

ABSTRACT

**CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND MEDITATION AND THEIR ROLE IN
SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

by

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This dissertation covers the role of contemplative prayer and meditation and the role they may play in spiritual growth. This project included a model for teaching various contemplative practices. The means of teaching these practices included lecture, small group experiential opportunities, and individual practices.

The participants for this research were primarily, white, middle-class members of the United Methodist Church. Many, but not all of the participants had previous experience with contemplative prayer and meditation.

The project was founded upon theological and historical Christian foundations of meeting God in moments of stillness and contemplation. Each weekly session focused on a contemplative practice, its historical and theological background and experiencing the practice as a small group. The participants were given the opportunity to experience the practice during the following week and to journal about their experience.

Evaluation of the project was based on pre- and post-tests, journal entries and short answer questionnaires. The research revealed that participants felt a closer relationship with God after practicing contemplative prayer and meditation. They also came to understand that contemplative prayer was accessible to all Christians.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND MEDITATION:
THEIR ROLE IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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by

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To God be all Glory.

CHAPTER 1

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter discusses the researcher's interest in the process of spiritual growth and formation as it relates to growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It briefly outlines the scriptural foundations of discipleship related to being in an intimate relationship with Christ. Chapter One also addresses the lack of understanding of spiritual growth and discipleship among people who name themselves as Christians in the twenty-first-century church. This first chapter also includes the rationale for the project and an overview of its research methodology.

Personal Introduction

My passion for ministry has always been the spiritual formation of Christ-followers. When I first began to discern my own call to ministry, I was unsure whether I was being called to serve in the local Church or another form of ministry. There was a period during which I thought I was being called to become a pastoral counselor and thought I would serve as a licensed therapist on a church staff or in a private clinic. Eventually, I knew that my primary concern was that God's people would discover the joy and fulfillment that comes with a vital, dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ. My God-given desire was to see people experience spiritual transformation that leads to becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ. My passion is spiritual transformation.

As I prayed about it, I came to understand how few people in the Church comprehend what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Perhaps they equated becoming a Christian with discipleship but had gone no further in growing in their faith nor in their relationship with God. I knew then that I wanted to serve in the Church as a pastor to empower and equip God's

people to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. I saw too many people in the pews who were not experiencing the fullness of joy, peace, and purpose that being a Christ-follower can bring.

As a youth in the Church, I observed several adult members who seemed genuinely connected to God. Not only did they express a broad understanding of God's Word, but they also displayed wisdom, integrity, and a sense of living in God's presence. They were role models of the type of Christian I wanted to be as an adult.

However, as I grew into adulthood, I battled a great deal of anxiety and depression. I was not successful in being a Christian who experienced the transformative power of God. I attempted to deal with my mental health by berating myself or denying that there was any problem. I felt responsible for not having a deep enough faith to overcome my problems and feel a deeper connection to God.

During that period of my life, I had not yet heard of Contemplative Prayer or Christian meditation in any formal sense. But I did know Psalm 1:1, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the company of mockers. But whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night" (*Holy Bible: New International Version*). I also knew Proverbs 23:7, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (*New King James Version*). Thus, I began to immerse myself in scriptures that referred to joy, peace, encouragement, and comfort. I began to contemplate God's deep love for me. I experienced a great deal of deliverance from meditating on God's Word and character. I began to experience a deep sense of God's presence and grace at work in my life. I was able to love and accept myself, just as I was, and was also able to seek medical help for my mental health.

As I have continued in my own spiritual journey, I have experienced continued spiritual growth through the practice of spiritual disciplines. One of the most significant of these has been

prayer, specifically contemplative prayer and meditation on the scriptures. I have found that by meditating on the scriptures and offering this up in prayer to God has allowed the words of the Bible to become living and active in my life (Hebrews 4:12). Thus, through study and prayer, the Word of God has become a divine scalpel enabling me to more clearly see myself in the mirror of God's Word and growth in my own discipleship. I have experienced so much joy in God's work in my life and in my obedience to God that I long for others to experience this as well.

As a pastor, I have been concerned with a lack of spiritual growth in God's people. I see a connection between practicing spiritual disciplines and the desire to serve God by serving others. I have observed that as people become more grounded in their relationship with God through prayer and meditation, there is a transformation that takes place. The inward transformation that takes place inspires people to serve God in more outward ways and communicate that transformation to others. These connections between prayer, meditation, transformation, and service caused me to consider what may be the effect if a congregation focused intentionally on spiritual transformation through contemplative prayer and meditation.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of Christians today who have little to no understanding of what it means to grow spiritually nor how this relates to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church even states that the denomination's mission is: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" (*What We Believe*). Meanwhile, most people sitting in the pews of United Methodist Churches have no idea how to live out this mission.

A 2019 study by the Barna Group indicates that the percentage of those self-identifying as Christian decreases by generation. However, there is a significant decrease in the percentage of those who self-identify as "Practicing Christian" across all generations. In the Barna study, sixty-

four percent of millennials self-identified as Christian, while only twenty-two percent identified themselves as practicing Christian. The results are similar with Gen X, seventy-three percent calling themselves Christian. Meanwhile, only twenty-six percent report that they are practicing Christians. The trend continues with Boomers. While eighty percent identify themselves as Christian, only thirty percent would say that they are practicing Christians. For this study, "practicing Christian" was defined as people who would say that their faith was important to them and that they had attended at least one worship service once in the past month ("A Snapshot of Faith Practice Across Age Groups").

Those who identify as Christian or as practicing Christians may or may not have had an initial conversion experience. Some people attend Church because that is how they were raised, others because they share their local Church's values, and still others value church attendance as their social connection. Some of these people may have had a salvific experience with Christ but have gone no further with their faith. Many have not experienced spiritual growth nor understand the meaning of spiritual growth. Many churchgoers do not understand what it means to be a disciple-making disciple of Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church, and indeed the Church of Jesus Christ, cannot be successful in continuing the mandate of the Great Commission of Matthew 28: 19 – 20 if Christians do not know what it means to grow spiritually and in their discipleship.

Central to maturing as a disciple of Jesus Christ is growing spiritually and in relationship with God. One of the primary means of deepening this relationship is through prayer. Communication is vital in every relationship, even the relationship with God. Unfortunately, in prayer, the communication tends to be one-way. People tend to talk *at* God without taking the

time to allow God to communicate back. If people do not listen to what God wants to speak into their lives, they cannot grow in relationship with God.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of a contemplative prayer and meditation program to effect spiritual growth among a self-selected group of members of College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana.

Research Questions

This study utilizes three research questions to evaluate the effectiveness of the practice of Contemplative Prayer to achieve spiritual growth and a better understanding of discipleship.

Research Question #1

How would participants assess their prayer life and spiritual growth prior to participating in the program?

Research Question #2

How would the participants describe the change in their prayer life and spiritual growth after participating in the program?

Research Question #3

What were the least helpful and most helpful aspects of the program?

Rationale for the Project

The final words recorded between Jesus and his disciples are recorded in Matthew 28:19 – 20. Jesus told his followers, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age" (*Holy Bible: New International Version*). This passage is commonly referred to as the great

commission. Jesus commissioned his followers, his disciples, to go forth and make more disciples, of all nations and all people. This command was not just for the twelve men of Jesus' inner circle or the first-century believers in Jesus as the Christ. If disciples are to be made of all nations and people, then this commission has been passed down through the centuries to today. One of the key issues facing the twenty-first-century church is that many Christians do not understand the meaning of discipleship. To understand what it means to be a disciple, one must grow in an understanding of God's will in one's life by studying the scriptures and by studying and practicing prayer.

Hebrews 4:12 states, "God's word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions." Intentional study of the scriptures helps people understand God better, understand themselves better, and grow and mature in their faith. When reading the Bible is coupled with contemplative prayer, the scripture's words become engraved upon the heart. Psalm 1:1-3 states, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do, they prosper" (*New Revised Standard Version*).

By integrating the scriptures' words with solitude, silence, introspection, and meditation, contemplative prayer takes the words from the page and inscribes them on the praying one's heart. The word of God becomes the scalpel of the Loving One who longs to draw people close and transform them in the image of his Son. The words of scripture, particularly the Psalms, highlight the benefits of meditating on and delighting in the words of God contained therein.

