

**ABSTRACT**

**SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS:**

**REDISCOVERING A NEGLECTED MEANS**

**OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

by

Carolyn Nettles

This dissertation is about equipping and empowering laity in the context of the local church to be spiritual friends who will in turn, walk alongside others, helping them to mature and conform to the life of Christ. A spiritual friend workshop (one day) was held with six pairs of self-selected spiritual friends as participants. Participants were introduced to the practice of spiritual friendships and an array of possible disciplines that they could share in order to strengthen their friendships and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ together. Participants were given a spiritual friend journal guide to give structure to their time together in the six-week practicum in which the pairs met once a week. Following the practicum, the six pairs reconvened to evaluate the process.

The four major findings include the following: (1) The spiritual friend study contributed to spiritual growth in ten out of twelve participants; (2) all components of the study were integral to growth (i.e. original workshop, meeting together regularly, and guidance from spiritual friend journal guide); 3) reflecting individually and then sharing those reflections were key elements in spiritual growth in the spiritual friendship; and, (4) the mutuality of the relationship was an important factor in their spiritual growth.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled  
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Date

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS:  
REDISCOVERING A MEANS OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP  
IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
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Doctor of Ministry

by  
Carolyn Diane Nettles

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Carolyn Diane Nettles

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM

#### Introduction

If the bookstore is any indication, spiritual direction is a very sought-after commodity today. Much of what is being termed *spiritual* is not Christian. Furthermore, in the material that is available on spiritual mentoring the model is rarely a mutual one. Most models, even in the Christian tradition refer to a *trained to lead* person leading a *less trained* person. While not being unappreciative of these ministries, there is another option that is currently not being fully utilized. Spiritual friendships are one tool often overlooked, among many, as an instrument for spiritual growth as a Christian.

Unfortunately, Christians have individualized their growth in discipleship rather than choosing to be discipled within a community. Francis Chan writes: “Individualism is widely celebrated in our culture. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient, and independent, able to “make it on our own.” Sadly, many Christians have developed this individualistic mindset” (296). Surveys have been done showing that persons now have fewer confidants or persons with whom they can share serious matters than they did thirty years ago (Baab, 29). As many pursue worldly desires, they end up using people and loving things (Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity* 27) rather than loving people and using things as Christ teaches. This attitude may leave a person lonely as well. In many cases, technology has replaced what used to take place in one-on-one, face-to-face encounters.

The constant dependence upon technology for living in this world has affected how people relate to one another. Nicholas Carr writes, “The price we pay to assume technology’s power is alienation. The tools of the mind amplify and in turn numb the

most intimate, the most human of our natural capacities-those for reason, perception, memory, emotion” (*Shallows* 211). The addiction to phones, tablets, and computers is affecting social skills and the ability to relate to one another. Carr, in another book, writes:

The human brain is incapable of concentrating on two things at once. Every glance or swipe at a touchscreen draws us away from our immediate surroundings. By connecting us to a symbolic elsewhere, the smartphone ... exiles us from the here and now. We lose the power of presence. (*Glass Cage* 200)

The gift of *presence* is necessary for the building and keeping of friends. A failure to communicate leads to a failure to be present which leads to a failure to value the people who are with us.

The world is increasingly distracted, fragmented, and impersonal. Sherry Turkle has pinpointed some of what society has lost. Turkle discusses how in a variety of jobs, technology is keeping individuals from creativity, depth, and complexity:

New ideas emerge from in-person meetings. Emails pose questions and get answers-most of the time an email boils down to an exchange of information. In acting, in law, in business, the loss of a face-to-face meeting means a loss of complexity and depth. (264)

The younger generation assumes universal technological communication, and speaking face-to-face with someone is not even a thought that crosses their minds. (262). In light of these changes in modes of communication, the building of deep friendships is not something that people spend time considering as a society at large. Brian Edgar observes:

Friendship is ... seen as becoming rarer and subject to negative influences from social fragmentation and the influence of information technology and social networking, which while increasing the frequency of contacts, tends to diminish the depth and integrity of substantial friendship. (123)

As further proof of this lack of substantial friendship, forty years ago, people would visit with their neighbors often. That is no longer the case. Statistics show us that Americans no longer visit with their neighbors as much as they used to. “In 1974, nearly one-fourth of Americans visited with their neighbors several times a week. By 1994 this figure had dropped to sixteen percent, and there was a shocking increase in the number of people who had “never spent an evening with their neighbor” (DeNeff and Drury 129). In many various ways, the world of today does not facilitate the development of deep friendships, not to mention friendships designed to help followers of Jesus to grow in Christ.

Peter admonishes the people who made up the Church to “grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). Left to themselves, many Christians are not making growth in Christ-likeness a priority in their lives. Too many other things occupy their time. The original disciples met together, struggled with issues together, fought at times, yet came to common conclusions. They worked as a community of believers.

Many churches today do not have any intentional way of developing a community in which a serious discipleship can be explored and fostered. Spiritual friendships could be a tool for the church to use to grow disciples of Jesus Christ. Once transformed, followers of Jesus can reach out and help others to grow in their discipleship, and transform churches and communities by reflecting Christ and His love.

Discipleship requires intentionality. Jesus set a great example. He intentionally chose twelve disciples, and by sharing time together He helped shape them by teaching them the ways of the kingdom of God. Richard Lamb states that Jesus nurtured his relationship with the disciples by spending *quality time* and *quantity time* with them. “To

pursue a relationship with Jesus, we must spend time with Jesus. To enjoy friendship the way Jesus did, we must spend time with other followers” (79). For Jesus’ earthly ministry, discipleship occurred in a small group of twelve and sometimes only three. In many cases, the church today does not intentionally gather together for the purpose of discipleship.

In the past few decades because of the growing interest in spiritual formation, there has been a rediscovery of spiritual friendship as a means of spiritual formation. Spiritual friendship is being considered by many people from many traditions and backgrounds. It is something deeply rooted in Scripture and the Christian tradition, and there is a growing body of contemporary literature related to it.

Any two believers can find a rich resource of spiritual guidance and growth by seeking and developing spiritual friendships. By mutually committing to the Holy Spirit’s leading and spending time in the Bible together, spiritual friendships can serve as a guide to newness of life, mutual accountability, and a renewed commitment to Christ so desperately needed in the lives of followers of Jesus, and in churches. If believers knew how to intentionally engage one another as spiritual friends, they would grow as disciples as evidenced by their understandings and experiences.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of spiritual friend workshop and six-week practicum on participants’ attitudes, knowledge, and experiences related to spiritual friendships.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used in measuring the impact of the study:



**Research Question #1**

What were the initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants before the spiritual friend study?

**Research Question #2**

What are the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants after the spiritual friend study?

**Research Question #3**

What aspects of the spiritual friend study most impacted the participants attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships?

**Definition of Terms** Many definitions of *spiritual friendship* can be found in the literature today. Brian Edgar maintains that such friendship, which is “nothing less than a means of grace” (160) includes a number of key elements:

[I]t is freely chosen and mutual association (not based on kinship or obligation) of love and friendship, which is grounded specifically in friendship with God in Christ, and which seeks for both oneself and the other a deeper intimacy with Christ and love for God, and a continuing development of virtue and personal character, all achieved in such a way that it is a benefit to the community as a whole. (98-99)

Edgar has crafted a definition that is biblical and realistic and has its foundations in the love and friendship of Christ.

Wesley Hill compares spiritual friendship with the relationship one has with one’s siblings. They are more than acquaintances. Spiritual friendship happens when people interact with one another in love as brothers and sisters in Christ (*Spiritual Friendship* 60). Hill has captured the level of intimacy and knowledge of one another that comes from being siblings and connected it well to being a spiritual friend to another.

For the purposes of this dissertation, spiritual friends are two Christians committed to each other and the journey of growing in *Christlikeness* together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The relationship is mutual (not one above the other), based on self-less love, grace, honesty, openness, confidentiality, active listening, and a teachable spirit.

Such attributes do not come naturally, but are gifts from God in the power of the Holy Spirit available to all believers. The Bible is one of the tools the Holy Spirit uses to grow believers in grace, and is the instruction guide on how to live as Jesus did, obeying His law of love. Developing a spiritual friendship entails a commitment to live a life of prayer, living life out of a love for the Word, and living with a willingness to learn from the Holy Spirit and others who will teach believers along the way.

### **Ministry Project**

The SF study consisted of a one day workshop and a six-week practicum. The workshop took place on a Saturday, 22 October 2016 from 9-4 p.m. in a local church setting. Congregants of the Wesley United Methodist Church in Vienna, West Virginia, and other United Methodists who were interested in the study came to the workshop with someone whom they viewed as an SF and were paired accordingly. A researcher-designed spiritual friendships handbook was used to instruct and guide. The teaching during the workshop focused on characteristics of an SF, barriers to healthy spiritual friendships, and the six purposes of spiritual friendships. The six purposes are to offer presence, assist in discernment, grow in the Word together, encourage one another through story and prayer, hold one another accountable, and encourage one another to live into God's great possibilities.

Prior to the study, a spiritual friend presurvey was administered. Results were tabulated and used as the base-line of the participants to compare to the findings of the spiritual friend post-survey, which was administered at the close of the six-week practicum.

At the one-day workshop, each participant was provided with a spiritual friends journal guide (SFJG) for a six-week practicum. The SFJG provided direction for their times together as they met as spiritual friends. Participants met with their spiritual friend no less than once a week for six weeks for conversation and to record in a journal specific observations as instructed in their SFJG.

After six weeks (i.e. the practicum), the participants were asked to gather to retake the SF survey. Scores were tabulated and compared to their original scores before the SF study. In addition, participants were asked to complete a hand-written evaluation of the SF study. These results were transcribed and evaluated. In addition to the survey, interviews of three pairs of participants (one pair at a time) were conducted at the closure of the practicum, and results were transcribed and evaluated.

The hope is that participation in the SF study will enable participants to have a tool to foster continual growth in discipleship that will lead them to guide others into a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.

### **Context**

This study was conducted partly to inform the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The West Virginia Annual Conference consists of the state of West Virginia and Garrett County, Maryland. One possible forum would be the

annual clergy school, which is a setting for many pastors to receive their continuing education credit.

The study may be shared in a clergy gathering in the Little Kanawha District. The conference is divided into seven districts in the state of West Virginia and Garrett County, Maryland. A district is comprised of approximately fifty to one hundred United Methodist churches. Pastors are required to attend district clergy gatherings.

The study took place in the context of United Methodists (lay and clergy) who gathered at Wesley United Methodist Church in Vienna, West Virginia. Participants were of various ages, backgrounds, and vocations. Two pairs were members of Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC), and some were laity and clergy from other United Methodist churches, two pairs from Parkersburg, one pair from Lubeck, and another pair from Harrisville, West Virginia. They all are United Methodists from West Virginia.

### **Methodology**

An explanatory, mixed-methods design was implemented in the research. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used in gathering and assessing data. The quantitative measure was a spiritual friend pre-survey and post-survey. The SF pre-survey was given to participants at the start of the SF study to create a base line of data concerning their attitudes, knowledge, and experiences related to spiritual friendship. The SF post-survey taken after the study supplied data that, when compared to the pre-survey results, measured changes in attitudes, knowledge, and experience related to spiritual friendship. The material taught in the spiritual friends workshop was based on a researcher-written handbook on spiritual friendships.

Qualitative data was derived from two sources. First, after the six-week practicum, participants were asked to complete a researcher-designed evaluation of the study. These results were transcribed and evaluated. In addition to the survey, interviews of three pairs of participants (one pair at a time) were conducted at the closure of the practicum, and results were transcribed and evaluated.

### **Participants**

Participants were self-selected individuals who volunteered to be a part of the study, and all were United Methodists living in West Virginia. The participants were both clergy and laity. There were three pairs of married couples, and three pairs were women friends. Six pairs of adults (age 18 and older) willing to be spiritual friends participated.

### **Instrumentation**

Three types of instruments, all researcher designed, were used in this study. The three instruments were the survey (pre and post alike), the interview questions, and the evaluations.

### **Variables**

The independent variable was the SF study. The dependent variables were the initial understanding and experiences regarding spiritual friendships of participants. Anticipated intervening variables included the possibility of having one or more pairs drop out of the study for reasons such as illness.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection occurred in the administration of the SF pre-survey at the start of the study, and a SF post-survey at the conclusion of the six-week practicum.

Additional data was collected and transcribed from the questions posed in the spiritual friend interviews, which took place at the end of the practicum to help evaluate the understanding and experiences of six participants in the study. All participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the SF study, which was also evaluated and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

The study involved quantitative analysis of the results from the SF pre- and post-surveys. The quantitative portion was followed by qualitative analysis through interview responses by transcription. Qualitative analysis was also used on the participants' evaluations. Descriptive statistics were used throughout the data analysis.

### **Generalizability**

Delimitations will include the size of the group of participants. Only twelve individuals are sharing their thoughts on spiritual friendships. Because of the small number of people in the study, claims to generalizability would be minimal.

Limitations may be the sameness of the educational background of the group, which may restrict its being translated to other groups with less education. Another limitation may be that it was used with only United Methodists, which may reduce its generalizability.

The significance of this study is that it has the potential to transform individual lives and church communities. As individuals develop spiritual friendships in an intentional way, they will grow in their discipleship and ability to follow more closely the way that Jesus taught. The participants' knowledge of the possibilities for finding, developing, and keeping spiritual friends can contribute to a life-long learning and

growing in Christ-likeness. This study may reach beyond the local church to inform the Little Kanawha District, and even the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

### **Theological Foundation**

Spiritual friendships are a reflection of the friendship of the Trinity. In Genesis, God said, “Let us make human beings in *our* image” (emphasis added; Gen. 1:26, NLT). People were created to reflect in their relationships with God and others the characteristics of the relationship the persons of the Trinity have with one another.

Edgar concurs by declaring that spiritual friendship is rooted in the Trinity: “Through friendship, Jesus draws believers into a new level of relationship—not only with himself, but also with the Father and the Spirit. In this way, his friends are able to participate in the holy friendship of God” (126). The friendships exhibited in the Trinity serve as a model for spiritual friendships among believers.

Mark Shaw highlights the relational aspect of the Trinity as revealed in the gospel of John. He writes: “The love among the persons of the Trinity is displayed very clearly in the Gospel of John.” As Shaw shares, in the first four chapters of John, the intimate relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is evident. Shaw declares that John reveals: “1) full equality, 2) glad submission, 3) joyful intimacy, and 4) mutual deference” (Shaw 62) among the three persons of the Trinity. Spiritual friendships mirror the relationships revealed among the Trinity, and reflect these characteristics as well.

Spiritual friendships are healthiest when they consist of the same qualities seen in the Trinity. The full equality between spiritual friends is one of the greatest strengths of a spiritual friendship. Both persons are pilgrims on a journey of Christ-like holiness, and

encouraging one another along the way. Glad submission in a spiritual friendship involves always looking out for the interests of others above one's own interests without grumbling. Joyful intimacy in a spiritual friendship points to the joy that comes from having a friend with which to share one's deepest thoughts and feelings. Mutual deference in a spiritual friendship would allow both to have opportunity to yield to the judgment/opinion of the other that is, mutual submission to the other. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friend" (John 15:13, ESV). This action of self-giving found in the Trinity gives the example of the depth of love one should have for his or her friends.

Edgar beautifully summarizes the essential connection between the Trinity and friendship:

Friendship thus exists at the center of both Christian life and theology. The love of the Father, Son, and Spirit has opened up and brought about the possibility of the believer's friendship with God. Friendship with God is an expression of the free dynamic relationships that exist in a Trinitarian understanding of divine nature. Without friendship, the concept of Trinity is sterile and pointless. (127)

He continues, "Human friendship is a reflection of the relationships in the Trinity and is the form of fellowship (koinonia) in the Body of Christ" (127). Followers of Jesus are to join in the fellowship of the Trinity and extend the hand of fellowship and friendship to one another as they live as the Body of Christ. "Through friendship, Jesus draws believers into a new level of relationship-not only with Himself, but also with the Father and the Spirit. In this way, his friends are able to participate in the holy friendship of God" (126). Indeed, the strength of spiritual friendship is its rootedness in the relationships of the Trinity.



In keeping with this Trinitarian foundation, one can find many snapshots in Scripture that describe being an SF. Jesus, speaking to his disciples, tells them, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Jesus emphasized the intimacy of the relationship with His disciples as He refers to sharing with them the act of “knowing” what the Father is doing.

Jesus was a spiritual friend to the disciples in a variety of ways. He spent time with them, was present with them, and discussed things with them:

Jesus defined friendship in terms of obedience. Christian friendship is more than a casual acquaintance; it is a partnership of mutual esteem and affection (John 14:21). Jesus elevated the disciples above mere tools and made them partners in his work. Unity instead of rivalry, trust instead of suspicion, obedience instead of self-assertion must rule the disciples’ common labors. The measure of their love for one another is that of his love for them (cf. John 13:34), which would be further demonstrated by his forthcoming sacrifice. (Gaebelein 56)

Jesus taught the disciples by dialoguing with them, and answering their questions. Jesus loved them where they were, yet wanted to see them grow in grace to become more like Him. Jesus prayed for the disciples and taught them how to pray. Jesus was and is the living Word and lived out of a deep knowledge of Scriptures and invited his disciples to the same. Jesus listened to people and encouraged them on their faith journeys. Jesus also challenged and rebuked the disciples, which is also an example of being an SF.

Another way the Bible teaches the closeness that is a part of spiritual friendships is in the word for *fellowship*. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship, found first in Acts 2:42-47. The early church was known for this unique way of living together. They shared life together. They shared in hearing the apostles’ teaching, shared meals together, prayed together, and shared their possessions with one another as well. The Greek

meaning of the word is translated “fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse; the share that one has in anything; participation, intimacy” (Thayer 352). The intimate bond of fellowship, which unites Christians, is *koinonia*.

### **Overview**

The groundwork for the dissertation has been laid in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, a theological framework and literature review informs the problem as well as the instrumentation for the SF study. In Chapter 3, the details of the methodology for the study are recorded. In Chapter 4, the findings and analysis of the results of the interventions are stated. The dissertation concludes in Chapter 5 with a discussion on the analysis of the findings.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Spiritual friendships have become a topic of great interest to many people, and the literature on the subject is growing rapidly. This literature review begins by looking at biblical perspectives on spiritual friendship both in the Old and New Testaments. Next, it explores the historical perspectives on spiritual friendships, focusing on the thoughts of Aelred of Rievaulx, who first wrote on spiritual friendships in the twelfth century, and John Wesley, who began the Methodist movement in the 1700's. Lastly, the literature review will consider what contemporary authors have to say on the subject of spiritual friendships.

#### **Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Spiritual Friendship**

The Bible has much to teach on the topic of spiritual friendships. We will look at Deuteronomy and Exodus, move to Proverbs, and then explore several examples of spiritual friendships in Scripture. Next, the *one another* statements in the New Testament epistles, denoting expectations of those who are a part of the Body of Christ will be examined. The biblical section concludes by considering the passages containing the Greek word *koinonia*, focusing on fellowship as disciples of Jesus Christ.

According to Hill, "The Bible uses two consistent images in its representation of friendship. The first is that of *the knitting of souls together*" ("Souls"). Deuteronomy provides the earliest mention in this regard when it speaks of a "friend who is as your own soul" (13:6), that is, one who is a companion of one's innermost thoughts and feelings. "Prominent in this reflection is the concept of intimacy" (Hill, "Souls"). The

other image to which Hill refers is that of friendship as a *face-to-face* encounter. “This is the image used for Moses’ relationship to God.” In the tabernacle God spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod. 33:11). “The special bond between God and a person chosen as God’s instrument is occasionally described as friendship.” (Harper Collins Bible Dictionary 301). Both of these images portray the closeness and intimacy that can be founds between friends, and even more so between SFs (Hill, “Souls”).

Proverbs offers some very useful advice on friendships in general. What applies to friendships in general, should equally and especially apply to a spiritual friendship. One of the first admonitions concerning friends in Proverbs is to “beware of the whisperer” who separates close friends (Prov.16:28). Gossip and leaking information that was supposed to be confidential is one of the greatest destroyers of friendships and especially spiritual friendships. Gossip is a stumbling block to healthy spiritual friendships. Spiritual friendships are affected even more acutely by betraying a trust, because people tend to have higher expectations of their brothers and sisters in the faith than their other friends. Proclaiming loyalty, and being loyal are two different things. “Many proclaim themselves loyal, but who can find one worthy to trust?” (Prov. 20:6, NRSV) Trustworthiness is an essential part of spiritual friendships.

Proverbs 17:9 reminds the reader to forgive one another, which is a very important aspect of spiritual friendships. All need forgiveness at one time or another. Forgiving on another quickly, rather than choosing to hold a grudge, is a characteristic of SFs.

Proverbs 17:17a contains the oft-quoted words “a friend loves at all times.”

Proverbs 18:24 teaches: “Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.” Being able to trust someone through the good and bad times is a great benefit in life.

A friend has the ability to wound, and certainly an SF also has that capacity.

Whenever love is part of a relationship, the capacity to get hurt is also present. Proverbs 27:6 invites us to know that “well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts.” This verse ties in nicely with the fact that a “friend loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17a). If a friend challenges our actions or words, we can know that although it may sting at the time, our friend truly did have our best interests at heart. Criticism is easier to hear when someone who loves you and wants the best for you speaks the truth in love.

Another wonderful characteristic of an SF is dependability: “[I]n the day of your calamity” (Prov. 27:10), we can depend on friends. When the world seems to be falling apart, friends can be there offering their presence and prayers. The first phrase of that verse is, “Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your parent” (Prov. 27:10a).

Dependability is a virtue.

One last piece of advice from Proverbs is a warning not to make friends with those “given to anger” (Prov. 22:24). It is wise to be *choosy* about whom is selected to be one’s SF. Those *given to anger* may have issues better addressed in a relationship other than with an SF.

Biblical examples of spiritual friendships abound in the Scriptures. In many cases, Scriptures do not reveal a full picture of friendships. Perhaps only a single characteristic is emphasized, but that one thing can be very insightful. There are many pairs mentioned

in Scripture, including Joshua and Caleb, Jonathan and David, Nathan and David, and finally Naomi and Ruth—all from the Old Testament. Then, Elizabeth and Mary, Barnabus and Paul, and finally Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament will be considered.

Joshua and Caleb are among the first biblical models of spiritual friendships presented in the Bible. When Moses was told to send an expedition to explore the Promised Land and bring a report, Joshua and Caleb were among the twelve leaders chosen. The majority of these leaders returned full of fear by sharing the stories of how large the descendants of Anak were, how the journey consisted of too many obstacles, and too many groups of peoples that would have to be encountered and overcome before they could take over the land. Caleb was the first to say, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” (Num.13:30, ESV). The people responded in an uproar and rebelled in fear of the giants, rather than responding in faith to Caleb’s perspective of possibility, knowing God would fight for them. Moses and Aaron “fell face down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there” (Num. 14:5). Joshua and Caleb also tore their clothes (Num. 14:6). They said to the people:

[T]he land, which we passed by through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them (Numbers 14:7-9).

The Israelites responded by stoning them (Numbers 14:10). In this passage, Joshua and Caleb model spiritual friendships by reinforcing and standing by one another. They spoke in unity against great opposition. They had eyes to see things the way God saw them.

They encouraged one another to live God-sized dreams. They lived in God's world of possibilities rather than in the world of fear and doubt. They trusted in God and God's promises, and spoke boldly and courageously in his name. These are all characteristics of SFs.

Jonathan and David are another pair of spiritual friend mentioned in Scripture. "In the Bible, friendship is primarily a relationship of mutual trust and congeniality" (Harper Collins Bible Dictionary 300). Jonathan and David are a wonderful example of this kind of friendship, and of spiritual friendship. "At this first meeting, Jonathan and David are immediately bound together, life to life" (Brueggemann 136). They loved one another deeply (1 Sam. 18:1; 2 Sam. 1:26). "Jonathan, the crown prince, recognized in David a kindred spirit, and struck up a deep friendship with him" (Baldwin 138). To further make the point:

Saul's firstborn son found in David a soul mate, and "Jonathan's soul was tied to David's soul." This was understandable because David and Jonathan had much in common; they were both courageous and capable young warriors who possessed profound faith in the Lord. Both had initiated faith-motivated attacks against militarily superior Philistines that had resulted in great victories for Israel. (Bergen 199)

Common interests are a good starter for spiritual friendships, enriched even further by a shared faith.

David and Jonathan even made a covenant with one another (1 Sam. 18:3-4). It is repeated in 1 Samuel 20:17: "And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself." The idea of covenant is intrinsic to the formation of SFs. A covenant verbally even if not written binds the participants together in a way that denotes their intention of loyalty, good will, and love toward one another. Scripture reveals they were mutually committed to their friendship by their sworn love

for one another, not just by their words but also by their actions. One such action is: “The action of Jonathan in giving David his robe and armor is a dramatic act that seems to transfer to David Jonathan’s right to claim the throne” (Brueggemann 136). Jonathan in this act gives away probably his most precious possession, which was the inheritance of the throne of his father Saul.

Jonathan and David wept with one another when they knew they must part ways (1 Sam. 20:41). “Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord.’” (1 Sam. 20:42) David’s words highlight that their friendship had deepened into a spiritual friendship. Spiritual friendships are different from other friendships because what binds them together is a mutual love for the Lord.

Nathan and David are another pair of SF’s. Unlike Jonathan and David, it is not known if the relationship was a mutual friendship. What is shown through the Scripture is Nathan was acting as a SF would in this circumstance. David had sinned by committing adultery, planning and then having a man executed, and misusing his power as king. Nathan acted as an SF would in helping David to see the error of his ways, and to prepare him for the consequences of his actions. To help David discern his error, Nathan did not just blatantly come out and accuse David, although he could have. Instead, Nathan told a story, drawing David in, and then revealed the truth. At the end of the story, David wanted the life of the horrible man who had done this injustice to another, and Nathan revealed to him that he was that man.

