to the “young men.”⁸

Within this group of believers, there were those who were considered to be “seniors in Christianity” who had matured in the things of God and had a greater authority within the faith community.⁹ Matthew Henry writes, “By ‘fathers’ he means those who have wisdom and maturity that comes with experience.”¹⁰ To this group of elders John ascribed the ability to not only “overcome the evil one (2:13-14) and overcome the world (5:4) but also to overcome ‘them,’ the false prophets inspired by the spirit of antichrist (4:4).”¹¹ There is an implication that with greater spiritual maturity comes greater authority to conquer the challenges of life. These Fathers “have known him who is from the beginning” (1 Jn 2:13); they have the gift of great perspective having lived through the stages of faith and seen the sweeping sovereignty of God throughout the decades of their lives.

The “young men” in this passage refer to those who have “persevered in the life of faith and commitment.”¹² They are no longer young infants who need to be constantly cared for, but have grown to a level of maturity and faith where they “are strong and the

⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 738.

⁸ 1 John 2:12, 14. “Little children” is also used in a more generic sense throughout the epistle to refer to the entire community of Christ followers (2:1, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21).

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 1957.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: 1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 66.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

word of God lives in [them]” (1 Jn 2:14). These young men have risen to great accomplishments in life; they “have overcome the wicked one” (1 Jn 2:14). They are in a stage of enjoying influence and achievement.

The final group John addresses is the “little children” (1 Jn 2:12), the infants who are still in the early stages of simply having their sins forgiven. They are reliant on God to do the work for them and enjoy the love and acceptance of God as a baby accepts the care of a beloved parent. John acknowledges that there are different developmental stages to the Christian journey and encourages each of his fellow believers to fully engage with God at whatever stage they find themselves, whether as an infant, a young adult or a mature parent.

Growing Up is Often Difficult

Moving from the simplicity of childhood, into the uncertainty of adolescence, and finally into the responsibility-laden life of adulthood are often challenging times of transition. Young babies that are fed every three hours and have their every need met, know nothing of the financial, emotional and relational hardship that possibly awaits them in their forthcoming adult years. And for newly committed followers of Christ, the later stages of doubt and spiritual uncertainty that lead to a mature Christian faith are rarely a consideration in the beginning stages of the journey. Saint John of the Cross observes that in the early stages of faith, there is a simple desire to “wallow like a happy baby” in the loving presence of God.¹³ However, over time, “God removes the baby clothes from the soul. He is setting her down from his arms and making her walk on her

¹³ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 18.

own two feet. He removes her lips from the milky breast and replaces the soft, sweet mush of infants with the crusty bread of the robust.”¹⁴ Faithful followers of Jesus are required to grow up. They are called away from the dependency of their infant faith and led into a liminal space where the old ways no longer work, but the new stage is yet to be explored or understood.

Life was Never Meant to be Easy: Taking up the Cross

Jesus never promised his disciples a trouble-free life. He never guaranteed happy feelings and he never told them that they would live on a constant spiritual high in a utopian community. In fact, Jesus assured them that they would encounter trouble and that if they truly longed to follow him, they would need to take up their cross and die to their own selfish desires for a life of comfort and ease (Mt 16:24-26; Lk 9:23). Jesus made a call for complete and utter surrender. He told his followers that “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Lk 9:24). This often stands in stark contrast to the promise of some Pentecostal ministers who declare, “Life should be fun. You should be enjoying yourself each day.”¹⁵

Jesus’s focus was not on the pleasures of life, but on the eternal. He said, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self” (Lk 9:25). It is implicit that efforts to maintain earthy pleasure may actually result in missing out on eternal blessing. If followers of Christ are caught up in reaching for the myth of a happy, healthy and wealthy life, they may ultimately miss the true call of God on their

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ Pat Mesiti, *Wake Up and Dream* (Sydney: Pat Mesiti Ministries, 1994), 24.

lives. Although Pentecostal preachers may quote the Bible as saying, “As a man thinks so he is” and encourage believers to “set [their] minds to conceive and believe” for personal “successes and achievements,” this teaching draws more from the secular world of consumerism and motivational hype than from the wisdom of Jesus.¹⁶ Sayers observes, “We find it hard to give up on the individualist dream of making it to the top, of getting that good life. Many of us know no other way. It is the only story we have ever heard. We are told from childhood that . . . we can have a happy life. . . . [However] as we value things that are material, we become less and less interested in the interior life of things or people.”¹⁷ Jesus calls his followers to follow him, to walk the way he walked and to value what he valued. He modeled a life that was surrendered to the Father even when it took him to places of suffering and hardship. Ultimately, Jesus calls his disciples to lay down their lives and take up their cross daily, putting aside their own selfish needs and sharing in “the fellowship of his suffering” (Phil 3:10).

Refined through Hardship: Joseph’s Journey

Sanders asserts, “God is more concerned with our spiritual growth than with our temporal comfort.”¹⁸ Rather than leave believers in a state of immaturity and childishness, God desires to see each one reach her full potential, even if that means she must go through difficult and challenging times to achieve that goal. The story of Joseph (Gn 37-50) shows God’s commitment to the long-term development of those he loves.

¹⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁷ Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 34.

¹⁸ Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity*, 37.

As a young, arrogant seventeen year old, Joseph boasted to his brothers of two dreams he had experienced that depicted them bowing down to him (Gn 37:5-11). He had received a vision and in his immaturity and pride bragged of it to his brothers. He was enthusiastic, but his youthful enthusiasm caused him to be tactless and immodest. God had a great plan for Joseph's life, but in order for God to use him, Joseph needed to mature. So began a twenty-two-year journey of hardship, doubt and uncertainty that caused Joseph to undergo immense adversity, but climaxed in God placing him into a position of power and authority where the Holy Spirit could work unhindered in his life and his dream would finally be fulfilled.¹⁹ Henry Morris observes,

Joseph's own experiences were very real and harrowing. . . . Though it would be a terrible and bitter experience for him, in the providence of God it would work together for good. He himself, with his serious personal problem of pride and arrogance, needed to learn humility and patience before his remarkable gifts of intellectual brilliance and political leadership could be put to God's use.²⁰

In order for God to use Joseph he needed to relinquish the belief that he was the architect of his own destiny. God subsequently led him through stages of betrayal (Gn 37:24), imprisonment (Gn 39:19-21), false accusation (Gn 39:13-18) and hiddenness (Gn 40) in order for Joseph to realize that apart from God, he could do nothing (Gn 41:16). He was brought to a place of utter dependence on God where all his dreams and plans appeared dashed. However, from this dark night experience where everything seemed uncertain

¹⁹ When Joseph was sold into slavery he was seventeen years old (37:2). When he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and subsequently took charge of the land of Egypt, he is said to have been thirty years old (41:46). By the time Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, seven years of plenty (41:29) had passed (41:47) and Egypt had entered the second year of the seven-year famine (45:6). As such, it would appear that Joseph was most likely thirty-nine years old when God's prophecy was finally fulfilled, making it a journey of maturity spanning twenty-two years.

²⁰ Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 540.

and Joseph appeared to be forgotten, he emerged with “a great growth in spiritual maturity. His years of slavery and imprisonment had indeed taught him humility and patience.”²¹ Joseph’s passage from an impetuous young man to a humble servant-leader stands as an example that God often uses the stage of darkness, uncertainty and hardship to refine and mature his devoted followers.

Pruning for Greater Fruitfulness: John 15

Once again the biblical motif of the stages of spiritual maturity echoing the stages of growth in nature can be seen in Jesus’s last supper discourse in John 15.²² Speaking to his disciples about the events to come, Jesus reminds them that they must “remain in the vine” (Jn 15:3), an allegory of surrendering to the life of the Spirit. He suggests that God is the “gardener” (Jn 15:1) who superintends the stages of growth development and ensures that the vine reaches its ultimate purpose of producing fruit. Throughout the process of maturation, the gardener will prune the vines so that they can “be even more fruitful” (Jn 15:2). During these periods of pruning, fruitful branches will be removed and to those onlookers who do not understand the gardening process, it could appear that the gardener is treating the vine harshly. However, Jesus assures his followers that as they trust and surrender to the work of the gardener in the stage of pruning, they “will bear much fruit” (Jn 15:5).

Within the lives of believers who desire to produce the fruit of the Spirit, there will likewise be stages where God allows a “cutting back” of those things that would

²¹ Ibid., 579-580.

²² The last supper discourse is recorded in John 14-17. This passage contains Jesus’s last words to his disciples following the last supper and preceding his arrest and crucifixion.

appear positive and productive in order to bring about even greater growth. Pleasurable feelings such as a sense of closeness to God, enjoyment of the Scriptures, and awe in worship may be removed by God for a significant time in order to facilitate greater growth in the spiritual realm. Boa writes,

The movement toward Christian proficiency generally leads to a point in which the senses are stripped of all pleasure and joy in prayer. This experience of aridity and apparent destruction is a gracious purifying process that leads the soul to direct its attention toward God to know itself only in him. Those who submit to these painful purifications learn to persevere in the pursuit of God even in the absence of spiritual consolations. . . . [This pruning] leads through dread to eventual joy, not despair; it refines the intentions of the heart and creates greater simplicity and sincerity.²³

God lovingly prunes back the fruitful branches in order to produce even more fruit: He removes that which appears good in order to gain that which is better.²⁴ God's desire is to purge from those he loves anything that would prevent the Spirit from flowing freely through their lives. As D.A. Carson writes, "He trims and prunes the branches" for greater productivity and God's greater glory (Jn 15:8).²⁵

Suffering Breaks Self Will: 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Coming to the realization that one cannot control one's own destiny is often a shock. But it is also an important stage in the maturing process.²⁶ The young child believes that he is the center of the universe and that whenever he cries someone will meet his need. However, over time, he enters a stage of maturity where he learns that he

²³ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 172.

²⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 356.

²⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1991), 513.

²⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 119-121.

is not in control, but is completely at the mercy of those who care for him.²⁷ When his wants are not instantly met and his cries for help go temporarily unattended he learns that he is powerless to meet his own needs. He discovers that he has no ability to feed, clothe or shelter himself without the gracious support of his loved ones. Fowler writes, “This fall is traumatic” and frightening for the infant,²⁸ however, this stage is also the place where “seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused.”²⁹ Fowler calls this stage “Undifferentiated faith”³⁰ and in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, Paul describes the parallel experience of moving from a spiritual stage of “undifferentiated faith” toward greater reliance and maturity in Christ.

Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul tells of the suffering and hardship he underwent on his third missionary journey: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed we felt we had received the sentence of death” (2 Cor 1:8-9). At this point on his journey, Paul was faced with the reality that he was not in control of the circumstances of his life. Things had not gone as he had hoped and he was aware that he was powerless to stop the relentless opposition he experienced - “The way to life was barred: death was in prospect.”³¹ In this place of despair God revealed to Paul that he was nothing without God’s sustaining power and gracious care. Paul explains, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 120.

²⁹ Ibid., 121.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B, Eerdmans, 1997), 86.

on God, who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:9). Paul was brought to a place where he was forced to acknowledge that control of his life was not in his hands but in the hands of God. There was absolutely nothing Paul could do to rescue himself. Gaebelein writes, “The rare word *exaporethenai* (“despaired”) implies the total unavailability of an exit (*poros*, “passage”) from oppressive circumstances.”³² He was forced to relinquish any self-reliance and was “compelled to utter dependence on God.”³³ Paul grew into a stage of faith where he developed “an instinctive and implicit trust in God. Paul was a changed man as a consequence of this experience.”³⁴ God will use suffering, hardship and perceived abandonment to bring believers to a place where their self will is replaced with a deep reliance on the sustaining power of God.

Stages of Faith Formation in the Scripture

As stated earlier, God’s desire is for his children to grow and develop into men and women of mature faith. The process of maturity is one that takes believers through various stages of faith where they grow spiritually just as they would grow physically. Each of these developmental stages, both physically and spiritually, can be accurately identified by certain behavioral traits, emotions and experiences that commonly occur within that stage. The life of David is a good example of the way in which God leads those he loves through these stages of faith in order to bring them to a place of maturity

³² Frank E. Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 10* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 321.

³³ *Ibid.*, 322.