This project developed an adaptable program that enables pastors and teachers to lead congregations toward a better understanding of discipleship by experiencing spiritual growth through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Individual participants could experience a deepened relationship with God, a better understanding of discipleship, and spiritual growth through the practice of contemplative prayer.

Definition of Key Terms

Spiritual Growth - Dr. Robert Mulholland Jr. in his book "Invitation to a Journey" defines spiritual growth this way:

Spiritual growth is, in large measure, patterned on the nature of physical growth.

We do not expect to put an infant into its crib at night and in the morning find a child, an adolescent, or yet an adult. We expect that infant to grow into maturity according to the processes that God has ordained for physical growth to wholeness. The same thing is true of our spiritual life (Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* 21).

Therefore, in this work, "spiritual growth" will indicate the process by which people progress in their journey toward spiritual maturity.

Contemplative Prayer - Jan Johnson speaks of Contemplative Prayer as "one of the practices that give God time and access to work in our inner person, changing the attitudes of the heart that ultimately drive us" (Johnson 3). Thus, this study defines contemplative prayer as Thomas Merton did in writing *Contemplative Prayer*, "we are going to concern ourselves with personal prayer, especially in its meditative and contemplative aspects. It is understood that the personal prayer of the monk is embedded in a life of psalmody, liturgical celebration, and the meditative reading of Scripture" (*Lectio Divina*) (Merton 2).

Discipleship – Narrowly, discipleship is the ongoing life of a disciple. In today's common vernacular, an adherent or a follower is a disciple. In Jesus' day, a disciple would sit at the feet of a rabbi as a learner. Michael J. Wilkins, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, has written, “Since disciple is a common referent for Christian, discipleship and discipling imply the process of becoming like Jesus Christ. Discipleship and discipling mean living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image” (Wilkins 45).

Delimitations

This study took place at College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. Both the congregation and the surrounding neighborhood population include a diversity of generations, economic levels, and education levels. The project participants were a self-selected group of adults over the age of 18, representing various age groups and economic and educational statuses.

Review of Relevant Literature

The review that follows examines literature relevant to two areas: contemplative prayer and spiritual growth. Contemplative prayer traces its roots to the early Church. Therefore, this work examines literature such as the fourth-century work, *The Soliloquies of Augustine*. The 1912 English translation bears the subtitle "A Manual of Contemplative Prayer" (Augustine and Augustine 1). The term *contemplative prayer* encompasses several inward disciplines. These include centering prayer, mindfulness, meditation, and *Lectio Divina*. Richard J. Foster examines these disciplines in his work *Celebration of Discipline*.

In Dal Santos and Neil's work *A Companion to St. Gregory the Great*, Barbara Muller states that St. Gregory and his contemporaries practiced reflective meditation on scripture through

Lectio Divina (85). While contemplative prayer is an ancient practice and the literature reviewed will trace its roots to Augustine, St. Gregory, Julian of Norwich, and others, contemporary authors and contemplative prayer teachers and practitioners are also considered. These authors include Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, Jan Johnson.

Spiritual growth, sometimes referred to as spiritual formation, has enjoyed a resurgence in interest since the late twentieth century. Just as with contemplative practices, this interest may be newfound but not original to contemporary Christian thought. St. Gregory the Great taught that continued spiritual growth was necessary for those who would lead the Church. He emphasized that the purpose of spiritual growth was to serve others (Dal Santo and Neil 215). Richard J. Foster's work, *The Celebration of Discipline*, is subtitled "The Path to Spiritual Growth." Thus, even the title of Foster's work links the practice of various forms of prayer to spiritual growth.

M. Robert Mulholland Jr. produced two volumes on the process of spiritual formation and growth and the resulting inner transformation in *Invitation to a Journey* and *The Deeper Journey*. In the former volume, he discusses the definition of spiritual formation and its relationship with spiritual disciplines. Spiritual growth or formation is often referred to as a pilgrimage or journey. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the father of Ignatian Spirituality, provided a framework or path for pilgrims on the journey. Margaret Silf, in her book *Inner Compass*, leads readers through Ignatius' eleven landmarks on the path: 1) Discovering who you are, 2) Directing myself toward God, 3) Noticing God's action in my life, 4) Responding to the movements of my heart, 5) Discovering the nature of my deepest desire, 6) Seeking God's will, 7) Becoming free of all that distracts me from my deepest desire, 8) Making choices in line with my truest self, 9) Connecting my lived experience with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, 10) Responding to God's love for me, 11) Finding God in all things (Silf 15).

As a Wesleyan Christian, contemplative prayer and spiritual growth will also be viewed through John Wesley's lens and the influences in his life. Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* aided Wesley as he formed his spiritual practices. John Wesley believed that inner disciplines such as prayer were a means of receiving God's grace into Christians' lives. These means of grace enable them to grow in faith. Thus, contemplative prayer and spiritual growth will also be studied from a Wesleyan point of view as a means of receiving and growing in grace.

Research Methodology

This project used mixed-method research to study the perceived impact the practice of contemplative prayer had on the spiritual life of study participants. Spiritual growth and formation is mostly a subjective area of study. Therefore, this project utilized surveys, questionnaires, and participants' journals to evaluate the participants' self-assessment of their spiritual lives and maturity pre- and post-participation in the Contemplative Prayer and Meditation project.

The questionnaires and interview responses were studied to determine whether the participants had experienced any perceptible change in their spiritual understanding or experience. Naturally, every person is unique and experiences Christ and spiritual transformation in different ways. However, using qualitative research methods, each participant was able to describe their distinct experience and describe whatever growth they perceived in their own life after the project versus before their participation.

Type of Research

This project was an intervention study. A contemplative prayer initiative was developed in order to create a program that could be implemented in the local Church to facilitate spiritual growth in its members. The research was based on qualitative research methods. The study focused on how participants rate their level of spiritual transformation, growth, and understanding

of discipleship before participating in the program. The research tools used in this study were Likert-scale statements, open-ended questionnaires, and participant journals.

Participants

The study focused on a group of self-selected and invited members of College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. All Church members were invited to participate in a program focusing on spiritual growth through contemplative prayer and meditation. Participants ranged from mature Christians, those younger in the faith, and others in between. Later other individuals who had expressed interest in contemplative prayer but had not responded to the open invitation were also invited to participate. This invitation was intended to ensure a mix of ages and contemplative prayer experience.

Instrumentation

The instruments used to collect data were pre-tests, post-tests and participant journals. While the primary method of instrumentation was qualitative, the Likert scale was also used to collect data to measure the level of increase spiritual awareness and depth experienced by the participants in the program. One of the pre- and post-tests used was The Spiritual Well-Being Scale which was designed by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Craig W. Ellison.

Data Collection

According to Tim Sensing, "Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience" (Sensing 57). As spiritual formation through contemplative prayer and meditation is an experiential process, qualitative research is the ideal method for collecting data for this project. The primary data source was open-ended questionnaires administered pre-and post-participation in the contemplative prayer and meditation

program. These questionnaires were supplemented with semi-structured interviews and participant journals.

The collection of the data took place over two months. Participants in the contemplative prayer workshops completed a pre-test that included both Likert-scale and open-ended elements before the program's commencement. These questions ask the members participating in the project to evaluate their depth of Christian experience, transformation, and spiritual growth by answering open-ended questions. These questions allowed the participants to reflect upon their experience and respond accordingly. At the end of the program, participants filled out a similar questionnaire. This information was coupled with the results as measured by the Likert scale portion of the questionnaire.

Finally, participant journals were used as a basis for the program participant to record their own experiences and perceived progress. Paula Meth used a similar method in her work with women in South Africa. She writes, "Solicited diaries then are written with the full knowledge that the writing process is for external consumption. This practice differs from private diaries that may have been written for private purposes, raising ethical questions about researchers making use of such resources" (196). The purpose of the solicited diary, according to Meth, is to reflect what the researcher is studying. Therefore, it must be understood that there is a degree of subjectivity due to the researcher's relationship with the researched one.