As this conversation between David and Nathan shows us, sharing stories with one another can be an important part of a spiritual friendship. Stories convict, sometimes



encourage, and are almost always memorable. Unlike this Scripture, storytelling needs to be mutual to keep the friendship healthy.

Naomi and Ruth are another pair of SFs from the Old Testament. They were mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but their relationship went even deeper than just relatives. Ruth declared her loyalty to Naomi in these verses:

Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your god my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Ruth not only spoke these words but in every way lived them out by her actions. The depth of Naomi’s feelings for Ruth is not recorded. Ruth displays the characteristics of loyalty, dedication, the willingness to put the needs of the other first, selflessness, commitment, and a willingness to let God be her God. Ruth exhibited these qualities and more, identifying her as someone who would make a good SF.

In summary, the Old Testament teaches much about spiritual friendships. From Joshua and Caleb, one learns the importance of sticking together, speaking together boldly against opposition, having *eyes to see* in the power of the Holy Spirit, encouraging one another to live into God’s great possibilities, and trusting in God and God’s promises. From Jonathan and David one learns about commitment, deep love, and dependence upon God for guidance as essential elements to a spiritual friendship.

Moving on to the New Testament, one of the pairs of SFs encountered is Mary and Elizabeth. They shared blessings and experiences of great joy (Luke 1:44). Elizabeth affirmed Mary’s calling as she referred to Mary as the “mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43). They offered one another encouragement. Mary offered Elizabeth encouragement by

traveling so far just to see her. Elizabeth's encouragement is in the form of a blessing and is recorded in Scripture. In Luke 1:45, Elizabeth exclaims, "Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." They are joined together by the power of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth's acceptance of Mary and her awkward situation must have been a great relief to Mary. Mary's story was one that was difficult to believe. Elizabeth knew her story before she even arrived and received her graciously and without judgment. Larry Crabb writes about the importance of acceptance in a friendship:

Connecting is a kind of relating that happens when the powerful life of Christ in one person meets the good life of Christ in another. What every Christian can pour into another is the powerful passion of acceptance, a passion that flows out of the center of the gospel, a passion that fills the heart of God. (66)

Elizabeth gave Mary the gift of acceptance and provided Mary a safe space to stay.

Mary also models the characteristic of availability, which is very important in spiritual friendships. Mary then stayed with Elizabeth for three months. SFs need to be committed enough to hang around in the ups and downs of life. The gift of presence is a valuable gift indeed.

Barnabus and Paul were another example of spiritual friendship. Barnabus' name means "Son of encouragement" (1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:1, 9,13, Col. 4:10). Barnabus lives up to his name by "his ability both to perceive God's activity in people and to encourage birthing of the Spirit's presence in fruitful living." (Miller 137). To begin with, Barnabus befriended Paul when none of the other apostles would associate with him. Miller continues: "Barnabus is the person who can perceive the reality of faith in Saul, the Pharisee who had persecuted believers around Jerusalem, hauling them off to jail and having some put to death" (137). Barnabus helped pave a way for Paul's ministry (Acts

9:27) when others merely responded to how Paul used to be: a persecutor of those seeking to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. On Paul's behalf, "Barnabus ... graciously opened the circle of leaders to include Paul" (Willimon 107). What Paul could not do for himself, Barnabus did for him. Paul could not convince the leaders of his changed life because his past was too vividly etched in their minds. William Barclay writes:

It was by the grace of God that they sent the man they did send....[T]hey sent the man with the biggest heart in the church. They sent Barnabus. Barnabus had already stood by Paul and sponsored him when all men suspected him (Acts 9:27). (95)

Barnabus, as one of the leaders, was needed to influence the others by speaking on behalf of Paul's legitimate transformation. Barnabus was an encourager.

Encouragement is an important ingredient to a healthy spiritual friendship. When one knows that the person sharing with them really has their best interests at heart, one finds facing his or her weaknesses and faults much easier. In Acts 13:2, the Scripture shows the Holy Spirit has called them by name to go out together in ministry to the Gentiles. The others confirmed their ministry by laying hands on them and sending them off. At the beginning of their relationship, one would probably refer to Barnabus as the mentor and Paul as the pupil. It seems that as they continued in ministry together that their relationship became a more mutual one. They "taught a great many people" (Acts 11:26) together at a church at Antioch for a year.

Accountability is another important part of spiritual friendships. Accountability was also a characteristic of Paul and Barnabus' relationship. Paul tells in Galatians 2:11-14 how he confronted both Peter and even Barnabus about being hypocritical by not eating with the Christian Gentiles when the "circumcision Jews" were around. In other words, they were saying one thing, and then acting another way, depending on who was

watching them. An SF, such as Paul, can help a person to see things about themselves that they cannot see in themselves, apart from another's assistance. When inviting others to hold one accountable, a person has the incentive needed to do what the Lord has put on their hearts to do. Accountability can keep a person from many errors and sins, and, as it did for Peter and Barnabus, can serve as a corrective to help a person get back on track as they are reminded of what is really important.

Perhaps the best example in the Bible of spiritual friendships is the friendship between Jesus and His disciples. Jesus knew them better than they knew themselves, and loved them anyway. He knew their struggles, and even knew they would all fall away when things went from bad to worse. He coveted their presence and their friendship.

David G. Benner outlines beautifully the ways in which Jesus not only spoke of being a friend to His disciples, but was a friend through His actions (64). Jesus was their friend just by spending time with them. They ate together, drank together, walked together, "and discussed things that were important to both him and them" (64) (Luke 24:13-45). This passage from Luke describes the walk to Emmaus with Jesus and two disciples following his crucifixion and resurrection.

Benner also points out that Jesus "shared the most painful depths of his experience with them" (64). Their shared grief is vividly revealed at the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus called His disciples to come with Him to keep watch and pray. Jesus was in angst and shared with His disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). Jesus did not want to be alone in His time of heart-wrenching trial.

Jesus also “shared insights that were not disclosed to those outside the circle of friendship” (Benner 64). An example can be found in Matthew 13:36-52. In this passage, Jesus explained the parable of the Sower specifically to His disciples and not to the general crowd gathered to hear Him teach. Jesus chose the twelve to disclose Himself fully in contrast to His relationship with the multitudes.

Jesus acted as an SF as He “humbled himself in offering acts of tender care” (Benner 64). Jesus’ humility and care is vividly shown in John 13:1-17 where Jesus washes His disciples’ feet and calls them to do the same by “washing one another’s feet” (John 13:14). SFs look out for one another and care deeply about one another with a humble spirit, as Jesus did.

Providing emotional support is another characteristic of an SF. Jesus “offered [His disciples] emotional support, repeatedly reminding them that there was no need to fear; and demonstrating genuine concern for their feelings” (Benner 64). In John 14 are some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture, as Jesus sought to comfort and reassure His disciples. In this passage that Jesus promised the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to come into their lives.

Jesus was an SF to the disciples by inviting and answering their questions (Benner 64). An example of His answering their questions is found in Luke 11, where the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and He answered them by teaching them the Lord’s Prayer. In the midst of a spiritual friendship where trust, truth, and holding confidence are cherished, a safe place is created for one friend to question another honestly.

A very important characteristic of an SF is that he or she be someone who loves us as we are but also loves us enough not to leave us that way. Someone who will encourage us to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ is acting as an SF. Jesus “related to them [His disciples] in ways that were loving, yet challenged them to grow” (Benner 64). Jesus’ washing His disciples’ feet is an example of Jesus meeting them where they were and inviting them to grow in knowledge of loving and serving.

SFs pray for one another and lift one another up. While in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for His disciples that they would not fall into temptation (Matt. 26:41). At another time, Jesus taught the disciples how to pray (Matt. 6:8-13). Jesus modeled living a life of prayer and invited the disciples to the same (Luke 11:9). He reminded them they needed to abide in the vine to stay attached to God. SFs serve as reminders of how God is working in a person’s life already, and how to reconnect when they get off track.

Jesus was indeed the living Word. Disciples are to live life out of a love for the Word. Jesus knew the Scriptures well and was able to use the Word to defeat the enemy when tempted. SFs need to be dedicated to knowing the Word, and able to apply it to their own life situations and the situations of their friends. The Word is indeed the sword God has given to defeat Satan’s schemes against believers.

One of the most inspiring references Jesus made about the disciples being his friends comes in John 15:13-16. Jesus told the disciples that He was no longer calling them servants but calling them friends. “Jesus specifically identified the basis of His friendship with the disciples-the full sharing of confidential information” (Dongell 185). Benner explains it this way:

These words are among the most amazing recorded in Scripture. Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, invites us into the intimacy of the circle of friendship that exists between him and the father. The friendship that Jesus offers he has shared from eternity within the Godhead. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity places friendship at the very heart of the nature of God. And almost unbelievably, the eternal interflow of companionship that binds the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other, extends to those Jesus calls to be his followers and friends. (65)

Jesus, Son of God, has indeed revealed to humanity that God wants to be our friend.

Stephen Seamands writes about this intimate relationship of the Trinity in which believers are invited to participate. Seamands shares about meeting with a small group of SFs:

As we've met together, Jesus has been true to his promise that when two or three of us gather in his name, he will be in our midst (Matthew 18:20), and through him, the Father and the Spirit as well! In our fellowship with one another, we have experienced a deep divine fellowship, the fellowship of the Trinity. (47)

Christ is calling believers into the circle of friendship that He enjoys as a part of the Trinity and inviting them to invite others as well.

Jesus' approach to spiritual guidance involved an essential element of being another's SF: "Jesus made himself available to the people" (Demarest 17). The gifts of availability and time are key to any spiritual friendship. The Holy Spirit helps us in this endeavor. "Jesus ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit," and "dealt with persons as unique individuals" (18). He "engaged people in creative dialogue" and "asked probing questions" (19). When teaching others about spiritual friendships, the uniqueness of each person and their path to spiritual growth is important to remember. All individuals are uniquely created, so what works for one may not work for another. Well thought-out, pointed questions often lead a person to greater spiritual maturity.

Jesus “listened attentively and empathetically” (Demarest 174). Listening is an extremely important gift given to one another as SFs. Here are some tips given to spiritual coaches that would probably be helpful in any relationship when one is listening: putting phones and e-mails on silent mode so they will not be distracting, maintaining eye contact when face-to-face, being aware when interrupting and stopping, relaxing and paying attention to all that is being said (Miller and Hall 165). Parrott writes:

An active listener is one who intently listens to another person with the goal of being able to identify with the life of the one sharing in order to be a more effective tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit in the other person’s life. (Parrott 88)

Jesus did not have as many distractions as we do today, yet still He leads by showing us the value of being an attentive and active listener.

Application of the Scriptures is an important component of SFs. “Jesus applied the Word of God to people’s lives.” (Demarest 175). Jesus’ words can shape a believer’s life, if one will apply them, and help one another to apply them, too. Muto writes:

We share the Lord’s words in our joy and in our pain, for faith grows in light and darkness. We need only to witness the public ministry and passion of Jesus to know that his words are an expression of this life. There is no separation between what he says and who he is. Hence, his words are full of power. To read and believe in them heightens our awareness of God’s love as it sustains us in everyday life. (Muto 64)

The Word does indeed encourage believers on their journey and can be used as a powerful tool for encouragement between SFs.

Jesus “affirmed and encouraged people on their faith journeys. Jesus identified obstacles to spiritual growth” (Demarest 175). One of the ways SFs can encourage one another is to identify walls that are keeping them from following where the Holy Spirit may be leading (Jane Creswell 64).



In addition, “Jesus challenged, confronted, corrected and rebuked ... [and]... was fervent in prayer for those to whom He ministered” (Demarest 176). Jesus continues to challenge, confront, correct, and rebuke in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will guide believers as He convicts. In turn, the believer seeks to discover their failings, repent, and begin again. Spiritual growth comes through this cycle. Prayer is one of the greatest gifts one can offer another and believers should always remain fervent in prayer. All of these dimensions are at the heart of what spiritual friendships are all about.

Paul and his writings, along with the other epistles, offer many more insights into spiritual friendships through references as to how individuals are to interact as disciples of Jesus Christ with one another. The *one another*'s of the New Testament have much to teach the Body of Christ about how to be SFs.

In a spiritual friendship, acceptance of one another is important. As believers, we are to accept one another, recognize differences and choose to love each other anyway. In Romans 15:7, Paul exhorts Christians: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” This acceptance involves loving people where they are but not necessarily a willingness to leave them where they are. Jesus accepts people where they are but longs to see them transformed more into His likeness. A SF should do the same.

Love covers a multitude of sins, and is imperative in a spiritual friendship. “Love one another deeply,” Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:22b, “from the heart.” One characteristic of love is looking out for the interests of others rather than seeking for one's self. The opposite of love may not really be hate but selfishness. Looking out for the interests of others flows out of a love for others (Phil. 2:4). Another aspect of loving is devotion.

Romans 12:10a says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” (NASB) Devotion involves faithfulness, loyalty, and dedication. The second half of the verse Romans 12:10 says, “[H]onor one another above yourselves” (NIV). Honoring others means treating them with love and respect. A SF will respect a person’s right to be themselves and to think differently than they do without always being told they are wrong.

Being forgiving of one another is another essential aspect of being SFs. In Ephesians 4:31-32, the writer exclaims, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” A bitter root can quickly dissolve a friendship, which is why forgiveness is so important. Forgiveness does not mean that one was not wronged. To the contrary, it means something was done wrong that was hurtful but that the person has chosen not to hold it against the other anymore. This verse is also a gentle reminder to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. Being kind and compassionate are key ingredients in a spiritual friendship, also.

Encouragement is at the heart of spiritual friendships. The world is very quick to tear down a person at every turn. In contrast, the Scriptures exhort believers to be an encouragement to one another. Encouragement is a hallmark of Paul’s ministry and is found abundantly in his letters to the churches. In 1 Thessalonians 4:18, Paul exhorts them to encourage one another with words of Scriptures. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Paul writes, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up just as in fact you are doing.” The writer of Hebrews says to “encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13). Spiritual friends encourage one another.

Encouraging one another keeps one from participating in tearing one another down. The deceit comes from thinking that by criticizing another, one elevates themselves. In contrast to the ways of the world, Jesus taught them to love one another, and as Paul writes love is not proud or boastful but patient and kind, bearing all things (1 Cor. 13:4, 7). In a similar vein, Hebrews 10:24 exhorts the reader “to spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” This Scripture reveals yet another form of encouragement. Believers all need prodding at times to do the right thing. Lastly, Hebrews 10:25 reminds that in meeting together people are given a forum to encourage one another. Indeed, in community, believers grow best as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Word of God teaches not to “grumble against each other” (Jas. 5:9a). Grumbling is extremely destructive and contagious. The few words spoken under one’s breath reveal one’s hearts’ true sentiments. Gratitude is the best antidote for grumbling. A person cannot grumble and be grateful at the same time.

While in spiritual friendships the ability to challenge one another to grow is valued, and friends agree to disagree on some things, there are core values and essential truths that lead to a healthier relationship than one that does not share these values and essential truths. Paul writes,

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Cor.1:10).

Paul is saying that brothers and sisters in Christ need to be single-minded in their devotion to living a life of love in order to encourage others. SFs need to have the same unity of heart and mind. Peter backs up Paul’s thoughts in 1 Peter 3:8: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be

compassionate and humble.” Peace and harmony come by refusing to hold grudges, not grumbling against one another, forgiving one another, and speaking the truth in love when needed. Harmony is also aided by an abundance of compassion, sympathy, and love. Thinking of others more highly than one thinks of themselves also contributes to harmony. Lastly, Peter encourages believers to be humble. A humble heart is a teachable heart. Teachable hearts are a requirement for healthy spiritual friendships.

In 1 Corinthians 12:25, Paul encourages believers to “have equal concern for one another.” Mutuality is an important aspect of spiritual friendships. If one is devoted to the other, and the other does not return the devotion, then the friendship may not even be a friendship. Furthermore, if one of two SFs is always doing all of the listening because the other has never learned to listen, the relationship will probably not last very long. If it does, it will not be healthy. Spiritual friendships need a healthy dose of mutuality. Mutuality demands a balance of listening and sharing. Listening is a characteristic of someone who cares.

Another function of spiritual friendships is that of teaching and admonishing one another (Col. 3:16). SFs are supposed to challenge one another to grow by speaking the truth in love. Jesus came full of grace and truth. Both grace and truth are needed. Grace without truth leads to arrogance, and truth without grace will lead to despair. When held in tandem, truth and grace can help one grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ, which is a goal of spiritual friendships. The first part of Colossians 3:16 reminds believers that when people let the “word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” that they will be enabled to teach and admonish one another. SFs need to be devoted to spending regular time in the Word of God both alone and with others. In addition to the Word, the wisdom with which

a believer shares the truth in love should come from his or her relationship with the Holy Spirit who believers are promised will “guide [us] into all the truth.” (John 16:13, ESV)

Honesty is an important aspect of spiritual friendships. Ephesians 4:25 (NIV) states, “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” If one in a spiritual friendship comes to the relationship without being genuine, the relationship will not be a healthy one. True growth occurs when a person is willing to honestly look at themselves. A SF, in love, is able to lead their friend there. In a spiritual friendship, one is invited to abandon all defensiveness (Willard and Johnson 133). In a spiritual friendship, one is invited to share and be authentic with another. “This includes a willingness to be known in our most intimate relationships for who we really are” (133). As a friend, one must be willing to listen and be willing to be obedient to change and growth. Pretending to be *holy* when one’s heart is far from it is comparable to being a Pharisee in Jesus’ time. He told them they were “like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So outwardly you appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:27b-28, ESV). In other words, the outside looked good, but the inside was a mess. SFs are genuine with Jesus and one another.

Patience is another virtue important in spiritual friendships. Believers are to “[b]e completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2, NIV). As SF’s meet with one another, remembering that people are in different places in their spiritual journeys will help with growth in each SF. No one is perfect, and SFs should not expect others to be perfect, either. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we who

believe have been granted grace. SFs need to live in grace and, in response to grace, extend that grace to others by being patient with them.

Inevitably, when seeking to grow in grace together in the context of spiritual friendship, a person's natural tendency is often to compare oneself with where another is on the journey. In some instances, an SF may think of themselves as having moved *beyond* where the others are. Conceit may result. Others may think of themselves as being in a similar place as another and give into the urge to compete with one another. At the other end of the spectrum, perhaps one does not feel as adequate for the journey as another and end up envying the other's spiritual maturity. Paul in Galatians 5:26 deals with all three of these unhealthy scenarios. He writes, "Let us not become conceited, competing against each other or envying one another." (NRSV) Believers are called to focus on their own journey with Jesus rather than to compare themselves with others, as Christians and especially as SFs. In summary, through these *one anothers*, Paul offers some excellent advice on how to be healthy SFs.

Another way the Bible teaches of the closeness that is a part of spiritual friendships is through the word for fellowship. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship, found first in Acts 2:42-47. The early church was known for this unique way of living together.

Luke writes in Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (ESV) This passage indicates an expectation of following Christ that included gathering and participating in the fellowship of believers. Somewhere along the way, many believers have missed that they need to participate in the fellowship. Individualism has crowded into their thought processes and

convinced them they are self-sufficient and do not need others to grow in their faith.

Many still buy into this thought process. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul writes, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In this passage, believers are not only invited into the fellowship of believers with one another, but they are also called into the fellowship with the Son. Then in 1 John 1:3, John writes, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (NIV) Believers are invited not only into fellowship with one another but also with the Father and the Son.

This fellowshiping with the Son and with one another is characterized by walking in the light and living by the truth. As is written in First John,

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth, but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1John 1:6-7)

SFs need to be committed to walking in the light as well as living by the truth. A more contemporary application of *koinonia* is found in a church planted in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, called the Hot Metal Bridge Church. Their pastors founded the church and built the church around *koinonia*, the fellowship of believers. Rev. Jim Walker, one of the founding pastors, defines *koinonia* as the following: “to be in communion with; to be in close relationship with; to be in partnership with; to participate in or with; to be yoked or bound together; to be tightly woven or closely connected with” (34). He goes on to write that believers need to have *koinonia* with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the body and blood of Jesus Christ (i.e., communion), with others, with the poor through giving, in Christ’s sufferings, in the good news of God’s grace, and in the

faith (34-35). They have built a church around these principles. In their worship, communion is served every week, and worship is followed by a shared meal together, free to anyone who might attend.

In summary, the Scriptures confirm in various ways the concept of spiritual friendships. They are modeled in various pairs of friends. The Proverbs are very encouraging of friendships and the necessity of having them. The way the Body of Christ is exhorted to be present *one another* throughout the epistles confirms the idea of spiritual friendships. The idea of *koinonia* in the early Church contributes to the development of spiritual friendships. Lastly, Jesus himself modeled beautifully how to be an SF.

### **Historical Perspectives on Spiritual Friendship**

The writings of Aelred of Rievaulx and John Wesley present historical perspectives on spiritual friendship. Aelred was one of the first to write on the topic of spiritual friendships. John Wesley began an entire movement based upon smaller and larger groups of friends who met for the purpose of spiritual growth and guidance.

#### **Aelred of Rievaulx**

Aelred of Rievaulx was from England born in North Umbria in 1110. Aelred became a monk first and then the Abbot of Rievaulx from 1147 until his death in 1167. In addition to being a writer and abbot, he was also a saint.

Aelred “described the vocation of friendship as one of the highest Christian disciplines” (Ford 36). Aelred believed that “there is a special form of love which comes closer to the love of the saints in heaven than most others: the love of friendship”



(*Spiritual Friendship* 19). He began his consideration of friendship citing Cicero's definition of friendship, which was "agreement on matters human and divine, with charity and good will" (qtd. in Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship* 22). Aelred's beginning point included an acknowledgement that friendship has a connection with divine matters.

Aelred believed one could identify four stages by which one climbs to the perfection of friendship: the first is selection, the second probation, the third admission, and the fourth perfect harmony in matters human and divine with charity and benevolence" (*Spiritual Friendship* 93). He believed one should be selective right at the start with whom one chooses as a friend. Aelred expressed his caution this way:

For since there is no one more detestable than the man who injures friendship, and nothing torments the mind more than desertion or insult at the hands of a friend, a friend ought to be chosen with the utmost care and tested with extreme caution. (93)

SFs should be chosen with the greatest of care.

One of Aelred's pupils asked him, "Is there a difference between charity and friendship?" Aelred's response to them was the following:

[T]here is a vast difference for divine authority approves more are to be received into the bosom of charity than into the embrace of friendship. For we are compelled by the law of charity, to receive in the embrace of love not only our friends, but also our enemies. But only those do we call friends to whom we can fearlessly entrust our heart and all its secrets: those, too, who, in turn, are bound to us by the same law of faith and security. (*Spiritual Friendship* 58)

Believers are to love even their enemies. Spiritual friends are those whom a person can share their deepest thoughts and longings.

In Aelred's writings on spiritual friendship, he quotes Solomon from the Book of Proverbs: "'He that is a friend loves at all times,' manifestly declaring that friendship is eternal if it is true friendship; but if it should ever cease to be, then it was not true

friendship, even though it seemed to be so” (55). Aelred further states his case on this matter by quoting Jesus:

Christ himself set up a definite goal for friendship when he said: ‘Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ See how far love between friends should extend; namely that they be willing to die for one another (*Spiritual Friendship* 78).

SFs are, by Aelred’s thoughts based on Jesus’ words, engaged in an intimate relationship rather than just a casual relationship.

Not to have friends was a great tragedy in Aelred’s way of thinking. Aelred quotes Ecclesiastes 4:10: “Woe to him that is alone, for when he falls, he has none to lift him up.” The following is a brief description of Aelred’s affinity for friendships:

But what happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you need have no fear to confess your failings; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can trust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans! What, therefore, is more pleasant than to so to unite to oneself the spirit of another and of two to form one, that no boasting is thereafter to be feared, no suspicion to be dreaded, no correction of one by the other to cause pain, no praise on the part of one to bring a charge of adulation from the other. (*Spiritual Friendship* 72)

This kind of friendship involves a deep trust and commitment to confidentiality that is often difficult to find. Aelred expected SFs to be willing to share their very souls with one another, without fear of being betrayed or manipulated. Where Aelred’s view of friendship differs from most contemporary writings on spiritual friendship today is on the “speaking on terms of equality” rather than one being *above* the other. Aelred’s writings lead one to believe that the mutuality of the relationship is one of its greatest strengths.

Furthermore, Aelred was convinced that friendship was “a stage toward the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of his fellowman becomes the

friend of God, according to the words of the Savior in the Gospel: “I will not now call you servants, but my friends” (73, John 15:15) Aelred even went as far as to say, “God is friendship” (17). He believed a true friend would always lead a person closer to God and never lead them astray. Aelred maintained that what was true of love was true of friendship, to the point he would allude to 1 John 4:16, by saying, “[H]e who abides in friendship abides in God, and God in him” (66). Aelred saw friendship as being intricately linked to a person’s relationship with God.

Honesty and integrity were important characteristics of a true friendship for Aelred. Indeed, “if a true friend wants to influence his or her companion, the persuasion is done purely for the sake of love; love of God and love of the friend” (Ford 39). In a spiritual friendship, one is invited to lay aside one’s false self and be real with one another. Perhaps this inability to lay aside our false selves is why so few have true SFs. In order to help discern if one qualified to be one’s SF, Aelred created a test. “Aelred believed true spiritual friendship would pass a test of four qualities: Loyalty, Right Intention, Discretion and Patience” (41). By loyalty, Aelred was referring to the call to keep a confidence. Loyalty “called upon each friend to maintain confidentiality” (41). As Proverbs reminds, a gossip is good at tearing apart friends. Nothing can kill a friendship faster than a leak of confidentiality. Aelred’s right intention could be compared with Jesus’ call for a pure heart. Having a pure heart implies one is not coming to a relationship with one’s own agenda wishing to manipulate things to his or her advantage. A right intention implies one wants only the best for the other out of a pure heart toward God. Patience is needed in a spiritual friendship because eventually one will fail the other in some way. Forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary along with patience to keep

the friendship a healthy one. In addition, “at times a good friend may also need to speak a hard truth to us in love; we applying patience, are called to receive this word without losing heart” (41). SFs need to have a heart willing to listen to criticisms and correction when friends have a difficult word to share with them.