³⁴ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 86.

and Godly influence. The writer of Hebrews likewise demonstrates the theory of faith formation stages in the letter of instruction to the early Christian believers in Rome.³⁵

Stages of Faith Formation in the Life of King David³⁶

The life of King David spans the Old Testament pages from the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Psalms to the New Testament genealogies of Christ recorded in the Gospels. He represents one of the great life journeys from childhood to adulthood, and from an infant faith to a deep maturity in God. David, who was first introduced in the Bible narrative as a young shepherd boy (1 Sm 6:10) was led by God through the many stages of faith until he became known as the greatest king of Israel (2 Sm 5:3) and “a man after [God’s] own heart” (Acts 13:22).³⁷

In 1 Samuel 16, David is described as a young boy. He is spending time alone with God in the fields tending his father’s sheep. It is likely that it was during these early days, as David enjoyed the beauty of his natural surroundings, played the harp and wrote songs, that he began the first stage of his faith journey: “The Recognition of God.”³⁸ Hagberg and Guelich write: “Frequently, nature will provide our initial entrée to the spiritual journey. . . . The rushing brook invigorates us . . . the lighting of a log fire

³⁵ Both Jerusalem and Palestine have also been suggested as possible destinations of the letter to the Hebrews, however, scholars generally agree that Rome is probably one of the most likely destinations. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 14. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, 20. Carson., Moo and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 401.

³⁶ The stages of faith formation as outlined in Hagberg and Guelich’s *The Critical Journey* will be used as a template for this discussion.

³⁷ David Mills writes “David’s reign and life became the standard by which all later kings were measured.” David Mills, *Reflections on the Life of King David* (US: Self-published, 2012), Kindle ebook.

³⁸ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 31-50.

inspires us; the warmth of the sun soothes us. . . . We see God in nature and long to experience God more in these ways.³⁹ It is possible that David's first recognition of God occurred in this way. As a young shepherd boy, when he gazed at the beauty of creation around him, he wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters" (Ps 23:1-2).

1 Samuel 16 records what could be seen as the second stage of David's spiritual journey: "The Life of Discipleship."⁴⁰ David is still shepherding sheep, playing the harp and communing with God (1 Sm 16:18) when Saul requests that he play the harp for him. 1 Samuel 16:21 says, "David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers." Describing this stage of development, Hagberg and Guelich write, "This stage is best characterized as a time of learning and belonging. . . . We are apprentices . . . we clearly are the learners, not the teachers. . . . We look to leaders to shape us, we are learning to follow and heed the advice and instruction of others."⁴¹

Stage three of David's journey, "The Productive Life,"⁴² could be said to have occurred from the time David battled Goliath until he was driven out of his home by Saul's jealousy. David had done his apprenticeship under Saul and 1 Samuel 18:30 states that he had "met with more success than the rest of Saul's offices, and his name become

³⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52-69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 53, 56.

⁴² Ibid., 72-89.

well known.” He had stepped into his gifting and learned how to reach outside himself and serve others. Hagberg and Guelich explain,

Stage 3 is best described as the “doing” stage. . . . It is positive and dynamic, centered on being productive in the area of our faith. . . . It feels exciting, fulfilling, awesome, inspiring, fruitful. . . . It seems to be almost an insatiable period because everything is going so well. . . . We experience a gradual increase in confidence . . . and are able to accept the fact that we can do specific things well.⁴³

However, right at the moment of David’s apparent success, he moves out of stage three and begins “The Journey Inward,”⁴⁴ where he “faces an abrupt change to almost the opposite mode.”⁴⁵ Everything he has built is now threatened by a crisis in his relationship with Saul (1 Sm 18:28-29). The great spiritual high that he had experienced whilst operating in his gift has now evaporated under the fear of Saul’s attack on his life (1 Sm 19:1). David is forced to flee his home, leave those he loves, and live as a fugitive. His productive life suddenly seems ruined. Hagberg and Guelich write, “When this stage comes, many feel propelled into it by an event outside themselves. . . . For the first time, our faith does not seem to work. We feel remote, immobilized, unsuccessful, hurt, ashamed, or reprehensible. . . . Things begin to unravel and some people find themselves asking a lot of questions.”⁴⁶ David is at a loss to understand why God has seemingly abandoned him (Ps 10). His confident foundations feel as though they are crumbling and he is plagued with doubts and questions as to whether God even cares (Ps 10).

⁴³ Ibid., 73-74.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92-111.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 94-95.

From this place of brokenness, where David's hopes appear to have been dashed, he begins to realign his life and future ministry. In the cave of Adullam he gathers with other malcontents and marginalized men and provides them with refuge and protection. He starts to rebuild his leadership influence, but this time, from a place of humility, brokenness and servanthood.⁴⁷ He is no longer relying on the strength of his own abilities, but writes, "I cry to you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living'" (Ps 142:5).⁴⁸

David emerges from stage four, having broken through "The Wall"⁴⁹ of his own ego and facing his true vulnerability and weakness. He is now ready to embark on "The Journey Outward" from a "new, grounded center of [him]self."⁵⁰ Hagberg and Guelich suggest that in stage five "our primary motivation in life becomes the desire to love honestly and live according to God's purposes."⁵¹ This can be clearly identified in David's refusal to lift his hand in retaliation toward Saul. Rather than seek the self-satisfaction of revenge, David moves from a center of love and honor, desiring the approval of God more than his own personal gratification (1 Sm 26:9). He is no longer

⁴⁷ Mills, *Reflections on the Life of King David*, Kindle ebook.

⁴⁸ "This psalm is a prayer, the substance of which David offered up to God when he was forced by Saul to take shelter in a cave." Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 726.

⁴⁹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 114-130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 132-149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

driven by his own immature ego, but has been refined by God to live beyond himself and forgive those who harm him.⁵²

Finally towards the end of David's life, a shift into stage six "The Life of Love" can be seen.⁵³ Having gone through many years of successful leadership, along with times of hardship, brokenness, shame and grief, David ultimately comes to a place where he "reflects God to others in the world more clearly and consistently than [he] ever thought possible."⁵⁴ God's sovereign dealing in his life had refined David and he had come to a place of maturity where he forgave (2 Sm 14:2-33) as he had been forgiven (2 Sm 12; Ps 51) and he loved as he had been loved (Ps 119). Hagberg and Guelich in describing this stage of the Christian journey write:

At stage 6 we become aware that the more of God we have, the less of everything else we need. We do not renounce material possessions. We simply learn to need them less; we become detached from things and people as props or bolstering devices. . . . We may not be in good health, nor do we need to be beautiful by the world's standards, but we are wonderful by God's standards. . . . We choose to do anything God asks, whether the most menial or the most prestigious things. We can be close to God wither way.⁵⁵

In his final years this would appear to be the stage of spiritual formation within which King David lived. "God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do'" (Acts 13:22). David died having relinquished the power and authority of his great kingdom to his son Solomon, and having humbled himself before God whom he loved and served until the

⁵² Mills, *Reflections on the Life of King David*, Kindle ebook.

⁵³ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 152-159.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

end. In Psalm 63, toward the end of his life, David's focus has shifted from the search for prominence, to the desire for intimacy. He writes, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you. . . . On my bed I remember you, I think of you through the watches of the night because you are my help."

Stages of Faith Formation in the Early Church: "Milk to Meat:" Hebrews 5:12-14

The book of Hebrews is a call to Christian maturity. Written to an audience of first-century Jewish believers,⁵⁶ the author condemns their spiritual immaturity,⁵⁷ and seeks to motivate them to greater growth and development in their faith. The message in Hebrews 5:12-14 is clear; there are stages of faith maturity and God's desire is that his followers acknowledge these stages and grow into spiritual adulthood. The author writes,

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Heb 5:12-14).

The stages of faith described by the author begin with infancy, where there is a need for mother's milk (Heb 5:13), through to adulthood where solid food is eaten (Heb 5:14). There is a clear indication that the Christian life is one of progression from childish and immature faith, to a deeper understanding of God's purposes. Guthrie observes, "When the author exclaims, "You need milk, not solid food" (Heb. 5:12), he is describing in no uncertain terms a level of immaturity among his readers. Spiritually they are acting like babies still suckling at a mother's breast, unconcerned with the rich, hearty foods of

⁵⁶ See note above regarding destination and recipients of letter.

⁵⁷ Carson et al, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 393.

the adults' table."⁵⁸ However, the state of maturity where hearty food is easily digested does not simply occur by itself. It is the result of faithful perseverance through stages of hardship and uncertainty. True maturity can only come to those who have experienced the painful separation of being weaned from the spiritual breast and have learned to walk in faith even though God sometimes appears hidden from their view. Those who fail to progress past the "elementary teachings about Christ" (Heb 6:1) are often seeking to avoid suffering which ultimately "prevents them from working out the deeper implications of the gospel in their lives."⁵⁹

The writer of Hebrews is suggesting that maturity in Christ is the better way, albeit not always the easiest path. There is an implication that one can choose to remain in an infant state if they so desire.⁶⁰ Refusing to give up childish comforts and remaining in a state of infancy may offer temporal satisfaction, but ultimately will not be pleasing to God who desires maturity. According to Guthrie, "His hope is that they will repent of their spiritual immaturity, grasp hold of the deeper matters of the faith, and, ultimately, endure in the face of persecution."⁶¹

The Dark Night of the Soul: Doubt and Questioning

One of the finest attributes of the Bible is the way in which it portrays men and women of God in their most authentic form. Their mistakes, failures, willful disobedience, doubts and fears are all recorded alongside their triumphs, victories and

⁵⁸ Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, 202.

⁵⁹ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 209.

⁶⁰ Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, 202-204.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

successes. The chronicling of God's interaction with humankind throughout Scripture reveals not only the highs, but also the lows of the faith journey, offering hope and affirmation to believers who encounter doubts and discouraging times. When Christ-followers are led into the dark night where they begin to question and doubt their faith, they can draw hope from the fact that Scripture records a similar journey by one of Jesus's own disciples.⁶² When they feel abandoned and doubt God's goodness, they can turn to the pages of the Psalms and know that a man greatly loved by God has also questioned God's purposes and plans.⁶³ The doubt and questioning experienced in the dark night of the soul is graciously recorded in the pages of Scripture and offers hope and affirmation to those who feel alone on this stage of the journey toward maturity in Christ.

Thomas Grows through Doubt

Doubt and unbelief are not the same thing. Doubt involves the weighing and considering of options and possibilities that may or may not be true, whilst unbelief is conclusive and refuses to engage with ideas or concepts already convinced to be false. Doubt is open to reason and intelligent dialogue; unbelief is certain of its "rightness" and shuts itself off from debate. Doubt is open to question; unbelief is certain that questions need not be asked. Doubt can lead to new pathways of understanding and engaging with one's faith, but unbelief refuses to accept the validity or necessity of faith. Gregory Boyd writes, "Like most Christians, I once assumed . . . that doubt is the enemy of faith. . . . But the only way to determine if a belief is true is to rationally investigate it. Which

⁶² See the story of Thomas in Matthew 20:24-28.

⁶³ See the laments of King David in Psalm 6 and 10.

means you have to doubt it. It's simply impossible for people to be concerned that their beliefs are true unless they're genuinely open to the possibility that their current beliefs are false.⁶⁴

Often referred to as "Doubting Thomas," the story of Thomas Didymus recorded in John 20:24-29 serves as a liberating example of the necessary and positive function of doubt in the Christian journey.⁶⁵ Despite the disparaging name given to Thomas and the common accusation toward him of unbelief, Scripture actually reveals him to be a man of faith and courage.⁶⁶ When the other disciples were reluctant to follow Jesus to Bethany for fear of their lives, Thomas alone remained faithful and offered to die with Jesus (Jn 11:16).⁶⁷ He had been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry and was present at the last supper. There is no denying that Thomas was a committed disciple of Jesus.

Having been absent when Jesus first appeared to the other eleven disciples, Thomas expressed incredulity at his friends' announcement that Jesus had risen from the dead. Doubting the validity of their story, Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25). His reluctance to believe their story was understandable. The disciples themselves had not believed Jesus had risen from the dead until after he had

⁶⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 13-14.

⁶⁵ There are 2,790,000 results under the Google search "Doubting Thomas," Google, https://www.google.com.au/?gfe_rd=cr&ei=2YN9U7usOcjC8ge-_YCgBg#q=Doubting+Thomas (accessed March 30, 2014).