Reflexivity recognizes how one's own viewpoints and perspective may affect the research process (Sensing 43). In using these research methods, it was imperative to understand that the researcher is also a research tool in the process. Therefore, it was necessary in the performance of this study for the researcher to be self-aware and cognizant of her own interpretations and emotions.

Data Analysis

Tim Sensing writes, "Qualitative analysis requires some creativity, for the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories, to examine the data in a holistic fashion, to find a way to communicate the data to others (194). The questionnaires and the participants' journals were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns. As themes and patterns emerged, they were labeled and coded to create a systemic method for interpreting the data collected.

Generalizability

The research for this project was done with a relatively small number of participants in a specific locale and context. The results are thus delimited to those who participated in the program. However, the self-identified cross-section of participants of varied ages, genders, and perceived spiritual maturity does suggest some generalizability may exist for others who may participate in the contemplative prayer and meditation for spiritual growth program. The utilization of a primarily qualitative research approach through pre-and post-program questionnaires, which included open-ended questions and the Likert scale, added internal validity to the findings

Project Overview

Chapter 2 examines the Biblical, historical, and theological basis for the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation as a spiritual discipline that enhances spiritual growth. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the design of the study. Chapter 4 shares the results and findings from the ministry intervention. Chapter 5 presents a summary and conclusions of this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents a review of the literature relevant to the study of contemplative prayer and meditation as a spiritual discipline that facilitates spiritual growth. The research for this section was categorized into four sections. First, since the relationship between human beings and their God is the foundation of spiritual life and growth, the chapter explores the understanding of the relationship of the human/divine relationship as informed by Biblical theology. The second section provides the scriptural basis for contemplative prayer and meditation. The third section provides historical evidence of the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation throughout Church history to the present. The final section examines concerns and controversies around the practice of Christian contemplative prayer and meditation.

Biblical Foundations

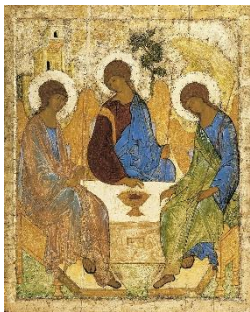
The primary source of understanding contemplative prayer and meditation comes from the Biblical narrative. The following section includes an examination of the scriptures related to deepening one's relationship with the Creator via the use of prayer practices that include contemplation and meditation.

The Intent of the Divine to be in Relationship with Humanity

Old Testament. God created man and woman for relationship. Humanity was created not only for fellowship with one another but also with the Creator God. Human beings are unique from the rest of creation in that they are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). Theologian Karl Barth believed that the creation of human beings in the image of God gave evidence of God's intent to enter into a unique relationship. Thus, humans are able to be in

relationship with, converse with, and enter into covenants with their Creator (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 177).

The use of the personal pronouns in Genesis 1: 26, "Let us make humans in *our* image..." has been the object of much interpretation. The pronouns could be an address to heavenly beings, to elements of the earth, or as a plural of majesty. However, several scholars interpret the use of the plural pronouns in this passage as referring to God, the Holy Trinity (Hasel 62–63). Andrei Rublev's classic icon of the Holy Trinity portrays the Triune God living in communion with one another (Figure 1). The creation of humanity in the image of God supposes an invitation to join the Triune God in this life in community. Genesis 3:8 speaks of God walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening, looking for Adam and Eve.



(Figure 2.1)

The Trinity. 15th century, tempera on wood. 142 x 114 cm. painter Andrei Rublev. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Russia), inv. no. 12924

Even though the humans that God created violated his will, God continued to provide ways in which they could remain in fellowship with their Creator.

In Genesis Chapter 3, God provides animal skins to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness after their sin of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When all of humanity, save Noah and his family, lived in depravity, God provided the means to remain in fellowship with humanity. God, through the family of Noah, saves the human race by means of an ark, thus establishing a covenant with Noah (Genesis 6:9–18).

Likewise, God pursues a relationship with Abram and makes a covenant with him that extends to yet unseen future generations (Genesis 15). God continues to initiate a relationship with each of the Old Testament patriarchs. God appears to Isaac in Genesis 26, promising to bless

Isaac and his ancestors in accordance with God's covenant with his father, Abraham. Again, God appears to Jacob, saying;

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. (Genesis 26:13–14)

Through Jacob, God creates a holy nation set apart to be in a unique relationship with the Creator God. An angelic being descends to earth in human form to engage with Jacob in Genesis 32. This being and Jacob wrestles all night. There are many interpretations concerning this being's identity, including an angel, demon, and Canaanite Numen. However, several theologians, including scholar Walter Brueggeman, believe the being to be YHWH (Brueggemann 409). Tenaciously Jacob refuses to let the being go until Jacob receives a blessing. Jacob is told, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28). Jacob later names the place Peniel (face of God) because he believed he had seen God face-to-face. Brueggeman concludes that in the giving of the blessing, there is a sharing of God's power with Israel (Brueggemann 412).

In the book of Exodus, God comes to the rescue of the nation of Israel when they become enslaved in Egypt through Moses. Coming to Moses from the midst of the burning bush, God tells him, "I have observed the misery of *my* [emphasis added] people who are in Egypt" (Exodus 2:7). God once again affirms God's desire to be in relationship with humans. The Exodus narrative is a discourse on God setting apart a people for a unique relationship and purpose (Exodus 6:7–8). J. Sidlow Baxter writes that Exodus is "a marvel of *condescension* – as seen in the Tabernacle, by

means of which the infinite, holy God abode, in a special way, among His redeemed people" (Baxter 80–81).

In the Exodus account, God's people set out on a journey to freedom from slavery. However, as Baxter refers to, God also condescends to live among humans uniquely, as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. Within the walls of the tabernacle, God's presence dwelt and was accessible by God's chosen servant Moses. God did not send Israel out into the dangers of the desert alone but with the assurance of God's own presence. The fire by day and the cloud by night was the sign to them that Yahweh was living among human beings in God's chosen nation, Israel (Carretto xx). As Israel wandered in the wilderness, Moses experienced a unique relationship with God within the tent of meeting. Exodus records, "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11).

After Moses's death, God passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua, saying, "As I was with Moses, so shall I be with you" (Joshua 1:5). Joshua leads God's people into the Promised Land to fulfill the covenant God made with Abraham years before. A.W. Tozer wrote that the truth Joshua had to learn was that of God as the Great Antecedent. God was, is, and always will be. This fact does not diminish as the mantle is passed from one leader to another (16). Throughout the Pentateuch, God demonstrates that he is setting apart a people unto himself, "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Leviticus 20:26). The Biblical account clearly shows that God intended to have a relationship with this people that was unique among the nations. Gordon J. Wenham writes, "First and foremost, the OT covenants were arrangements of divine grace. God called Abraham. He brought Israel out of Egypt. He chose David. In every case, God took the initiative in saving his

people and created a relationship of fellowship between himself and them" (*The Book of Leviticus* 60)

The calling of Samuel as a child serving in the temple is another example of the Divine initiating a unique relationship with a human being. 1 Samuel Chapter 3 records how God spoke to Samuel in the quiet of the night, giving him a message to relay to the priest Eli. Chapter 3 of 1 Samuel continues to record how God continued to be with Samuel as he grew, and that God continued to speak into Samuel's life (1 Samuel 3:19–21). God's on-going presence and communication with Samuel exhibits that God was the initiator of a relationship intended for the good of all Israel (Arnold 118). Samuel, as a Judge over the nation of Israel, was sent by God to anoint David as a youth to be the next King of Israel (1 Samuel 16). In this passage, not only is God's intimate communication with Samuel evident, but it also marks the beginning of the narrative of God's relationship with David.

New Testament. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus indicates that God desires to be in relationship with human beings. John 3:16, perhaps the most well-known verse in all of scripture, tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The next verse goes on to say, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). God's love had previously been demonstrated to the people of Israel. It has been primarily the people of Israel that have enjoyed a covenant relationship with YHWH. Now, the scope of God's love and opportunity for relationship has been extended to the entire world. Anyone who responds to the invitation in faith is eligible to receive God's love and acceptance (Köstenberger 515).