In a contemporary response to Aelred’s writings, Tom Grosh IV offers insight into the difficulties one may encounter when seeking to follow Aelred’s counsel. One of the distinctives of spiritual friendship is the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit as friends gather together. “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ is in our midst” (Aelred 30).

When reading *Spiritual Friendship*, I led/participated in a prayer gathering interwoven with a dialogue of a shared journey of spiritual friends. During that time I had to remind myself of the call for our conversations to be filled with charity and humility—that there is an interior wasteland not only in others (and other fellowships), but also within me (and my own fellowship!) (Grosh)

Conversation can easily turn quickly (even in the midst of a spiritual friendship) to tearing another down, gossiping, or being prideful. When these words seep into friend’s conversations, they crowd out the desire for shared charity and humility.

In summary, Aelred was among the first to write in depth about spiritual friendships and left much to be pondered. From the four stages to enter into the perfection of friendship, to friendship being a stage moving forward in love and knowledge of God, to the importance of honesty and integrity in spiritual friendships, Aelred was thorough in his assessment of SFs.

### **John Wesley**

John Wesley was an Anglican minister, writer, and theologian (1703-1791), and the father and cofounder of Methodism (with Charles, his brother). Wesley was

committed and did much to encourage the Methodists to be SFs to one another. Wesley did not use that terminology, but as one looks at the function of the bands, the Society, and classes, one will find that he was asking them to be SFs to one another in a small group setting as they held one another accountable for walking as disciples of Jesus.

Wesley based the content of the time people spent in their *bands* on Scripture, specifically James 5:16: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” As Wesley wrote in his Rules of the Bands, to this end members of the Band intend to meet once a week, start on time, begin with song or prayer, and then take turns inquiring of one another’s souls (Outler 180).

The heart of the matter was this: “To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting” (180). Wesley had a long list of probing questions for them to take turns asking one another. Accountability was the main function of these bands.

The journey of spiritual growth requires fellow pilgrims on the journey. M.

Robert Mulholland, Jr. writes:

As we enter into spiritual disciplines, we will also experience the need for a support community to uphold us in the disciplines. We need some structure of accountability both to hold us to the discipline and to encourage and support us in the discipline. This realization was the genius of Wesley’s classes and bands in the early Methodist movement, which were regular fellowships of mutual accountability, nurture and support. (160-61)

Left on one’s own, Mulholland continues, a person will talk themselves out of holding to a discipline that is difficult for them (160-61). Others inquiring of someone’s well-being

is a great motivator to “stick with it.” It is the mutual accountability which can lead a person towards growth in their spiritual journey. Spiritual friendships, which include accountability, will bear much fruit as one keeps another aware of the state of his or her soul.

In addition to the classes and bands, there were united societies. Wesley defined it as “a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation (Mulholland 178).

Wesley also expected them to pray together and for an encouraging word to be shared in the group. Prayer and encouragement are essential in a spiritual friendship. Wesley also includes “watching over one another in love.” At the heart of spiritual friendships is the intention and assumption that a friend wants the very best for their SFs. Correction is easier to swallow when one knows that one is loved. His questions had to do with temptations faced and how they had overcome them, and encouraged them to confront one another with their faults. One pointed question was, “Do you desire to be told of all your faults?” (181) Great trust is needed and mutuality for this question to be fruitful.

Another question was, “Do you desire that ...we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?” (180-181).

Transparency does not always come easily, but Wesley knew how to get to the root of the matter. This was a call to true discipleship and not a “feel good” support group for sinners (181).

While the band was a close-knit and important part of Wesley’s method of making disciples, there is a sweeping new interest in the revival of Wesley’s class

meetings. The class meetings were less intrusive than the band meetings and usually included both women and men. Although less invasive than the band meetings, there were elements of accountability in the class meeting, including the question, “How is it with your soul?” (Watson 415) The purpose of the class meetings also was to “watch over one another in love” (Watson 415). Kevin Watson has captured and contributed a valuable resource for the recovery of United Methodists of the class meeting. Watson suggests that the beginning of the decline of United Methodist membership came when they stopped having class meetings. At that time, Methodism was becoming no longer a denomination of the poor but of the middle and upper classes who did not wish to be transparent with others. Thus, they switched from classes and bands to Sunday school where the *expert* told the other passive listeners what the Bible said, without asking questions such as, “How is it with your soul?” (Watson 54)

In contrast to Sunday school, the class meetings were focused not on intellect and gaining knowledge but on transformation of lives. Watson refers to them as “Transformation Driven Groups”(6). “These groups focus not on discussion of mastery of content, but on changed lives, on group member’s experience of God” (6). Furthermore, “they are especially focused on being made new by the grace of God” (260). He challenges the church: “Form a class meeting, where you will actively pursue deeper faith in Christ with others” (260). Watson shares as a modern example of a class meeting in one local church called *Kitchen Groups*. “Kitchen Groups foster a community of honesty and pursue accountability” (285). These are characteristics of a group of SFs (rather than just two) but are still pointing to the same outcome: a deeper walk with God.

Deep sharing and vulnerability among friends is a hallmark of spiritual friendships. “Early Methodists were asked to invite others into their lives, and to be willing to enter deeply into the lives of other people so that together they would grow in grace” (Watson 415). This willingness to be vulnerable exemplifies the level of sharing that needs to be a part of a healthy spiritual friendship. Furthermore, “they were committed to the idea that the Christian life is a journey of growth in grace or sanctification. And they believed that they needed one another to persevere on this journey” (427). Growth in grace is one of the goals of spiritual friendships and also provides another to share the journey.

A local church Dallas Willard pastored developed Wesley Fellowship Groups as a way of reclaiming the class. “In Wesley Fellowship Groups we were encouraged to share our lives, hold each other accountable, pray together, study Scripture, and commit ourselves to outreach” (Watson 879). These are all components that could be part of a spiritual friendship. After experiencing being a part of a Wesley Fellowship Group, “persons began to experience God’s call to lead and do things far beyond their capabilities” (891). Another way of phrasing this extraordinary capability is *dreaming God-sized dreams*. God-sized dreams attempt to do something that will only happen if God appears. In other words, not in human strength but by the power of the Holy Spirit can people do things “far beyond their capabilities.” (891) SFs encourage one another to dream God-sized dreams.

Wesley, while not using the terminology of spiritual friendships, has much to offer in the description of the bands, societies, and classes to help one learn how to be another’s SF. While these groups were larger than the two individuals that I am



suggesting make up spiritual friendships, many facets of what Wesley organized and wrote about can be translated easily to a smaller group of two. The new resurgence of interest in reclaiming Wesley's class meetings may lend itself to a renewal in the United Methodist Church.

In summary, Aelred of Rievaulx had much to say about spiritual friendships and articulated their importance, even essentiality to living life in the way of Jesus Christ. Wesley organized people into groups, societies, bands, and classes built around the characteristics of SFs. There is much historical evidence for the benefits of spiritual friendships.

### **Contemporary Perspectives on Spiritual Friendships**

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in spiritual friendships of many kinds with very different slants. The interest in spiritual friendships while varied covers a broad range of traditions and even branches into the Christian counseling field. Tilden Edwards writes from an Episcopalian background about Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spiritual direction Kenneth Leech writes about spiritual friendship or *soul friends* in the Anglican tradition. The Catholic tradition of spiritual friendship is explored in Mary DeTurrís Poust's book. Benner combines the two fields of theology and psychology, as he is a psychologist, spiritual director, retreat leader, and author. Ray Simpson writes of *soul friendship* in the Celtic tradition. This list is not exhaustive by any means but is enough to convey that each of many traditions are interested in the topic of spiritual friendships and helping people to identify and develop friendships that have a spiritual nature to them. Two of the most recent publications on the topic of spiritual friendship have altered the name to clarify the concept, by referring to them as biblical

friendships. “How Should We Develop Biblical Friendships” by Beeke and Haykin was published in 2015, and “The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendships” by Holmes in 2014. These last two mentioned are aimed at millennials and post-millennials and are very practical and understandable for laypersons interested in spiritual friendships.

Perhaps the reason for this explosion of interest in spiritual friendships is driven by the increasing fragmentation caused by social media and the disenchantment that makes one appear *connected to others* but in reality leaves one feeling quite isolated and alone.

Many of the younger generation have not been taught social skills or graces that could and would aid them in finding true friendships. Many are glued to their phones instead of building healthy relationships with one another. Evidence of being preoccupied with electronics can be found all around. One may see a dad walking down the street with his daughter who is looking up at him and he is busy *connecting* on his cell phone. A couple goes to dinner, and while they are waiting for food, instead of talking, each is busy texting another in some other place. Our culture leads people to tend to be self-absorbed individuals who “worship a false trinity: power, possessions, and human relationships” (Johnson, *Invitation* 187). Pursuing human relationships often times refers to relationships that can be manipulated and controlled. Many people in American culture have forgotten largely how to be present where they are. People are in desperate need of SFs.

## **Characteristics of Spiritual Friendships**

Most people have several types of friendships in their lives, with differing levels of sharing and depth. For example, one would probably not share with an acquaintance intimate details of his or her struggles in life. Friends, most would agree, are those who can be trusted, at least at some level. SFs can be defined as two Christians sharing the journey of growing in Christlikeness together. SF's can be defined by many common characteristics.

The literature review reveals many of the same characteristics of SFs that the Bible and both Aelred and Wesley have already unveiled. The themes are mutuality/equality, time/intentionality, active listening, the gift of presence, deeper conversations about God, Christ-like character, commitment to grow in grace and willingness to be transformed, practice of prayer and studying the Word, and encouragement.

### **Mutuality**

One of the distinctives of spiritual friendships is mutuality. Many other helping one-on-one relationships are usually about one person directing/coaching/teaching and the other being directed/coached/taught. Spiritual friendships involve individuals who share these roles as needed. Gary W. Moon and Benner share about Wesley's habit of introducing "'twin souls' to each other for the purpose of mutual spiritual guidance 'without reserve and without disguise'" (123). Wesley understood the value of one-to-one soul care in a mutual relationship of caring for souls. While Henri J. M. Nouwen with Michael Christensen and Rebecca Laird are speaking of a Christian community, their words contribute to this conversation:

Together we are called to let God be the center of our lives, speak to us, guide us, hold us, renew us deep within. We have the freedom to say yes to God's call and to choose to live it in very specific ways. Our communities help us make and sustain that choice. (*Discernment* 17)

It is often in community, or with another, that a person can hear God's still small voice most clearly, and find a space where the Spirit can transform them. In Christian community, a person can not only hear God's voice, but is equipped by the support of another to follow through and "sustain that choice" (17).

Ford writes, "[I]n contrast to spiritual direction, spiritual friends take turns sharing and listening" (25). This quote also validates the claim that one of the key aspects of spiritual friendships is the mutuality of sharing and listening between the two rather than one person *above* the other. Furthermore, spiritual friendships are between two equals.

[A] spiritual friendship is between two equals who walk alongside each other for the purpose of helping each other grow into the image of Christ. Rather than being a pedagogical approach to discipleship, the soul friendship is a relational approach to growing in faith. (Miller and Hall 111)

Spiritual friendship is thus defined by its mutuality. If the two individuals involved are not equals, then something other than spiritual friendships is being discussed. Margaret Gunther seemingly dismisses the usefulness of spiritual friendships for growth and prefers the hierarchy of spiritual direction. She admits sometimes spiritual direction does lead to spiritual friendship, and that nothing has gone wrong. However, she goes on to say the other will need to find another spiritual director because "[t]he give-and-take between friends cannot substitute for the careful attentiveness of a lovingly distanced director" (*Holy Listening* 67). In a later book, she seems to be more affirming of spiritual friendships: "Whether we call them spiritual friends or soul friends, we need them

desperately” (*Toward Holy Ground* 26). Gunther seems to have evolved in her thought processes to enthusiastically acknowledge the importance of spiritual friendships.

In the mutuality of opening up our souls to another a space is created where the Holy Spirit can transform individuals more into the image of Christ (Caliguire 23).

Spiritual friendships require grace as this transformation unfolds. “Mutuality and grace are intrinsic to friendship” (Edgar 173). Spiritual friendships are unique in their transformative capacities:

Christian friendship is to be transformative. It is a loving ministry that transforms us into the image of our friend Jesus, and enables us to be friends and reflectors of Christ’s character to others. The moral life is not achieved by anything other than friendship with Christ, and this is most often mediated by friendship within the Christian community. (172)

The mutual *give-and-take* relationship is “one of the most important aspects” of spiritual friendships. “Those engaged in giving ministry are partners with those receiving it, and it is frequently the case that both parties are enriched because of the relationship” (172).

The mutuality of spiritual friendships, in addition to the power of the Holy Spirit, make the relationship a transformative one.

In many ways, this mutuality is the opposite of what many have been taught as Christians. Leech brings this concept out in discussing the John Bunyan’s book *Pilgrim’s*

*Progress*:

Here it is the solitary character of the spiritual journey that is stressed. Christian must go it alone, rejecting the pseudo-guides he meets along the way. This sturdy independence, a “do-it-yourself” spirituality, was to remain one of the central features not only of the Puritans, but of wide sections of evangelical Christianity. (82)

The idea of a spiritual friendship is not a popular concept in our culture. Many people have bought into this *do-it-yourself* motto entirely, even in their spirituality. It can be an obstacle to being open and developing spiritual friendships.

Benner states, “[M]utuality in a friendship is based on a rhythm in which the giving and receiving of each will balance over time, not within a given day or week, or even month” (76). Sometimes, due to the circumstances of a person’s life, one will need to monopolize the time spent together. Eventually, after that season has passed, the other will need to be the focus for the time together. Otherwise, the balance will be skewed and the relationship can suffer. Benner is making the point that the essence of spiritual friendship lies in the mutual giving and receiving over a period of time.

Moon and Benner, while reflecting on Paul’s letter to Timothy, derive several jobs for a spiritual mentor and then suggest that they can be *twin souls* for each other as Wesley called them (127). Some of the categories are guide, model, coach, advocate, and mediator. The guide “ushers the[other] into the Lord’s presence” (127). The model is one who walks the walk beside the other. The coach encourages the one seeking assistance to be more like Jesus. The advocate is there to offer support on the journey when others fade away. The role of mediator refers to the priesthood of believers to intercede on behalf of the other.

Soul friendships, while involving care, are based on soul intimacy, not caring alone (Benner 76). A friendship that is based on caring alone would not qualify as a spiritual friendship. Soul intimacy is the piece of spiritual friendships that makes them different from other types of friendships. By *soul intimacy* Benner is referring to the deep

sharing of cares, concerns, hopes, and dreams that comes from sincere compassion, a commitment to wanting only the best for the other, and mutual trust within a friendship.

### **Intentional Time Together**

SFs make a commitment to take time intentionally to be with one another. Lamb writes: “To pursue a relationship with Jesus, we must spend time with Jesus. To enjoy friendship the way Jesus did, we must spend time with other followers” (97). People tend to act like those they are around. With whom one chooses to spend his or her time can greatly impact that person’s actions. An example of Jesus’ commitment to relationships is His commitment to spending time with the disciples:

Jesus was willing to sacrifice time in exchange for friendship. When Andrew and another of the disciples of John asked Jesus where he was staying, he did not simply give the information they wanted. He said, “Come and . . . see.” They went “and spent that day with him” (John 1:37-39). It was about 4:00 p.m. when they went home, and it seems that these two spent the night with Christ. The Savior of the world, perfect model for the Christian leader, was inefficient according to much modern management philosophy. He spent a whole day on an unplanned appointment. (Fernando 33)

Many of us have lost the art of just spending time with friends. Perhaps one of the results of people’s unwillingness to spend time lingering is that many people have trouble identifying a *real friend*. Jesus knew that relationships, meaningful relationships, take time. Developing spiritual friendships takes deliberate, intentional, mutually committed time:

The type of friendship we are advocating is rare today because we have forgotten how to linger. Time is too precious for lingering, we claim. Indeed time is precious. But that is not why we have stopped lingering, for lingering is a good way to spend precious time. Our problem is we are too restless to linger. We live in a world where people are competing and struggling to overtake each other. It is good to know that there are some people who will accept us for what we are, and in whose presence we can

let our hair down, be ourselves, and talk about things that really matter to us. (32)

The information age with all of its instant communication has left many searching for something more. The search has made souls restless and, as Fernando states, too restless to linger with friends. As a society, we have become too restless to settle down to be truly present with one another. Busyness is a great hindrance to building friendships. “[T]he hectic pace of life is one of the biggest friendship challenges of our time” (Baab 47). *Busyness* becomes an excuse not to invest in the life of another, not to linger long with another, and often not to let anyone truly know the true self. Jonathan Holmes concurs: “If we want biblical friendship, we must be willing to invest a resource that is limited and irreplaceable. We must invest our time” (63). He goes on to say that friendship requires sacrifice, and normally that sacrifice is the giving of one’s time to another. Joel R. Beeke and Michael A. G. Haykin call the commitment of spending time together simply “being together” (34). “Never underestimate the power of personal presence. When it comes to friendship, there is no substitute for time together. It certainly involves communication, but it aims for communion—sharing life together” (34). They go on to say, “True friendships take time: it takes time to build into one another’s lives. The transparency and trust essential to true friendship cannot be established overnight” (34). Friendships can die from lack of spending time together. Time spent together person to person is imperative in spiritual friendships because to know and be known takes time.

### **Active Listening**

True listening is a gift and a vital component of a spiritual friendship (Ford 20). An SF is one who will answer the “call to simply be still”:



By cultivating internal stillness before God and the other, I relax the aperture to the lens of my soul; I let go of the need to find an answer or offer a wise word. This is hard work at times, because naturally I want to be useful to my friend. Nevertheless, something profound happens when one is simply being heard, metaphorically held in the spacious container that attentive silence provides. (21)

Dying to one's self and allowing the peace of Christ to flow through one in active attentive silence are true gifts to one's friend rather than letting the flesh arise in an attempt to *fix* them. Benner seconds these thoughts about holy listening in the midst of spiritual friendships and adds to them by encouraging friends:

Try speaking less and listening more. Practice being fully present to the other person, setting aside your private preoccupations and feelings, and making yourself available for the Spirit. And most important, begin learning to listen to the Spirit and the other person at the same time. Be attentive to God's presence yourself and seek to be attentive to the presence of God with and in the one to whom you listen. This is holy listening. By means of it, you help the other person increase awareness of God's presence and this ... is central to spiritual transformation. (159)

The work of the Holy Spirit as the third person in our midst is what makes conversations between SFs transformational. Creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work is the heart of active listening. Ele Parrott offers this definition of active listening:

An active listener is one who listens to another person with the goal of being able to identify with the life of the one sharing in order to be a more effective tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit in the other person's life. (88)

Active listening does not include intending to change or manipulate the other person (89) but rather to create a space where the Holy Spirit can inform and transform.

Active listening is a tremendous gift in a world of people who are often starved for attention. Many people go through their daily lives and never really have anyone truly listen to them. Wayne McDill writes, "Self-expression is a serious need that everyone has. If someone really listens to you while you express your thoughts and feelings, its like

finding an oasis in a hot desert! Refreshment! It encourages a person to keep going!”

(63). Everyone needs to be heard, and SFs offer that listening ear to one another.

Alice Fryling writes that active listening is fostered by a “contemplative attitude,” “an open spirit,” and “a humble perspective” (40-41). By contemplative attitude, she means “to view with continued attention, to observe thoughtfully, to consider thoroughly, and to think deeply” (40). An open spirit “allows our friends to be where they are without judgment and we invite them to experience grace in their present circumstance” (41). A humble perspective means “we let go of preconceived opinions, we let go of the need to be right, we let go of our own insecurities, and we let go of the need to appear good, wise, or spiritual. In short, we let go of ourselves to be present to the other” (41). These aspects of active listening are a gift of hospitality. Inspecting translations of the word *hospitality* in other languages brings light on the topic. “The German word for hospitality ... means friendship to the guest, and the Dutch ... word for hospitality means freedom of the guest. Hospitality wants to offer friendship without binding the guest, and freedom without leaving him alone” (*Reaching Out* 48-49). Nouwen goes on to write, “Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can occur” (*Reaching Out* 48-49). SFs are people who make a space for one another that is safe and provides fertile soil to for the other to grow and be transformed by the Spirit.

Kay Lindahl writes, “Over the years, I have discovered that there is a basic context that nurtures and develops the practice of listening as a sacred art. Three qualities that are essential to this deep listening context are silence, reflection, and presence” (16). She continues by saying the silence is to “create [a] space for listening to God. Reflection gives us access to listening for our inner voice. Presence is the awareness of listening to

another” (16). All three of these could be used as a focus for spiritual friendships as they seek to listen to one another. In Christian spiritual friendships, friends will also be listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit within to guide, convict, and encourage them on the journey.

Thomas Moore is in agreement with Lindahl and writes:

In friendship, there may be more not-doing than doing. Friendship does not ask for a great deal of activity, but it does require loyalty and presence. After all, what the soul wants is attachment. Therefore, like all forms of soulful living, friends require attention. (95)

Again, there is the combination of presence and attention in addition to loyalty for healthy spiritual friendships.

Benner maintains that this offering of presence and attention is, in effect, giving the gift of hospitality and presence to another:

Spiritual friendship is not primarily a matter of doing certain things. Often, in fact, it is precisely the opposite of doing; it is a gift of not doing—not interrupting, not attempting to solve problems, not prematurely or inappropriately advising, not assuming that what has worked for us will work for others. Stated positively: spiritual friendship is a gift of hospitality, presence, and dialogue. While all of these have a component of doing—that is they have to be lived out—they are grounded in ways of being. (46)

Benner believes that the key is to create a quiet place within in order to receive the other person devoid of divided attentions, distractions, or agendas (Benner 51). Then out of one’s own peaceful state, one can be a non-anxious presence to someone else. A person cannot give away what he or she does not possess. The Holy Spirit gives both gifts.

Benner concurs again:

But ultimately the presence that transforms lives is not mine, but God’s. As I bring my true self-in-Christ to relationships of spiritual friendships, what the other person encounters is not just me, but Christ in me. Spiritual

friends help each other discern God's presence and respond to him in loving surrender and service. (52)

One is reminded that people cannot transform one another but the Holy Spirit who is present. Norvene Vest writes seconds this opinion as she teaches about active listening:

We need Christ's help in order to be this kind of listener. All of us invariably bring biases and prejudices and other limitations that keep us from being good listeners. Consequently, an important start to the skill of good listening is self-knowledge, so that we can be extra careful in those areas where we know we find it difficult to hear. And we need to always be praying that God will enable us to be more open. So listening begins with self-understanding and prayer. (51)

By inviting Christ/the Spirit to help, friends can lay aside their selfish, critical selves and hear the other speak and the Spirit speaking truth in the midst of the conversation.

Nouwen writes of the transformation that can take place when those who know they are blessed by God in response offer blessings to others around them:

I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your blessedness. The blessed one always blesses! (*Life* 82)

The gift of blessing could be a wonderful tool for SFs as they encourage one another and listen to one another.

### **Deep Sharing/Gift of Presence**

In participating in active listening and offering one's *real* presence to one another, one will find oneself in the midst of deeper conversations about God than would normally occur. The gift of hospitality to one another enables friends to share more deeply. A positive consequence of spending time with one another and lingering is the tendency to go into deeper conversations. Time allows friends to get beyond shallow conversation and move to topics of significance:

Those who set apart time for enriching discussions, on issues, on the things of God, will rediscover the joy of truth. They will bring new depth of true personal fulfillment to their lives. We need to bring long chats back into our schedules, allowing significant slots of time for truth-related discussions. Truth is one of the riches aspects of the Christian life and so should be one of the richest aspects of Christian fellowship. (Fernando 33)

In a world where truth is hard to find, and most people are trying to be something they are not, Fernando's suggestions come as a breath of fresh air. *Long chats* seem to be more of a luxury than a common occurrence in this day and age. Christian fellowship could be greatly enhanced if pastors and leaders of the church would make spaces in the life of the church where people could linger a little longer intentionally. Unfortunately, too often personal *agendas* get in the way of having these deep conversations. With agendas so tightly packed, room for lingering is left out. The solution, then, includes a setting aside of *agendas*. When one begins a day certain of what and who it will include, barriers are erected against, perhaps, what the Spirit would have one do or with whom the Spirit would lead one to converse or spend time lingering. When a person is willing to lay aside one's own agenda and take time to listen and obey the nudges of the Holy Spirit, ample opportunities become available either to provide a much needed listening ear or to learn and grow from discussing the truth of God, who He is and how He is acting in a person's life and in the world.

Deep sharing is indeed an important part, and distinctive even, of spiritual friendships. Benner writes about *deep* sharing and refers to it as *spiritual intimacy*:

Spiritual friends share with each other at the level of their soul... [I]f they never share at this level the relationship is not worthy of being called a spiritual- or soul-friendship. Friends who enjoy soul intimacy never settle for gossip or simple information exchange. Instead, they use the data of events as springboards for the sharing of feelings, perceptions, values, ideas, and opinions. The conversations of such friends are never merely about what happened in their lives ... but move from this to how they

experience, react, and understand what happened. Dialogue continually shifts from the surface to the depths, from the external to the internal. This is the crucial distinctive of dialogue in spiritual friendships. (73)

One of a person's deepest longings is to be known. In the midst of a spiritual friendship one not only discovers the joy of knowing another, one also finds our truest selves. When friends share deeply, truest self comes to the light. This sharing takes great trust, honesty, confidentiality, and time. One way to grow closer in relationship with SFs is to share deep longings with one another:

Spiritual intimacy demands ... attentiveness to the inner world. Soul conversations invite inclusion of the spiritual dimension of life when they pay attention to inner experience, not simply the external world. Our spirituality is most clearly expressed in the deep longings that enliven us. Spiritual intimacy involves sharing these longings. (74)

According to Benner, this type of sharing goes beyond *superficial exchanges* to the place of sharing our "anxieties, hopes, concerns, dreams (both metaphorical and literal) preoccupations, and ruminations" (74). When friends share at this deeper level, they are sharing of themselves and that which is very important without fear of seeming trivial or inconsequential. (74). Spiritual intimacy will also involve *sharing our experience of God*. Sharing at this deep level illumines opportunities for change in one's life:

The role of the spiritual companion in the face of change, is to highlight the tensions present, to confront the delusion that things can remain as they are, and to provide stability and support so that one's friend can say yes again and again to God's invitation. (Stewart-Sicking 40)

As friends are challenged, they are offered a safe space by the other in which a positive change can occur.