⁶⁶ Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 1628-1629.

⁶⁷ Some have suggested that this verse refers to Thomas dying with Lazarus rather than dying with Jesus. However, Albert Barnes states, "Others suppose more correctly, that it refers to Jesus: He is about to throw himself into danger. . . . [Thomas says] Let us not forsake him. Let us attend him and die with him." Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Publications, 2000), 362.

appeared to them in the flesh (Mk 16:11). Thomas, like the other disciples, was trying to wrestle with the impossibility of the news. His statement of doubt was not a stance of unbelief, but rather a sincere desire to ascertain truth. Thomas did not turn from his faith in Jesus. He did not abandon the disciples as they met together. He doubted and questioned, but held onto his faith. And Jesus lovingly responded to his need for confirmation. Entering the locked room, Jesus approached Thomas and said “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (Jn 20:26). Jesus’s actions were affirming towards Thomas. Recognizing his genuine desire to seek truth, Jesus reached out and met Thomas at his place of questioning. Henry Drummond observes, “Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief . . . for the intellectual questioning of Thomas he was respectful and tolerant. When Thomas came to him and denied his very resurrection, and stood before him waiting for the scathing words and lashing for his unbelief, they never came. They never came!”⁶⁸

Jesus understood that wrestling with doubt is a necessary part of the faith journey and must be acknowledged in order to reach spiritual maturity. In fact, it was through Thomas’s honest engagement with his feelings of doubt that he was able to experience a life-changing encounter with Christ culminating in a prophetic declaration of Jesus’s divinity (Jn 20:28). Thomas’s questioning and uncertainty led him to a place where he had a revelation of Jesus that was so profound that he exclaimed “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28). Arthur Pink notes, “This is the only time in the Gospels that anyone owned

⁶⁸ Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World* (ebook Publications: FQ Classics, 2008), Kindle ebook.

Christ as ‘God.’ . . . It was a blessed testimony to our Lord’s Deity. It was a clear, unmistakable declaration that Thomas believed him to be not only man, but God.”⁶⁹ This revelation from the Spirit of God came not from a man who was in the middle of a faith-filled time of exuberant worship, but rather from a man who was in the process of wrestling with questions and doubts.

Thomas’s story reveals God’s gracious and patient heart toward those who are struggling to make sense of their faith. Stages of questioning and doubt are stepping-stones to greater trust and spiritual revelation. Rather than signifying a state of spiritual unbelief, doubt actually indicates the believer’s honest desire to wrestle with difficult faith concepts. Like Thomas, followers of Christ who acknowledge their doubts, yet remain faithful to God in the midst of their uncertainty, will ultimately be rewarded with a more expansive understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.⁷⁰

David’s Questioning of God

Arterburn and Felton in their exposé of dysfunctional models of Christian faith, list “Toxic Rule #6” as “Don’t ask questions, especially if they are tough ones.”⁷¹ They note, “Questions reveal that a follower has some doubts and lacks faith. Any questioning

⁶⁹ Arthur. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 1113-1114.

⁷⁰ Extra-biblical literature records that Thomas had one of the most powerful and influential evangelistic ministries of the twelve disciples. He was active outside the Roman Empire in countries such as Osroene, (now eastern Turkey) Armenia, Iran, India and Southeast Asia. Eusebius stated that he was responsible for the conversion of princes and influential leaders of nations. Tradition claims Thomas died of stab wounds inflicted by Hindu soldiers whilst he was praying in a cave. C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1997), 120-135.

⁷¹ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 215.

is considered to be resistance to the organization or the leader.”⁷² This attitude toward the asking of a sincere question could not be more opposite to the examples observed throughout Scripture. The Psalms record many instances of David’s open and authentic relationship with God, where his prayers become desperate questions and pleas for understanding. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me” (Ps 13:1-2)? David was not afraid to open his heart before God and question him regarding God’s slowness to intervene in his life. He asks, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble” (Ps 10:1).

During the stage of faith formation where it appears that everything around one’s life is being shifted and shaken, “Gnawing questions become more and more unmanageable. . . . We are no longer able to ignore or repress them.”⁷³ It is normal to want answers even though they many not be available. It is understandable that uncertainty will push the believer toward questioning God’s ability and willingness to act (Ps 74:11). When God’s favor and blessing appear to have been cruelly taken away, the need for answers can become unbearable.⁷⁴ David cries, “My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, How long” (Ps 6:3). And again he prays, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God I cry out by day but you do not answer me, by night, but I find no rest” (Ps 22:1-2).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 95.

⁷⁴ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 101.

Thankfully, God knows the depths of the heart and understands human frailty (Ps 103:14). He acknowledges the need for his followers to honestly express their doubts and questions. God does not reject or show anger toward the believer who cries out in distress, but rather hears their cry and turns toward them in love (Ps 18:6). David writes, “In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him into his ears” (Ps 18:6).

David demonstrates an open heart and an honest faith that is determined to engage with God even though his life is surrounded by darkness. He does not turn away from God in disappointment or anger, but turns to God, bringing his questions and frustrations to God as to a friend. This is likewise the sign of a mature follower of Jesus Christ: one who understands that questioning God is not a sign of disrespect, but rather an indication of an authentic faith, grounded in the assurance of God’s unconditional love.

The Dark Night of the Soul: God’s Silence and Spiritual Darkness

When silence descends on the earnest prayers of a committed follower of Jesus it can be confusing, discouraging and heartbreaking. After many years of faithful, loving communion with the Spirit, it is shocking when the heavens fall silent and God seems distant. Susan,⁷⁵ a Christian for thirty-two years, writes, “I can’t bear this silence a minute longer. If God cares for me at all, I need him to speak to me. I need him to answer some of my questions. Why is he treating me like this? Why is he letting me suffer? Why

⁷⁵ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

isn't he loving me like he used to love me? I used to feel so close to God and now I feel nothing but an empty space where he used to be. Everything is confusing and dark."⁷⁶

In the dark night of the soul, when God temporarily removes the sense of his presence from the believer's life, it feels as though a great weight of heaviness has descended and settled on the heart. As the writer of Lamentations protested to God, "You have hidden yourself in a cloud so our prayers cannot reach you" (Lam 3:44). The disillusioned follower of Christ finds that there are no immediate answers to the questions of "why?" and there appears to be no clear path forward beyond the darkness. They are caught in a liminal space where the only option is to surrender into peace and quietude and trust in the goodness of God.⁷⁷

Thankfully, believers can be encouraged by the fact that Jesus knows and understands their feelings of discouragement and pain. Hebrews assures them that Jesus empathizes with their sense of weakness, having experienced the same temptations and challenges whilst on earth (Heb 4:11). Pete Greig observes, "Even Jesus suffered the silence of unanswered prayer. The One who turned water to wine, healed the sick and even raised the dead, was also denied and apparently abandoned by the Father. What's more, as far as we can tell from the Gospel accounts, Christ's unanswered prayers seem to have been concentrated on His time of greatest need: the four days of His Passion."⁷⁸ During the days leading up to Jesus betrayal and crucifixion, and then in the hours

⁷⁶ Personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

⁷⁷ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 68.

⁷⁸ Pete Greig, *God On Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer* (San Francisco: Regal Books, 2007), 15.

following his burial and resurrection, Jesus himself experienced a dark night of the soul where God was silent and darkness filled the earth.

Perceived Abandonment: *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani* (Mt 27:46)

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Jesus cried out in desperation and agony to his father in heaven from a cross on Golgotha (Mt 27:33, 46). The unimaginable pain from the cruel beatings and the torture of crucifixion must have racked his body and left him physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually shattered. And then, in the midst of such agony, the previously "unbroken communion between the Father and the Son was mysteriously broken."⁷⁹ Jesus was alone on the cross. The Word who had existed before time began, who had experienced perfect unity within the Trinity, was now cut off from the unconditional love he had always known (Jn 1:1). The pain of separation must have been the final unthinkable humiliation that Jesus was forced to endure. In his isolation he cried out to God, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani,*" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"⁸⁰ In that moment, Jesus experienced the pain and remoteness of God's silence and asked the same question that has echoed down through generations of faithful believers: My God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you left me alone? Why have cut off your voice from my heart? Why have you gone silent at my most vulnerable and helpless moment? Why God? And in that moment, God

⁷⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew: Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 722.

⁸⁰ Jennifer Rothschild suggests that Christ's "cry" was an indication of his deep pain and despondency toward God. "Jesus could have whispered his question from the cross, but both Matthew and Mark (Mark 15:34) record that he shouted it. When we find ourselves on a cross in our lives – a place in which we feel pain, confusion, or darkness – we want to shout to God." Jennifer Rothschild, *God is Just Not Fair: Finding Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 112.

continued to remain silent. Greig adds, “Nailed to a cross and slowly suffocating, the Son cried out to the Father with a chilling question: ‘My God,’ He gasped, ‘My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ And there was no response to the ‘why.’ No dove descending. No booming voice. No answer to prove the question wrong.”⁸¹ Jesus’s prayer was left hanging in the air and God in his sovereignty chose not to refute his son’s accusation of abandonment, but to reinforce it with deafening silence.

Nonetheless, God’s silence did not denote lack of care. Scripture assures believers that God heard Jesus’s desperate cries for help (Heb 5:7). The Father chose to ignore Jesus’s cry not because he was indifferent, but because he desired Jesus to fulfill a greater, sovereign plan. Hebrews 5:7-9 explains:

[Jesus] offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

God’s thoughts are not always the same as the thoughts of his followers, nor are his ways the same as their ways (Isa 55:8). Jesus himself would not have chosen the path God set out for him (Lk 22:42). The suffering, pain, abandonment and silence were not Jesus’s choice, but he surrendered his will to the sovereign will of the Father.⁸² Jesus understood that his anguish had a greater purpose beyond his immediate condition, so he

⁸¹ Greig, *God on Mute*, 16.

⁸² Leon Morris asserts that the use of the word “My” in Jesus prayer of “My God,” denotes an attitude of intimacy and trust despite his cry of abandonment: “The human Jesus felt and gave expression to the abandonment, but he also retained his trust. “My” points to a continuing relationship. . . . In the anguish of godforsakenness Jesus still cried out in trust.” Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 722.

submitted to God's plan and the greater glory it would bring (Isa 53:3-12). He trusted God to work all things together for good (Ro 8:28).

Such is the experience of many devoted followers of Jesus who like their Lord, surrender to God and pray, "not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Their heartfelt desire is to walk in deep fellowship with God and they are prepared to yield to him no matter what the cost. However, when they are actually faced with the shocking refinement of the dark night of the soul, they can feel as though God has abandoned them. Their prayers appear to have been unheard and the God in whom they placed their trust appears to have betrayed them when they needed him most.⁸³ The silence of God is perceived as his lack of care rather than a wonderful act of grace. They fail to appreciate that God is doing a profoundly sacred and precious maturing work in their hearts and "liberating [them] from attachments and idolatries, bringing [them] to the realization of [their] true nature."⁸⁴ The silence is a gift even though it does not feel that way. God has a plan for greater glory; a path of suffering that reaps the reward of Christ-like maturity and a deeper fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Grief and Loss: Silent Saturday when God Lay Dead in a Tomb

For Jesus's disciples, the silence and darkness did not end with Christ's death. His lifeless body was placed in a borrowed tomb (Mt 27:59) and all the disciples' hopes and dreams of a victorious life with Christ were likewise buried with him (Lk 24:21). The disciples had walked and talked with Jesus for three full years, sharing their days and

⁸³ Rothschild, *God is Just Not Fair*, 112-116.