In Luke 15, Jesus relates the "lost" parables to his disciples. The parables include stories of a shepherd with one lost sheep out of a hundred, a woman with a lost coin, and the lost son or the prodigal. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find the one lost sheep, rejoicing when the sheep is found. The woman with the lost coin searches through her entire house, sweeping, looking for the one small coin. When the coin is found, she calls her neighbors to celebrate with her. The final parable of lost things is that of the prodigal or wasteful son. The son, having taken his inheritance, wastes it on extravagant living and is finally left destitute. The father of the prodigal watches and waits for his son to return. When he does, the father runs to the son and embraces him, holding him to his heart. Craig Blomberg writes, "no older, self-respecting Middle Eastern male head of an estate would have disgraced himself by the undignified action of running to greet his son" (Blomberg 242). Thus, this paints a beautiful picture of an extravagant God that pursues a reconciled relationship with all of God's children.

John's epistles are full of statements of God's love for humanity. He writes, "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love is revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:7–9). John's statement, "God is love," is the most succinct expression of the nature of God in all of the Biblical narrative. Dr. David Benner writes, "The deepest need for all human beings is to surrender to Perfect Love (Benner, *Surrender to Love* 32).

The Apostle Paul also is explicit in describing God's desire for relationship with humanity. In his letter to the Church at Galatia, Paul speaks of the sacrificial love of Christ that now inspires him to sacrifice his life on behalf of Christ (Galatians 2:19–20). The context of these verses

addresses the relationship between God and humans that is transformative. It moves followers of Jesus from slavery to sin to redemption and reconciliation through divine love (De Villiers 3.1).

Prayer and Meditation

Old Testament. In the most simplistic of terms, prayer is communication with God. Perhaps one of the earliest prayers recorded in the Old Testament is Abraham's petition to God to spare the city of Sodom from destruction. Abraham pleads with God to spare the city on behalf of the ten righteous people, Abraham's nephew Lot and his family, that dwell within the city. God hears Abraham's petition and postpones Sodom's judgment (Genesis 18:22–33). The Patriarch Jacob prays in Genesis 32 as he prepares to meet with his estranged brother Esau. Jacob pleads with God to save him from his brother's wrath.

As mentioned earlier, God initiated a relationship with Moses that continued throughout Moses' life. A significant part of Moses' relationship with God was the communication through prayer between God and Moses. Moses would meet with God in the tent of meeting to converse with God, commune with God, and receive guidance in guiding God's people to the Promised Land. Moses' entire life was characterized by on-going communication with God.

The book of Joshua contains the first account of the use of the word, הָאָזְנוּ frequently translated "meditate" (Strong loc. 1897). In Joshua Chapter 1 Verse 8, "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall *meditate* on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful" [emphasis added]. God, in communication with Joshua, indicates that the focus of meditation (pondering, musing) is God's Laws as given to the nation of Israel. Through Joshua, the people of Israel were commanded to keep God's Law on their lips and in their minds.

The Psalms are replete with references to prayer and meditation. Meditation appears in the opening verses of Psalm 1, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; ² but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they *meditate* day and night" [emphasis added]. Again, the word here for "meditate" is הִשְׁתַּדְּד – to ponder, mull over, mutter. The focus of meditation, here and in the verses that follow, is upon God and God's Word. Psalm 63: 6, "when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; Psalm 143: 5 I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands." Psalm 119, the longest Psalm at 176 verses, reflects the psalmist's love for the scriptures and his joy at meditating upon them. In verse 27, he writes, Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works". In verse 48, "I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes." In verse 99, "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation." These passages demonstrate that from Biblical times until now, *meditatio Scripturario*, is central to Christian prayer and contemplation (Foster, *Prayer* 146).

Many of the Psalms are in and of themselves prayers. The Psalms serve as both prayer book and hymnal for the Church (Foster, *Prayer* 110). Psalm 3 is the first Psalm that is clearly a prayer. It is attributed to David when fleeing from his son Absalom, "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me...Stand up Lord! Save, me my God!" (verses 1, 7). In Psalm 4, the Psalmist cries out for God to answer his prayer. Every human emotion is expressed in the prayers contained in the Psalms: Thankfulness (16, 23, 25, 67, 92); Sorrow (31, 38, 42, 55); Anger (10, 58, 64, 129), Hope (25, 39, 40, 71) and many more. A study of the Psalms shows that prayer includes communication with God that encompasses the scope of human emotion. The prayers of the Psalms express the breadth and depth of the human/divine relationship. N.T.

Wright proposes that the praying and the singing of the Psalms can be transformative, enabling people to see themselves and the world from God's perspective (Wright 6).

New Testament. Jesus is the most significant example of prayer in the gospel. The scriptures demonstrate Jesus' "rhythms of prayer" where he would remove himself from the demands of ministry to spend time in solitude in the Father's presence (Holm McHenry 22). In Matthew Chapter 14:13, Jesus withdraws from the crowds for a time of solitude when he hears of the beheading of John the Baptist. Mark Chapter One records a demanding day in Jesus' ministry. Jesus had spent the day in the synagogue. Afterward, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law of fever. Later that evening, Jesus healed the sick and the demon possessed. Jesus rose early the next morning and went to a solitary place to be alone in prayer (Mark 1:35). The gospel of Luke also records Jesus spending time in prayer in solitude (Luke 9:18). New Testament Scholar Craig A. Evans notes that there is a pattern of Jesus praying in solitude just prior to significant events in his ministry (Evans, sec.22). In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded to have taken refuge alone on a mountain after the feeding of the five thousand. Amid the demands of ministry, Jesus, in his humanity, gave priority to spending time in solitude in God's presence.

Jesus' session of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane shows his reliance upon God in his time of distress. Jesus knew that he needed the Father's strength in order to be watchful and empowered to endure what was before him (Holm McHenry 42). Jesus cried out in earnest that he might be spared this cup of suffering; nevertheless, he was fully committed to his Father's will (Matthew 26:36–46).

Jesus devoted a significant amount of his teaching to the importance of prayer. In Matthew Chapter 6, Jesus teaches his disciples not to be showy in their prayers, to go to a place of solitude, and to pray to their Father in heaven. The passage in Matthew 6:5-15 is also the first record of the

prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray using the example now called the Lord's Prayer (also recorded in Luke 11). This prayer's elements include prayer for God's will to be done, God's provision, God's forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation. Willimon et al. explain, "In praying the Lord's Prayer, we have been commandeered by God, sanctified, set apart, ordained, made holy. We are commissioned to live our lives in such a way as to make visible to all the world that the holy God reigns, that God has a rightful claim to all of his creation, that God has newly won territory is us" (Willimon et al. 44).

In John's gospel, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray by example. In John, Jesus prays for those whom God has placed into his care during his earthly ministry: his disciples. He prays for their unity, strength in persecution, and continuance in truth and that their love would manifest. According to Edwin Walhout, to live out God's purposes with such unity embodies the image of God (Walhout 268).

The Acts of the Apostles and the epistles give evidence that Jesus' disciples learned well the importance of prayer. All through the book, significant spiritual events and prayer are interconnected (Bock loc. 9621). The book of Acts opens by giving an account of how the disciples gathered and were united in prayer in the upper room as they waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:13–14). The new believers prayed as they celebrated Peter and John's release from prison (Acts 4:23–30). Peter, while spending time alone in prayer, receives the vision that sent him to Cornelius' home, thus beginning the ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9–48).

In his epistles, Paul consistently speaks of his prayers on behalf of the Church. Paul's epistles contain eight times the amount of prayers than the epistles written by others, thus demonstrating Paul's reliance on prayer (Pink 12). In Romans Chapter One, he begins by telling the Church at Rome that he "continually" mentions them to God in his prayers and gives thanks

for their faithfulness (verses 8–10). In his first letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul opens in a similar manner. In this letter, he gives thanks to God for the grace that has been given to them (verse 5). One of Paul's most renowned prayers comes from the first chapter of Ephesians. Paul prays, that God would give them wisdom and revelation that makes God known to them. He prays that they would receive the hope of God's call upon them, the wealth of God's inheritance, the understanding of God's greatness, and the power of God at work in them (verses 15–23).