Carmen Acevedo Butcher further agrees that a deeper level of intimacy in the relationship is needed for it to be characterized as a true friendship:

We understand that friendship is infinitely more than exchanging cards at Christmas or on a birthday. It is putting myself in someone else's place and trying to see the world through that person's perspective. Friendship also is bearing others' burdens, not because we always feel like it, nor because we expect something in return, but because it is the way of Jesus, who is love incarnate.... [I]f we are to carry others' problems well, we must first cultivate our deep yearning to be friends with God. May we learn to listen to our best friend, Christ. (83-84)

Human friendships are resourced by friendship with God through Christ and requires a deepness of relationship and being present for the other person.

Active listening, offering the gift of *presence* to another, and participation in deeper conversations are deeply interwoven. When really listening, one offers one's presence, and deeper conversations are more likely to take place.

Sometimes, when actively listening, the hearer is aided if he or she can come to the conversation with an attitude of *wonder*. Jan Johnson encourages her readers, when one encounters an idea or interpretation of something that seems *very different* from one's own thoughts, to approach that person from a state of wondering rather than criticism or judgment. A person wonders what may have led him or her to that conclusion, and so one responds with further questions instead of criticism (*Savoring God's Word* 151).

### **Christ-like Character**

Another theme that emerges in discussing spiritual friendships is Christ-like character. In particular, the characteristics of honesty, trust, confidentiality, and right intention, are imperative in keeping a spiritual friendship healthy.

Simpson, in conveying characteristics of a soul friend in Celtic spirituality, expresses the need for an SF among other things to be able to keep a confidence, be attentive in listening, be respectful of differences, be reliable, be able to discern

movements of the Holy Spirit, be honest, and express humanity. Simpson's description of *humanity* is that of being warm, compassionate, understanding, and responsive. He uses terms such as seeker and soul friend in discussing spiritual friendships with an emphasis on mentoring rather than mutuality (189-90).

Guenther stresses that SFs are people with whom one speaks easily, from whom prayers are requested, and "whose discretion we trust.... We trust them because we recognize them as fellow travelers who are also growing up into Christ, fellow travelers who will speak the truth ... in love" (*Toward Holy Ground* 26). SFs can help correct one's perspectives when they are skewed and "provide a much needed reality check" (27).

Natalie Chambers Snapp writes about the importance of trust and believing in another in the midst of friendship, using Mary and Elizabeth's story as a backdrop:

The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand nor the kindly smile nor the joy of companionship. It is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him. (16)

Just as Mary found Elizabeth as one who believed in her and trusted her and her story, SFs are invited to offer one another the same gifts.

Stephanie Ford says, "[I]n the Christian tradition, a fundamental characteristic of spiritual friendship is its grounding in Christ" (17). In making reference to Aelred of Rievaulx, she elaborates by saying emotional honesty and integrity are characteristics of a spiritual friendship (38). She also seconds Aelred's "four qualities" (i.e., loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience) and sights confidentiality as a necessity for spiritual friendships (39, 26). When Christ is incorporated into a relationship, that relationship is transformed:



[W]hen God and Christ are introduced into a friendship, it cannot be a self-centered or cozy relationship. There can be no reduction of friendship to human standards, but rather a reevaluation of friendship according to the friendship of Jesus Christ. In friendship, Christians can develop a habit of love that eventually becomes a principle of life. (Edgar 92)

Friendships with Christ in their midst change our mindset from self-centeredness to love and being other-focused.

Poust, in writing about spiritual friendship in the Catholic tradition, talks about being honest in the midst of spiritual friendships but also true to oneself:

Spiritual friendship is not about giving up our individuality and taking on the traits of our friends. It is not about changing ourselves to the other person's likes or dislikes.... It is about honesty, about two people walking on separate but parallel paths together. We walk alongside each other, living our own lives, proceeding to do whatever we are called to do as individuals. But then, maybe once a day, or once a week, or once a year, we come together to gather strength from each other and refocus our spiritual journey. (38)

Spiritual friendship leads friends to be their truest selves as they grow in Christlikeness. It does not lead them to become just the image of another or who the other would like for them to be.

Honesty is an imperative in a spiritual friendship. Edgar concurs that being a “gospel friend means speaking plainly, frankly, and honestly. It means telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” (185). He goes on to share about how speaking the truth is not always a pleasant experience, but it can bear fruit in a person's life if one will let it: “[I]t means making an open, honest assessment of the situation and applying spiritual lessons in order to build up that which is good and to challenge that which is not helpful” (185). SFs are committed to speaking the truth in love to one another.

Spiritual friendships differ from worldly friendships by their focus on the things of God rather than on the things of the world. Poust warns against becoming a gossip

group or just defaulting to conversations of the world focused on “consumerism, jealousy, pettiness, annoyance over minor differences” (Poust 59). Instead, she relates that as friends mutually focus upon God-centered things, the relationship blossom into a spiritual friendship: “With God at its center, the friendship leans toward virtue” (59). Charity and humility are the “mother virtues” and all the rest hang on these two (53). Interior humility is a key that can transform a friendship into a spiritual friendship. Humility, she says, means not that a person is to be a doormat but that one puts the needs of his or her SFs before his or her own (60-61). It is a person’s humility and knowledge of one’s utter dependence upon God that leads one to other “key virtues of spiritual friendship: honesty, patience, kindness, empathy, charity” (62). She goes on to say, “[T]he opposite of humility is pride, and there is really no place for pride in a spiritual friendship” (53). In spiritual friendships, one focuses on the other and the other’s needs and lay aside one’s own.

### **Commitment to Grow in Grace**

The transformational element of spiritual friendships is aided by a mutual commitment to grow in grace and a humble heart willing to change. A teachable spirit is needed in a spiritual friendship where the focus is on growth in Christlikeness.

Transformation can only occur when the two have a mutual trust in one another to keep a confidence. Sharing with one another spiritual struggles, honest fears, and doubts will only occur when a person knows he or she is in a *safe place*:

In a spiritual friendship, we must be able to talk about matters of the heart and spirit without fear or self-consciousness. In return, we must be willing to listen to our spiritual friends in the same spirit of openness and compassion. (Poust 73)

Creating a safe space for others to be themselves is a key element of spiritual friendship.

One of the benefits of spiritual friendships (as well as qualifiers) is the ability to speak the truth in love to another. Likewise, an SF must also be able to *hear* the truth spoken in love. The mutuality of the exchange contributes to the health of the relationship:

By daring to be honest with us, friends offer us invaluable opportunities for growth. They can help us penetrate our self-deceptions and cherished illusions. Soul friends help us to see things we cannot see on our own. There are things about ourselves that we would never recognize without them. The true soul friend will not accept our self-deceptions, but will gently and firmly confront us with our soul blindness. Soul friends want each other to settle for nothing short of becoming the whole and holy person they are called to be. (Benner 70)

As the Psalms say, “Who can discern his own errors?” (Ps. 19:12). Indeed, left on a person’s own, one can easily wander blindly with one’s own “self-deceptions and cherished illusions” (Phillips 28). Confronting a person’s deceptions leads one into a deeper understanding of oneself, even the part of a person that lives in one’s blind spots. SFs are those who are given permission to inquire about our motives and intentions. “In real friendships, we give others the right to ask the big questions” (28). It is called speaking the truth in love. Sometimes the asking can be very hard on the one doing the asking, as well as on the hearer. Asking the big questions is usually the result of having listened with one ear to the friend speaking and with one ear turned to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit. When one is open to being taught, suggestions for steps to take to create a change in this area can be made and received in the midst of friends whom one knows and who have one’s best interests at heart. For this process to succeed, a friend needs to ask well worded questions:

Friends need to develop the ability to ask good questions. This is crucial if we are to communicate with people in ways that will cause them to join or continue with us in our pursuit of God. Asking good questions and

listening well to the answers will help us to get to know people more deeply, and provoke people to think for themselves about key issues of life and faith ... and what it means to be a disciple. (Lamb 129-30)

Asking questions keeps one from trying to *fix* the other person. Questions lead the other to finding their own solutions, hopefully by turning to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Truth needs to be spoken but always in love. If friends are simply critical without love, the chances of transformation occurring in the other are greatly impaired. A balance between confrontation and support is imperative for growth (Benner 71). When critical words are spoken not out of love, they have great potential to harm.

Edgar writes that spiritual friendships are a catalyst for growth in a person's spiritual journey and imperative in one's growth in holiness and love of God. In particular, he points to the fruit of the Spirit: "The fruits of the Spirit simply cannot be learned in isolation; they are essentially relational, and growth in the Christian life depends on having close companions who can help develop them" (75). It is indeed difficult to discern one's own errors. Spiritual friendship can be a tool to help one discern one's errors and develop a pure heart. "The monastic view of the Christian life valued friendship deeply and saw it as an essential part of the development of that purity of heart that is love and intimacy with God" (97). Boldness is a preferred characteristic of an SF:

A good friend will aim at assisting in the character of the other even though this may require difficult words. This kind of bold speech could only be effective where there was a high level of mutual trust and was only appropriate between equals. (143)

Trust, boldness, and mutual relationship are all key to healthy spiritual friendships.

Based on 2 Timothy 2:22-26, Robert W. Kellemen addresses the issue of confrontation, seeing it as a gift of spiritual friendships. He says confrontation requires

integrity, spirituality, humility, gentleness, and concern. The benefits of confrontation are that they expose worldviews out of sync with God's kingdom views, expose spiritual inconsistencies, and "[show] people how they are intoxicated by the lies of the world, the flesh, and the Devil" (247). Elsewhere, Kellemen addresses the need for truth in spiritual friendships. Speaking the truth without seeking to maintain or grow the relationship can lead to intimidation with expectations of compliance on the other end. Working on and building a relationship without daring to speak the truth leads the other to indecision, which leads to confusion. Having a balance between enriching the relationship and speaking the truth in love leads to internalization of truth, which leads to conformity to the image of Christ (114).

### **Praying Together and Studying Scripture Together**

Another distinctive of a spiritual friendship is the importance of praying for one another. When friends listen to one another in earnest, they can also hear from God. Paula Ripple brings this idea to light:

Listening to God's call is directly related to our willingness and ability to listen to the call for a friend. Listening to God is the basis of our ability to listen to another. Unlike all others, God's call is the only one which carries with it the promise of fulfillment as the call to friendship carries with it the possibility of discovering new life. Listening to God in prayer and listening to another in friendship are not separate realities. (63)

Too often, people are so wrapped up in the circumstances of their lives that they are not able to discern for themselves where God is in the midst of those circumstances.

Listening for God's still voice can be difficult at times on one's own. Many voices compete for attention in a person's mind. An SF can be one to help a person sort out the voices and truly hear what the Spirit is speaking to one's heart:

It is in the rich soil of the listening heart that all the qualities that prepare us to love self, other and God take root. It is in this same soil that the ability to make and keep commitments is nourished. It is in this rich soil that the profound mysteries in the life of each person unfold. It is out of this rich soil that prayer grows. (65)

One is once again reminded that not just listening for God but also to having a *listening heart* for one another is an essential characteristic of SFs. It is a great privilege and gift to lift one another up in prayer. Johnson writes, “Being a Spiritual Friend to someone else is a great privilege.... It does not require great wisdom, just good listening, openness, and a willingness to hold the person in the light” (*Spiritual Disciplines Companion* 156). SFs can offer the gift of their *presence*. They offer a friend an intentional listening ear as together they experience the power of the Holy Spirit, abiding and guiding from within, helping them to hear God’s call in their lives.

Use of the Bible as a guide for Christian living is another spiritual friendship distinctive. SFs use the Bible as a road map for growth in Christlikeness. Parrott encourages those who would mentor others to spend time in the Word daily, to learn from Jesus Himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Parrott also uses the Bible to help guide a mentee as she meets with him or her and encourages those she mentors to be in the Word alone as well. Parrott suggests beginning with the Gospel of John and working one’s way slowly through it, lingering long enough to allow the Holy Spirit to teach and guide the individual into all knowledge and truth (61). Parrott, while speaking specifically to women who are mentoring other women, states that being a “woman of the Word of God” (58) is one criterion, while being a woman of faith and of prayer are her other two. She further states that a spiritual *mentor* must also be an active listener and have “life experience as a Christ-follower” (48). Despite her title, *Transforming*

*Together*, her book is based upon a *more mature Christian* leading and being a mentor for a *less mature Christian*. Parrott is not writing about a mutual, equal friendship. However, she does have influential thoughts that can be translated into a mutual spiritual friendship. Throughout her book, she focuses on the importance of letting the Scriptures speak on their own terms through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit who is the Teacher. What she claims for a specific mentoring relationship between women can also be easily translated to anyone interested in being an SF.

Beeke and Haykin also encourage friends to pray together: “When we worship together and offer up our prayers together, we find ourselves bound together with cords of heavenly love” (39). They also encourage the habit of praying for one another aloud, rather than glibly saying, “I will pray for you.” There is a great blessing in hearing a prayer offered up specifically for one by his or her own name. (39)

Prayer is “a centerpiece of spiritual friendships” (Poust 80). Prayer can bind two friends together even when they are physically apart for a period of time. Prayers can be spoken aloud for one another. Prayers can be a result of a shared meditation or reflection on the friends’ spiritual journey. Sometimes prayers between SFs can be a shared time of silence. Poust even goes as far as to say, “Spiritual friendship without prayer is like a ship without a rudder, we may move, but we probably will not reach our destination” (81). Prayer is what connects the *two friends* with the third in their midst, who is the Holy Spirit.

One way that SFs can share their prayers is by writing them in a journal. Susan Annette Muto writes, “Journaling is one of the most helpful exercises (we) can do to increase our capacity for meditation and prayer” (95). Journaling helps a person to

discern God's *still small voice* and gives a way for one to record what he or she is hearing. When shared in the context of a spiritual friendship, it can be a great resource for sharing and *going deeper* into the heart of what is going on within a person.

Saint Ambrose in writing on praying for others who are sharing their cares and concerns with Christ wrote:

Added to this there is a prayer for one another, which, coming from a friend, is the more efficacious in proportion as it is more lovingly sent to God, with tears which either fear excites or affection awakens, or sorrow evokes. And thus a friend praying to Christ, on behalf of his friend, and for his friend's sake, desiring to be heard by Christ, directs his attention with love and longing to Christ, then it sometimes happens that quickly and imperceptibly the one love passes over into the other, and coming, as it were into close contact with the sweetness of Christ himself, the friend begins to taste his sweetness and to experience his charm (Psalm 34:8). Thus ascending from that holy love with which he embraces a friend to that with which he embraces Christ, he will joyfully partake in abundance of the spiritual fruit of friendship, awaiting the fullness of all things in the life to come. (qtd. In Aelred, "Spiritual Friendship" 120)

Ambrose expresses beautifully the heart of the intimacy and bond of love shared when two who love Christ are willing to pray for one another.

In describing the résumé of an SF, Kellemen mentions having an educated head to understand God's truth and calls this trait *knowing*. An SF needs to be equipped to know and be *complete in knowledge* of the things of Christ. An SF also needs a "sharp mind for biblical truth: Biblical Wisdom" (36). He proposes a "biblical ministry by changing lives with Christ's changeless truth" (36). Being knowledgeable in Scripture aids an SF in guiding another SF.

### **Encouragement**

Encouragement is an important part of being another's SF:

A spiritual friend is one who offers insights and prayers, comfort and encouragement when we are struggling with our children or a problem at



work. We can pray with one another—or for one another. We can talk about spiritual questions that not everyone else wants to discuss. Such companionship can bring us a deep sense of peace that comes from knowing we are loved in a particular way, that we are not alone, and that what we are longing for and striving for is not so impossible or crazy after all. (Poust 7)

Through one's prayers, presence, and questions, one can offer an SF great comfort in knowing he or she is not alone but loved and heard. The companionship offered in a spiritual friendship can bring with it a renewed sense of the peace of Christ dwelling deep within.

Another source of encouragement comes from what Benner calls “mediating grace” (57). In spiritual friendships, friends can help one another discern God's presence and grace in their midst. “The most important thing I can do is to help the other person be in contact with the gracious presence of Christ” (57). Benner goes on to define this interaction as *mediating grace* and places it at the very heart of soul care. Johnson, while writing about the safeguards needed when thinking one has *heard from God* says:

Confirmation often involves repeating what we think we heard from God to people we trust. They often confirm for us, and possibly add to it, becoming vehicles for God speaking in our lives. Just knowing I am going to check it out with someone else and be open to their ideas keeps me from entertaining outlandish, self-centered ideas. (*When the Soul Listens* 137)

Indeed, others are needed often to discern clearly that still small voice of God, and offering what they have heard to others often confirms and clarifies what one thinks he or she heard.

While explaining why one needs spiritual friendships today, Beeke and Haykin share, “God has designed the Christian life to be ‘a life together’ in which believing friends aid one another and bear one another's burdens and pray for one another and

encourage one another” (44). Indeed, as the biblical foundations revealed earlier, God’s intention, according to His Word, is for friends to aid one another in following in Christ’s way of love. Instead of individualistic spirituality, when friends bind together, the load is lightened as burdens are shared.

One of the purposes of a spiritual friendship is to encourage one another to be one’s best self in the power of the Holy Spirit. John O’Donohue writes, “One of the most precious things you should preserve in a friendship ... is your own difference. Love should encourage and free you fully into your full potential” (28-29). He warns against the temptation to imitate the other or to be made in the image of the other. SFs are uniquely themselves while they are with each other. The best of spiritual friendships are relationships where both become most fully themselves and reach their fullest potential.

Spiritual friendships are guided by moral standards and nourished by accountability. “Worthy friendship is always morally acceptable and accountable” (Phillips 28). If SFs are listening to the Holy Spirit and following in Jesus’ footsteps, then those friendships will be morally acceptable. The pursuit of morality is aided through mutual accountability:

What is the state of your soul? This is the primary question explored in spiritual friendships and spiritual community. It’s the question that take us to the heart of the matter and focuses on what’s going on in the deepest place within, where God alone seeks to reside (our soul), out of which all of life is fulfilled. When we have friends in community who are willing to go there with us, we plumb the depths and reside together in the midst of the nitty-gritty material of our lives. Authentic sharing opens the way to spiritual friendship where there is no need to compare, contrast, correct or contradict one another. We simply come alongside each other to bring out the very best of what God desires to create, redeem, sustain or transform in our everyday lives. (Macchia 153)

Deep questions can be asked and answered when others are listening and deeply want the very best for their friend. When friends pray for one another to avoid giving in to temptations and to walk as Jesus did, when they ask one another the tough questions through mutual accountability, their chances of *doing the right thing* are greatly increased.

One of the defining characteristics of a spiritual friendship is that it is grounded in a devotion to the betterment of the other. Devotion means a commitment, and in a spiritual friendship it needs to be a mutual commitment. Furthermore, “[a] friend encourages you to reach your fullest potential” (Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship* 105). Having an SF should lead a person to become better than he or she is and lead one to become all God wants him or her to be. An SF should be committed to helping a person be his or her very best and always have the other’s best interests at heart (Devers 12). SF’s give one another space to be themselves, but expect growth in the other. “A friend is someone who leaves you with all of your freedom intact, but who obliges you to be fully what you are” (12). This balance of freedom and responsibility always exists in the midst of a spiritual friendship.

Gregory of Nazianzus describes his spiritual friendship with Basil of Caesarea in this way:

We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit. Though we cannot believe those who claim that ‘everything is contained in everything,’ yet you must believe that in our case each of us was in the other and with the other. Our single object and ambition was virtue, and a life of hope in the blessings that are to come; we wanted to withdraw from this world before we departed from it. With this end in view we ordered our lives and all our actions. We followed the guidance of God’s law and spurred each other onto virtue. If it is not too boastful to say, we found in each other a standard and rule for discerning right from wrong. (qtd. in Hill, “Souls Knit Together”)

When followers of Christ remember where they are heading and that this earth is not their final destination, remembering compels them to wish to withdraw from the ways of the world. On one's own, withdrawing from the ways of the world is difficult. An SF can be a valuable encouragement and guide along the way to lead one to pursue and live out the virtuous life that Jesus calls believers to live.

SFs can lead others to achieve God-sized dreams or at least to live more fully into God's great possibilities for their lives. Jane Creswell speaks of this encouraging large thinking in terms of coaching, but it can be translated into spiritual friendships easily. She uses Scripture to evaluate common characteristics of those in the Bible who achieved *God-sized dreams*. Four common characteristics emerged. They all "were originally headed in another direction, ... felt inadequate for the task, ... acknowledged God as the Lord of their lives, ... and ... made a choice to follow" (130-31). Today then, believers also can expect God to use them when they too are headed in another direction and do not feel adequate for the task, if they will acknowledge God as the Lord of their lives and choose to respond with obedience. Johnson writes, "When we are seeking God's dreams for us, it changes what we do, and what we pray" (*Enjoying the Presence* 82). As one surrenders one's daily choices of where to go and what to do, when seeking God's dreams, that person lets go of his or her selfish worldly wants and desires and instead desires to assist God in building His kingdom. Through accountability, an SF can help one follow through with being obedient to whatever the Spirit is calling that person to do.

Benner says that the true test of whether a friendship is a spiritual friendship "is whether all parties are growing as a result of it" (80). Growth is the desired outcome of

spiritual friendships. Benner writes that characteristics of a healthy spiritual friendship should include:

attunement to the Spirit, hunger for God, and surrender to his will, love for others, self-understanding and attentiveness to the voices of (one's) inner world, curiosity about God's creation, enjoyment of life, discernment of (one's) unique self-in-Christ, courage to follow (one's) calling, a depth of passion and compassion, a sense of gratitude, and (an) overall experience of holiness and wholeness. (80)

In essence, growth in individuals should be a hallmark of spiritual friendships.

The Holy Spirit in the midst of friends leads and guides them to grow as SFs. The Holy Spirit corrects, convicts, and guides friends to the degree they are open to receiving His direction. If SFs are not willing to surrender to God's will and way, they will not grow in grace. Love is necessary to keep and maintain any sort of friendship, especially a spiritual friendship. As SFs grow together in Christ, they will also grow in self-understanding. As mentioned in other places, when SFs meet regularly with one another for *deep conversations*, their truest intentions and motivations come to light. The truth can be hard to hear at times, but illumination comes with understanding and *speaking the truth in love*. In addition to vulnerability and self-understanding, an SF will be one to offer the encouragement needed to follow God's call:

Biblical friendship exists when two or more people, bound together by a common faith in Jesus Christ, pursue him and his kingdom with intentionality and vulnerability. Rather than serving as an end in itself, biblical friendship serves primarily to bring glory to Christ, who brought us into friendship with the Father. It is indispensable to the work of the gospel in the earth, and an essential element of what God created us for. (Holmes 27)

This definition of biblical (spiritual) friendship brings up several important points. First, beyond sharing one's faith in Jesus Christ with another, SFs also share in their pursuit of Christ and His kingdom. Their hearts are passionate about the things for that which Jesus

is passionate, namely people and showing love to people. Next, intentionality is a key part of any friendship. Friends make time to be with one another and share with one another what is on their hearts without fear of judgment. Vulnerability is another essential for biblical friendships. When baring one's soul, the mutual willingness to be vulnerable enables and creates a space where the deep things of the heart can be freely discussed. If one chooses not to share deeply or not to be vulnerable on a regular basis, the friendship would cease to be a spiritual friendship. Finally, the purpose of spiritual friendships is to bring glory to God. SF's do not share for selfish reasons but to bring glory to God through their witness of His love and grace as they visibly share with one another. A shared passion for Jesus and His Kingdom will lead friends into more compassion for one another.

Increased self-understanding is a fruit of spiritual friendships. Edgar writes,

A person can come to know his own character only by studying that of his friends. A friend is "another self" who can be examined with a degree of objectivity. Yet intuition tells us that we are fundamentally the same. A person is able to see his own character reflected, as in a mirror, in his friends. (113)

As a person seeks to understand another, that person will end up with a deeper understanding of him or herself. Indeed, "virtue cannot be achieved in solitude.

Friendships, specifically virtuous friendship, are at the heart of Christian community. One needs friends in order to be holy" (113). Self-understanding does not come by being alone, but from being a part of a friendship or community of friends. A friend grows in Christ as one travels together with other believers. Spiritual friendships often lead a person into a deeper understanding of one's self.

The Trinity serves as a model for what a spiritual friendship should look like.

Furthermore, “[f]riendship ... exists at the center of both Christian life and theology” (Edgar 127). Jesus models spiritual friendship by His relationships with His disciples. “Through friendship, Jesus draws believers to a new level of relationship—not only with Himself, but with the Father and the Spirit. In this way his friends are able to participate in the holy friendship of God” (126). Jesus comes and calls His followers His friends, and they are then invited to share in the friendship of the Trinity: “Human friendship is a reflection of the relationships of the Trinity and is the form of fellowship (*koininia*) within the body of Christ” (127). Furthermore, Edgar writes,

Humans are constituted as persons by this creative relationship with God, just as God is constituted as God through the mutual friendship-love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The goal of human life is nothing other than participation in friendship and love with God. Friendship ... may well be described as the primary expression of Christian love. (126)

This notion of the Trinity as a circle of love and friendship is expressed well also by Seamands. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in a *face-to-face* relationship with one another, which is characterized by “joyful, intimate fellowship, eternally near and dear to one another... [N]ow we too, through faith in Christ, are enfolded in that divine fellowship and join in the dance! We are invited...inside the circle of intimate, delightful trinitarian love” (60). The invitation has been made to believers to share in this sacred dance of love and life. It is a good gift, to be received with a humble heart. “Spiritual friendship ... is the means by which God reveals his goodness by helping us know others and ourselves and thereby know him. It is a gift God gives to us. It is a gift we can give to others” (Benner 84). Spiritual friendship is indeed a good gift to be received by God and then passed on to others.