⁸⁴ May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 67.

nights, eating together, laughing together and being taught the heart of God from a leader they loved and trusted. But now, everything seemed to have been taken from them. The one they loved lay dead in a tomb and their faith in him lay in tatters. When they awoke on the morning following Jesus's crucifixion, they must have felt grief and loss, together with a great aching silence. Greig writes, "The Bible tells us almost nothing about this mysterious day sandwiched between crucifixion and resurrection when God allowed the whole of creation to live without answers. It's a day of confusion and silence."⁸⁵

Yet in the midst of this deafening silence, God was hard at work. The disciples had no idea of the magnificent plan that God was outworking (Lk 18:31-34). Jesus had told them that he would rise from the dead, but they were blinded by grief and did not appear to believe that it would really happen (Lk 24:4-8). Like all people who lose someone they love, the disciples' desire to turn back the clock and once again enjoy the familiar fellowship of walking and talking with Jesus must have been overwhelming (Jn 16:6). But God was taking them to a greater, more productive space in the Kingdom. They were on the cusp of something truly profound even though it felt like death. Within the silence, in a place of mourning, God was expanding their relationship with him and changing the way the Spirit would work in their lives (Jn 16:1-11). God was taking them from a small space to a large space; but first they had to let go of the old relationship that they had previously had with Jesus. The old, familiar ways had to die so that greater, more wonderful ways could grow (Jn 16:7). Greig continues, "The silence and unknowing of Holy Saturday are essential to growing deeper in our relationship with God. The silence of God is intentional. It is one of the great disciplines He puts on His

⁸⁵ Greig, *God on Mute*, 193.

children ‘that we may share in his holiness’ (Hebrews 12:11). . . . When God is silent and may even appear absent from the world, we may be sure that God is weaning us off ‘adult supervision’ but that He has not abandoned us altogether.”⁸⁶ Even when it appears that God is dead in a tomb and the old ways of relating to Jesus have been buried in silence, the Spirit of God is still very much at work. The old things are passing away and all things are becoming new (2 Cor 5:17).

Navigating the Dark Night of the Soul

The dark night of the soul can be a particularly challenging and discouraging time for believers who are unaware of its existence or unprepared for the darkness they will encounter. For those Christ followers who do not understand that God often uses silence, hiddenness, hardship and obscurity to mature his loved ones, it can be a heart wrenching experience to perceive that God has removed his presence. The Bible does, however, offer hope for those who are undergoing this stage of faith maturity and provides strategy for cooperating with God in the refining process. Through the love and support of the community of authentic believers, together with a willingness to encounter God in the darkness, believers can navigate this challenging stage of the faith journey secure in the knowledge that God is at work in their lives (Phil 2:13).

Love and Support from the Community of Authentic Believers

In Genesis 2:18, God said “It is not good that man should be alone.” Human beings were designed to live in fellowship with one another just as the Trinitarian God lives in perfect fellowship as Father, Son and Spirit. When God created the first female it

⁸⁶ Ibid., 199.

was because he desired for men and women to share the journey of life together, loving and supporting one another through the good times and the bad (Mt 19:5). Life was never meant to be lived in isolation, but as part of a community where people grow together through mutual support, understanding and accountability. Boa writes, “Growth involves the whole person and it is enhanced in relation rather than isolation. . . . We develop in our thinking, our character, and our application when we are connected to authentic people who share the journey with us, particularly when some of them have progressed further down the road than we have.”⁸⁷ As believers begin the journey into the dark night, where obscurity descends and the path forward is uncertain, the support of a community of faith is absolutely vital. This stage of transformation cannot be walked alone.

In writing to the church in Rome, Paul encouraged the believers to remember that they were part of something bigger than themselves; they were different parts of one body and because “each member belongs to all the others” (Ro 12:5) when one part suffers, they all suffer. He reminded them to “be devoted to one another in love” and to “honor one another above [them]selves” (Ro 12:10). Within this type of loving community, where each person is nurtured, followers of Christ will find the support and understanding they need to navigate the stages of doubt and darkness. When their faith is shaken and questions rise, they will find patience and love from those who know what it is to “mourn with those who mourn” (Ro 12:15). Rather than feel as though they need to hide their struggles, those in the dark night will be afforded a safe place to be honest about their doubts and fears. Without fear of condemnation, believers will be able to open

⁸⁷ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 437.

up to one another, confess their honest feelings and receive prayer and healing to help them navigate the journey ahead (Js 5:16).

Paul exhorts the believers at Galatia to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) and to show understanding and patience toward those who are struggling. The Greek word for “burdens” in this text is *baros* meaning, “Weight, heaviness, great trouble, anything grievous and hard to bear.”⁸⁸ In this instance the community of believers is told to help those who are too weighed down with their own loads to stay the journey. Sometimes the burdens carried by others do not appear attractive and can often be misjudged or misunderstood. However, there is an implication here that the Body of Christ is called to look past negative surface behavior or “burdens” in order to see each other as God sees them, seeking to bring restoration and reconciliation, rather than judgment (Gal 6:1). Things are not always as they seem, and when mature believers within the faith community come alongside those who are struggling, they are able to discern the movement of God in those people’s lives and offer great encouragement and affirmation. Gerald May observes,

[During the dark night of the soul] people lose the concepts and images about God that have served them so well in the past. It is not at all uncommon in experiences of the night for individuals to doubt that they even believe in God anymore because all the signs and hallmarks of what they considered to be their faith are disappearing. Yet to a perceptive companion, the love for God is still there . . . [and can be observed] in the yearning felt by the individual.⁸⁹

Those within the faith community have a unique opportunity to provide much needed affirmation and comfort to those in the dark night who are unable to sense God’s

⁸⁸ Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 67.

⁸⁹ May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 172-173.

presence. They are able to see the movement of the Spirit in the life of the discouraged believer and assure them that God is in the experience even though they may not feel it. The community of believers plays an integral role in “encouraging the disheartened” (1 Thes 5:14) and helping them to navigate the dark night from a more objective standpoint. Ultimately, the support of the community allows those who are feeling abandoned to come to a place where they are able to accept the experience as something that God has allowed into their life for their growth.⁹⁰

Encountering God in the Darkness

The Bible is replete with images of God actively encountering humankind from within the midst of darkness. God made covenant with Abraham in deep darkness (Gen 15:17-21). He spoke with Moses from within a “thick cloud of darkness” (Ex 20:19-21). At the completion of Solomon’s temple, God declared that he would “dwell in thick darkness” (1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron 6:1). The psalmists write that God appears majestically from heaven with “darkness under His feet” (Ps 18:9) and that “clouds and darkness surround Him” (Ps 97:2). Jacob wrestled with God in the darkness and was deeply wounded and intensely changed (Gen 32:22-32). Even the most profound events surrounding the incarnation were clothed in darkness: Jesus was conceived in the darkness of the womb (Lk 1:35); He was born in darkness (Lk 2:7-8); he died in darkness (Mt 27:45-50); and he was resurrected in darkness (Mt 28:1). God often does his intimate and most transformative work shrouded in the obscurity of darkness. Concealed from the

⁹⁰ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 136.

eyes of humankind, God changes and rearranges circumstances breathing new life and hope into the world.

At creation, God had the opportunity to totally extinguish the darkness, however, he kept the nighttime as an important space of restoration, rest and quiet (Gn 1:3-5). It is at night, when all is still and clothed in darkness that the body is refreshed and renewed. There is a place of silence that occurs in the darkness where God can be encountered without distraction (Ps 63:6). Nature further echoes God's design to bring about transformation through darkness as seen in the metamorphosis of the caterpillar. Within the blackness of the chrysalis the Creator's hidden work of radical change is clearly illustrated. The caterpillar cannot rush the process. It must wait in the darkness for nature to do its work, without understanding, but fully surrendered to the changes taking place. Sue Monk Kidd observes, "Everything incubates in darkness. . . . Whenever new life grows and emerges, darkness is crucial to the process. Whether it's the caterpillar in the chrysalis, the seed in the ground, the child in the womb, or the True Self in the soul, there's always a time of waiting in the dark."⁹¹

God does not only work in the brightness of day and the warmth of the light. He is also encountered in the blackness of night and the evening darkness. God's great promise to Isaiah was that "I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by name" (Isa 45:3). Clearly there are treasures to be found in the darkness that will remain undiscovered by those refusing to leave the comfort and warmth of the light. The dark

⁹¹ Sue Monk-Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 148.

night of the soul, where blackness and uncertainty obscure the sight are sacred spaces in which God routinely meets with, and transforms, those he loves.

As the community of believers begins to acknowledge the divine nature of stages of darkness in the maturing process, those who have been led into these nighttime spaces will be encouraged and affirmed. Their challenging journey will be validated as they begin to appreciate that God is present in the darkness and at work in their lives. Rather than being judged as faithless or backslidden, their journey into the dark night will be seen as a cocooning season where God will do a transformative work releasing them into their true purpose. They will be to see the grace of God meeting them in the darkness.

PART THREE
MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

MINISTRY PLAN

Part Three of this paper (comprising Chapters 6 and 7) presents the proposed strategy for CityLife Church to move forward and become a community that engages with, rather than denies, the maturing stages of doubt and spiritual darkness. Chapter 6 paints a picture of how CityLife adults will grow and mature as a result of acknowledging the importance of these times of hardship. Building on strong theological foundations, a preferred future will see men and women confidently identifying and navigating their particular stage in the faith formation journey. Those experiencing stages of doubt or spiritual darkness will be understood and affirmed through the implementation of the strategy content. Finally, a description of the training and leadership personnel required to implement the strategy will ensure adequate support for the project.

Chapter Seven outlines the implementation of the proposed strategy. It provides a suggested timeline that details what tasks need to be completed leading up to the launching of the teaching series. A description of the necessary training and development of the teaching team and small group leaders ensures that all participants are equipped for the task. A list of resources and support personnel needed to undertake the project are

included along with an assessment plan that will evaluate the effectiveness of the project and determine whether or not the strategy goals have been met.

Theological Implications

Whilst it is sometimes claimed that “ignorance is bliss,” in the case of one’s spiritual journey, the idiom “forewarned is forearmed” is a far better option. As noted in previous chapters, it can be frustrating and discouraging for Christ followers to enter stages of testing without prior understanding or knowledge that these stages are a normative part of the maturing process. However, as believers acknowledge, understand and affirm the existence of the stages of faith in the Christian journey, they will be better equipped to handle the sometimes difficult and confusing spiritual darkness they will inevitably encounter. When questions and doubts rise from within a previously certain faith, those traversing this challenging terrain will be assured that it is all part of the journey and that God is growing and maturing their faith.

Undergoing Stages of Change and Growth

Bruce Demarest writes, “Just as we develop physically and emotionally from childhood to adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, maturity and old age, Christians grow continuously as they move through the spiritual seasons. . . . While God invites us to grow and mature, we retain the freedom to resist his gracious call.”¹ As stated earlier, God’s desire is that every believer should grow and mature, so that they might ultimately “measure up to the full and complete standard of Christ” (Eph 4:13). During one’s

¹ Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul: Stages of Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 13.

Christian journey, there will be stages of change and development that will require trust, surrender and cooperation with the Spirit of God. As believers are taught the principles of kingdom growth, they will come to the realization that every stage is not filled with elation and excitement.

Although the beginning of the journey may be defined by eagerness and a tangible sense of God's surrounding presence, CityLife congregants will come to understand that as they grow in maturity, they will likely encounter stages where God requires them to walk purely by faith in his faithfulness, rather than by their feelings. They may feel that God has abandoned them and, like Christ, they may wonder why God refuses to answer their prayers for deliverance. However, they will have gained a clear understanding that spiritual growth will require them to let go of childish dependence on past warm feelings of consolation, and instead, they will learn to eat the "dry bread of faith."² Believers desirous to reach maturity, will be prepared for change and understand that growing up may require them to let go of their past attachments and press on in faith toward the prize of deep union with God (Phil 3:13-14).

Providing a Valid Model for Clarifying and Normalizing the Maturing Process

When there is an acknowledgement that the Christian journey does not consist of one long, glorious life of happiness and pleasure, there also exists a corresponding acknowledgement that stages of darkness, doubt and loss will form part of the walk toward maturity in Christ. Examples from the lives of great biblical characters will be used by CityLife leaders to show that stages of hardship and God's hiddenness are

² Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 84.

commonplace amongst those whom God calls, refines and matures. The lives of Job, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and King David are just some of the faithful men of God who will be used to exemplify the way in which God leads his people through the stages of faith formation.³ Examination of these narratives normalizes the stages of faith in one's everyday life. CityLife congregants can read accounts of infant faith where one comes to a trusting awareness of God; followed by the confident and successful use of talents and gifts in service to God; then the shock of the dark night of the soul, where committed disciples are forced into places of hardship, doubt and uncertainty in order to bring about God's purposes; before finally being restored to full union with God.⁴ Believers will be validated and affirmed as they acknowledge that God is maturing them in the same way that he has matured generations of faithful men and woman before them: by leading them through stages of consolation as well as stages of desolation; by revealing himself and by hiding himself; through great blessing and through great suffering.