Paul's intercessory prayers provides insight into the pastoral side of his apostolic ministry and into the life of the early Church (Wiles 1). For the Church at Philippi, Paul prays that their love would become rich in knowledge and insight and that they would be filled with the righteousness of Christ (1:9–11). It is also in the book of Philippians that Paul writes of what the focus of the disciples' meditation and contemplation should be: that which is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise (4:8–9). In the first letter to the Church at Thessalonica, Paul writes to pray continually (5:17). The passage in Philippians 4:8–9 helps illumine an understanding of this command to continually pray as one focuses on those good, true, holy, and pure things. In the second letter to the Church at Thessalonica, Paul confesses that he prays "constantly" for the Church that God will continue to make them worthy of their calling. As the Apostle Paul instructs young Timothy in his ministry, he instructs that prayer be made for all people, including authorities, so that Christians may live in peace (2:1–3).

Spiritual Growth

Old Testament. As stated above, spiritual growth, for the purpose of this study, refers to the process and journey of one from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. This process is not addressed in the Old Testament in the same way or to the same extent as in the New Testament.

Steve Harper wrote, "It is important to remember that there is no Old Testament spirituality, technically speaking. Because the books were composed over a period of approximately a thousand years, what we really have is a series of Old Testament spiritualities" (Harper 64). However, Steve Harper rightly states that does not mean that a study in Christian spirituality or spiritual formation should ignore the Old Testament (Harper 63).

The creation accounts reveal that God desired to live in relationship with humankind. With Adam and Eve's disobedience, there was a breach in the relationship between God and those God had created. Later in the Genesis narrative, Noah was righteous in God's eyes (Genesis 6), indicating that how Noah lived his life was pleasing to God. In Deuteronomy, as the laws and statutes required for pleasing God are given, God gives the Great Commandment:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

This command to love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength is the foundation for spiritual life and growth. Jesus stated that that all the Law and Prophets were founded upon this commandment (Matthew 22:37–40). Here, Jesus was implementing the Jewish principle of interpretation *gezerah shewah* linking two commands with "you shall love" (Keener 516).

Psalm one initiates the metaphor of spiritual fruit as a symbol of spiritual health and well-being, "but [the righteous] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and

night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither” (verses 2–3). Here the Old Testament affirms that meditating on God's law and delighting in God's law results in growth and fruit. Psalm 119 focuses on the joy and glory of God's laws. As the Psalm extols the benefits of delighting in and meditating on God's laws, the *Torah*, the Psalmist states that doing so ensures that one is able to adhere to the way of life (Wilson 150).

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is clearly stated in its opening verses:

For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young— let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. (Proverbs 1:2–4)

Thus, the purpose of the book of Proverbs is not only practical advice for daily living but also advice for spiritual growth in righteousness and holiness. One of the most well-known verses from the book of Proverbs alludes to spiritual growth, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (3:5–6). The word here for acknowledge is the Hebrew word **יָדַע**, which does not mean acknowledge in the sense of giving validity to or admitting to the existence of but to perceive, discern, and know God by experience (Holladay 128-129).

New Testament. Spiritual growth is an ongoing theme in the New Testament. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was more than teachings on morality. Jesus states that in the spiritual life relationship with God goes beyond rote obedience. Instead, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:9). This statement indicates

a state of heart and mind that desires a fulfilling relationship with God that results in the righteousness of heart and life. These are people who yearn for God more than anything else, whether food, drink, or any other relationship (Keener 169).

The Sermon is when Jesus first indicates his purpose not to do away with the Law but to fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17). Thus, Jesus goes beyond the outward obedience of the Law to the inward attitudes of the heart. Jesus presents for his listeners the many facets of life as his disciple. Jesus focuses on compassion, love, and just living. Throughout Jesus' teachings he admonishes his followers to discern the righteous from the unrighteous by observing their "fruit" (Matthew 7:6). However, in John 15, Jesus talks about the righteous, his followers, bearing fruit by "abiding" in him (verse 7). Thus, by giving heed to one's relationship with Christ and remaining in that relationship, one can experience (spiritual) growth and bear (spiritual) fruit. Adam Clarke speaks of the abiding of John 15 as living in union with God in such a way as one is a "vigorous vine...perfectly filled with love" (Clarke and Earle 941).

Continuing in the theme of bearing fruit, Paul writes to the Church at Galatia about the results of living a life that is rooted in and guided by the Holy Spirit. The evidence of living such a life will be the witness of the fruit of the Spirit in one's life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). The use of the Greek *karpos* for "fruit" may accentuate the manner in which the Spirit *produces* the spiritual virtues in the lives of believers (Moo 363). Discipleship, in the writings of the Apostle Paul, is intricately related to spiritual growth.

For instance, to the Church at Rome, Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by

the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1–2). For Paul, the spiritual life was not about outward conformity but rather inward, spiritual transformation, a metamorphosis. This metamorphosis reorientates the Christian to see the world through the lens of Christ's likeness (Witherington and Hyatt 268).

In Peter's first letter, he encouraged his readers to desire the "pure milk of the word" in order to be nourished for spiritual growth. This language is similar to that of the author of the letter to the Hebrews. Only in this case, the author is disappointed at the lack of spiritual growth in his readers:

About this, we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

(Hebrews 5:11–14)

The writer goes on to say that it is time for them to move beyond the basics of the faith and to go on to maturity. The argument is not that "milk" is insufficient, but it is symbolic of the child phase of spirituality. The writer of Hebrews is arguing that one should grow in their spiritual understanding, skilled in God's word (Guthrie 135). The expectation is that disciples of Jesus Christ would be intentional about growing in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Historical/Theological Foundations

What follows is a chronological study of the historical and theological foundations of contemplative prayer/meditation and its relationship to spiritual growth. The roots of meditation and contemplation can be traced back to the Greek Mysticism of Socrates and earlier. However, for the purposes of this study, the distinct focus will be on Christian Contemplation as it relates to growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul - Contemplation and Meditation as a Means of Spiritual Growth

The Early Church's practice of contemplation and meditation was covered in some measure under the Biblical Foundations heading. However, this section examines the concepts of contemplation and inner transformation as they relate to discipleship. For instance, in Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth in Chapter 3 Verse 18, Paul writes, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." The Greek *κατοπτριζόμενοι* translated in the New Revised Standard Version "as though reflected in a mirror" can also be translated as "gazing upon" or "contemplating." With these definitions in mind, one could say that another interpretation of this verse could be that as one contemplates on the glory of the Lord, they are transformed into that same image. This is a process whereby as one contemplates God's glory, they are transformed from one degree of glory to another (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 71).

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul links inner transformation with the renewal of the mind, which he refers to as an act of spiritual worship (Romans 12:1–2). Paul intends for this renewal of the mind to happen when in Philippians 4:8 he writes to the church at Philippi to λογίζομενος, that is "think upon," "dwell on," or "consider," the things that are true, honorable,

just, pure, pleasing, or commendable. Again, the theme of what the mind should focus on is repeated by Paul in Colossians 3:2, where the apostle writes; "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." In this passage, the word φρονεῖτε indicates the directions of one's thoughts and attitudes upon God and heavenly things, the things of God. They have "died," and now their new and transformed life is hidden in Christ. David G.R. Keller writes, "transformation was understood as a *normal process*. It was not intended for an elite minority" (Keating, *Spirituality, Contemplation, & Transformation* 134). Therefore, he asserts "...transformation was the central focus of the earliest Christian faith communities" (134).

The Desert Fathers and Mothers

The birth of Christian monasticism can be traced back to the third to fifth centuries. Scores of men and women left behind their livelihood, families, and religious institutions of the eastern Mediterranean region. In the deserts of Egypt and Syria, these men and women sought to live lives marked by simplicity, solitude, and prayer. While many lived in intentional communities of prayer, work, and worship, others lived in solitude (Beasley-Topliffe 6).

Bernard McGinn writes that there is widespread evidence of various types of "free-form asceticism" during this period of Christian history. There is papyrus text evidence of those called *apotaktitai* (Greek), *remnuoth* (Coptic), *iḥîdāyā* (Syriac), *sarabitae* (Latin), or the *monachoi* ("solitary ones") as early as 324 (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 133). Those that the community looked up to as having achieved inner transformation of the heart were hence called "Abba," father, or "Amma," mother (Keating, *Spirituality, Contemplation, & Transformation* 10). The teachings of these spiritual elders reveal contemplative practices that served to draw them into a closer and more vibrant relationship with their Creator. By the beginning of the fifth-

century, thousands upon thousands of men and women had entered the desert to learn from the ammas and abbas (Beasley-Topliffe 6).