Gary W. Moon concurs with Seamands and Benner about the Trinity being a *divine fellowship* characterized best by a dance:

If we are created in the image of a loving community of other-centered love best described as a perpetual dance of joy, then we will only feel at home to the extent that we have joined the dance. We are to sign on as apprentices, roll out the step chart, and learn to dance to the music of self-forgetful love. (Moon 63)

Spiritual friendships are a visible way to join the dance by joining with another and abiding together in the Trinity's self-less love.

### **Research Design**

The research design implemented an explanatory, mixed method with a quantitative measure and a qualitative measure. According to John Creswell, “[t]he basic assumption is that the uses of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself” (535). “When one combines quantitative and qualitative data, ‘we have a very powerful mix’” (535). In choosing the explanatory, mixed-methods design, the qualitative data both informed and enriched the quantitative data.

The spiritual friendship pre-survey and post-survey conveyed the quantitative measure. The spiritual friendship pre-survey was given to participants at the start of the SF study to create a baseline of data concerning their understandings and experiences compared to the spiritual friendship post-survey. The qualitative measure was derived from the entries made by participants in their evaluations, which were transcribed, and from the discussion at the end of the study with three pairs of participants being interviewed.



The instrumentation of the research design consisted of the SF pre/post-survey, a five-question evaluation, and questions for the interviews.

### **Summary**

The literature review indeed confirms the problem and informs the seeker of the characteristics and possible benefits of a spiritual friendship. The common American problem relates to an inability to keep friends for any length of time due to increased effects of social media, an inability to keep a confidence, lack of honesty in relationships, and the general trend of being a slave to busyness. While the problem was affirmed, solutions were offered as well. Many characteristics of spiritual friends were brought to light. Some of the defining characteristics include having mutuality, spending intentional time together, actively listening, sharing deeply, offering one's presence, pursuing Christ-like character, committing to grow in grace, praying and sharing Scripture together, and encouraging one another. The Trinity has been offered as a prime example of mutual spiritual friendship yet, Divine in nature. Although spiritual friends are hard to find, they can be very life-giving.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem and Purpose

The culture in the United States has lost the art of friendship, in general, and the vast population even of those who proclaim to be Christian has never thought of having spiritual friendships or developed knowledge that would empower and enable them to find and grow into such a friendship. This individualistic society has taught people to practice their faith alone as they do many other things. As Nouwen writes, “we do have personal experiences of God, but together we are formed as the people of God” (Nouwen, Christensen, and Laird, *Spiritual Formation* xxvi). Together is where transformation occurs, especially when encouraged in the context of spiritual friendships. The virtual connectedness of our society has displaced social graces and the ability to connect face-to-face with another in some instances, particularly in the younger generations. While there is a renewed interest in spiritual friendships, some of it is not Christian based, and a good portion of the literature really emphasizes one being over another rather than proposing a true mutual spiritual friendship.

In an effort to reclaim the value of spiritual friendships as an avenue for growing disciples of Jesus Christ, this dissertation offers a way to teach possible spiritual friends how to help one another grow to be more like Jesus. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of the spiritual friend workshop and six-week practicum on participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences related to spiritual friendships

### **.Research Questions and/or Hypotheses**

In order to assess growth in discipleship, a researcher-designed survey was used to discover participants' initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships. The survey was then applied again at the end of the six-week practicum. The information gathered was categorized in such a way as to address the research questions.

#### **Research Question #1**

What were the initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants before the spiritual friend study?

In order to address how attitudes, knowledge and experiences have changed due to the workshop and the six weeks of meeting with a spiritual friend, initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences needed assessment. I developed my own survey consisting of thirty questions (see Appendix B). Ten questions were designed to measure prior attitudes toward spiritual friendships; ten questions addressed their knowledge of spiritual friendships; and, ten questions related to the participants' experiences of spiritual friendships.

In the survey, questions 1, 4, 7, 10, 13,16, 19, 22, 24, and 27 addressed the attitudes of participants concerning spiritual friendships. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

In the survey, questions 2, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 21, 25, 28, and 29 addressed the knowledge of participants of spiritual friendship. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

In the survey, questions 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 23, 26, and 30 addressed experiences of participants that related to being in a spiritual friendship. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

## **Research Question #2**

What are the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants after the spiritual friend study?

In order to address how understandings and experiences changed due to the workshop and the six weeks of meeting with a spiritual friend, new understandings and experiences needed to be assessed. I used the same survey I had developed and used prior to the study. Ten questions addressed attitudes toward spiritual friendships; ten questions addressed prior knowledge of spiritual friendships; and, ten questions addressed experiences associated with spiritual friendships. The post-survey was identical to the pre-survey used in Research Question #1 in order to assess changes in responses.

In the survey, questions 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 24, and 27 all addressed the attitudes of participants toward spiritual friendship. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

In the survey, questions 2, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 21, 25, 28, and 29 all addressed the knowledge of participants concerning spiritual friendship. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

In the survey, questions 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 23, 26, and 30 all addressed experiences of participants that related to being in a spiritual friendship. The scale of possible responses included SD for strongly disagree, D for disagree, A for agree, and SA for strongly agree.

### **Research Question #3**

What aspects of the spiritual friend study most impacted the participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendship?

There are two instruments specifically designed to evaluate what aspects of the SF study caused changes in the participants' attitudes, knowledge, or experiences. The two instruments included an evaluation of the SF study (see Appendix C) and interview questions (see Appendix D) that were given to a subgroup consisting of three pairs of participants.

The evaluation, which consisted of five open-ended questions was one of the qualitative tools used to determine what aspects of the SF study increased or improved their attitudes, understanding, and experiences of SF. On the same day that participants took the post-survey, they were asked to complete an evaluation. These responses were analyzed.

Another tool, a researcher-designed interview protocol, included the responses of the six participants who volunteered to be interviewed as pairs. These six questions were the same for each pair. Results were analyzed.

### **Population and Participants**

Six pairs of self-selected spiritual friends volunteered to participate in the SF study: workshop and practicum. The only criteria were that they were required to come

with a spiritual friend of their own choosing and a willingness to participate, to the best of their ability, in all required meetings (i.e., the SF workshop and weekly meetings with their spiritual friends for six weeks during the SF practicum). Some were congregants from my present appointment at Wesley United Methodist Church in Vienna, West Virginia. Others were United Methodists from Parkersburg, Lubeck, and Harrisville, West Virginia. The participants were from differing backgrounds. Some were city people; some rural; and, some with college backgrounds while others were without. Ages ranged from 38-68 years old. Three pairs were husbands and wives, and three of the pairs were made up of women only.

### **Design of the Study**

The research design implemented an explanatory mixed methods with both quantitative and qualitative measures. The SF pre-survey and post-survey conveyed the quantitative measure. The SF pre-survey was given to participants at the start of the spiritual friendship workshop to create a baseline concerning their attitudes, knowledge, and experiences about spiritual friendships to be compared to the responses from the SF post-survey, which was administered at the close of the six-week practicum. The qualitative measures were derived from the discussion at the end of the six-week practicum with the six members who were interviewed in addition to an evaluation given to all participants at the close of the six-week practicum. In choosing the explanatory, mixed-methods design, the qualitative data both informed and enriched the quantitative data.

The project had four phases. The first phase consisted of participation by the six pairs of spiritual friends in the one-day SF workshop I taught on a Saturday. The SF

workshop was seven hours in length. The second phase was participation in the six-week practicum that immediately followed the workshop. Participants met once a week with their SFs at a place decided upon by participants and completed the SFJG together in that time. No specific amount of time was allotted for these meetings. In the third phase, all twelve participants met to take the SF post-survey, and qualitative data was collected as participants completed an evaluation consisting of five open-ended questions. The fourth phase only applied to the six participants who were interviewed two at a time and answered six open-ended questions that provided qualitative data as well.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrumentation of the research design consisted of the SF pre/post-survey, questions for the interviews, and the evaluation. Each instrument was researcher designed.

**The spiritual friend pre- and post-survey.** The SF pre- and post-surveys provided the quantitative data for the research. Twelve participants completed the pre-survey at the SF workshop. The thirty-question Likert four-point scale pre-survey revealed participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences concerning spiritual friendships before receiving instruction offered by the SF study. The post survey Likert four-point scale questions were identical to the pre-survey questions but were administered at the end of the six-week practicum in order to identify changes in participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences concerning spiritual friendships quantitatively.

**Questions for the interviews.** The interview questions were designed to gauge changes in participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences from the outset of the

workshop and since the end of the practicum. Questions were open ended to foster a multiplicity of responses. These responses were compiled and analyzed (see Appendix D).

**The evaluation.** At the end of the six-week practicum, an evaluation of the study was given to participants. The five open-ended questions were designed to determine what parts of the study were the most helpful in facilitating their spiritual growth or what parts inhibited growth. These responses were hand-written, compiled, and analyzed (see Appendix C).

### **Pilot Test**

Two non-participating individuals were asked to take the thirty-question survey to discover if questions were clearly worded and easy to understand. Both expressed that it was.

### **Variables**

The independent variable was the SF study. The dependent variables were participants original attitudes, knowledge, and experiences regarding spiritual friendships. Intervening variables may include the implications if a pair or more drop out of the study for some reason such as illness.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The data collection was reliable and valid. All participants' information was gathered at the same time and in the same fashion. Each participant was given the same opportunities for participation without favoritism. I did not select participants for the interviews; rather, they volunteered. Participants were given a number by which their information was identified, and no names were recorded.



The data is reliable and consistent in that it was gathered in the way put forth earlier in this document. The plan was followed to the letter.

The research is valid. The survey, evaluation, and interview questions reflected the purposes set forth in the Chapter 1. The questions from the evaluation that each participant completed were all in alignment with the purpose of the SF study. Likewise, the questions for the three pairs who were interviewed were all in alignment with the original purposes. Those purposes were to offer one another the gift of presence, to assist in discernment of God's working in their lives, to grow in the Word together, to encourage one another through prayer, to hold one another accountable, and to encourage each other to live into God's great possibilities.

### **Data Collection**

I began by seeking six pairs of SFs to participate in the SF study. Two pairs volunteered from the church where I am currently serving. Four pairs came as friends/peers in the surrounding United Methodist churches. A letter was sent explaining the SF study along with the dates and times that would be required to those who had expressed an interest in participating. An ethical procedure and consent forms were included in their letters. The date for the workshop was set for Saturday, 22 October 2016 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

On the day of the SF workshop, the participants and I gathered together in the Wesley Room at Wesley UMC. We began with a welcome and introductions, followed by sharing the agenda for the day. Then, the consent and ethical procedure forms were collected. Afterwards, I gave instructions, and we participated in a group *lectio divina* of Ephesians 3:16-19. I served as leader and read through the passage three times with

silences in between for them to ponder and then share, as they were willing, how the passage intersected with their lives.

Following the *lectio divina*, the group was given the SF survey consisting of thirty questions after instructions to rank each statement with SD, D, A, or SA according to their first impressions rather than stopping to think about them too much. Fifteen minutes was allotted for the completion of the survey.

After the survey, participants were given a handout of the biblical example of Jonathan and David as spiritual friends. A discussion followed concerning what they observed, and learned about spiritual friendships from these passages. Each was then given an index card with a Scripture on it that has the words *one another* in it to look up in the Bible. Participants took turns reading their Scriptures, and at the close we discussed which ones particularly *spoke* to them. Afterwards, I handed them a written copy with all the Scriptures together to take with them.

After a ten-minute break, in a more lecture style, I shared from the spiritual friendships handbook (see Appendix E) the vision and purposes for a spiritual friendship. This was followed by a discussion about characteristics of SFs led by content from the spiritual friendships handbook. Next, we returned to lecture style, and I shared the obstacles to healthy spiritual friendships. Afterwards, we took a break for a thirty-minute lunch and went downstairs in the church to the fellowship hall.

We regathered for the afternoon in the Wesley Room once again. We began our afternoon by refocusing and using a *visio divina* of an empty bench by a fountain. Instructions for the *visio divina* were given and handed out. Fifteen minutes was given to

complete the *visio divina*. Then anyone willing to share about his or her experience was invited to do so.

After the *visio divina* discussion, we explored together the topics chapter by chapter in the spiritual friendships handbook. At the close of the discussion on the handbook, we offered each pair of Spiritual Friends a Covenant to sign, stating they agreed to meet with one another once a week for six weeks, using the SFJG (see Appendix F) and that they would return to Wesley UMC on Saturday, 10 December 2016 at 2 p.m. for evaluation and selected interviews.

Then, I offered further instructions and handed out the SFJG. Time was given for questions/answers. We closed the day in the sanctuary with a service of Holy Communion after which we departed. Then began the six-week practicum, where participants met once a week for six weeks for an undesignated amount of time to complete the questions/activities in the SFJG.

The participants regathered at Wesley UMC on 10 December 2016 at 2 p.m. Participants were first given the SF survey to retake to be compared to their original survey. This was the quantitative measure for the study. All the participants were then given an evaluation sheet with five open-ended questions. These evaluations were collected and later compiled. These were used as one of the qualitative measures.

Then, three pairs of SFs volunteered to be interviewed, one pair at a time. They were asked six open-ended questions. These sessions were taped with participants' permission, and the results were transcribed. The interviews were the second qualitative measure.

### **Data Analysis**

The pre/post-survey results were analyzed using statistical analysis, which represents the quantitative measure. The qualitative measure consisted of the responses from the interview questions from three pairs of participants and the handwritten evaluations of each participant. The responses from the interviews were recorded and analyzed. The transcriptions were evaluated by noting common words, themes, or descriptions.

The evaluations were handwritten and examined. The compilations were analyzed by noting common words, themes, or descriptions.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Each participant signed an informed consent form giving their permission for the use of the information gathered to be included in this study and the dissemination of data beyond the study. Assurance was given that no individuals would be referred to by name but only by the participant number assigned upon arrival at the initial SF workshop. Participants were informed that confidentiality of their particular responses was guaranteed.

A copy of the informed consent form is in Appendix A. The informed consent form let participants know that they were able to quit the study at any time if they wished to do so. It also guaranteed the confidentiality of any and all information shared in the course of this study.

All papers gathered from participants were locked away at my home following the workshop to be destroyed by shredder a year later.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

The problem this study addresses is that within United Methodist congregations, and many others as well, there is a growing individualization of one's spiritual growth that is unhealthy and contrary to Christian faith. According to Scripture, United Methodist tradition, and the current books about spiritual friendship available, there is a desire surfacing or resurfacing in many quarters to gather together with like-minded others for the purpose of growing in "grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Intentionally meeting with an SF on a regular basis has the potential to grow persons closer in their walk with Christ.

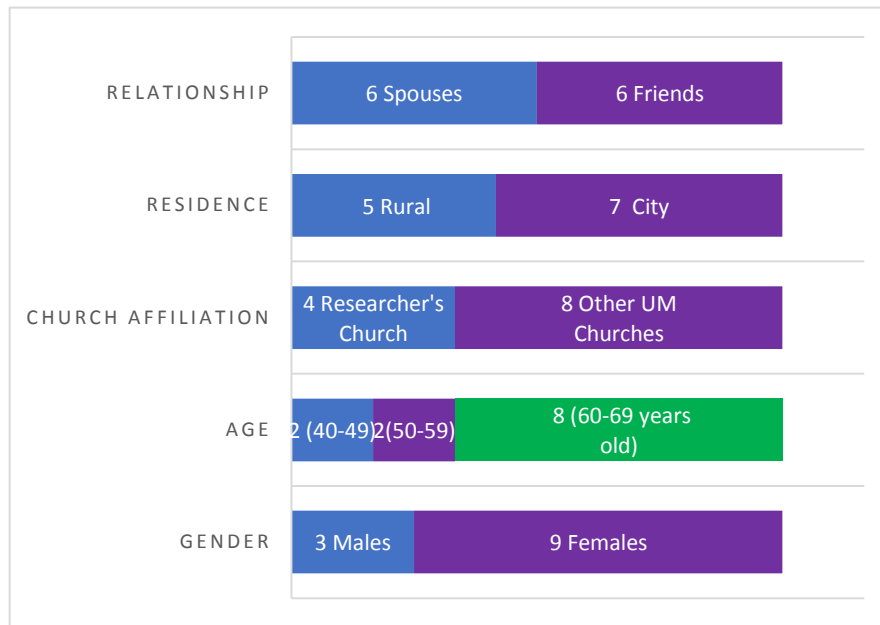
This study was designed to facilitate equipping the laity to pursue and become SFs, for the ultimate purpose of making disciples who would make disciples. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of the spiritual friend workshop and six-week practicum on participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences related to spiritual friendships.

#### **Participants**

Participants consisted of six pairs of SFs. Two pairs attend Wesley UMC; two pairs were from local churches in Parkersburg, West Virginia and, the other two pairs were fellow United Methodist clergy members and their spouses. One of the clergy/spouse pairs was from Lubeck, West Virginia, and the other from Harrisville, West Virginia.

Educational backgrounds varied. Some had completed high school; others college; and, others had further degrees. Some lived in city areas, and others were from rural areas. Some were familiar with the concept of an SF. The ages of participants spanned from 40 to 69 years old. Three of the pairs were husband/wife couples and three pairs were women who were friends (see Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1. Demographics of participants**



**Research Question #1**

What were the initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants before the spiritual friend study?

The first research question investigated the original attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of the participants in relation to spiritual friendships and the concepts related to the forming of healthy spiritual friendships. The tool used to assess participants' initial attitudes, knowledge, and experiences in relation to spiritual friendships was the pre-

survey administered on the day of the SF workshop. A four-point Likert scale was used in the survey. I assigned number values to each response. For strongly disagree (SD), 1 point was given; for disagree (D), 2 points; for agree (A), 3 points; and, for strongly agree (SA), 4 points. This assigned numerical expression was then used to compare and combine findings. Twelve participants filled out the survey, but two of the participants did not complete the final page of the survey and were not included in the totals. For all of the Likert survey results, both pre- and poststudy, N=10. The responses of all ten participants were averaged for each question.

Overall, the surveys revealed that the participants' attitudes toward spiritual friendships was generally a positive one. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the breakdown, showing an aggregate total of ten participant responses to each of ten questions. The lowest score possible (i.e., all SDs) was 1.0. The highest score possible (i.e., all SAs) was 4.0. All of the aggregate *attitude* scores fell between 3.1 and 3.8.

**Table 4.1. Initial Attitudes Toward Spiritual Friendships (N=10)**

Sentence	Aggregate Avg.	Question #
I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a SF.	3.3	1
I am comfortable with being accountable to another person concerning my spiritual life.	3.1	4
I feel SF's are valuable in my faith journey.	3.5	7
I would like to live more completely into the fullness of God's great possibilities for me.	3.8	10
I feel I have an intimate relationship with God through Jesus.	3.4	13
I enjoy serving others.	3.8	16
I am confident that I hear from God regularly.	3.2	19
I feel I am a good active listener.	3.2	22
I feel I am an encouraging person.	3.6	24
I enjoy looking out for the interests of others.	3.5	27

While all of these scores are *high* relative to the possible 1-4 range, it may be helpful to consider the lower, medium, and higher end where the participants found themselves. The lowest of these scores came in response to questions #4, 19, and 22. They were concerned with their comfort with accountability; as well not being certain about these statements: “[I am] confident that I hear from God,” and “I feel I am and believe that they are active listeners.” The middle range scores were in response to questions #1, 7, 13, and 27. Those questions with the highest rankings were #10, 16, and 24. These four questions pertained to participants liking to live into God's new possibilities, enjoying serving others, and thinking they are encouraging persons.

Table 4.2 is an aggregate average summary of the questions that addressed participants' original knowledge of spiritual friendships. There was a greater spread in their knowledge of spiritual friendships than in their attitudes. The range for Table 4.2 is 2.2 to 3.7. **Table 4.2. Initial Knowledge of Spiritual Friendships (N=10)**



Sentence	Aggregate Avg.	Question #
The Bible is source of my strength to me.	3.4	2
I have learned to use a journal to grow in my walk with Christ.	2.2	8
I know we are to help carry one another's burdens.	3.6	11
I know what the main purposes of a spiritual friendship are.	2.6	14
I hear from God through many ways, including His <i>still small voice</i> .	3.2	17
I know what <i>active listening</i> is.	3.4	20
I have a plan for how to grow in my spiritual journey.	2.5	21
I know we are called by Christ to serve others.	3.7	25
I know what my spiritual gifts are.	3.4	28
I know what my (spiritual) passions are.	3.3	29

The three low scores that stand out are for journaling (2.2), knowing the main purposes of spiritual friendship (2.6), and having a plan to grow in one's spiritual journey (2.5). Somewhat higher responses were given for hearing from God in many ways, including His *still small voice* (3.2). All of the other scores were relatively high.

Table 4.3 indicates the results for the initial experiences of the participants in relation to spiritual friendships. The range of responses for Table 4.3 was 1.8 to 3.6. There was an even a wider range of responses than either in their prior attitudes or in their prior knowledge of spiritual friendships.

**Table 4.3. Initial Experiences of Spiritual Friendships (N=10)**

Sentence	Aggregate Avg.	Question #
My prayer life is enhanced by journaling.	2.5	3
I have written an account of my faith journey.	2.5	5

My SF encourages me to serve others.	3.6	11
I meet with a SF regularly and we discuss our walk with Christ.	1.8	9
I have shared my faith journey with others	3.4	12
SFs have helped me to discern God's voice in the midst of my life.	2.6	15
My SF and I encourage one another.	3.0	18
I have someone in my life that encourages me to dream big for God.	2.8	23
I read my Bible daily, listening for God to speak.	2.8	26
Praying with a SF draws me closer in my walk with God.	3.4	30

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One of the most telling questions was #9. It had the lowest score on any question of either the pre- or post-survey. Although participants came with someone with whom they were willing to explore a spiritual friendship, most participants did not have anyone with whom they regularly met with (i.e., once a week) to discuss their walk with Christ. Because of their participation in the study, this group seems to have some interest in spiritual friendships but not much experience.

The other lows for Table 4.3 are seen in responses to questions #3, 5, and 15. Their content pertains to having a prayer life enhanced by journaling, having written their faith journey, and having an SF who helped them discern God's voice.

Overall, the participants have a positive outlook on the concept of spiritual friendships. However, they did not have as much knowledge as they had a positive attitude about them. In addition, they had less experience than they had interest or knowledge of spiritual friendships.

### **Research Question #2**

What are the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships of the participants after the spiritual friend study?

The second research question investigated the attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of the participants in relation to spiritual friendships and the concepts related to the forming of healthy spiritual friendships following the SF study.

Three different tools were used to assess this research question. The first was quantitative, the post-survey that examined participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experience after the SF study. Ten surveys were completed. Twelve were given the survey, but two of them did not complete the final page of the survey and were not considered in the results. The results of the post-survey are listed first, and then compared them with those of the pre-survey. Two qualitative measures were also used. The first was the handwritten evaluation with five questions completed by all twelve participants. The second qualitative measure was the information gathered from the three pairs who were interviewed. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions.

First, the aggregate averages for each of the questions on the post-survey are listed. Table 4.4 shows aggregate averages for postattitudes alongside the preattitudes. Table 4.5 indicates postknowledge alongside the preknowledge, and Table 4.6 provides postexperiences alongside the preexperiences.

**Table 4.4. Post-survey Attitudes toward Spiritual Friendships and Comparison (N=10)**

Sentence	Pre AA	Post AA	%	Question #
I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a SF.	3.3	3.9	18.0	1
I am comfortable with being accountable to another person concerning my spiritual life.	3.6	3.1	16.0	4
I feel SFs are valuable in my faith journey.	3.9	3.5	11.0	7

I would like to live more completely into the fullness of God's great possibilities for me.	4.0	3.8	5.0	10
I feel I have an intimate relationship with God through Jesus.	3.6	3.4	5.8	13
I enjoy serving others.	4.0	3.8	5.0	16
I am confident that I hear from God regularly.	3.2	3.2	—	19
I feel I am a good active listener.	3.7	3.2	15.6	22
I feel I am an encouraging person.	3.6	3.6	—	24
I enjoy looking out for the interests of others.	3.8	3.5	8.6	27
<hr/>				
AA—Aggregate Average				

Comparing the two sets of responses, it can be seen that in every question except two, which remained the same, there was growth. Although the attitudes seemed to be high in the pre-test, they were even higher following the SF study. Next a comparison of the original knowledge of participants to their knowledge following the SF study will be given (see Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5. Postsurvey Knowledge of Spiritual Friendships and Comparison (N=10)**

Sentence	Pre AA	Post AA	%	Question #
The Bible is a source of strength to me.	3.4	3.5	3.0	2
I have learned to use a journal to grow in my walk with Christ.	2.2	2.5	13.6	8
I know we are to help carry one another's burdens.	3.6	3.9	8.0	11
I know what the main purposes of a spiritual friendship are.	2.6	3.9	—	14
I hear from God through many ways, including His <i>still small voice</i> .	3.2	3.8	18.8	1
I know what <i>active listening</i> is.	3.4	3.8	11.7	20
I have a plan for how to grow in my spiritual journey.	2.5	3.4	36.0	21
I know we are called by Christ to serve others.	2.5	3.4	36.0	21
I know what my spiritual gifts are.	3.4	3.7	8.8	28
I know what my (spiritual) passions are.	3.3	3.4	3.0	29

Every question had a positive increase, obviously some greater than others. One of the two largest increases (50 percent) came from knowing the main purposes of a spiritual friendship though one would expect an increase after participating in a six-week practicum that focused on possible purposes of a spiritual friendship. The second largest increase (36 percent) is also not surprising since participants were given at least one week to develop a Rule of Life, which is a plan for spiritual growth, and then given another week to reshape it as needed. This increase shows that many did what the SFJG instructed them to do.