Identifying one's own Stage of Faith Formation and Promoting Space for Growth

As the community of faith comes to understand that God matures his followers by leading them through various stages of growth, they will also begin to appreciate that everyone is at different stages in the journey and must be treated accordingly. Richard Rohr observes that many of the problems within faith communities could be resolved if there was an understanding that people are at different levels and stages of growth and

³ Job 1-42; Genesis 12-25; Genesis 25-35; Genesis 37-50; 1 Samuel; 2 Samuel; 1 Kings; 1 Chronicles.

⁴ This is a very broad overview of all the stages of faith formation theories. The different theorists offer a wide variety of the number of stages and the description of those stages. However, they all have similar overarching themes of a happy and fulfilled life leading to failure and brokenness, then back to redemption and restoration.

therefore they react and respond in vastly different ways.⁵ Those who have progressed past the early stages of conversion will appreciate the joy and anticipation of coming to faith in Christ and can therefore assist in discipling those beginning their journey. Those within the CityLife community who may appear to be cynical or discouraged will be validated and affirmed in their questions and doubts by those who understand that progression from one stage of faith maturity to another often requires the deconstruction of early belief systems. As the stages of faith are identified in one another's lives, those who feel that God has abandoned them will be reassured that this is often a sign that they are being purged in the dark night of the soul and that God is still very present in their lives. CityLife life group leader, Philip,⁶ writes,

Since learning about the stages of spiritual development I have so much more patience for people in my life group. I used to listen to some of them rave on about God telling them what to wear and finding them car parks and I wanted to tell them to stop being so flippant. But now I understand that they're just doing what young Christians in early stages of faith do. . . . I know I'm in a dark-night stage . . . and so I'm not so hard on myself now. I don't get so annoyed with them anymore and I understand why they think I sound like I don't have any faith. I'm like a teenager trying to find my own way and they are like babies still enjoying their parents' care. . . . I get it now and it's an incredible relief.⁷

Preferred Future: Supporting those who are in Stages of Doubt or Spiritual Darkness

As outlined above, when the pervasive culture in which believers live and worship celebrates success, health, wealth and happiness as the goal of life, it can be difficult to reconcile failure, sickness, financial hardship or suffering. And when that

⁵ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2009), 163-164. See also, *Richard Rohr's Daily Email Meditations* from Center for Action and Contemplation, "Levels of Growth," Sunday, January 26, 2014.

⁶ Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁷ Except from personal email from CityLife congregation member: *permission granted*.

culture confuses the goodness of God with “feeling good,” believers can find themselves disillusioned with God and wonder why he has removed his blessing from their lives. Whilst those whose lives are outwardly successful happily claim that God has favored and blessed them, those who are undergoing struggles are often forced to hide their pain for fear of being judged “faithless.” In the current environment, CityLife members are consistently faced with the outward appearance of success and blessing and it can be extremely hard for those who are struggling to be honest about their doubts, fears and questions and gain much needed support. However, the preferred future for CityLife Church would be vastly different to this.

Following a strategic educational program designed to introduce adult members to stages of faith formation theory, CityLife Church would become a community of authentic believers who offer understanding and support for people on all stages of the journey toward Christian maturity. Men and women would understand that the path to spiritual maturity requires growth in areas that are often challenging. They would come to appreciate that God’s blessing is not synonymous with wealth, health and happiness, but that there are times when God appears to remove his blessing out of love and a desire to promote growth. There would be an acknowledgement that doubt and questions are indicators of a faith-filled desire to establish greater intimacy with God, not a sign of unbelief or apostasy. They would reinforce the truth that maturity in Christ comes at a cost and that suffering and the hiddenness of God can be valid indicators of the dark night of the soul experience.

CityLife congregants would become familiar with the various stages of faith so that they would better identify their own place in the journey as well as those with whom they live, serve and pray. They would easily recognize the characteristic hallmarks of each of the stages and help people engage with God “where they are.” CityLife believers would come to appreciate the differences and diversity of the community rather than trying to force everyone into the same stage. They would understand that one stage is not better than the other, but simply different.

There would develop a culture of honesty where the fear of being criticized or judged for expressing uncertainty would be covered by a heart of grace, love and understanding. Men and women would be free to share their struggles and CityLife would become a safe place where people “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “mourn with those who mourn” (Ro 12:15). Ultimately, this awareness would enable CityLife Church to become a community that is equipped to acknowledge, identify and navigate the various stages of faith formation and especially support those who are in stages of doubt or spiritual darkness.

Strategy Goals

Through the implementation of a proposed strategy of pulpit teaching and small-group engagement it is anticipated that CityLife adults will come to a full appreciation that Christ-like maturity is a lifetime journey of growth, development and spiritual refinement. As the stages of faith formation are explained, and the particular characteristics displayed in these stages are identified, congregants will be able to easily identify their own stage in the journey, and that of others around them. Scriptural

teaching around the truth that God uses stages of darkness, hiddenness, uncertainty and doubt to elicit deep change in the life of the believer, will enable CityLife congregants to affirm the validity of dark night of the soul experiences and to support those who are enduring this difficult stage. Finally, the proposed strategy of teaching and small-group engagement will equip CityLife believers to not only support others, but develop necessary disciplines and strategies to navigate the stage of the dark night of the soul in their own personal journeys.

Accepting that Maturing in Christ Requires a Lifetime Journey of Growth

As explained in Chapter 4, there exists a strong emphasis within CityLife Church on the practice of evangelism and the subsequent need for people to have a concrete born-again experience. This has resulted in over-accentuation on the importance of the moment of conversion, and an under-accentuation on the ongoing journey of faith in the years that follow conversion. As such, the goal of this project strategy is that CityLife congregation members would come to an acute awareness that the point of conversion is merely the beginning of a lifetime journey of growth and development. Through the exposition of Bible texts people will view their spiritual lives as a continual movement towards maturity, where they grow from infants to mature adults in the faith. They will expect to continue to grow throughout their lives and continue to “move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity” (Heb 6:1).

Engaging Stages of Faith Formation as a Compass for Navigating the Process of Maturity

Having acknowledged that Christ-like maturity entails a lifetime commitment to growth, the second goal of this project is that CityLife members would acknowledge the value of faith formation theory and engage with it so as to better navigate the journey into maturity. As congregants are taught the various faith formation theories, (with particular emphasis on Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey*), this teaching provides vital framework for anticipating the journey ahead. CityLife believers will be able to use the descriptions of the stages of faith as a type of compass to assist them in navigating the years of growth and refinement that lie before them. They will have confidence that God is moving in their lives to bring about his purposes just as he has done in generations past. They will see the same stages of faith outworking in their own lives as in the lives of Abraham, Joseph, David and many more great men and women of faith.

Offering Acceptance and Support to those Experiencing Different Formative Stages

As CityLife believers acknowledge the validity of the stages of faith and begin to engage with the characteristics of each stage, they will accomplish the third goal of this project, which is that each member would be equipped to identify their own current stage, and that of their fellow travellers. The behavioral and spiritual hallmarks of each faith development stage provide valuable insight into where each person resides on the journey. CityLife adults will be able to identify where they currently find themselves in the maturing process, and will gain insight as to why they feel and act the way they do, and why others in the community respond differently. This project will create a culture of acceptance, grace and understanding for every believer in every different stage.

Acknowledging that the Dark Night of the Soul is an Essential Stage of the Journey

Another goal of the proposed ministry strategy is that members of CityLife would acknowledge that God uses doubt, uncertainty, spiritual darkness and suffering as tools in the maturing process. As congregants engage with biblical teaching around the stages of faith formation, together with personal anecdotal sharing, they will acknowledge that stages such as the dark night of the soul are often used by God to bring about his deepest and most profound transformative work. They will see that God has historically used times of suffering and hardship to generate significant change in his followers, and that darkness is often God's space of metamorphosis. CityLife members will appreciate that these challenging stages are not lapses in faith, nor the consequence of sin, neither are they proof of God's displeasure, but rather they are an indication that God is graciously and lovingly seeking to transform and purify their lives for greater service.

Developing Personal Strategies to Navigate the Dark Night of the Soul

Further to the previous goals listed above, the final objective of this ministry project proposal is that CityLife believers would be equipped with the necessary tools and strategies to navigate the stage of the dark night of the soul. With the valuable foreknowledge that times of spiritual darkness will inevitably come to those who are seeking a mature relationship with God, believers will be well equipped to face the perceived hiddenness of God when it occurs. When they cry out "my God why have you forsaken me," they will recall the despondent words of Christ on the cross, who walked the same pathway before them. They will wait patiently in the darkness remaining confident that God is working in their lives, obscured from their sight or senses. They

will wrestle with questions and doubts that rise in their hearts without any sense of condemnation or fear of falling into unbelief. They will find new pathways to encounter God that are not dependent on feelings or emotional comfort. They will be prepared for the desert even though they desire green pastures. Yielding to God's sovereign timing and work in their lives they will pray, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

Strategy Content

Mark Conner, writes, "Wise leaders take their God-given vision and form it into a strategic plan that describes how the vision will become a reality."⁸ In order for the vision of this project to become a reality, the following concrete strategy will be used to address each of the goals listed above. The strategy content includes the presentation of a four-week preaching program at celebration services, a corresponding four-week life group program where congregants can process the material presented at the weekend meetings, purpose-written small-group study material, and online resources and support for those seeking further information.

A Four-week, Pulpit-based Teaching Program to Explain Faith Formation

Pentecostal Christians have long held their pastors, leaders and teachers in particularly high esteem,⁹ and as detailed above, CityLife has had a history of strong,

⁸ Conner, *Pass the Baton*, 61.

⁹ See Bevere, *Honor's Reward*.

charismatic leadership where biblical teaching from the pulpit has been a major focus.¹⁰ The belief that the teachers and leaders in the pulpit set the tone for what happens throughout the church was affirmed by a congregational survey of CityLife members who indicated that the sermon was the most influential method of teaching truth.¹¹ Referring to the influence of the leader in the pulpit, Pringle asserts that “the world changes from the top down not the bottom up.”¹² He further remarks that the preacher is “the bell ringer, the trumpet blower, the vibration maker, the vision caster, and the drum-beater. He gathers people to a distinct purpose. He imparts the burden, he inspires absolute, inspired commitment and he sets the pace for achievement.”¹³ Jack Deere likewise observes, “The majority of what Christians believe is not derived from their own patient and careful study of the Scriptures. The majority of Christians believe what they believe because godly and respected teachers told them it was correct.”¹⁴

To that end, one of the key strategies to equipping CityLife adults to acknowledge and effectively navigate the faith formation stages of doubt and spiritual darkness is to present a clear, concise, biblically-based teaching program in each of the celebration meetings. Using four consecutive weekly sermons, these messages will communicate the truth that the Christian life is one of lifelong growth and maturity and there will

¹⁰ Conner, *Pass the Baton*, 77.

¹¹ In-house email survey of CityLife members undertaken by Pastoral staff in 2011. See also Markus Richardson, “A Strategy for Growing Citylife Church through a Multi-Site Model” (DMin diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2010).

¹² Phil Pringle, *You The Leader* (Dee Why, AU: Pax Trading Ministries, 1998), 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering how God Speaks and Heal Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 47.

inevitably be times when God purges and refines those he loves.¹⁵ The concept of stages of faith formation theory will be introduced and Hagberg and Guelich's six developmental stages will be briefly overviewed.¹⁶ Examples of Bible characters who illustrate the stages of faith will be examined and the concept that hardship and suffering is a normative part of the journey will be affirmed. The dark night of the soul will be examined through the lens of Scripture particularly the Psalms and Job. God's hiddenness, unanswered prayer and the perceived abandonment of God will be considered in the light of the life of Jesus and the days surrounding Christ's death and resurrection. Finally, a strategy for navigating the darkness will be introduced based on engagement with ancient spiritual disciplines together with the honest and authentic support of the community of faith.