Women in the early centuries of Christianity were still considered the property of men. Even though Jesus and the Apostle Paul included women in their ministries, this was not the norm in the early Church. Women had been participating in significant leadership roles within the Christian community. However, as Christianity integrated with the society-at-large male leadership became less comfortable with women in public leadership. Women such as Ammas Syncletica, Theodora, and Sarah found that desert ascetic experience allowed them to exercise spiritual leadership with greater autonomy (Swan 10).

Anthony the Great was one of the first of the great monastics and was thus referred to as the "father of monasticism" or "the father of monks." While not the first of those to retreat to the desert, Antony serves as one of the first of those recorded to organize disciples into intentional faith communities. Most of what is known about Antony's life and contribution to the topic of contemplation comes from the writings of Athanasius.

Abba Anthony gave the following advice: "Believe in the Lord and love him. Keep yourselves from impure thoughts and fleshly pleasures. Pray continually. Avoid vanity. Sing psalms before sleep and on awaking" (*Beasley-Topliffe 23*). While the veracity of some of the colorful temptations and events recorded in Athanasius' *The Life of Antony* have been called into question, what is not questioned is Antony's dedication to and influence upon the practice of contemplation as an act of consecration unto God (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 134–39).

The Greek Fathers

For Clement of Alexandria, contemplation served as a means by which humans attained a greater revelation into God's character and nature. The contemplative life was marked with prayer, not for the purpose of achieving a state of rapturous unity with the divine but for the practicalities of life in Christ. That is, contemplation served to strip one of all that was false, fleshly, and unbefitting to godly living. Clement, pointing to the example of Jesus, believed that prayer was to be an intentional practice with the intent of a greater knowledge of God and of the Father's will and intent (Casey 92-93).

Bernard McGinn has called Origen of Alexandria "The Master of Early Christian Thought" (108). Christian theologian Origen was influenced by Greek Neoplatonist philosophy and its emphasis on the spiritual journey toward union with "The One," or, as would be expressed in Christian parlance, God. Origen's contribution to contemplative understanding and practice was an understanding of the role of scripture in spiritual growth through contemplative exegesis and interpretation. Origen introduced a three-part contemplative model for the interpretation of scripture (literal, moral, and spiritual) accompanied by a three-part pattern for spiritual growth. The spiritual path ascended from beginner (*praxis*) to proficient (*theoria*) and perfect (*theologia*). As one progressed in spiritual growth, they would grow in Christlikeness (Sheldrake 27–28).

The practice of contemplative prayer was birthed from the Greek desert fathers. One of the contributions of Evagrius Ponticus is the understanding of the practice of *hesychasm* (contemplative prayer). The practice was based on Jesus' teaching on private prayer in Matthew 6:6, where Jesus spoke of going into one's room and closing the door to converse with the Father. Significant to Ponticus' legacy was his trilogy *Monachikos* (The Monastic Life). This text provides the basic framework of Ponticus' understanding of the contemplative life (McGinn 146).

The three books are comprised of *Prakitkos*, his teachings on the ascetic life; the *Gnostikos*, describing how the contemplative should pass on spiritual understanding, and *Kephalaia Gnostica* describing his understanding of speculative mysticism (McGinn 146).

Ponticus' contribution to the study of contemplative prayer as it relates to this study is how he connects the contemplative life with spiritual growth. Through contemplating upon nature, things, and God and through prayer, one can progress in spirituality. He marked the spiritual journey with three stages, *praktikē*, *physikē*, *theologikē*. These stages serve to restore the fallen human's inner self to its source through the power of the "Incarnate Christ" (McGinn 148, 150). The *praktikē* stage worked to free and purify one from its passions (Ousley 6). The role of *physikē* is to reveal hidden truth through contemplating the physical world (McGinn 148-149). The ultimate goal is to have one's heart turned back to the "original source," God. For Evagrius, this was the blessing of *theologikē* (McGinn 149). Jeremy Driscoll writes that Evagrius guided Christian disciples to encounter the Logos, Christ, through contemplation and prayer (Driscoll 2).

The Cappadocian Fathers

Basil the Great (330–379), bishop of Caesarea; his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395), bishop of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389), who later became Patriarch of Constantinople, are known to history as The Cappadocian Fathers. The most significant contribution the Cappadocian Fathers made to Christian theology is their work on the doctrine of the Trinity. They combatted the heresy of Arianism. This teaching of Alexandrian priest Arian asserted that Jesus was not equal with God but instead created by God and thus subordinate to the Father. Basil is credited with proposing the formula of God's being three persons (*treis upostasis*) of one nature (*mia ousia*). Thus, from his thought comes the trinitarian doctrine of hypostases, God in three persons but of one substance (Torbet 549).

The younger brother of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, is considered to be one of the most profound mystical theologians. In this area of study, Gregory of Nyssa is best known for three major works: *The Life of Moses* (De vita Moysis), *On the Song of Songs*, a collection of homilies on the scriptural text, and *On the Beatitudes*, eight homilies on the Sermon on the Mount. In light of the Cappadocian Fathers' battle against the Arian controversy, Gregory and the remainder of the Greek Fathers found themselves reexamining the doctrine of God to a deeper degree than in previous generations. This depth of thought led to profound shifts in Christian thought, including mysticism. For instance, Gregory's work *The Life of Moses* examines Moses as a "model of the soul's spiritual journey to God" (McGinn 140 – 141).

One of Gregory's significant contributions to contemplative Christianity is the creation of a systematic apophatic or negative theology. Unlike kataphatic, or positive theology that states that "God is love" and other such positive statements, apophatic theology emphasizes the "otherness" of God. That while God is immanent, God is also transcendent; God is both knowable and unknowable (Carabine). Gregory, citing Philippians 3:13 (Paul's ongoing pursuit of the prize of knowing God), described the goal of the Christian life as the "endless pursuit of the inexhaustible divine nature (McGinn 141). Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of God's transcendence, along with the concept of a spiritual journey toward knowledge and union with God, provided the Church with an indispensable foundation upon which contemplative practice was built.

The Latin Fathers

St. Augustine of Hippo is indisputably one of the most significant teachers in classic Christianity. Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions* provide the reader not only with an understanding of Augustine's life but also the development of his theology. Augustine's

reputation as an intellectual theologian has caused considerable debate as to whether he should be labeled as a contemplative. However, in his writings, Augustine gives evidence that he was not only an intellectual but also possessed a mystical dimension to his spirituality. Even before his conversion, Platonism revealed to Augustine the existence of transcendent reality. In his *Confessions*, it becomes evident that this understanding of transcendence is what eventually led Augustine to belief in God.

As a goal of contemplation is a better understanding of and a more profound experience of the presence of God within, Augustine expressed a mystical/contemplative facet intrinsic to his theology. One of the most quoted of Augustinian passages demonstrates this well:

Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee!
For behold Thou were within me, and I outside; and I sought Thee outside and
in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou were
with me and I was not with Thee. I was kept from Thee by those things, yet had
they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to
my and break open my deafness: and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine
upon me and chase away my blindness: Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me,
and I drew in my breath and do not pant for Thee: I tasted Thee, and now hunger
and thirst for Thee: Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace. (Augustine and
Augustine 253).

John Peter Kenney asserts that Augustine concluded that contemplation was a mirror in which one could glimpse the shining of their own within the light of eternity. He further states that “Contemplation...cleared the way for the action of grace within [Augustine’s] soul” (163).

John Cassian, a contemporary of Augustine, was not just a devotee of monasticism and its attention to the interior life. Cassian was monastic *in toto*. His life and writings were dedicated to monasticism and instruction of fellow monks (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 218). His writings, *Conferences*, were intended to present the basics of spirituality and living in community. Referring to Philippians 3:12–14ⁱ, as have other contemplatives, Cassian saw the goal as sanctification. The journey toward sanctification for Cassian required that one fix their thoughts upon God to such a degree as was possible. This steadfast focus could be accomplished by praying without ceasing (Cassian and Beasley-Topliffe 11, 51).