Notably, one of the increases (18.8 percent) came in knowing God's *still small voice*. One of the hopes for this study was to help people grow in their relationship with God. Hearing God speak individually is an important part of seeing that growth occur.

Table 4.6 show the results of the postexperiences survey alongside the preexperiences survey followed by a percentage of increase between the two.

**Table 4.6. Postsurvey Experiences of Spiritual Friendships and Comparison (N=10)**

Sentence	Pre AA	Post AA	%	Question #
My prayer life is enhanced by journaling.	2.5	3.0	20.0	3
I have written an account of my faith journey.	2.5	3.4	36.0	5
I have had SFs who have encouraged me to serve others.	3.6	3.8	5.5	6
I meet with a friend regularly and we discuss our walk with Christ.	1.8	3.5	94.0	9
I have shared my faith journey with others.	3.4	3.6	5.8	12
SFs have helped me discern God's voice in the midst of my life.	2.6	3.5	34.6	15
My SF and I encourage each other.	3.0	3.9	30.0	18
I have someone in my life who encourages me to dream big.	2.8	3.5	25.0	23
I read my Bible daily, listening for God to speak.	2.8	3.3	18.0	26
Praying with a SF draws me closer in my walk with God.	3.4	3.7	8.8	30

As with the comparisons on knowledge, there was increase in every category.

Some tried the journaling. Many wrote their faith journey perhaps for the first time and shared it. The greatest increase (94 percent) was in question #9, which was about meeting with someone regularly to discuss their walk with Christ. This increase suggests that the majority of the people who were in the study did not previously have someone in their lives that they met with regularly for the purpose of discussing their journey with Christ. The increase simply affirms that they did what they were asked to do as part of the study.

Many areas of growth were revealed in the results of the SF pre/post survey. The greatest change in attitude was toward sharing a journey with an SF. The largest changes in knowledge came in the areas of learning the purposes of spiritual friendships, knowing

the still small voice of God, and having a plan (i.e., Rule of Life) for growing in their spiritual journeys. The greatest increases occurred in the area of experiences associated with spiritual friendships. Seven out of ten areas showed a positive change of 18 percent or more (up to 94 percent) in comparison to their original responses. Those seven include having a prayer life enhanced by journaling, writing a faith journey, having a friend to meet with for the purpose of discussing their walk with Christ, having an SF who helped them discern God's voice, having an SF to encourage one another, having an SF that helped them dream big for God, and the reading Bible daily expecting God to speak to them.

Table 4.7 shows the percentages of growth, positive and negative, based on each individual's responses to the two surveys (pre- and poststudy). Totals were derived by counting a response of SD as 1, D as 2, A as 3, and SA as 4. Then responses from their entire surveys were calculated. The lowest possible score would be 30, and the highest possible would be 120.

**Table 4.7. Individual Percentages of Growth from Pre- to Postsurvey**

Presurvey Score	Postsurvey Score	Change %
84	106	26.25
86	106	23.25
93	109	17.00
100	109	9.00
114	114	—
96	101	5.00
96	114	18.75
84	116	38.00
91	109	19.70
108	103	-4.60

These results include one person with no change, and one person with a negative percentage, showing that individual's score decreased following the SF study. For eight out of ten individuals there was growth ranging from 5 percent to 38 percent, indicating that each of those eight individuals had growth in their attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships. The average percentage change was 15 percent with great variance.

The study consisted of the initial SF workshop that took place on a Saturday, followed by a six-week practicum where SFs met once a week using the SFJG to direct their time together. The study concluded on another Saturday when the twelve participants met once again and completed an SF evaluation (five open-ended questions) and three pairs were interviewed (six open-ended questions). Overall, what seemed to be most helpful included several elements.

Overall, several themes emerged from the written evaluations. They appreciated the value/meaningfulness of doing exercises together and sharing what they had learned. They found the SFJG and the spiritual tools within to be helpful. They found having someone to talk to and grow with on their spiritual journey with Christ helpful. Intentionality was a key component of the growth in their spiritual friendship. Another theme was the benefit of having someone to encourage them and to listen to them without judging and with compassion. Lastly, most (five out of six) said that having a spiritual friend had helped them grow in their walk with Christ.

One theme was the value/meaningfulness of doing exercises together and sharing what they had learned. One participant emphasized "learning about God and His plan for me" and then sharing "that plan in order to fulfill it." While another underscored,



“Meeting with a SF and discuss[ing] changes experienced through seeking a closer relationship with God.” Participants found meaning not just in doing the spiritual disciplines, but also in doing them together.

Many of the participants commented on the helpfulness of the tools from the SFJG. Those specifically mentioned were *prayer of examen*, creating a Rule of Life, and listening to one another. Four out of twelve specifically mentioned the meaningfulness of creating their own rule of life. Another participant mentioned “the review of spiritual gifts, and the ideas of passion in my spiritual life.”

Participants appreciated having another person to talk to and grow with around the topic of their mutual spiritual journey in Christ. One person wrote, “[M]eeting and knowing my SF better, being encouraging to one another, and talking about our faith.” The same person also wrote that what was most helpful were the “experiences that offer activities and questions that encourage me to think deeper and perhaps hear God’s directions.” Another wrote, “[T]he visio and lectio divinas” were a strength as they contributed to “having the sharing deepen and broaden my experience.”

Another theme was the importance that intentionality made in the process. They intentionally were to meet six times. They were intentionally invited to participate in one another’s journeys using the SFJG as their common tool. One participant wrote, “The most meaningful part of the exercises and practices is that it made me intentional in sharing in and with a ‘friend.’” “Goal-directed meetings each week” were a strength of the SFJG. “Knowing the expectations” was helpful as well. “I liked the focus on the reason for the friendship.” Once more, the intentionality and tools/resources to help guide the time together played an important role in their spiritual growth.

Many participants commented how helpful to have someone to encourage them and listen to them without judging but with compassion. “Being encouraging to one another” was mentioned as a strength of the practicum. Another benefit expressed by a participant was, “Having a friend who has an agreed upon goal of our relationship to share our spiritual joys, struggles, and know they don’t judge and care about me and my inner life.” Intentionality and purpose gave meaning to the friendship and to the time the friends spent together. Lastly, responses given during the oral interviews on the day of evaluation will be considered. Three out of six pairs of SFs were interviewed. The following is a summary of the findings.

In the interviews, one of the questions asked if having an SF helped participants grow in their spiritual walk with Christ. The responses included five yeses and one “a little.” They mentioned that the accountability was helpful; they had an increased awareness of God; the devotional time increased; and, prayer for others increased. All six said that having something specific to do together increased the value of the time together. One said that it was a “reminder that time with [an SF] was valuable.” Participants found the time useful for growth as a follower of Christ.

In summary, the friends benefited from the mutuality of meeting together for the purpose of growing spiritually. Active listening, mutual concern and caring, encouragement, accountability, and time in the Word together were all beneficial. Intentionality seemed to be key as well. They helped one another *listen to God*. Mutual tasks shared in the SFJG made the relationship meaningful.

### Research Question #3

What aspects of spiritual friend study most impacted the participant's attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships?

The third research question revealed which aspects of the spiritual friend study most impacted the participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences of spiritual friendships. Two forms of qualitative data were considered: the SF evaluation completed by all twelve participants and the information gathered by interviewing the three pairs of participants.

The SF study was broken into two parts. The first was the one-day workshop on SFs, which was designed to give participants tools to engage positively in the SFJG. The SFJG was a workbook that gave participants directions of what to do each of the six times they met. The second part of the study was to engage with an SF once a week for six weeks, using the SFJG.

After reviewing the remarks made on the SF written evaluation, I found some of the commonalities. The first was a unanimous proclamation that the SF workshop aided them in participating in the study. These are some of the comments:

- “[The workshop] explain[ed] some techniques so I knew what to expect and that they are doable!”
- “[The workshop] prepared me for what was coming without being overwhelmed and frightened.”
- “It [the workshop] was informative and instructive as to how to proceed with each of the SF meetings each week. [The leader] anticipated questions through careful

explanation. We had opportunity to ‘practice’ sacred reading and sacred visioning [i.e., *lectio divina* and *lectio visio*].”.

- “[The workshop was] very important and helped clarify[ing] ‘the purpose and plan’ for the study.”
- “[The SF workshop gave] processes for focus, relaxing in God’s presence, and listening.”
- “[The workshop provided tools for each of us to use individually and with our SF.” One mentioned they appreciated “listening to others and their thoughts [i.e., *lectio divina* and *lectio visio*].”

The comments unanimously showed appreciation and value from participating in the SF workshop component of the study.

The six-week practicum consisted of the SFs meeting (each pair separately) once a week for six weeks. Several mentioned the power and importance of encouraging and lifting one another up both through prayer and encouraging words. They expressed appreciation of being able to meet with another to discuss their walk with Christ.

Encouraging one another was a repeated theme, as well. One participant commented, “I have developed a much deeper connection and closeness with my spiritual friend and our awesome Lord!” Another wrote, “Although my SF and I have been friends for a very long time, our bond has grown beyond anything I could ever imagine.” Intentionality within the boundaries of spiritual friendship often leads to deeper intimacy between friends.

One of the most important pieces of the SFJG was, in part, the intentionality that caused the friends to share at a deeper level than they may have otherwise. One was the

value/meaningfulness of doing Self-understanding does not come by being alone. exercises together and sharing what they had learned. The SFJG was “well-written with precise easy to understand directions” and “most definitely God-inspired.” Another participant said in response to how they had grown in this experience, “I have grown in being more regular in devotions and meditation through Lectio Divina.” The SFJG offered “activities and questions that encouraged me to think deeper and perhaps hear God’s direction.” Three participants mentioned the helpfulness of the prayer of examen. In addition, three saw the creating of a Rule of Life as a beneficial part of the SFJG.

From the six people (three pairs) interviewed, many recurring themes emerged. From the SF workshop (one day) they shared how hearing others’ experiences, the comradery, finding others who are pursuing a deeper walk not all from the same location, were all very helpful. Others echoed that finding other adults interested in a deeper walk was very uplifting. Some mentioned how the *lectio* and *visio divinas* were effective tools in hearing others’ responses and how these practices intersected with their lives.

The three pairs were also asked, “What part of the six-week practicum was most meaningful?” Their responses varied. Common themes were appreciated confidentiality, accountability, and the deepness of the sharing. They liked reading something to apply it to life. They enjoyed learning more about their spiritual friend. One pair mentioned that they had a “commonality of language that they didn’t have before.” Another commented, “[Having a] deeper understanding of the spiritual background of a friend was like gold.” In addition, one mentioned that having a neutral place to listen and hear one another was a blessing. One pair called each other every day and discussed a Scripture passage.

Another question that was asked during the interview was, “Which day were you glad that you had a friend to walk with you through it?” For five individuals, the most important day was the first day when sharing one’s faith journey was the topic, and five also mentioned the second day when the Rule of Life was constructed. One participant found the third day, where friends encouraged one another the most important day to have a friend. One pair benefited most from doing the service project together, which was day four. No one interviewed mentioned the sixth day, which was finding their spiritual gifts and passion.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

All three evaluative tools—the survey, the written evaluation, and the interview questions/answers—had many common threads. After considering the data collected, there seems to be several major findings that appear throughout the results on multiple occasions. Participating in the SF study had the effect of spiritual growth:

1. All components of the SF study contributed to the spiritual growth of SFs.
2. Reflecting and shared reflecting were key elements to growth in SFs.
3. The mutuality of the relationship contributed to the spiritual growth.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Major Findings**

The problem this study addresses is that within United Methodist congregations, and many others as well, there is a growing individualization of our spiritual growth that is really not Christian at all. According to Scripture, United Methodist traditions, and the current available books about Spiritual Friendship—both old and new—there is a desire surfacing or resurfacing in many to gather together with like-minded others for the purpose of growing in their spiritual journey toward Christlikeness. Intentionally meeting with a spiritual friend on a regular basis has the potential to grow a person closer in his or her walk with Christ and to grow churches.

This study was designed to facilitate equipping the laity to pursue and become SFs for the ultimate purpose of making disciples who would make disciples. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of the spiritual friend workshop and six-week practicum on participants' attitudes, knowledge, and experiences related to spiritual friendships. What follows are the specific major findings of the spiritual friend study.

#### **Participants Experiencing Spiritual Growth**

Participants experienced spiritual growth as a result of this SF study. Several made comments such as, "I have known them [SF] forever, but I have learned deep things I never knew about the other." The same person added, "Now we have a language we did not have before to discuss things together." Deep sharing between friends resulted in transformation. Another person said, "Now we share ideas that we never would have thought to have shared before." One pair started sharing Bible verses with one another

daily, which was not part of the *study*. They took a suggestion in the study, expanded it, and made it their own. They also talked about the richness of sharing and how much they looked forward to discussing Scripture together. It was evident that the Holy Spirit was in their midst as the third who was with them.

Intentionality was a factor that seemed to free individuals to explore their friendship and their walk with Jesus at a deeper level. According to the study, they were supposed to meet and had specific things to accomplish at each meeting. The structure provided freedom and an invitation to share that may not otherwise have surfaced otherwise.

Increases in experiences with spiritual friendships led to an increase in spiritual growth. As participants lived into the roles of SFs, they grew in their spiritual walk with Christ as well.

On a quantitative level, ten out of twelve participants in the SF study perceived spiritual growth. There was little change in attitudes as they were already high. The results showed there was a change in knowledge of spiritual friendship. The largest change was in experiences with SFs. One could conclude that having an SF when accompanied by instruction can result in spiritual growth in the individual.

The literature review reinforces the idea that the intentionality forced by participating in the study was a component that contributed to spiritual growth as spiritual friends worked together. It supports the importance of active listening, sharing stories, encouraging one another, and helping one another to live into God's great possibilities for them (Benner).



The biblical study on verses relating to spiritual friendships as a whole does substantiate the findings that having another to walk with can be of great benefit in one's spiritual journey. The many examples of SFs in the Bible, Jesus' example of sharing with friends, and the *one another* verses, all point to the benefits of sharing the spiritual journey with a friend. For example, in 1 Corinthians 13:24-25, Paul encourages believers to "have equal concern for one another." Another example is in 1 Peter 3:8: "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble." The Bible affirms the need for others to help a person grow spiritually.

### **All Components of the Spiritual Friend Study Contributing to Spiritual Growth**

Contributing factors to the growth included an initial SF workshop, regular meetings with an SF, and the SFJG, which directed their time together with a listening friend. Growth does not happen randomly but is experienced through intentionality of meeting with a commitment to learn/experience something new. Intentionality and meaningful purpose for getting together and for the work they did together were key elements.

The SF workshop (one day) served as an introduction and opportunity to experience some of the ideas represented in the SFJG. Several expressed gratitude for the information and experiences they had at the workshop, which, in turn, prepared them for the six-week practicum. The component called the practicum involved the covenant commitment of two people to meet weekly to work through the SFJG together. The other part of the study was the SFJG itself, which guided the friends for the six-week period.

Comments both verbal and written in the evaluations revealed that the SFJG was a tool that benefited the friends on their journey together.

The literature review in many places supports the finding that spiritual friendship can be a tool for spiritual growth. Aelred of Rievalux first wrote about spiritual friendships, and he was very compelling in his description of the benefits of spiritual friendships in relation to individual spiritual growth. Benner affirms that SFs can be an important component in spiritual growth. Hill, Edgar, Poust, and many others affirm the same.

What is substantially missing in the literature review is the point that structure, such as was used in the SF study (e.g., workshop, practicum, workbook) was instrumental in participants' growth. This study suggests that the structure provided made a valuable contribution to the growth of spiritual friends. The literature review affirms spiritual friendships and even affirms spiritual growth through SFs but leaves it up to individuals to figure it out. A more structured approach can help people, especially since they generally do not know much, if anything, about spiritual friendship as a spiritual discipline.

### **Reflection and Sharing as Key Elements in Growth in a Spiritual Friendship**

Out of the six topics in the SFJG, the Rule of Life and *daily examen* were among the most meaningful to several participants. Both of these disciplines are reflective exercises. Sometimes having another person to help talk and think through things can really illumine what someone most needs to hear, which, in turn, leads to growth. Participants also specifically shared that it was helpful to reflect, but it was even more helpful to share those reflections with another.

In this busy world, often people do not take time to reflect on where they are or where they hope to be in the future. Again, the intentionality that comes from committing to meet regularly with an SF creates a safe space where for reflecting and sharing one's reflection, which is often the precursor to transformation. When a person does not stop long enough to find out where he or she has gone wrong, there is little room for the Spirit to intercede and work with that person to make corrections.

The literature review supports the benefits of reflection for spiritual growth that can happen in spiritual friendship. According to Benner:

Spiritual intimacy demands...attentiveness to the inner world. Soul conversations invite inclusion of the spiritual dimension of life when they pay attention to inner experience, not simply the external world. Our spirituality is most clearly expressed in the deep longings that enliven us. Spiritual intimacy involves sharing these longings. (74)

Attention to the *inner world* cannot happen without reflection. A person will not change by simply rushing through his or her days. One does not become aware of one's *deep longings* apart from reflection. Benner clearly states this exchange is an important part of spiritual friendships.

Benner also emphasizes the need for making a quiet space within ourselves (46). A deep friendship without the aid of mutual reflection, paying attention to one's inner world, and the ability to find a quiet place inside of oneself would be difficult.

Jesus also often modeled the importance of reflection by taking time to pray alone. One could conclude that there was reflection involved in His time of prayer. In this passage, one sees Jesus engaged in reflection with his disciples. Following Jesus' resurrection, two disciples were travelling on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). They were talking about all that had taken place. Indeed, they were reflecting on "all that had

happened” (v.14) in the past few days. During this discussion of reflection, Jesus met them along the road, walked with them, and sought to help them understand what had happened.

### **The Mutuality of the Relationship Contributing to Spiritual Growth**

Mutuality was a key to spiritual growth. In spiritual direction, mentoring, and coaching, one person is ranked higher than the other, which creates a particular dynamic. When the relationship is one-sided and hierarchical, the depth of sharing and intimacy can be inhibited. The mutuality in the relationship is what serves as the glue, along with the Holy Spirit.

The mutuality of caring, active listening, encouragement, trust, and the commitment to meet together as SFs, all contributed to spiritual growth. To have a friend, one has to be a friend. Mutual caring replaces jealousy, backbiting, or tearing down. Mutual listening helps dissolve the idea that no one really listens to us and validates our worth as human beings. Mutual encouragement fosters a healthy, safe space to grow. Mutual trusting along with confidentiality are imperative in a healthy spiritual friendship. The mutual commitment to meet together is the backbone of the relationship. The power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a friendship with the purpose of growing in Christ is able to work freely where two are gathered in His Name.

Just as the Trinity is reflected in a dance (i.e., *perichoresis*), likewise believers are invited to join the dance. Just as the Trinity is not hierarchical, friendships that reflect the dance of the Trinity will flourish and grow. As Benner writes:

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity places friendship at the very heart of the nature of God. And almost unbelievably, the eternal interflow of companionship that binds the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other, extends to those Jesus calls to be his followers and friends. (65) What makes this work is the Holy Spirit in the midst of two believers gathered together in His Name. Seamands writes about meeting with a small group of spiritual friends:

As we've met together, Jesus has been true to his promise that when two or three of us gather in his name, he will be in our midst (Matthew 18:20), and through him, the Father and the Spirit as well! In our fellowship with one another, we have experienced a deep divine fellowship, the fellowship of the Trinity. (Seamands 47)

Where the Holy Spirit is invited to be one's Guide, transformation will most likely come.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is a distinctive of Christian spiritual friendships.

There are those who stress friendship where one *friend* is *above* the other (e.g., spiritual direction, mentoring, coaching). Yet there are many spiritual formation writers who stress the importance of mutuality in spiritual friendships. As noted earlier:

Some of the defining characteristics (of Spiritual Friendships) include mutuality, confidentiality, honesty, edification of the other, grace, love, patience, openness to correction and direction, humility, self-giving, the gift of time and presence, forgiveness, love of the Word, commitment to prayer, and a mutual commitment of growth in Christ-likeness. The Trinity has been offered as a prime example of mutual spiritual friendship (Nettles 77-78).

Mutuality in spiritual friendships can be found in Scripture. David and Jonathan, as well as Barnabus and Paul, are clear examples. The *one another* Scriptures previously discussed also underscore the importance of mutuality. In 1 Corinthians 13:24-25, for example, Paul encourages his readers to have equal concern for one another. Colossians 3:16 reminds believers that it is as friends let the "word of Christ dwell in (them) richly" that they will be enabled to teach and admonish one another. The Word and the Spirit are always the believer's guide. In addition, the term *koininia*, which means fellowship, also

has the meaning of *joint participation*. (Nettles, 37) Mutual friendships are supported by Scripture.

The major findings are deeply interwoven with one another, which confirms their importance. The intentionality and structure provided by participating in a workshop and practicum, the relationships established and deepened by being a part of this study, the reflection component that fosters deep sharing, and the mutuality of the relationship all worked together for spiritual growth in the individual.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The spiritual friends study as a tool for spiritual growth has several implications for the practice of ministry. First, instead of continuing to emphasize individual growth in congregations, a shift needs to happen to suggest that growth is more likely to occur when a person has a spiritual friend to share the journey. Education can come through multiple venues. The value of spiritual friendships could be preached in sermons, using David and Jonathan, Mary and Elizabeth, Barnabus and Paul, or simply the *one another* verses as texts. The same Scriptures could be shared in Bible studies, youth groups, or other study groups. A change in mind-set from individual growth to growth together needs to be fostered. Having a common language among a congregation will be needed in order for spiritual friendships to flourish.

Second, the importance of reflection and sharing in the spiritual growth of SFs also needs to be stressed. Pastors and teachers need to find ways to teach their congregants how to linger, reflect, and be attentive to their inner world. Times for reflection could be given in the setting of worship, Bible study, or any other groups of the

church. Integrating time into the church's schedule to linger could create a space where congregants could share with one another in a reflective way.

Third, incorporating a Rule of Life and *daily examen* in some way into the life of the church should be explored. A Rule of Life is an intentional plan of guiding principles that help a person to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes about the Rule of Life: "Life-giving rules are a brief and realistic scaffold of disciplines that support your heart's desire to grow in loving God and others" (36). A Rule of Life is fluid and open to frequent revision as needed and reflects sacred rhythms of rest and work. The Rule of Life was best made known by Saint Benedict, and the *daily examen* originated with Ignatius. In its simplest form, the *daily examen* asks questions at the end of a day: (1) Where was I *in the flow* with the Spirit or the gifts of the day; (2) where was I *out of the flow*, or where did I struggle; and, (3) what are God's invitations for me as I begin a new day tomorrow (i.e., improvement)? The value of these tools in part came from sharing these self-reflections with an SF. Along with this idea, resources that are prepared and used with ongoing groups of SFs need to include a healthy dose of reflective disciplines such as the Rule of Life and the *daily examen*. Other reflective exercises should be explored and incorporated on an ongoing basis.

Fourth, structure should be a factor in any teaching by pastors or educators. Structure was foundational to the spiritual growth that occurred between SFs. Instead of being inhibitive, the structure created a space for freedom to share with one another in a deep manner. When pastors or other teachers/leaders are trying to instruct others in a new prayer practice, this study implies that providing a structure will help them grow. At the very least, a handout should be provided to remind participants of the instructions along

with space to do the work. In the study, participants were encouraged to experience a for seven days. In order to encourage this practice, *daily examen* booklet was provided with seven days already marked “Gifts, Struggles, and Invitations.” This way their reflections were organized and all in the same place to facilitate reflection upon the days.

The Rule of Life was another piece of the SFJG in which structure was helpful. The Rule of Life itself is a structure in which a person put words to his or her plan for spiritual growth. Rather than creating a legalistic binding document, it actually provides freedom by stating boundaries for an individual to allow him or her to say *yes* or *no* based on their Rule of Life. In the SFJG, an example of a Rule of Life and instructions for putting one together was provided, as well as space in which to write one. Then the next week, space was given to offer an opportunity to revise one’s Rule of Life based on how well they had previously followed it. Structure was an important piece of this study and can help many others in their teaching.

Fifth, laity and clergy alike need to be informed of the importance of meeting regularly with an SF for spiritual growth. To aid in this, clergy need to model spiritual friendships. Unfortunately, many clergy have the tendency to function as “lone-rangers” in ministry. A dramatic shift is needed in both the thinking and actions of both clergy and laity. Transformation begins with new attitudes. New attitudes come from hearts that are in touch with their deepest longings. Longings of the heart are revealed by the power of the Holy Spirit often through the prayers of God’s people. In order to see a change, both prayer and hard work will be needed.

In the local church, this SF study could be used to infiltrate spiritual friendships into the fiber of all churches willing to participate. One option would be to identify a



team of persons interested in pursuing spiritual friendships within the local church or in a parish. Next, those interested would use the spiritual friendships handbook to teach about spiritual friendships to potential pairs of spiritual friends. This could be done in a one-day seminar or workshop or over a period of time as needed. Then the self-selected pairs of spiritual friends could covenant together to use the SFJG as a resource for a six-week experiment. Pairs of friends would be invited to meet together intentionally once a week for the purpose of spiritual growth through reflection and sharing with the Holy Spirit as their guide. At the end of the six weeks, a group of pairs of spiritual friends would then regather and share their experiences. At that time, those pairs of friends interested in continuing may make another covenant to meet together either once a week or every other week.

The church needs to supply either a pastor, or lay leader, or other servant leader who would gather the friends once a month and guide their time of reflecting together, as well as offering new resources for encouragement to stay together and for further growth as SFs. A framework of structure needs to undergird these efforts. Something such as the SFJG could be expanded as an ongoing resource for SFs.