Engaging all Life Groups in a Corresponding Small-group Study

Alongside pulpit teaching, one of the other key strategies for accomplishing the goals listed above is to reintroduce the content of the weekend messages in the form of purpose-designed, small-group studies to the hundreds of life groups that meet throughout the following week. William Beckham writes,

A church is more than what happens inside a building on one day of the week. . . . Small groups allow the church to have an integrated rather than compartmentalized approach to ministry. . . . Large group worship provides a setting for inspiration and information. . . . Small group communities allow for application, edification, incarnation and preparation.¹⁷

¹⁵ Each message will be 45-50 minutes in duration.

¹⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*.

¹⁷ Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 69-82.

By re-packaging the one-way dialogue of a sermon into a more inclusive small-group discussion, CityLife members will be given the opportunity to fully engage with the teaching on a personal level. The study material allows room for greater consideration and analysis of the weekend sermon, and provides valuable space to talk about what they have heard. They will be able to wrestle with new ideas, ask questions and express doubts. They are given room to share their personal stories and encourage one another.

As each week progresses and the small-group studies continue to “flesh out” the sermons from the past weekend, CityLife members will gain a clearer understanding of the biblical foundations for the stages of faith formation. As they follow the stages in the lives of various Bible characters, they will be able to openly identify and discuss their own current stage and will be provided a safe space to be honest about their journey. As the more mature members of the life group gain a better understanding of the various stages, they will be well equipped to mentor those who are in the earlier stages of faith, or provide loving support for those who admit to struggling in a stage of spiritual darkness.

Providing Access to Online Materials

CityLife members are generally quite computer literate.¹⁸ The majority of church correspondence is carried out by email and all information including church calendar, Bible-reading program, life group information and discussion notes, service times, conference and event details, preaching videos, and general resources are available via the CityLife website. The church also has its own smartphone app that provides much of the same information as the web site. Further to these internet resources is the CityLife

¹⁸ More than 85 percent of all CityLife partners are currently registered to receive online weekly church updates.

Facebook page and “Mark’s Blog” both of which provide information relevant to the weekend messages, along with space to interact and comment on what has been presented. Intentional use of these resources and social media pages provides the last of the proposed strategies designed to fulfill the goals listed above.

The CityLife website will be utilized in several ways. First, to accommodate a page relating to the stages of faith series, where general information and resources relating to the topic of stages of faith formation will be legally reproduced and available for download. Second, to make the weekly sermons available for download so that congregants can view the messages a second time or people can “catch up” if they miss a weekend meeting. Third, the website will be used by members to access the weekly life group study notes under the “Life Group” tab on the site. And last, it will be used to simply advertise in the rolling banner across the page that the current series is running and offering options for further information.

“Mark’s Blog” will be utilized to provide “Senior Minister validation” of the message. For some CityLife members, new concepts are to be treated with suspicion until he affirms them. As such, Mark’s Blog will offer a summary of each of the weekly sermons thereby validating the message. Additional relevant information and resources will be offered on both “Mark’s Blog” and the CityLife Facebook page and opportunity will be given to respond to the topic via feedback forums.

All of these online strategies will support and consolidate the message that is shared at the weekend celebration meetings. Through the various social media options accessed throughout the week, CityLife members will have the opportunity to engage

with the pulpit teaching and relevant additional information surrounding the stages of faith formation. They will be given opportunity to process and discuss the teaching in several different ways resulting in a greater understanding and acceptance of the truths being taught.

Leadership and Target Population

CityLife church is a well-resourced community with experienced pastoral/teaching staff and a highly committed team of volunteer leaders. There exists an extensive communication network that extends outwards from the network pastors (on paid staff), to the volunteer life groups leaders, and then reaching out to the thousands of CityLife attendees. These leadership networks will be used to disseminate information and to consolidate and validate the stages of faith formation message. As stated earlier, there exists within CityLife a strong culture of respect for leadership; this outlook results in the ready acceptance of new concepts that have been taught and endorsed by one's trusted leadership network. As such, much of the strategy revolves around using the current leadership team to spearhead change. The teaching team will be trained to communicate various aspects of the strategy from the pulpit; life group leaders will be resourced and equipped to follow-up and reaffirm the pulpit messages in their small groups; and finally all CityLife members will be given information and support through on-line resources in addition to their usual connection with celebration meetings and life group interaction.

Facilitating the Series through Existing Team Meetings

The teaching team, led by Mark Conner, plays a foundational role in the planning and decision-making process for the direction of CityLife's teaching schedule. Twice yearly, Conner holds a teaching team-planning meeting where he brings a proposed schedule for the following six months to those who will be preaching the messages. The team then discusses future topics, themes and direction of each message or series and any additional ideas are considered. When the various weeks' topics are locked in, the teaching team then meets weekly, usually eight weeks in advance, to discuss the actual content of each of the messages. The creative ministries team also joins these weekly celebration service-planning meetings in order for them to discuss and plan the music, media and drama that will be used to support the sermon.

It is at these scheduled celebration service team meetings that the training and resourcing of those implementing the strategy content will take place. When the faith formation series of sermons are first introduced by Conner at the half-yearly planning meeting, each of the teaching team will be given a copy of Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey* to take home and study, (even if they are not actually preaching in the series themselves). They will also be given an outline of each of the weekly sermons to be preached in the series and a clear indication of the main thrust of each message. The team will have opportunity to discuss the material, share their personal thoughts about the subject being presented, and gain any necessary clarification.

At the weekly celebration service meeting (to which the creative ministry team also attends) the content of the upcoming message will be discussed and everyone present

will be given a summary of the sermon to ensure that they understand the concepts being taught. Any further ideas for communicating the message will be considered and media, music and drama will be planned to reinforce and compliment the sermon content. In this way, all those presenting the message in any form will understand what is being taught and will be equipped to reinforce and consolidate the same content.

Resourcing Current Life Group Leaders to Facilitate Training and Communication

The CityLife life group leaders are some of the most enthusiastic and committed volunteers within the church fellowship. There are currently just over 420 active life groups and each life group has one senior leader and up to three intern leaders. As such, there are approximately 1,100 registered life group leaders in the network. These leaders are contacted weekly via church email, monthly via a phone call or personal visit from their network pastor and life group coach, and gathered together quarterly for teaching and encouragement at an “All-Church Leaders Meeting” held at CityLife Knox.

As part of the proposed strategy for equipping CityLife adults to navigate the faith formation stages of doubt and spiritual darkness, all network pastors, life group coaches and life group leaders will be provided with resources to support and reinforce the content of pulpit messages over the planned series. The upcoming theme will be explained to them at the “All-Church Leaders Meeting” and they will be briefed on the subject matter and given an overview of the messages being shared over the four-week period. Each network pastor and life group coach will be given a copy of Hagberg and Guelich’s *The Critical Journey* to read prior to the launch of the series. Following the All-Church Leaders Meeting, each individual life group leader will be contacted via

email and provided with relevant reading material and resources to prepare themselves prior to the series being launched. The regular follow-up calls by the network pastors will provide opportunity for the life group leaders to discuss the subject and clarify any questions. Once the pulpit teaching series begins, all life group study notes will be available on the CityLife website under the “Life Group” tab. Life group leaders will then be equipped to facilitate discussion and personal application surrounding the content of the weekend messages at their particular life group meetings.

Reach the Target Population - Citylife Church Adult Attendees

The vision for seeing CityLife adults acknowledging and confidently navigating stages of spiritual darkness and doubt, will finally be realized through the combination of teaching and education across all spheres of contact. To change an idea, concept or culture, there must be a layered approach to education where the same message is repeated from several different sources.¹⁹ To this end, CityLife members will engage with a pulpit message preached on four consecutive weeks, together with follow-up teaching and discussion at their life group meetings, and finally reinforced through weekly “All-Church” emails, Facebook contact and web-based blogs.

¹⁹ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 93.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTATION

Adult members of CityLife Church (who traditionally struggle to acknowledge the validity of stages of doubt and spiritual darkness) will be equipped to identify, understand and navigate these historically recognized stages of faith formation through the implementation of an integrated strategy of pulpit teaching, small group engagement and associated social media input. Through a well-coordinated approach, congregants will begin to understand that God desires his children to grow into spiritually mature adults, which involves undergoing difficult times of purging and refinement.

CityLife believers will come to an understanding that God sometimes hides the sense of his presence in order to wean them from immature attachments and build greater measures of faith in those who follow him. They will be encouraged to openly express their feelings of doubt, discouragement or uncertainty in order to promote deeper levels of authenticity within the CityLife community. They will build bonds of honesty with one another and support one another in whatever stage of the Christian journey they find themselves. This chapter will explain how these changes will take place and how the strategy will be implemented.

Pilot Summary: Four-Week, Coordinated Teaching and Small Group Series

The strategy will commence with the announcement of an upcoming teaching series entitled “Growing Up in God.” The all-church emails will notify congregants of the series, explain a little of its content, and offer links to the designated CityLife webpage where they can access relevant resource material. The celebration service welcoming staff will hand out small, advertising brochures in the month leading up to the start of the series. Teaching team members will be thoroughly briefed regarding the content of each message and resourced accordingly. All creative ministries leaders will be informed at the weekly celebration service meetings and will plan relevant creative input to compliment the series.

All leaders will be briefed at the all-church leaders meeting and informed of the upcoming series. The network pastors and life group coaches will receive an outline of each of the messages to be preached and a copy of *The Critical Journey* to ensure they understand the principles being communicated. Individual life group leaders will be given a brief outline of the messages being shared and will be informed of the coordinated small group studies available on the CityLife website, which will be used to accompany the series. They will be thoroughly resourced in the weeks leading up to the start of the series through the weekly network pastors’ emails, phone calls and personal visits. The small group studies will be available for download through the life group leaders page on the CityLife website.

Finally, the coordinated web-based resources will support and reinforce the sermons being given and the small group studies being discussed. The CityLife banner on

the website will advertise the upcoming series, the Life Group tab will provide weekly studies for download together with related resource material, the Smartphone App will advertise the series and will provide a summary of each of the messages that have been shared following the weekend celebration services, and the Facebook page and senior minister's blog will provide additional comments and information surrounding the topic together with opportunity for online interaction.

Following the completion of the series, all teaching team speakers will take part in one-on-one interviews to gather their personal feedback. All network pastors and life group coaches will take part in focus group interviews that will discuss the outcomes of the series. Remaining life group leaders and creative ministry team leaders will be asked to answer a set of questions that will be emailed to them and returned to Lynn Moresi via email. This questionnaire seeks to evaluate the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the series and to provide relevant testimonies and feedback. Finally, congregation members will be contacted via the CityLife Church Newsletter, which is emailed to all members each week. They will be invited to complete the online questionnaire and all results will be evaluated and assessed in the light of the proposed strategy goals.

Timeline For 2015

The following timeline seeks to provide a concrete schedule to ensure that the proposed strategy is completed within the necessary time frame. The "Growing Up in God" series is scheduled for late-September through early-October 2015. The series has been scheduled for later in the year to avoid the particularly busy Easter season where the

entire church team is focused on building connections with the local community through special “Invite-a-friend” services and other outreach programs.

From February to June the team will prepare outlines and resources for pulpit sermons and small group studies. They will also gather source articles, links and related material for the website. In July the team will meet with the senior minister and the entire teaching team at the bi-yearly team-planning meeting. At this point each member will be give a copy of *The Critical Journey*.

Between July 22 and August 19 (four consecutive meetings, eight weeks prior to the commencement of the series team members will meet with both the creative and ministry and teaching teams at weekly meetings. This will be followed up with a meeting with the media team to inform them of the upcoming series to lock-in preparation time for associated media. In August plans will be shared with the network pastors and life group coaches. Also, at this time church flyers will be designed and printed for advance distribution to leaders at the all-church leaders meeting in early-September.

At this meeting all leaders will be informed about the series and flyers will be distributed. After this meeting Power Point presentations and media announcements will be prepared. In September the network pastors and life group coaches will email the small group leaders and an all-church email will be sent to congregation members. At this time all of the planned social media strategies will also begin.

The series will run from the third weekend in September through the second weekend in October. After the series website activity will be monitored. At the end of

November an evaluation of the effectiveness of the series will take place. This analysis will be presented to the senior leadership team in December.