Praying without ceasing was at the heart of Cassian's understanding of spiritual growth. He writes about the union with God that takes place as one's life becomes an unending prayer:

Then will be perfectly fulfilled in us our Savior's prayer when he prayed to his Father for his disciples, "So that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and they in us" (John 17:26), and again, "That they all may be one as you, Father, in me and I in you, and that they may be one in us" (John 17:21). The perfect love with which "he first loved us." (1John 4:10) will pass into our heart's affection, ...and that unity which now belongs to the Father and the Son will be transfused into our mind and understanding (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 223).

Italian Contemplatives

St. Gregory the Great, or Pope Gregory I, was the first monk to be elected as Pope. His monastic lifestyle continued into his papacy and influenced his papacy (Huddleston). Not known as the most profound of theologians, Gregory was a true ascetic, pastoral theologian. Gregory emphasized understanding the scriptures through the process of *discernio*, spiritual discernment.

Only through discernment could one rightly interpret the Biblical texts. Gregory believed that whatever wisdom one received from God through contemplation upon the scriptures or in the ascetic practices was not only for one's own spiritual growth but for the good of others as well (Demacopoulos 33).

Franciscan spirituality was also borne out of Italian mysticism. St. Francis is known for his love of nature and animals, in particular. Amid a time of trial and turmoil, Francis cried out to God and had a vision of Christ speaking to him to "rebuild my church." As Francis answered this call, literally at first, he experienced his parents' rejection. He abandoned the comforts of the wealthy home of his upbringing and set about rebuilding the church San Damiano (Robinson).

Soon, others began to follow Francis to live together in a monastic community. The basis of their rule of life was simplicity, prayer, and service. Nature provided the backdrop of Francis' contemplative life. Simple acts such as standing in mud brought Francis "simple joy." The changing of the seasons provided Francis fodder for his contemplation on the presence of God (Davis 52,53). Francis' burning desire was to be God's and God's alone. When feeling distracted from his devotion to God, Francis would cry, "God, you are my all and my everything" (Davis 58).

One of the most common misconceptions of mysticism and the contemplative life is that it is available only to those worthy of Sainthood or monastics. This was not the case for St. Thomas Aquinas. In his work, *On Prayer and the Contemplative Life*, St. Thomas demonstrates his belief that a contemplative life was a natural outcome of the spiritual life of one who serves God and devotes themselves to the study of scripture and prayer (Aquinas loc. 63). It was his view that contemplation and meditation upon the scriptures increased one's devotion and service to God. G.K Chesterton writes that when Aquinas was not reading, he was walking, and walking fast at

that. Thus, Chesterton writes that Aquinas was probably an active contemplative (110). Aquinas' practice of contemplative walking is encouraging for those concerned that the contemplative life calls for long hours of sitting in stillness.

Females were also part of the Italian monastic tradition. St. Catherine of Siena encountered visions and other mystical experiences from a young age. As a young adult, she dedicated herself to life as a tertiary Dominican. She became very influential throughout Italy, as many men and women looked to her as their spiritual "mother." Her work, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*, records the conversation between God and one's soul. Her writing outlines how one attains spiritual perfection (De Jaegher 141). Catherine voluntarily lived a life of severe asceticism that negatively affected her health. However, her legacy is that of a life lived wholly devoted to the pursuit of God's will. Catherine lived in deep communion with the unseen God through prayer and meditation (Roberts 73).

French Contemplatives

St. Bernard of Clairvaux was named Mellifluous (flowing with honey) Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XII in 1953. The sweetness of St. Bernard's legacy is the communion of one's soul with that of God through contemplation and the silence of monastic life (Merton, *The Last of the Fathers* 11,12). Meditation on the scripture and contemplation upon God's self was, in Bernard's thinking, integral to the work of sanctification in the life of believers (80 – 81). St. Bernard was vital in emphasizing the use of *Lectio Divina* (the spiritual reading of and contemplation on the scriptures) in monastic communities. He likened the presence of the Holy Spirit in *Lectio Divina* to a kiss received from God that enabled one to experience union with their Creator (Coleman).

William of St. Thierry, a contemporary of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, considered Bernard a mentor that greatly influenced his life. Late in his own life, William took on the task of recording the life of Bernard of Clairvaux (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 224). This work was left unfinished at his death. The impact of Bernard of Clairvaux is evident in the life of William of St. Thierry. William's writing, *Exposition on the Song of Songs no. 1*, reflects his understanding that humans are created in the image of God and that contemplation is participation in that divine image (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 226). William deems contemplative life and practice as essential for spiritual progress. William described this process in terms of three stages of spiritual growth. First, Christians have faith but are only "moved by authority, reminded by doctrine, and inspired by example what is good where they find it" (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 230).

At the next stage of spiritual development, the believer moves from the outward influences and experience of faith to the inward experience of religion. They experience the soul as being directed toward God, who dwells within them. Finally, the Christian in the last stage is sanctified, made complete as they are led and enlightened by the Holy Spirit (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 230).

Guigo II authored *The Ladder of Monks* c. 1150. Guigo's text is considered the first systemic description of the method of Lectio Divina (Colletti). The four rungs of the Ladder of Monk consisted of the four stages of Lectio Divina. These four steps include reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation (Guigo II 8). Lectio Divina has since become one of the cornerstone practices of contemplative prayer.

The reading portion of Lectio Divina, as described by Guigo, involves the reading of the scriptures with an engaged, attentive mind. This is the first and outer step of Lectio Divina, the beginner step (Guigo II 28). The second rung of the ladder of Monks is meditation. Meditation in

Lectio Divina means to approach the scripture with the intent of receiving a deeper understanding of the text. Guigo II wrote, “It is not enough to read through the text: meditation must penetrate and, obscuring through the obscure corners, get to the heart of it” (Guigo II 11). It is through meditation that the reader prays with the Psalmist, “Create in me a clean heart” (Psalm 51:1).

After reading the scripture attentively and meditating on the scriptures, the person then opens up to God's purposes through the work of the Holy Spirit. Guigo states that after this, the soul humbles itself and takes its refuge in God in prayer, the third rung on the Monk's Ladder. Prayer, says Guigo, is the heart elevating itself to God, reaching toward that which is good (Guigo II 8). Finally, contemplation is the reward of the prior three rungs. In contemplation, one's spirit is refreshed, renewed, and restored by the presence of the Holy Spirit (Guigo II 15).

While John Calvin is not always attached to contemplative practice, his teaching gives evidence of his understanding of the value of contemplative practice. Calvin's commentary on the Gospel of John examines at length Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches in John 15. In Calvin's study of the passage, he affirms that there is union between the believer and Christ, just as is asserted in mysticism. However, he places two limitations on this understanding of John 15. The first limitation he places on this mystical union experienced through “abiding in the vine” is that this is not an ontological union but rather one of praxis (Kim 118). The second limitation he places on the union of the believer and Christ is that while this union is mysterious, it is knowable through the work of the Holy Spirit (Kim 119).

While some may argue that Calvin's doctrine of predestination annuls the need for prayer, John Aloisi asserts that Calvin's *Institutes* contradicts that assumption. Calvin includes many arguments in favor of prayer, including the sanctifying effect of “that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him” (Aloisi 6). While Calvin would

not be classified among contemplative theologians, when speaking of the manner of prayer Aloisi states, “When approaching God in prayer, Calvin said, the believer should seek to rid his mind of all “alien and outside cares” (9). Authors John Coe and Kyle Strobel give several rationales for Calvin’s contemplative quality but specifically refer to chapter twenty of *Institutes*, where he states the deepest expression of prayer is “pure contemplation on God” (Coe 79).

Thérèse de Lisieux lived only to the age of twenty-four but made a mark on the history of contemplative Christianity. Thérèse entered the cloistered life of a Carmelite convent at the age of 15. Known also as *the Little Flower*, Thérèse’s call to Christian vocation came to her when she was only nine years old. At first glance, her life seemed unremarkable. However, within her burned a great flame of love for Christ. In her memoir, she discussed the growth of her relationship with Christ while she was still a child (H. King 10).