Finally, the work of the Holy Spirit in this work cannot be minimized or overlooked. There is much mystery in the developing of spiritual friendships. This study has not spoken to finding a spiritual friend precisely because it cannot be taught. We have described what a spiritual friend looks like and the characteristics of a healthy spiritual friendship, but the participants chose their own friends. SFs must be self-chosen based on some common affinity. This study has attempted to provide a tool that, if offered and used by the Holy Spirit, can aid in helping friends grow deeper in their friendship by

becoming intentional SFs. Individuals cannot force growth, but the Spirit can provide growth. The framework of spiritual friendships is only a tool creating a space where the Spirit finds fertile soil in which to grow. Leaders need to be trained to help congregants listen for the *still small voice* of the Holy Spirit. Slowing down, lingering, actively listening, and being present to one another and the Spirit are all very important to growth.

District lay academies and other training events at the district level could help spread the word and recruit pairs of spiritual friends interested in pursuing spiritual friendships. Teaching opportunities at the conference or seminary level would be avenues to disseminate information quickly, which could greatly affect the local church.

The impact of spiritual friendship in every willing congregation may be nothing short of revival. Those who have a heart for a deeper walk will likely be those who will gravitate to developing spiritual friendships. If churches could identify, grow, and nurture groups of SFs, the fruitfulness in the life of the church has endless possibilities. If the people in congregations would develop SFs, churches would be transformed.

I have already mentioned that the Holy Spirit is the one who does the transforming. Yet, spiritual friendships can lay the foundation for creative fertile soil in which it is easier for people to hear the *still small voice* or to experience *holy nudges*. By listening, the church can become more like the Bride of Christ she was meant to be.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was the size of the population that participated—only twelve individuals. The number may have been limited by the fact that three of the six pairs were married couples instead of *just friends*. No pairs of male friends were included in this study. Another limitation of the study may be the lack of cultural diversity.

All the participants of the study were people I knew. Perhaps, if they had all been complete strangers to me, the results would have been different. In addition, persons were recruited to participate in the study because they had an interest in spiritual friendships and were available on the two Saturdays they were needed to be present. These may all be limiting factors to the study's generalizability.

Finally, six weeks is not really time to plummet the depths of a spiritual friendship. Instead, this was a time of learning and developing skills that would be helpful in maintaining a healthy spiritual friendship that may last for years.

### **Unexpected Observations**

This study had several surprises. I had hoped for growth but never thought of ten out of twelve of them (83 percent) showing spiritual growth. The results were overwhelming.

I did not expect the structure I provided to be a tool that would help set participants free for deeper conversations with their SFs. Some see structures in general as binding. Several expressed how the structure provided freedom that led to growth. All parts of the study led to growth, and the structure offered by the study created a space for people to grow and grow together.

I was surprised how much many of them wanted to get to know the other pairs of SFs better. Their yearning for fellowship beyond their own friend was evident. They wanted to know more about others who were interested in spiritual friendships and growth in their spiritual journeys. Wesley knew that both were needed. In Wesley's

Bands there were two to four people, and then they met together in the larger Classes, consisting of twelve or so.

The importance of reflective exercises as a major finding was a surprise to me. I never even thought of reflection being important in the development of spiritual friendships. Obviously, I thought it would be helpful but never thought of it being important. Reflection is essential in spiritual formation in general and seems to be something that does not naturally come into one's daily schedule but requires intentionality. It is only when a person has pondered where one is that one is able to move forward into becoming more like Jesus. Again, the Holy Spirit is a SF's guide, but their part is to make the time, then listen in the silence, and be open to making changes in their lives.

### **Recommendations**

While a good beginning has been made, there is room for much improvement. One suggestion would be to do the study with all same-sex pairs without the married couples. Some see these two groups very differently in the realm of spiritual friendships. While acknowledging certain differences, I believe the study did and can benefit from both friends only and married couples. One option for further study would be to explore the input of pairs of male friends as this population was not represented in this study.

Additionally, using a larger group would be beneficial to substantiating/correcting the findings of this study. Instead of six pairs, perhaps twelve pairs of individuals could participate. Involving a more culturally diverse group may be informative as well.

Another suggestion/recommendation would be to replace in the Spiritual Friend Journal Guide the days on Spiritual Gifts and Passion. No one in the study even

mentioned these two topics in a positive or negative light. In light of learning that reflection was key to deep sharing and growth, I would suggest replacing in Week 6, the Spiritual Gift and Passion pages with one (or all) of the following:

1. One addition could be a two-column page designed for examining in one's life, what are the things that *Feed My Soul* and what are the things that *Starve My Soul* and then listing each in the appropriate column. Then invite participants to circle at least one thing in the *Feed My Soul* column that they will attempt to do more of in the coming week and circle at least one thing in the *Starve My Soul* column that they will try to eliminate from their life in the next week.

2. Another possible addition would be to include an exercise on journaling a conversation with God (Wolpert 183). Another page would be included with two columns. The first would be labeled *My Thoughts* and the second *God's Thoughts*. The participant begins the conversation by posing a question in the column *My Thoughts* and then prayerfully waiting for the Spirit to reveal *God's Thoughts* on that topic. The participant then records what he or she hears in the second column, and the conversation continues back and forth. It is good to remember that God's thoughts will not contradict the Bible or the life of Jesus. If what one is *hearing* seems questionable, then hopefully sharing the concern with one's spiritual friend or someone else who *listens to God*, he or she will be able to discern what is truth.

3. A third possible additional page could address the *Prayer of Surrender*. Sometimes believers experience times where their joy and peace are depleted. In these times, they may find they have been carrying concerns of which they really need to release to God. The *Prayer of Surrender* is all about letting go of any worries, concerns,

situations, or problems by leaving them at the foot of the cross and trusting Jesus to move and/or meet the need. The very act of letting go is extremely freeing. Another way to use this prayer is to write on a blank sheet of paper the words *Letting Go* in the middle of the paper and then in one or two word phrases randomly depositing cares and concerns. Once again, they are trusting Jesus to intervene on their behalf. If someone is a visual person, he or she may want to draw a balloon for each concern as a reminder that he or she is, indeed, *letting go*.

Any of these reflective exercises may be beneficial, but other exercises may be helpful as well.

**APPENDIX A****INFORMED CONSENT LETTER****Spiritual Friendships: Recovering a Neglected Means  
of Christian Discipleship in the Local Church**

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Carolyn Nettles from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you have previously expressed an interest in this study.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to attend two workshops, and meet six times in seven weeks with your spiritual friend who has attended with you. The first workshop will take place on Saturday, October 22 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Lunch will be provided on site.) The concluding workshop will take place on Saturday, December 10 from 1 to 3 p.m. Both workshops take place at Wesley United Methodist Church in Vienna, WEST VIRGINIA. *In the course of the study, at first you will be asked to take a survey that seeks to assess your attitudes, knowledge, and experiences with Spiritual Friendships. At the concluding workshop, you will be asked to complete the same survey to assess any change in your attitudes, knowledge, or behaviors with Spiritual Friendships. At the conclusion workshop, you will also be asked to complete a written evaluation. Three of the “pairs” in the study who volunteer will be interviewed also at the concluding workshop. There will be no payment for participation in this study.*

Your family will know that you are in the study. The information you provide will be known by other people or at least your partner in the study. I have no way of controlling how they protect or do not protect that information. However, I as the researcher will do all I can to keep the information you share confidential. If something

affects you negatively (makes you feel bad) while you are in the study, please tell Carolyn Nettles. If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want. You can ask Carolyn Nettles questions any time about anything in this study. Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

---

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

---

Date Signed



**APPENDIX B**

**SPIRITUAL FRIEND INITIAL SURVEY**

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

For each statement, please circle the one that best describes where you are (not where you wish you were!). SD stands for Strongly Disagree, D stands for Disagree, A stands for Agree, and SA for Strongly Agree (or wholeheartedly agree!). Do not spend long on any one statement, but go with your first response to the statement.

- 1) I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a spiritual friend.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 2) The Bible is a source of strength to me.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 3) My prayer life is enhanced by journaling.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 4) I am comfortable with being accountable to another person concerning my spiritual life.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 5) I have written an account of my faith journey.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 6) I have had spiritual friends who have encouraged me to serve others.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 7) I feel spiritual friendships are valuable in my faith journey.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 8) I have learned to use a journal to grow in my walk with Christ.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 9) I meet with a friend regularly and we discuss our walk with Christ.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 10) I would like to live more completely into the fullness of God's great possibilities for me.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 11) I know we are to help carry one another's burdens.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA

- 12) I have shared my faith journey with others.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 13) I feel I have an intimate relationship with God through Jesus.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 14) I know what the main purposes of a spiritual friendship are.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 15) Spiritual friends have helped me to discern God's voice in the midst of my life.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 16) I enjoy serving others.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 17) I hear from God through many ways including His *still small voice*.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 18) My spiritual friend and I encourage one another.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 19) I am confident that I hear from God regularly.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 20) I know what *active listening* is.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 21) I have a plan for how to grow in my spiritual journey.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 22) I feel I am a good active listener.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 23) I have someone in my life that encourages me to dream big for God.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 24) I feel I am an encouraging person.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 25) I know we are called by Christ to serve others.  
SD            D            A        SA
- 26) I read my Bible daily, listening for God to speak.  
SD            D            A        SA

- 27) I enjoy looking out for the interests of others.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 28) I know what my spiritual gifts are.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 29) I know what my (spiritual) passions are.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA
- 30) Praying with a spiritual friend draws me closer in my walk with God.  
SD                    D                    A                    SA

**APPENDIX C**

**SPIRITUAL FRIEND STUDY EVALUATION QUESTIONS**

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

1) What was most helpful/meaningful in this SF Study?

2) What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the SF one-day workshop?

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

3) What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the spiritual friends journal guide?

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

4) Do you feel you have grown in your spiritual walk with Christ because of being a part of this Spiritual Friend study? If so in what way? If not, what were the obstacles?

5) Has your perception of Spiritual Friends changed? And if so, how? If not, just put "No."

**APPENDIX D**

**SPIRITUAL FRIEND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1) Did having a spiritual friend help you grow in your spiritual walk with Christ?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) What part of the SF workshop was most helpful/meaningful to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) What part of the Six-Week Practicum was most helpful/meaningful to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4) In working through the spiritual friends journal guide, which days were you most appreciative of having a friend to walk with you through it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5) If you were to go through the Spiritual Friend Study (entire experience) again, what would you (as a participant) do differently? (If nothing, just put “Nothing.”)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 6) Did having something specific to do together increase the value of the time together?

APPENDIX E

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS HANDBOOK

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## Introduction

*It is a privilege for me to share these words with you on Spiritual Friendships. This book differs from many other books “out there” because I believe that meaningful Spiritual Friendships can be forged between any two believers desiring such a friendship. I have read many books on spiritual companions, and usually it comes down to those who are “trained to lead” leading the “less trained”. I do not wish to discredit this wonderful ministry of spiritual direction by mentors and spiritual directors. They have an important place in the Body of Christ.*

*What I am suggesting is that there is, in addition to these opportunities, accessible to any believer, a usually overlooked source of richness and help that can be found by seeking and developing spiritual friendships. As others have said wisely, we must allow the Holy Spirit to be our guide. If we are mutually committing ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s leading and spending time in the Word together, I believe spiritual friendships can lead us into growth in our Christian journey. I believe spiritual friendships can serve as a guide to newness of life, mutual accountability, and a renewed commitment to Christ so desperately needed in our lives and in our churches. This is the foundation of this book. With God’s help, may it be so.*

## Chapter 1 : “What Does It Take To Be A Spiritual Friend?”

As we begin this journey of exploring spiritual friendships, there are foundational thoughts that permeate the pages. There are other ways of looking at spiritual friendship apart from faith in Jesus, but those ways are not considered in this book. The premise of this book is that the foundation for a spiritual friendship is faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Apart from faith in Christ, a person does not have the Holy Spirit living in them. It is the Holy Spirit that is our counselor, teacher, and encourager, and guide in the journey into growing as a spiritual friend.

As believers, our calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be committed to the life-long journey of growing in Christ-like holiness. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called it “holiness of heart and life” or our sanctification. Regardless of the words you choose, if you are a disciple of Jesus, then you are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18a) Spiritual friends are committed disciples.

The role of a believer that is often overlooked in modern Christianity is that of an apostle of Jesus Christ. Jesus command to “Go and make disciples.” (Matthew 28:19a) An apostle is “one who is sent.” Believers are not only called to grow in their own “grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ”, but are also called and sent to share the journey with others. Spiritual friends are committed to being apostles of Jesus Christ, and inviting others to join them on the journey.



A spiritual friend is a believer who has made a commitment to personally growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There are many facets to being a disciple. We will focus on three facets of discipleship that are especially important in the development of spiritual friendships. We will look at the importance of living a life of prayer, living life out of a love for the Word, and living with a willingness to learn from the Holy Spirit and others who will teach us along the way.

A spiritual friend is one who lives a life of prayer. The effectiveness of a believer to be a spiritual friend is inhibited if the person does not have an active prayer life. Sometimes we make prayer harder than it is, which works in Satan's favor. Of all the "things" you do, the "thing" Satan least wants you to do is pray. That is because it is in prayer that we gain the strength and ability to stand against his schemes and to live in the victory that Jesus died for us to have. Prayer is simply communicating with God. There is no one way we must pray. God speaks to each of us uniquely and in a way that we can best hear Him. This is why Christianity is not a religion like the others, but an invitation to a relationship with the living God through faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Relationships are a two way street. It takes communication and listening on the parts of both parties for the relationship to thrive. Think about your relationship with your best friend. Now, imagine you tell your best friend for the next month whenever you talk together you will do all the talking, and he/she can just listen. How long will that relationship last? I doubt it will last very long. Yet, we do that very same

thing at times with God. We will spend our time alone with God “throwing up” our concerns and the things we need help with, but then we don’t give Him time to respond and tell us anything. We just go on our way, and do our own thing.

Someone who desires to be a spiritual friend makes time to stay connected to God daily through sharing ourselves with Him and spending time just listening to Him. A spiritual friend ought to expect God to move in his/her life through answered prayer, and understands that we are co-workers with God. Our instructions for helping God with His work often come through prayer. We can be confident that God has gone before us in whatever situation He is calling us to, and He has paved the way for us to achieve His kingdom purposes in His power. Disciples also daily ask for and receive forgiveness for their failures, shortcomings, and sins. Disciples know that they are saved by grace through faith and not works. (Ephesians 2:8)

Another aspect of a disciple that is important in spiritual friendships is that they live life out of a love for the Word. The Bible is our road map to growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. The entire Bible is about God’s great love for His people. First God’s chosen people were the Israelites. Now, God’s chosen people are those who believe in Jesus Christ. The New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, and all of it is valuable. The Word is alive.

A spiritual friend will be one who reads the Bible not just for information, but also for transformation. (Wendy Miller, “Invitation To Presence”) The Bible informs us of how to live our lives, yet the power of the Word comes when we read it following a prayer to God to illuminate our hearts and minds in order to be changed

by the Word. One of the most vivid instances I can recall of the Word transforming my attitude and ultimately changing the actions I would pursue happened as I was a Minister of Discipleship in a large member church in Virginia. The senior pastor had said something in a sermon that I felt contradicted the foundation of Christianity. I was extremely angry, upset, and pondering leaving my position to keep from associating with this man and having to work along side of him.

Others were also very upset with this pastor for the same reason, and had gone as far as to say that his seventeen years of ministry were for nothing if he truly believed what he had said. The pastor was devastated. That was on a Sunday, and Monday morning I went to visit and help out a spiritual friend before I went to work. I shared my frustrations. She knew what I was talking about because she had been visiting my church and heard the same things I had heard and reacted pretty much the same. The only difference was she was more willing to forgive quickly. That morning she prayed for me to forgive him and for peace, but I was not present in her prayer. She was praying alone, although I was there. It was as if I had deliberately hardened my heart to prayer regarding how I felt about the senior pastor. In my mind he deserved to be condemned, and did not deserve to be a pastor of a Christian church at all. She was acting as a spiritual friend should, and I was not. As I left her, and was on my way to work, I got stuck in traffic. We were at a complete stand still. I had put my Bible in the car that morning, and it was on the passenger's seat beside of me. Since I had time, I opened up my Bible. This particular Bible was very worn, and the pages fell naturally open to the following verses:

**Galatians 5:13c-15 (NIV)**

.. serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

There was more:

**Galatians 6:10 (NIV)**

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

The next page was even more convicting:

**Ephesians 4:29-32 (NIV)**

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

The message to me could not have been any clearer. It was like “seeing the handwriting on the wall”. I was convicted, repented, forgave the senior pastor, and began resting in God’s forgiveness of me. I was done. I thought I had already done my good deed for the day in just forgiving the senior pastor. Apparently, God thought otherwise. There was more. There were directions.

God’s directions seemed clear to me. “I want you to go to the senior pastor and through prayer give him back credit for his seventeen years of ministry. His

ministry has been and continues to be a ministry of love. He needs to hear that I value His ministry among My people.”

I played a Moses. “Can’t You send someone else? I don’t think I am quite up to it.”

It came back clearly again. “No, you go. I don’t have anyone else to send. You are it. Go!”

So I went and did as God instructed. A great peace flooded through my soul. Not only did I pray for the senior pastor, but he in turn prayed for my ministry among God’s people. A couple of weeks later, the senior pastor rescinded what he had said, and confessed it did not coincide with biblical teachings. God/the Holy Spirit did the convicting. My job was to go in love and reconciliation. I learned the value of having the Word near my side, and the power of Christian love through forgiveness.

This is my disclaimer. Many of us have heard the story of the man that opened up his Bible at random, and the verse he came to was “Judas hanged himself.” The next time he opened up the Word the verse that “popped out at him” was “Go and do likewise.” Now, that would not be a time to follow the word. We must put any “word” we receive up and against the whole of scripture and measure it against years of Christian tradition, our own experience and reason. These are the characteristics of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used for judging “truth”. Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason were Wesley’s measuring stick, with the most weight given to Scripture.

Yet, from the example of the incident with my senior pastor, and many others, we know that God does still speak to His people through His Word. When I was a

student at Asbury Theological Seminary, chapel was an important part of campus life and still is. One particular chapel stands out in my mind. We had a guest preacher (I think he was from a foreign country, but I don't really remember.) I'll never forget what he did and said. He asked the people attending chapel (about fifty people, all students or people working at the seminary) if anyone had brought their Bibles with them today. About ten people raised their Bibles in the air. The speaker responded, "I see we have ten Christians with us today. Welcome to the rest of you as well." He had made his point abundantly clear. It ought to be that all true Christians value the Word so much that regardless of where they went, and especially in worship, they would have a Bible with them. A spiritual friend needs to be one in whom the Word dwells richly and often.

A spiritual friend is one who lives a life of prayer, lives life by willingly being transformed by the Word, and lives life with a willingness to learn from the Holy Spirit and others. Our attitude about our own growth either inhibits or increases our ability to grow. A spiritual friend needs to have the attitude and knowledge that they do not have all of the answers. No one knows what God will do in every situation, or they would be God themselves, and we know it is not so. A spiritual friend needs to have an openness and willingness to hear what others have to say about their own experience of God in a non-judgmental fashion. What is needed is an ability to allow another to teach us through their own experience something new about God. This keeps us from "boxing God in" which really defies who God is. He cannot be boxed in, for He is God.

Finally, a spiritual friend is one who is willing to let the power of the Holy Spirit move in their lives and lead, guide, and teach them and is willing to learn from others as well. Of course, this facet of being a spiritual friend is deeply tied to the other two facets of being in the Word and praying. The Holy Spirit is the one that enlightens the heart of a person to the meaning and application of a passage for us today. Also, we know that when we pray and we don't know where to begin, the "Spirit intervenes for the saints in accordance with the Father's will." Yet beyond this, a spiritual friend needs to have a teachable heart. One who seeks to be a spiritual friend needs to be willing to see the truth about themselves, and learn from another. It requires a humble spirit, and willing attitude.

## Chapter 2: Barriers to Healthy Spiritual Friendships

As we seek to develop spiritual friendships with fellow believers, it may soon become evident that there are several negative characteristics a person may have that will keep the friendship from being a healthy one. In hopes of avoiding some pitfalls, I offer here a short list of possible obstacles to maintaining healthy spiritual friendships. My list of obstacles includes: a lack of commitment, a lack of honesty, a lack of confidentiality, and a lack of listening skills.

First, let us consider a lack of commitment as a barrier to a healthy spiritual friendship. If only one of two (or two of three) is committed to meeting together, discontent will quickly grow in the relationship. All participants must make a covenant to gather together ever how often you decide, and then only break the covenant when an "emergency" arises. Things may fall apart quickly if individuals in

the group are not equally committed to gathering together. To commit oneself to a relationship or to commit to anything is very “out of style” these days. We struggle with commitment because we are stubborn. We want to prove we can do it ourselves. This thinking is deeply ingrained in our way of life. It is like the theme song from the old T.V. show “Laverne and Shirley”. It goes: “I did it my way, yes, my way, yes, made our dreams come true”. It is so much a part of the fabric of our lives to be independent, that being interdependent is foreign to us. For many, our worlds must come crashing down around us for us to admit we need anyone else, and perhaps even God.

Let’s look at commitment from a biblical perspective. Psalm 37:5 says “Commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him, and He will act.” Commit in the Hebrew means (Complete Word Study Dictionary of Old Testament) “one’s ways and works “rolled onto” (committed, entrusted) to someone (especially God.) To commit to God then would be to allow ones ways and works to be rolled onto God. One of the meanings of “roll” in Webster’s Dictionary is to “flow in a continuous stream”. God is holy; and if we were to roll something on to God it would need to be in keeping with God’s holiness. Then to be committed to God would mean that we were so in tune with God that all our ways and works flowed in a continuous stream onto God and melted into God’s ways and works. It is a joining in with God in a work and process He has already begun.



If I roll confectioners sugar into my cookie dough, it becomes “one” with the cookie dough. God’s call on our lives is to “become One” with His will and His ways. I love the idea of my works and ways flowing in a continuous stream to become “one” with God’s works and ways. When we are committed to God this will be the focus of our lives.

Indeed, God has woven our lives together for a reason. Believers are the Body of Christ and each one has a specific job and purpose. We need each other to walk in the Way that leads to life. It is not an easy road to discipleship. Just like the two on the road to Emmaus, met by Jesus, we all need another to help us discern God’s movement in our lives and encouragement along the way.

Another obstacle to a healthy spiritual friendship is a lack of honesty. “Do not lie” is one of the Ten Commandments for a good reason. Relationships built on something other than truth, will not last long, or if they do endure, they will fail to be healthy.

We need to tell the truth when building a spiritual friendship. If we cannot be honest with one another, we cannot build trust. Without trust, we cannot have a healthy relationship. We also need to be honest about who we are. If we come together to “chat” with a spiritual friend with our “masks” on, then it is difficult for the Holy Spirit to move through us to minister to the other.

Confidentiality is closely tied to the issue of honesty and trust. People involved in spiritual friendships must be able to keep a confidence, or the level of sharing will

be greatly impaired. If I am not sure that what I am sharing with someone won't end up being "leaked" in the community, there is a huge limit on what kinds of things I will be willing to share. A healthy relationship (as in marriage) is based on mutual trust. Anyone who has ever experienced being hurt by someone else's lack of ability to keep a confidence, knows how crucial to a healthy relationship keeping confidentiality is. If we cannot trust one another not to share what we say with others, it is very difficult to maintain any relationship at all. It makes a spiritual friendship very unlikely.

In a healthy spiritual friendship, there needs to be a good balance of listening and speaking between the two friends. Sitting for an hour where one friend simply "listens" to the other friend is a huge "gift of presence". Sometimes it may be necessary for one to do all the listening based on what is going on in the other's life. However, if regularly only one person is doing all of the talking, it is difficult to qualify that relationship as a spiritual friendship. Some of the purposes of a spiritual friendship include the mutual sharing and listening, the "gift of presence", and active listening. We will explore this further in Chapter 8.

Aelred of Rievaulx (Twelfth Century) was one of the first we know of to write of Spiritual Friends. He maintains in his book, "Spiritual Friendships", that there are "four qualities that must be tested in a friend: loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience." Loyalty and right intention were tied to the knowledge that we need to enter this friendship without wanting to seek anything from the other than God's

greatest good. He also writes: “The fountain and source of friendship is love. There can be love without friendship, but friendship without love is impossible.”

You may ask “Why do I need to have a spiritual friendship?” Aelred of Rievaulx grants us a delightful picture of the benefits of such a friendship. Hear his words: p.72

“But what happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you need to have no fear to confess your failings; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans! What, therefore, is more pleasant than to so unite oneself the spirit of another, and of two to form one, that no boasting is thereafter to be feared, no suspicion to be dreaded, no correction of one by the other to cause pain, no praise on the part of one to bring a charge of adulation from the other.”

Indeed the benefits of such a relationship are plentiful. When we can truly and fully share ourselves with another without fear, blessings abound. We were created to be there for one another and to help “carry one another’s burdens.” Within a spiritual friendship, such a relationship is found.

### Chapter 3: To Offer One Another the Gift of Presence and Help Others Discern God’s Movement In Their Lives

A key ingredient to being a spiritual friend is offering another the gift of “presence.” Being truly present to one another is very counter-cultural in the day in which we live. Commonly, cell phones, especially with texting, interrupt what

would have once been an uninterrupted meal or visit with someone else. There are other obstacles to offering one another the gift of “presence”. Some of the barriers to offering one another the gift of “presence” are multi-tasking (in some cases), mistaken priorities, and a fear of what will happen if we truly slow down.

If we are committed to avoiding the real issues of our lives by obsessing over the “smaller” issues, that will be an obstacle to our availability to another as a spiritual friend. Furthermore, if we live our lives pretending to be someone that we are not simply because we do not like the person we know ourselves to be, we will not be able to offer another our true “presence.” Indeed, in the frenzied busyness of our world, the gift of presence is a very special gift.