Leadership Development

John Kotter, an expert in the field of change management, consistently advocates the crucial role of “leadership by example” when seeking to introduce a new concept.¹ He highlights the desire people have to follow someone they trust and to feel secure in the knowledge that their leaders are living lives that are congruent with the vision they are promoting.² This theory is consistent with the way CityLife members look to their leaders for guidance and direction. Unless the leaders are well briefed and on-board with the goals of this project, CityLife members will not readily accept the concepts presented.

As such, the thorough training and development of leaders at the forefront of the proposed strategy is vitally important. The leadership training initiatives will therefore include the briefing, training and resourcing of the teaching team and creative ministries team; briefing and resourcing of network pastors and life group coaches; briefing and resourcing all other CityLife leaders; and briefing and resourcing of the media team.

The Briefing, Training and Resourcing of the Teaching and Creative Ministries Teams

Teaching team members will first be introduced to the proposed strategy at the mid-year teaching team planning meeting in July 2015. The upcoming series will be explained and each member of the teaching team given a copy of the four sermon outlines, together with a *The Critical Journey*. (Teaching Team members will be required

¹ Kotter, *Leading Change*, 96-97.

² Ibid.

to read *The Critical Journey* by the end of August.) Proposed outcomes of each week's message will then be reviewed and opened for discussion/questions from the team.

In consultation with the senior minister and the teaching team, I will allocate the various weekend sermons and diarize follow-up teaching team meetings with the selected speakers. All members of the teaching team will be made aware of the corresponding small-group studies and social media resources that will become available in the following weeks. Further input, support and resources will be offered to the speakers in the weekly celebration service meetings scheduled on four consecutive weeks, beginning eight weeks prior to the commencement of the series. Speakers and discussion questions will be answered regarding the specific week's sermon content. Following these sessions, needed clarifications will be offered and any supporting resources required provided.

The creative ministries team will also be included in these weekly celebration service meetings. Each of the team members involved in the week under discussion will given a copy of the sermon outline for that particular week to ensure they understand the direction of the message. Team members who are unsure of the topic under discussion or desires further clarification of the message to be communicated will be offered guidance. Access to the associated small group studies and additional resources will be available via the CityLife website.

The Briefing and Resourcing of Network Pastors and Life Group Coaches

Network pastors are responsible for the teaching and training of all life group coaches and all life group leaders in their networks. These network pastors and their key life group coaches will be briefed in August to explain the upcoming series and provide

them with resources to equip them to train their own teams. An outline of the four sermons to be preached will be provided, along with *The Critical Journey* and a timeline of when brochures and small group studies will become available. (Network pastors and life group coaches will be required to read *The Critical Journey* prior to the start of the series.) Any questions or concerns will be discussed and additional appointments made for anyone wanting further clarification.

The Briefing and Resourcing of all other Citylife Leaders

All remaining CityLife leaders who have not been personally briefed will have the “Growing up in God” series explained to them at the all-church leaders meeting in August. A brief outline of the series will be taught and the theme of each week’s topic will be explained. A timetable will be shared, outlining when brochures, advertising and web-site resources will become available. The small group studies that correspond to each week’s message will be explained and additional information/resources will be made available for those who feel unsure of the theme. Network pastors and life group coaches will then follow-up all life group leaders in the weeks leading up to the series launch to ensure that each leader is comfortable facilitating the small group study. Each leader will receive an advance copy of the advertising flyer to be distributed at celebration services the following month.

The Briefing and Resourcing of the Media Team

The media team will be informed of the proposed series for September/October and a general outline of the messages being preached will be explained in July. Each

member of the media team will be briefed on the goals of the series and provided with a copy of the message titles and a small summary of the content. An opportunity will then be provided for any discussion or clarification that might be required.

Resources

CityLife Church is not only blessed with a team of committed pastors and leaders, but also with a rich resource base from which the vision can be supported. The church has excellent facilities, including several multipurpose meeting rooms and a worship sanctuary that seats 2,000 congregants. With a full-time creative ministries team, together with a high-tech, multi-media center and recording studio, CityLife is able to resource the church with excellent quality media. Although church finances are consistently stretched to the maximum degree, there are always budget allowances for the purchase of required resource material to support planned ministry initiatives. The proposed strategy would require the following resources to successfully implement the goals listed above: use of auditorium and all related facilities/equipment for training and implementation of strategy; teaching team and small group outlines; sourcing and printing of additional notes; purchase of resource books; preparation of multimedia.

Use Of Auditorium and all Related Facilities/Equipment for Implementation of Strategy

The four consecutive weeks of pulpit teaching would obviously require the use of the church auditorium on the Saturday nights and Sunday mornings it is being presented. On each of the services held during these four weeks there would be a requirement for the usual support from lighting, sound, multimedia, musicians, pastoral staff and venue

managers. In the weeks leading up to the series delivery, the pastors' lounge would be required for the teaching team/celebration service meetings on each Wednesday afternoon from July 22 to August 19, 2015. The pastors' lounge would also be required for two full days in the first week of November to carry out post-series assessment interviews with the teaching team and senior leaders, and to conduct focus group interviews with the network pastors and life group coaches.

Development of Small Group Outlines and Additional Resources

Teaching team notes, including outlines of the four sermons, will be developed and formatted for distribution to the teaching team and selected pastors/creative team leaders. Small group studies will be developed and printed for teaching team, selected pastoral staff and key life group leaders. These notes will be uploaded to website for general access.

Relevant support material will be resourced from the Internet and the Joint Theological Library in Parkville, Melbourne. This material will be copied and collated for distribution to the teaching team, selected pastoral staff and key life group leaders. It will then be scanned and uploaded to website for general access.

Copies of *The Critical Journey* will be purchased and distributed to the teaching team, network pastors and key life group coaches. Additional copies, (approximately 2,000) will be purchased through the CityLife bookshop budget. They will be available for sale to congregation members at a slightly reduced rate.

Preparation of Advertising and Multimedia

Advertising flyers will be designed and printed for distribution at the all-church leaders meeting and in the weeks leading up to the “Growing Up in God” series. Powerpoint presentations will be developed for each of the four sermons, together with slides to be shown in the pre- and post-service announcements. A thirty-second @CityLife media announcement will be filmed. A specific “Growing Up in God” website “tab” will be designed with access via the CityLife Church website. Resource material will be uploaded to the “Growing Up in God” page, the Life Group page and Facebook. All websites will be monitored and maintained.

Support Personnel

The majority of the support personnel required to implement the proposed strategy is already in place within the week-to-week CityLife celebration service schedule. The teaching team members, the creative ministries staff and the multimedia team already follow a set structure for the resourcing of the weekly meetings. However, in addition to the staff that is already employed to cover the demands of the weekly celebration services, this strategy would require a small number of extra support staff to carry out tasks relating specifically to the “Growing Up in God” series.

Administrative Volunteer for Printing of Notes and Preparation of Resource Materials

As this series requires a significant amount of supporting materials to be resourced, printed and uploaded, a volunteer would be required to assist with this task. This volunteer would be required on a casual basis depending on the workload, but it is

estimated that they would be required for approximately two weeks over the preparation months of February to June 2015.

Media Team for “@Citylife” Media Advertisement and Web Design

Along with the usual work required for a weekly celebration meeting, there would be the additional need for the media team to film a specific @CityLife announcement to be used in the weeks leading up to the series launch. It is estimated that there would be a requirement for one week’s additional web-building design work by one of the media team prior to the launch of the series in September 2015. After the launch it is estimated that there would be a half-day per week required to maintain the web pages from September 19 through to the end of October 2015. For the month of November, the half-day would increase to a full day per week to enable the web-based evaluation to be implemented, managed and reported. One staff member in the media team would be required to design and oversee the printing of an A5 advertising brochure for distribution. This should only require one-days additional work.

Assessment Plan

Nancy Ammerman et al, in their text *Studying Congregations* make the following observation, “Every congregational member or leader has probably ‘researched’ some facet of congregational life. Almost unconsciously we gather information, reflect on what we have found, and share our conclusions, sometimes pointedly, with others. Yet this informal, casual, and experiential investigation seldom gets at the root of an issue.”³ In order to effectively evaluate the success of a program and gain a clear picture of whether

³ Ammerman et al, *Studying Congregations*, 196.

or not the goals have been met, it is important to have a clear strategy to measure results. As such, this proposal seeks to implement the following strategy for collecting and evaluating feedback relating to the goals listed above.

Interviewing Teaching Team Speakers and Senior Leadership Team

Following the conclusion of the “Growing Up in God” sermon series, one-on-one interviews will be scheduled with each of the participating teaching team members along with each of the senior leadership team. These interviews will be undertaken in the first week of November, two weeks following the conclusion of the series. The interviews will be approximately thirty minutes in length and will be informal in style. A set format for each interview will be followed whereby various questions directly related to the desired outcomes of the proposal will be asked.⁴ The questions will be emailed to each interviewee ahead of time to allow them an opportunity to consider their feedback. Permission to tape all interviews will be requested from each interviewee so that information can be thoroughly reviewed and collated.

Facilitating Focus Group Interviews with Network Pastors and Life Group Coaches

The network pastors and life group coaches (who are responsible for the training and day-to-day supervision of the life group leaders and their congregation members), will be gathered in four separate focus group interviews to provide room for group discussion and feedback regarding the “Growing Up in God” series. Although informal in style, there will be a list of questions that will be asked of each group in an attempt to

⁴ See Appendix A for a copy of the questions to be used in the one-on-one interviews.

discover whether or not the proposed goals for the series were met.⁵ It is proposed that these group interviews will be one hour in length and accommodate six people per group.

Emailed Questionnaire to Life Group Leaders and Creative Ministries Leaders

All remaining life group leaders and creative ministry team leaders will receive an email requesting them to answer a set of questions and return them to Lynn Moresi for collating. These questions are short-answer in nature and require the participants to write personal comments rather than simply select a multiple-choice rating.⁶ These questions can be answered in approximately fifteen minutes and then emailed back. One of the last questions asks about any known testimonies that might relate to the series. The life group leaders are working at the grass roots level and are well positioned to hear of any significant feedback from the general congregation members.

General Survey for CityLife Congregation Members

The final group within the church to be surveyed is the general congregation. This assessment involves a request to congregation members to complete a short survey regarding the “Growing Up in God” series. They will be invited to access the survey via a link in the CityLife Church Newsletter, which is emailed to all members each week. This survey will run through “SurveyMonkey”⁷ and will use the “Comment Box”⁸ option for

⁵ See Appendix C for a copy of the focus group interview questions.

⁶ See Appendix D for a copy of the questions to be emailed to Life Group Leaders and Creative Team Leaders.

⁷ See www.surveymonkey.com.

⁸ The “Comment Box” option on SurveyMonkey is used “to collect open-ended, written feedback from respondents. You can also specify answer length.”

each of the questions allowing for more lengthy feedback rather than just a rating from one-to-ten. It is anticipated that the survey of just seven short questions will take around ten to fifteen minutes to complete.⁹

Evaluate Feedback Posted on Webpages and Blog

Throughout the series, the CityLife Facebook page and Mark's Blog will be monitored for comments and discussions. Any posts relating to the series will be bookmarked and sent for inclusion in the assessment process. At the completion of the series the Facebook administrator will invite people to make comments regarding the series and give any personal stories or testimonies that relate to the "Growing Up in God" theme. Mark Conner will also invite comments and feedback from those who have been following the entries on his blog relating to the series.

Compile Results and Assess Goals Reached

Throughout the month of November 2015, the results from the one-on-one interviews, the focus group interviews, the questionnaires, the surveys and the Internet feedback will be collated. The results will be arranged under the five proposed goals outlined above in Chapter 6 under "Strategy Goals:" that CityLife members would accept that maturing in Christ requires a lifetime journey of growth; that CityLife members would engage with the stages of faith formation, acknowledging that they provide a valid compass for navigating the process of maturity and growth; that CityLife members would be able to personally identify their own stage and offer acceptance and support to those experiencing different formative stages; that CityLife members would acknowledge that

⁹See Appendix IV for a copy of the survey questions to be asked of congregation members.

the dark night of the soul is an essential stage of the journey; and that CityLife members would develop personal strategies to navigate the uncertainty and pain experienced in the stage of the dark night of the soul.¹⁰

All the responses to the questions will be listed under each of the corresponding goals. They will then be assessed as to whether the answer revealed a positive reaching of the goal; the answer revealed a complete missing of the goal; or the answer revealed that the responded is in a process toward understanding. A report on the findings will then be compiled and presented to the senior leadership team.

Report On Results

Each of the goals will be clearly articulated and the results from the feedback will be summarized under each individual goal and opened for discussion with the senior leadership team. An evaluation as to whether or not each of the specific goals has been met based on the criteria listed above will then be made. It is important to note that the evaluation process may appear somewhat subjective due to the goals being qualitative rather than quantitative. However, a general indication as to whether or not each of the goals has been met should be evidenced by the answers given to each of the questions in the interviews, group forums and questionnaires. Comments from the feedback pages on the blog and Facebook page should also reflect a strong sense as to whether or not the proposed goals have been met and attitudes have shifted or changed. A summary and recommendations for future teaching on the topic will complete the report.

¹⁰ Each of these goals is also outlined on Appendices B-E.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper began by asking the question “In a denominational tradition that was founded on an irrefutable belief that supernatural engagement with the Holy Spirit is the normative evidence of being a committed Christian, what does one do when that supernatural engagement can no longer be felt?” The answer to that question has been the focus of this paper. For many CityLife congregation members the idea that God would “hide himself” from those he loves, or intentionally lead them into stages of doubts, uncertainty or suffering, is a completely foreign concept. In their well-intentioned attempt to emphasize the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, some historical CityLife teachings have had the affect of swinging the pendulum too far, resulting in an over-realized eschatology that refuses to acknowledge the validity of stages of spiritual darkness and doubt in the faith development journey.

Nonetheless, ignoring these experiences has not prevented them from occurring. Many committed leaders and congregation members at CityLife have, along with generations before them, experienced prolonged periods of obscurity where God appeared to hide himself from those he loved in order to strengthen their faith. Several examples of emails and letters from congregation members and leaders illustrated the reality that nothing has changed over the centuries. Scripture reveals instances of God using suffering, silence and doubt as powerful refining fires to cleanse and mature those he loves. CityLife believers are not exempt from this stage of purgation no matter how hard they try to ignore it and push it down.

Pentecostal followers of Jesus are still being drawn along the same path of surrender that leads to the dark night of the soul. However, they have been doing so without the necessary framework within which to locate their experience. The pretense that this wilderness experience does not exist will be carefully dispelled through the multilayered teaching approach outlined above.

This paper has provided a clear blueprint to set in motion a cultural and theological shift within CityLife Church. Through the concentrated teaching, leading, modeling and dialogue proposed in this strategy, CityLife believers will be equipped to identify, understand and navigate the difficult stages of faith that have been previously dismissed and ignored. As speakers and leaders begin to share honestly and authentically about their own dark nights, and small group members open up to one another and share their own doubts and uncertainties, there will develop a normalizing and validating of the importance of this maturing process for those in the larger faith community. As the clear and concise “Stages of Faith” teaching is communicated and discussed, CityLife adults will be free to cooperate with the purposes of God in whatever part of the journey they find themselves. They will be empathetic towards others who are struggling with doubts or uncertainty and refrain from judgments based on the erroneous belief that faith equals absolute certainty, or that happiness and financial wealth is evidence of God’s approval.

Simon Chan writes, “Pentecostals have not gone farther up the mystical way because they have shunned the path through the dark night. Here is where Pentecostalism must be open to the challenge of the mystical tradition. It must recognize that trials and spiritual aridity, even spiritual defeat and desolation, are a part of growth even after one’s

baptism in the Holy Spirit”¹ Conversion, baptism in the Holy Spirit, identifying one’s spiritual gifts and serving in the local church are all important stages in the Christian journey. However, as Chan rightly asserts, if committed followers of Jesus truly desire to reach spiritual maturity, they must be prepared for a life-time journey of light and darkness; blessing and hardship; success and failure; and joy and sadness. Through the implementation of this ministry proposal, CityLife Church will become a safe environment where spiritual companionship, love and affirmation are offered to everyone along the faith formation journey, whether they are basking in the joy of a newfound faith, or walking the difficult path of the dark night of the soul.

¹ Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 76.

APPENDIX A

1. Jesus Christ - We Are a Christian Church The person of Jesus Christ is central to all we do and through Him we have relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.
2. The Bible - We are a Bible-Based Church We are committed to the Bible as the Word of God and our final authority for rule and practice.
3. The Ministry of the Holy Spirit - we are a Spirit-filled church. We believe that each Christian should develop the fruit of the Spirit and seek to use the gifts of the Spirit for the benefit of others.
4. Discipleship - we are a maturing church Our goal is to help people become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.
5. Prayer - we are a praying church Our goal is become a house of prayer for all nations.
6. Worship - we are a worshipping church Our goal is to express our devotion to God through joyful praise and intimate worship.
7. Loving Relationships - we are a loving church Our goal is to see every person loved and cared for in such a way that they feel accepted, valued and have a sense of belonging.
8. Servanthood - we are a serving church Our goal is to see every member developing their God-given abilities and using them to serve others.
9. Outreach - we are an evangelistic church Our goal is to reach lost people both near and far and influence our community for righteousness through evangelism, community outreach, missions and church planting.
10. Relevance - we are a contemporary church Our goal is to present the message of Christ in a way that is meaningful to regular attenders and comprehensible to outsiders.
11. Diversity - we are a unified church Our goal is to bridge racial, cultural, gender, socio-economic and generational gaps so as to create a community where all people can relate together in a spirit of love and unity.
12. Excellence - we are a quality church Our goal is to pursue excellence in all aspects of church life in order to bring glory to God.

APPENDIX B

Questions for One-On-One Teaching Team and Senior Leadership Interviews¹

GOAL 1: That CityLife members would accept that maturing in Christ requires a lifetime journey of growth

- ❖ After completing this series, what do you believe is the most important truth to remember about maturing in Christ?
- ❖ What are some of the metaphors or pictures that you feel best describe the process of growing in Christ and why?

GOAL 2: That CityLife members would engage with the stages of faith formation, acknowledging that they provide a valid compass for navigating the process of maturity and growth.

- ❖ Can you briefly outline each of Hagberg and Guelich's six stages?
- ❖ What is your *personal* evaluation of the stages of faith formation teaching?
- ❖ What do you believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of this teaching?

GOAL 3: That CityLife members would be able to personally identify their own stage and offer acceptance and support to those experiencing different formative stages

¹ Please note that the "Goals" listed in bold will not be shared with the participants. They will simply be asked the questions written below – The "Goals" are simply listed to provide focus for the interviewer.

- ❖ Can you identify where you believe you are on the stages of faith journey?
- ❖ Can you identify the stage in which your wife or husband or friend is currently walking?
- ❖ What support or encouragement would you give to them to affirm them in their current stage right now?
- ❖ Do you feel that this teaching has helped you to identify common 'trouble spots' on the faith journey? If so, what are they?

GOAL 4: That CityLife members would acknowledge that the dark night of the soul is an essential stage of the journey

- ❖ How do you feel about the idea that God sometimes 'hides' Himself?
- ❖ Do you agree with the common 'symptoms' outlined for those going through a 'dark night of the soul' experience?
- ❖ Do you feel that the concept of a stage of questioning, doubt and darkness can be reconciled with a Pentecostal belief in God's desire to bless?
- ❖ Do you see this stage of darkness as a value or a vice? Why?

GOAL 5: That CityLife members would develop personal strategies to navigate the uncertainty and pain experienced in the stage of the dark night of the soul

- ❖ Has this teaching given you tools to help navigate the various stages of faith outlined? If so, what are they?
- ❖ What would you say to someone who believes that the dark night of the soul is nothing more than a sign of unbelief?

GENERAL

- ❖ Do you have any suggestions for improvement of the teaching series and accompanying small group studies?
- ❖ Do you have any other comments, questions or observations that you would like to make about the “Growing in God” series.

APPENDIX C

***Questions for Focus Group Interviews for Network Pastors
and Life Group Coaches¹***

GOAL 1: That CityLife members would accept that maturing in Christ requires a lifetime journey of growth

- ❖ What do you think it means to mature in Christ?

GOAL 2: That CityLife members would engage with the stages of faith formation, acknowledging that they provide a valid compass for navigating the process of maturity and growth.

- ❖ Can you briefly outline each of Hagberg and Guelich's six stages?
- ❖ What do you believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of this teaching?

GOAL 3: That CityLife members would be able to personally identify their own stage and offer acceptance and support to those experiencing different formative stages

- ❖ Can you identify where you believe you or someone in your Network is on the stages of faith journey?
- ❖ What support or encouragement would you give to them to affirm them in their current stage right now?

¹ Please note that the "Goals" listed in bold will not be shared with the participants. They will simply be asked the questions written below – The "Goals" are simply listed to provide focus for the interviewer.

GOAL 4: That CityLife members would acknowledge that the dark night of the soul is an essential stage of the journey

- ❖ How would you reconcile the concept of a stage of questioning, doubt and darkness with a Pentecostal belief in God's desire to bless?
- ❖ Do you see this stage of darkness as a value or a vice? Why?

GOAL 5: That CityLife members would develop personal strategies to navigate the uncertainty and pain experienced in the stage of the dark night of the soul

- ❖ Has this teaching given you tools to help navigate the various stages of faith outlined? If so, what are they?

GENERAL

- ❖ Do you have any other comments, questions or observations that you would like to make about the "Growing in God" series.

APPENDIX D

***Questions for Life Group Leaders and
Creative Ministry Leaders¹***

GOAL 1: That CityLife members would accept that maturing in Christ requires a lifetime journey of growth

- ❖ What do you think it means to mature in Christ?

GOAL 2: That CityLife members would engage with the stages of faith formation, acknowledging that they provide a valid compass for navigating the process of maturity and growth.

- ❖ Can you briefly outline each of Hagberg and Guelich's six stages?
- ❖ What do you believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of this teaching?

GOAL 3: That CityLife members would be able to personally identify their own stage and offer acceptance and support to those experiencing different formative stages

- ❖ Can you identify where you believe you, or someone in your Life Group, is on the stages of faith journey?
- ❖ What support or encouragement would you give to them to affirm them in their current stage right now?

¹ Please note that the "Goals" listed in bold will not be shared with the participants. They will simply be asked the questions. The "Goals" are simply listed to provide focus for the interviewer.

GOAL 4: That CityLife members would acknowledge that the dark night of the soul is an essential stage of the journey

- ❖ How would you reconcile the concept of a stage of questioning, doubt and darkness with a Pentecostal belief in God's desire to bless?
- ❖ Do you see this stage of darkness as a value or a vice? Why?

GOAL 5: That CityLife members would develop personal strategies to navigate the uncertainty and pain experienced in the stage of the dark night of the soul

- ❖ Has this teaching given you tools to help navigate the various stages of faith outlined? If so, what are they?
- ❖ Have you gained greater insight for the Life Group members you lead?

GENERAL

- ❖ Do you know of any testimonies or stories from congregation members that would be beneficial to share?
- ❖ Do you have any other comments, questions or observations that you would like to make about the "Growing in God" series.

APPENDIX E

Questions for Survey of CityLife Congregation Members¹

GOAL 1: That CityLife members would accept that maturing in Christ requires a lifetime journey of growth

- ❖ What do you think it means to mature in Christ?

GOAL 2: That CityLife members would engage with the stages of faith formation, acknowledging that they provide a valid compass for navigating the process of maturity and growth.

- ❖ Did the teaching on the stages of faith help you in any way? If so, how?

GOAL 3: That CityLife members would be able to personally identify their own stage and offer acceptance and support to those experiencing different formative stages

- ❖ Can you identify which faith stage you think you might be in?
- ❖ Can you identify which faith stage you think someone else might be in?

GOAL 4: That CityLife members would acknowledge that the dark night of the soul is an essential stage of the journey

- ❖ Do you think God leads believers into times of darkness or uncertainty? If so, why?

¹ Please note that the “Goals” listed in bold will not be shared with the participants.

GOAL 5: That CityLife members would develop personal strategies to navigate the uncertainty and pain experienced in the stage of the dark night of the soul

- ❖ Has this teaching given you tools to help navigate the various stages of faith outlined? If so, what are they?

GENERAL

- ❖ Do you have any other comments or observations that you would like to make about the “Growing in God” series.

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