Without the gift of ‘presence’, it would be difficult to grow as spiritual friends. Only after we are truly present to one another will we be willing to share honestly and deeply with one another. One of the purposes of a spiritual friendship is to help the other discern God’s movement in their lives. I believe an important piece of this process is our commitment to be an active listener.

There is much “out there” written about active listening, so I won’t go into much detail, but just describe it in as much as it is a helpful tool as a spiritual friend. In active listening, we respond to the other in ways that the other knows they are being heard. Questions at the right time can be very helpful, as well as rephrasing what one has heard to be sure one has heard it correctly. We need to remember as a spiritual friend, we are listening in three ways (From p. 31 of *Coaching for Christian Leaders*.) First, we listen to our own “self-talk”. This includes not interjecting our own stories

too soon, asking precise questions, and being non-judgmental (apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit). The second way we listen is just simply listening attentively to the other. The third may be the most important, and that is to listen to the “still small voice” of the Holy Spirit. I mention in the opening pages about how the uniqueness of a spiritual friend comes from the fact that when you are both believers then the Holy Spirit lives within each of you and will be your guide in what to say, when to say it, or when to be silent. Indeed often, silence is golden. It is good to be listened to, for often even as we are sharing the things in our life, we will be able to see our troubles differently than if we had not articulated what we were thinking. Also, often we are unable to see for ourselves how God is moving in our lives, because we are so caught up in the circumstances. This is where a spiritual friend can help us to see God’s presence in our journey. Sometimes open ended questions can be helpful in leading others to discover for themselves how God is moving in their lives. (“How do you find yourself praying about this? What do you think Jesus is trying to teach you through this? How can you glorify God in this situation?” Transforming Together by Elle Parrot p.91), If there are difficult things that need to be said, we can claim the promise in Luke 12:12 “for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” Speaking the truth in love is always appropriate. The strength of the spiritual friendship lies in the dependence of both upon the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit.

## Chapter 4 : Growing Together in Grace and Knowledge of Jesus Christ

One of the purposes of a Spiritual Friendship is to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus together. One contributing factor toward this growth is time spent together in the Word. We must know the Word before we can share the Word with another. We have already discussed the importance of studying the Word individually for transformation, rather than just information. The same is true for studying the Word together. Together is often richer because what we fail to see in a passage often another can point out to us. Discovering a new truth (or rediscovering what you already knew) together encourages accountability in following through with obedience. As the apostle James reminds us, we are to be “doers” of the word and not just “hearers” of the Word. (James 1:22)

The Word has many uses, but here we will emphasize just four that will be helpful in our journey as spiritual friends. We will consider words of encouragement, words of challenge & transformation, words to empower and equip us, and words to remind us of God’s faithfulness.

We all need to hear an encouraging Word at times. The Scriptures were written for our encouragement as pilgrims on a journey to Christ-like holiness. A spiritual friend is one who has ready an encouraging word from the Word. We all find ourselves at times falling short of the people we feel God calling us to be. Being reminded of God’s love and grace can be great motivators for getting us back on track. I think of Jesus’ words “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be

afraid.” (John 14:22) Paul’s admonitions to “let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts” (Colossians 3:15) and to “keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2) are both helpful to encourage us on our journey. There are many other examples in the Word of which these are a small sampling.

Growing in grace and knowledge of Jesus will inevitably lead us to words of challenge and transformation. God loves us where we are, but He also loves us enough not to leave us there. (paraphrase Max Lucado) “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4) can be a challenge when we are sad or feeling down. “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2) challenges us to allow the Holy Spirit to prune our thoughts and conform them more to the thoughts of Christ. Isaiah 43 challenges us to “Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past”. Jesus words to “Come follow me” and “Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23) are all commands to deny ourselves and our own will and take upon us the will the Holy Spirit who leads us into all grace and truth.

A spiritual friend is one who will use the Word to empower and equip us for ministry. We all are in need at times of someone to remind us that what God has called us to God will equip us for. It is easy for Satan to slip thoughts into our minds about our inadequacies for carrying out whatever task the Lord has put before us. Actually, that is the beauty of it all. We are unable apart from the Spirit to do anything for the good of the Kingdom. (“Apart from Me you can do nothing.”) That is how God has chosen to reveal His glory to the world. As He infuses in us what we

need to accomplish a task that others know we are not capable of doing, He gets all the glory, and rightly so.

When we are anxious about speaking the “right words” to someone going through some sort of crisis, a spiritual friend could remind us that the Holy Spirit will give us the right words. (Luke 12:12) A spiritual friend could remind us of our gifts or even help us to discover our spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13). When we discover what our spiritual gifts are, then we can work on developing them for the glory of God and we seek to live out His Kingdom purposes in our lives. A spiritual friend could also be the one to remind us that we are to use our gifts empowered by the love of God and only for building up the Body of Christ, not ourselves.

**Joshua 1:9 (NRSV)**

<sup>9</sup> I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

**Jeremiah 1:7 (NRSV)**

<sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Lastly, a spiritual friend is one who can remind us of God’s faithfulness through time, by sharing stories of faith, and reminding us of God’s promises to us. Repeatedly in Scripture the Israelites are told to remember who they are and Whose they are. Jesus tells us that one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to “remind you of everything I have said to you”. (John 14:26) It is in remembering what God has done for us in the past that we are encouraged to face the future with hope. As we focus



on God and His promises, rather than our current circumstances, we can move forward with conviction that God is with us and that we are not alone.

These are just a light sampling of examples. The Word is rich and simple and deep all at the same time. If you give it a chance, it can change your life. It will lead you into more of the abundant life that Jesus died for you to have. Reading the Word together and sharing scripture verses is an important part of a Christian Spiritual Friendship. As a believer, we believe the Word is alive and continues to have applications for our lives today, and always.

## Chapter 5: To Encourage One Another To Be Disciples Of Jesus Christ

We have already looked at in the last chapter about how Spiritual Friends can encourage one another through sharing God's Word (Scripture). In this chapter, I would like for us to consider how we might encourage one another by sharing our stories and praying for one another.

Jesus used stories in a powerful way to teach His disciples and anyone listening who He was, who God is, and God's plan of redemption for His creation. It seems in current streams of thought on spiritual companions the role of sharing our stories with one another is frowned upon and discouraged. My friends, when we leave out our stories of how God has worked in our own lives, we have shut down one of the greatest tools we have to reach others who are hurting or just may need encouragement.

Beyond Jesus' stories, we could look at the Old Testament and how time and time again the story of God's deliverance of the Israelites at the parting of the Red Sea is repeated. It was told to encourage the Israelites that the God who was with them before has never left them. We need that same kind of encouragement today. I would like to share a story with you now, because I believe it is a story of God's faithfulness to all of us, not just me, although it happened to me. You may have a similar story, and I hope that you have shared it with someone or will consider sharing it with someone to encourage them on their journey.

At a very low time in my life, following what was then a recent divorce, I sensed the Lord "sending me" to go away to a lonely place to pause and reflect on the past, and to surrender my future willingly to Him. The invitation was to pour out my heart to God in my journal while being in the midst of His beautiful creation.

I accepted the invitation. I packed up my Bible, my journal, and some colored pens with my water bottle, and off I went. The drive was beautiful with sunshine gleaming through the clouds. When I got to the park, I found a quiet picnic table where I could watch the flowing river and be apart from where other people were gathered. I pulled out my journal and began pouring out my heart to God through my writing.

I just barely had begun, when a rain shower came up in the distance, and I could see it was coming my way. I quickly prayed, "Lord, this was Your idea for me to come to this place to seek Your presence and to pour out my heart to You. I

have been obedient. I drove an hour to get here, and here I am doing what You asked me to do. How am I suppose to continue to walk in obedience here if You let rain fall on my head?" In retrospect, it was a pretty impertinent prayer. It had a very "in your face" tone to it that God never deserves. That God would answer a prayer as flippant as mine is still amazing to me! Yet, answer it He did. What happened next, I will remember for the rest of my life. As I mentioned the rain was coming my direction from a distance. I could see the rain drops falling on the picnic tables in front of where I was sitting and again it was coming toward me. I felt compelled to sit still, even as it was approaching. The most amazing thing happened. The rain began to fall on the table directly in front of the table I was sitting at, and there the rain stopped. I hadn't moved my books that were out on the picnic table. It continued to rain about five feet from where I was sitting. It never did rain over where I was seated.

I know it sounds crazy. Yet, I believe with all my heart that the Lord of heaven and earth heard my heartfelt prayer. God wanted me to know that He is alive, real, and always present with us. He wanted me to know that He always hears my prayers. God wanted me to know that I was not alone and that I was loved. Often, one of the side-effects of a divorce is the feeling that one is "unlovable". On that day, I felt God poured His love for me into my heart and was sending me out once again. I don't think these messages were just for me. I believe they are for you, too. Be encouraged today!!

The power of stories is well established. Just read your Bible. They told the story of God's redeeming power, and then retold repeatedly. We are told to "remember" at least 149 times throughout the Bible (Old and New Testaments). There is power in our memories, which is why there is spiritual power in retelling our stories. As I recorded the story about the rain falling, I cried. (and again as I typed it!) Why? I cried because the memories all came back of how close I felt to God , and how I felt "recommissioned" once again to do His work in the world.

Jesus used stories to capture our imaginations and reveal some Biblical truth. He used stories to "bring it home," if you will. In our day and time, we have lost much of the power of sharing our stories. We have failed to pass down our stories from one generation to the next. We have failed to value our own "God stories" and one another's "God stories".

We don't make time to stop, sit, and listen to another's story, often because we are so wrapped up in our own "story of life." I believe sharing with one another the stories of how God has touched our lives is essential to building up the fellowship of believers. Storytelling is also an important facet of a spiritual friendship. Within a spiritual friendship is a safe place to share these stories, and mutually encourage one another in remembering them. As we share our stories often others can help us see in our stories how God is moving in ways we cannot see for ourselves.

I would stress here that we do need to *mutually* share our stories. If over time only one side continually shares, then the other will become wearied in

listening. I would also caution against always sharing a similar story that you have experienced immediately following someone sharing their story. It may make them feel as if they were not heard. While we are rehearsing in our minds what we will share, indeed, we are not being “good listeners.” The best advice I can give about when to share and when not to share is to “keep in step with the Spirit” and allow Him to nudge you, and be your guide. I feel, like in many things, when there are cautions we just “throw the baby out with the bath water.” Spiritual friends need to be *cautious with yet open to* sharing their stories with one another and others when encouraged to do so by the Spirit.

Next, let us consider how we might encourage one another through prayer. A spiritual friend is one who is willing to pray for us, especially in those times when we ourselves are not able to find words to pray. Sometimes life throws us a curve ball that blind-sides us. Caught unawares, we are too numb and stunned to even utter a prayer. It is in times like these we need a spiritual friend to come along beside us and offer prayers on our behalf. Their prayers remind us of God’s faithfulness, love, and presence even in times when we can not “feel” it for ourselves. Praying over the phone is another way to “be there” for another when we cannot be there “in person”.

Even in “every day time” lifting one another up in prayer can be such an encouragement. Just knowing someone cares enough about you to lift you up in prayer can be an encouragement all by itself. In prayer, we can celebrate one

another's joys, lift up one another's burdens, and seek God's comfort for our sorrows. The Bible tells us we can be assured that where two or three are gathered together in His name, Jesus is in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)

Another way that spiritual friends can be in prayer for one another is to trade "breathe prayers". A breathe prayer is an ancient prayer that originated with the Jesus prayer: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." A breathe prayer is to be short enough to come in and out in one breathe. It has two components. The first component is one's favorite name for God/Jesus/Holy Spirit. The second is our deepest need. Some examples include:

*Lord, lead me in Your paths.*

*Jesus, be my strength and my light.*

*Father, grant me patience.*

*Almighty God, keep me faithful to You.*

*Come Holy Spirit, fill my heart with Your grace.*

Our breathe prayers often change over time, as our needs change. A breathe prayer can be something that is prayed every time you stop at a stop light, the phone rings, a clock chimes, or some other regular event that can be an invitation to pray. When you know your spiritual friend's breathe prayer, you can pray that for them as well as praying for yourself through out the day.

## Chapter 6: To Hold One Another Accountable For Growth

As we journey together as spiritual friends, there will come a time where we both feel comfortable with allowing the other to “hold us accountable” in some area of our spiritual walk. Whether it is increasing in the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), or decreasing a bad habit, developing a new habit, trying a new spiritual discipline, or maintaining on old discipline, there will be opportunities to hold one another accountable in a spiritual friendship. (I highly recommend Adele Calhoun’s “Spiritual Disciplines Handbook” for anyone considering a new spiritual discipline.) I would briefly mention here that a spiritual discipline can be anything that draws us closer to God as we seek to be more like Jesus Christ.

Being accountable to someone else is a great motivation to achieve our goals. Just knowing that I will be asked the next time we meet, “How are you doing with \_\_\_?” motivates and encourages me to do whatever I am going to be asked about. Let me share an example of this.

As I am typing this today, a spiritual friend texted me “Are you writing?” That is what it is to hold another accountable for what God has clearly laid on our hearts to do. I must admit, I have struggled greatly with making time to write this book. That is an understatement. Yet, because I was willing to share with another the very thing I was struggling with, I ended up with someone willing to hold me accountable for my writing. Often times in our spiritual journey, it is not so much that we don’t know what God’s will for us is, but too often, it is that we are disobedient and fail to do that

which the Spirit has laid on our hearts to do. A spiritual friend who will lovingly hold us accountable can make all of the difference.

It is the same for any type of discipline in our life. For me, walking is much easier to do if I am to get together with someone else to walk. If it is just me, I am easily dissuaded from doing it. That is where a spiritual friend can be your encourager and accountability partner in almost any area of your life in which you are struggling. Both (or all) parties need to be honest with their struggles and their progress in a given area. Both (or all) parties need to be committed to doing their best to achieve their goals. I have been in groups where a few were taking the accountability seriously, and the majority either never tried or otherwise failed to use the accountability element as a gift in their growth as a Christian.

## Chapter 7: To Encourage One Another To Pursue God-Sized Dreams

The last purpose of a spiritual friendship that we will consider is that of encouraging one another to dream God-sized dreams. Too often in the spiritual life we settle too soon for far less than what God intends for us to be. We may be saved, but then we simply become “pew sitters” rather than vital vibrant worshippers of the living God. Vital vibrant worshippers are aware of their call to dream God-sized dreams. A spiritual friend can be one to push us in love to become more than we ever dreamed.

Submitting our lives to God’s control can be a scary thing, because you never know where He will lead you. We must remember that anything He calls us to do, He



will equip us to do. We often try to box God in, limiting God's activity in our lives. As I write this, I am hearing God's call to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree at Asbury Theological Seminary. Doubts of my ability, my availability, and our resources financially are clouding my mind. Yet, I know I need to trust and obey, believing that what He has called me to do He will equip me to do.

My undergraduate degree is in mathematics, and I like to think of myself as a very logical, organized, methodical person. You could even say I am proud of these characteristics of my personality. It is just in the last few years that I have begun to see myself as someone who is creative. Actually, the reason I even ever considered writing a book came from a question from "The Creative Call" by Janice Eisheimer. She invited the reader to fill in the blank: "If I could trust in the Lord's provision I would..." and what came out of my pen before I could think about it was "write a book on Spiritual Friends." So here we are. I am learning to listen to "holy nudges" such as these and to obedient to their promptings. When I am, I am nearly always surprised at the joy that comes from being obedient to the call God has placed on our lives.

You may be thinking, "Of course you are called, you are a pastor." The truth is every believer is called and equipped with gifts for ministry. The Spirit gives each one a gift as He sees fit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11) If we are not careful, we are apt to sell ourselves short and allow Satan to talk us out of our creative callings. Whether writing, singing, pottery, dance, photography, or some other art form, these are all creative callings that are often ignored. A spiritual friend can be there to listen to our

dreams and encourage us to be all that God is calling us to be. A spiritual friend can create a “safe space” where we are welcome to be our true selves. (Henry Nouwen-hospitality)

I have been blessed with having dreamt several God-sized dreams in my life. The following is the story of one of those dreams. God placed upon my heart a burden to start a ministry in the form of a coffeehouse in downtown Weston. The vision included free food and live Christian music. It also involved many churches in our community and not just my own. The “problem” was that we needed a place to have it. My husband Jonathan (who is one of my spiritual friends) suggested I go to Second and Center Café and ask Sue Smith (manager) if we could use their restaurant for our “Soul Café”. I heard his suggestion, filed it away, and... did nothing. Then I was reading in “Christ Centered Coaching: 7 Benefits For Ministry Leaders”, the following question left me sitting stunned. The question was “What are you afraid of?” I was stunned because my fears are what made me “do nothing”. I was forced to answer the question in my mind, and it came out that I was afraid she would say “no”. Rejection was my fear, pure and simple. In my conscience, in the stillness of my mind, I felt the Lord saying to me, “What is the worst that can happen if you ask her?” My reply was “She could say ‘no’”. If she says ‘no’ then we have no place to hold Soul Café. The small voice replied “How is that different from your present situation?” God had a point there. “Go” was the next command. So I went, the next day and set up a time to meet with her. When I did meet with Sue, she was not only

willing for us to use the café for “Soul Café” but she was ecstatic about the possibilities. For three years now, twice a month our Lewis County Christian Alliance (Ministerial Association with laity) takes turns hosting “Soul Café” on Friday evenings while the Second and Center Café is closed. Upon occasion, it is a place where strangers hear the Word of God through conversation and song that leads them to a church, and a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is designed to be a warm fellowship of believers with a desire to draw others to Jesus Christ. Our Christian Alliance (at least 7 different Christian denominations) believes that what we share in Jesus Christ is greater than our differences. This mission statement is lived out at Soul Café, among other places. Yet, if Satan had had his way, Soul Café would have never come into being... fear would have kept it from happening. A spiritual friend can be one to guide us to be faithful to the callings that God puts on our lives in both big and small things.

As we look at Bible stories, we find again and again, ordinary people being called to do extraordinary things. A few examples include Abraham, Moses, Mary, Paul to only name a few. As we look at these stories there are similar characteristics - They were originally headed in different directions.

- They felt inadequate for the task.
- They acknowledged God as the Lord of their lives.
- They made a choice to follow.
- Difficulties did not go away as a result of the choice; they may even increase.
- Their results inspire our faith today. (Christ Centered Coaching p.130-133)

When we attempt things we know we can do in our own strength, we get the credit or put another way, we “get the glory”. If we attempt things we know we cannot do in our own strength, and they happen, then God gets the glory, and rightfully so. In my experience,

I am more comfortable with just doing what I know I can do. I know God loves me right where I am. I tend to forget that God also loves me so much He does not want me to stay where I am. He wants me to “grow in the grace & knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18) When we dream God-sized dreams, pursue them in love, wait on God’s perfect timing , and see them happen through God’s power and strength rather than our own, we grow more into the likeness of Jesus and in the process, we, ourselves are forever changed. All the glory goes to God, because it could not have happened apart from His intervention.

### *Conclusion*

*Hopefully, I have encouraged you to consider pursuing finding a spiritual friend. If you are married, ideally your spouse should be one of your spiritual friends. You may want to pursue finding another spiritual friend of the same sex as you. It is simpler and there is less chance of temptations within the relationship if women meet with women, and men with men. Again, let the Holy Spirit be your guide in choosing whom to ask to be a spiritual friend. Often times, spiritual friends just come our way without specific invitation. These are helpful as well. Whether formally or informally, I hope you will pursue some of the ideas in this book together with a friend.*

*My prayer is that this handbook has drawn you closer to God, and wanting to grow more in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. May this be a resource to teach, and guide many in the blessings found in having a spiritual friend. All glory to God! Amen.*

**APPENDIX F**

**SPIRITUAL FRIENDS JOURNAL GUIDE**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Week 1: Sharing Your Faith Journey

Week 2: Developing A Rule of Life

Week 3: Encouraging One Another

Week 4: Serving Others

Week 5: Practicing “The Daily Examen”

Week 6: Living Into God’s Great Possibilities

## **WEEK 1: SHARING OUR FAITH JOURNEY**

**Focus:** Developing Active Listening Skills & Ability to Share Our Story

**First:** Review Covenant made at workshop and confirm next meeting time & place & pray together

### **Second:**

Read Bible Verses and discuss what contribute to learning to be an active listener.

(Altered From “Spiritual Friendships” by Robert W. Kellemen, Ph. D, p. 134)

L: Loving Motivation (Romans 13:8-10)

I: Intimate Concern (Colossians 4:6, James 3:17-18)

S: Slow to Speak (James 1:19)

T: Timing (Proverbs 15:23)

E: Encouraging (Hebrews 10:24-25)

N: Need-Focused Hearing (Ephesians 4:29)

**Third:** Practice Active Listening

Without interrupting the other, listen to each other's spiritual journeys.

When the person is finished, ask reflective, clarifying, or other questions.

Record here what it was like to be actively listened to and attach a copy of your spiritual journey.

Pray: Pray for one another to grow in ability to be present to one another and to actively listen to others.



**WEEK 2: DEVELOPING A RULE OF LIFE**

**Focus:** Creating a Rule of Life that will help you to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

**First:** Lectio Divina on 2 Peter 3:18 & Discuss.

**Second:** Share with one another the things you already do that feed your soul and create growth in you.

List some of them here.

**Third:** Consider sheet of Spiritual Disciplines. List any here that sound like you may want to try.

**Fourth:** *Create A Rule of Life*

A Rule of Life is a set of guiding principles for making choices and setting priorities in life; also, a plan for growing in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

(2 Peter 3:18) (At least 3 and no more than 7)

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

Example of a Rule of Life:

- 1) Be Christ to or receive Christ from all I meet (hospitality)
- 2) To speak words of life, peace, and grace
- 3) To spend time daily in the Word
- 4) To grow in creative spirituality and teach others
- 5) To improve self-care (eat/sleep/exercise)
- 6) To be a channel through whom the Spirit can flow
- 7) To daily adore and worship God & bring Him glory Carolyn Nettles

**Fifth:** Accountability

Write down the other's Rule of Life. Next week ask each other about how they did on each point individually. Come with specific examples in mind on each point, whether positive or negative.

Where did you succeed or fail or grow closer to God?

Friend's Rule of Life:

**Sixth:** Pray for one another to follow their Rule faithfully; to the best of their ability.

HW: Bring to meeting at least 5 encouraging Scripture verses to share with Spiritual Friend. List the chosen verses from your Bible here:

### **WEEK 3: ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER**

**Focus:** Engaging Scripture as a tool of encouragement for one another and sharing stories of encouragement.

**First:** Pray & Visio Divina (Purple Cloud) & share

**Second:** Read Bible verses of encouragement for one another.

(Record favorites here.)

**Third:** Share stories of who has been an encourager in your spiritual journey.

**Fourth:** Accountability Questions-take turns asking each other.

How is it with your soul? How did you do with your Rule of Life?

Was it freeing or strangling and why?

Should you make adjustments so it sets you free but gives focus and boundaries?

Record Your Revised Rule of Life Here: (if needed)

**Fifth:** Plans to Serve Together in the Next Week

Decide when, where, and how are going to serve together. (Food pantry, Soup kitchen, Clothing Closet, etc.) Ask your pastor if you are not sure where to go. After you serve, complete the Service Reflection Worksheet separately and bring to next meeting.

Write your plan details here:

**Sixth:** Pray for each other.

## **WEEK 4: SERVING OTHERS**

**Focus:** Learning about ourselves, the nature of God, and each other as we serve those in need together.

**First:** Pray & Visio Divina (Older & younger woman) & Share.

**Second:** Discuss Service Reflection Worksheet

**Third:** Accountability Questions: Take turns asking each other.

How is it with your soul?

What fed your soul this past week?

What starved your soul?

Who do you need to forgive (if anyone)?

**Fourth:** Further reflections on Serving

Discuss: Did serving make a space for a holy nudge to continue to serve?

If so in what way?

If not do you sense a nudge now?

**Fifth:** Pray for each other.

HW: Do FIVE days of Daily Examen before next meeting.

**WEEK 5: DAILY EXAMEN**

**Focus:** Sharing life and its gifts and struggles by being transparent with God and our spiritual friend.

**First:** Prayer and Lectio Divina Psalm 51:19-21 & share

**Second:** Share 5 Daily Examens

What did you learn about yourself?

What did you learn about your friend?

**Third:** Discuss your prayer life: Ask each other:

How do you best hear from God (music, nature, others, Bible, still small voice..)?

When do you pray?



What attitudes in you increase the fruitfulness of your prayers?

Do you have a particular place set aside at home that is your “prayer chair?”

**Fourth:** Share a story in your life where God answered your prayer in a visible way. Take turns listening.

**Fifth:** Close by anointing one another with oil in sign of a cross and pray for one another.

**HW:** Spiritual Gift sheets-on one of the sheets circle the Spiritual Gifts you see in yourself. On the other sheet circle the Spiritual Gifts that you see in your friend. Bring both next week.

## **WEEK 6: LIVING INTO GOD'S GREAT POSSIBILITIES**

**Focus:** As we grow in our walk with God, we discover He is calling us to do larger things than we can accomplish in our own strength and will. This serves to grow us in dependence upon God and allows His glory to be seen through us, because we could not have done it alone.

**First:** Visio Divina: Farmer Planting Seeds & Share

**Second:** What seeds are God trying to plant in your heart?

What are the obstacles that keep you from following where God is leading you?

**Third:** Discuss Spiritual Gift Sheets. Compare what your friend marked for you and what you marked.

Where do the two overlap? These are probably your spiritual gifts.

**Fourth:** Find Your God-given Passion – Complete Worksheet and then discuss.

**Fifth:** Accountability

How are you doing with your Rule of Life?

How is it with your soul?

With God anything is possible. Do you believe this? Do you live like you believe this?

(Difference between the two questions?)

**Sixth:** Pray for one another to hear and answer God's call on your life.

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