In meditation, Thérèse found that the gospels came alive to her. She found through the scriptures her sustenance and the experience of the Kingdom of God within her (Lisieux 144). What makes Thérèse significant in the history of Christian contemplatives is that instead of instituting a rigorous rule of life, Thérèse was dedicated instead to a “little way,” that is, complete and childlike surrender and abandonment to God. This childlike faith focuses not on great works of faith and sacrifice but rather a humble walk with God that gives the average person hope of attaining a deepening relationship with Him (McColman 88-89).

English Contemplatives

During the 14th century, the anonymous text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, emerged. This text served as a guide to contemplation. Evelyn Underhill edited the work in 1922, translating the text from Middle English to modern English. Nothing is known of the author aside from what can be discerned from the work itself. The author was a monk living in a cloistered community

devoted to the contemplative life (Underhill 13). The position of the author is that humility and charity are the characteristics of human virtue (Underhill 20). Thus, the goal of the contemplative is not to attain union with the Divine in order to boast of one's achievement. The purpose of growth toward God through contemplation is to share one's spiritual growth and the method of attaining it with one's neighbor, as the author did in this work. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is unique in its simplicity. There is no lofty theology nor quoting of esteemed theologians of the day. Instead, this work gives simple instruction of seeking God for the sake of God and God's praise.

Even though she lived much of her cloistered and secluded life as an anchoress, Julian of Norwich made significant contributions to the field of Christian Mysticism. The written record of her visions, *Revelations of Divine Love*, published in 1672, is the first known book written by a woman (Frykholm 10). Amy Frykholm states that in a culture of dutiful religion often based on guilt, Julian's understanding of God was that of unity, wonder, and release. God's requirement of righteousness was simply that people delight in God's world (12).

As with the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich did not believe her revelations were only for her but for all Christians. As a young woman, Julian became very ill, unconscious in a fevered state during which she received many visions from God. After she recovered, she sought out one of the friars at Austin Friary on Conesford Street to become her confessor, to which he agreed. This friar taught the practice of Lectio Divina and would give Julian passages of scripture to contemplate and pray upon until it became a part of her very being (Frykholm 71). After retreating to the anchorhold, Julian continued in her life of prayer, contemplation, and writing. Many came to Julian for words of wisdom. They would speak to her from their side of the curtain that secluded her from the outside world. The people were consumed with fears of purgatory and hell. Julian attempted to reassure them with the love and mercy of the

God who had revealed himself to her. She felt as if she were simply speaking to the black curtain. Her understanding of the God of love could not seem to penetrate the fear of judgment the people were facing. (Frykholm 118–119). Julian’s message was that there was a God of love that could be discovered through the practice of contemplation.

John Wesley is better known for founding the Methodist movement than for his contributions to contemplative Christianity. However, for John Wesley the whole of Christian life was about a journey toward spiritual perfection. Perfection, for John Wesley, was perfected in love toward God and toward others. Wesley saw this inward transformation to be the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (Wesley and Burwash 408, 411). Wesley’s view on salvation and spiritual growth are illustrated in his sermon, *Scripture Way of Salvation*. In this sermon, he describes the work of the Holy Spirit drawing one toward God in preventing or prevenient grace, being brought into right relationship with God through justification or justifying grace, and then the process of sanctification by the grace of the work of the Holy Spirit (Wesley and Burwash 441).

John Wesley taught that “means of grace” were the ways in which the Holy Spirit works these expressions of grace in the lives of believers. Chief of these means of grace, according to Wesley, was prayer (Wesley and Burwash 152). Wesley taught that Christians should indeed pray without ceasing, as the Apostle Paul exhorted in 1 Thessalonians 5:15. He wrote, “Prayer may be said to be the breath of our spiritual life. One who lives cannot possibly cease breathing. So much as we enjoy of God’s presence, so much prayer and praise do we offer up ‘without ceasing;’ else our rejoicing is but delusion” (Wesley et al. 81). In prayer, Wesley believes one breathed in the presence of the Holy Spirit and exhaled praise and thanksgiving. He concluded that the purpose of prayer was to express and experience total dependence upon God (Wesley et al. 93).

Late in the eighteenth century, English contemplative Evelyn Underhill was born into a nominally Anglican family. Like many contemplatives, Underhill was interested in spiritual life from a young age. As a young woman, she became an author, first publishing a book of verse (Cropper 54). Her interest in spiritual understanding and experience continued to grow. Underhill went on to author several more books while also researching Christian mysticism. She probably would not have described herself as a mystic at the time but rather a student of mysticism (Cropper 68–69, 79 - 80).

As Underhill studied mysticism for her book of the same name, she came to realize that ordinary men and women had the potential to be kindred to the mystics (Cropper 83). Underhill, as she studied mysticism and contemplatives, became one herself. Her works, *The Spiritual Life* and *The Spiral Way* are indicative of the contemplative that Evelyn Underhill was. *The Spiritual Life* was derived from four radio broadcasts on the BBC in the 1930s (Underhill 6).

In both of these works, Underhill addresses spiritual growth through contemplative prayer. She placed high value on the ability of attentive prayer to enable the Christian to put to death (mortify) one's selfish ambition and sinfulness in order to turn to God as a dependent child (Underhill 22 – 23).

German Contemplatives

Bernard McGinn writes that the text from the first chapter of Corinthians, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise;” (1 Corinthian 1:27), gave the female contemplatives, prophets, and reformers of the Middle Ages their mandate for speaking out. St. Hildegard was able to take up the prophetic mantle and speak out against the abuses and injustices in the Church at a time when male leadership was failing its duty (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 92). At the age of eighteen, Hildegard took on the vows of a Benedictine nun at the Monastery of

Saint Disibodenberg. Hildegard had seen visions since her childhood, but at the age of forty-three, she observed a vision of splendor in which she was instructed to put to paper “what you see and hear” (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 93). This mandate terrified Hildegard who overcame those fears and became a visionary of the Church, revealing a God who was not apathetic nor far removed but actively involved in his people’s lives (93).

Hildegard, like most monastics, spoke of contemplation, but unlike other authors of her era, she did not write of contemplative practices. Thus, Hildegard is not thought of as a contemplative in the traditional sense. However, her work for reform, her writings, and teachings are founded upon her experiences of contemplation and mysticism. Therefore, her works are significant to the study of contemplative practice and theology (McGinn and Ferris McGinn 99).

Significant to the legacy of the German contemplatives is the work *The Imitation of Christ* written by Thomas à Kempis. Thomas à Kempis was a canon regular as a member of the order of the Brethren of the Common Life. This work is divided into four books. “Book One, Admonitions Useful for a Spiritual Life” begins with the section “On the Imitation, or Following of Christ, and Contempt of All the Vanities of the World.” It is in this section that à Kempis discusses The Love of Solitude and Silence. Thomas à Kempis assures his readers that if they would refrain from idle talk and gossip, they would find ample time to devote their hearts and minds to meditate on good things. He continues by saying that if one would aspire to attain that which is “inward and spiritual,” they must find time to come apart with Jesus from the multitudes. Thomas asserted that time in solitude and silence was instrumental for achieving knowledge of the scriptures and understanding of one’s Creator (Thomas and Helms 33-35).

Thomas à Kempis’ Book Two is devoted to *Admonitions Concerning the Inner Life*. It is here that he writes of Jesus’ teaching that the “Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). It is

through the devotion of one's whole self to God and the turning of one's heart away from the world that rest for the soul is found (Thomas and Helms 57). Thomas writes, "A lover of Jesus and of truth, a truly inward Christian and one who is free from inordinate affections, can freely turn himself to God and rise in spirit above his self-concerns and fruitfully rest" (Thomas and Helms 59). Thus, solitude and meditation, according to the teachings of Thomas à Kempis, are essential not only to understanding the scriptures and one's God but also for entering into sacred rest in the inward self.

In book three, Thomas à Kempis focuses on "Internal Consolations." This is where he discusses how the Spirit of Christ speaks to the hearts of men and women. Speaking to the heart of contemplative prayer and meditation à Kempis writes:

I WILL hear what God the Lord will speak within me.

Blessed is the soul who hears the Jesus speaking in it, who receives from his mouth some word of comfort.

Blessed are the ears that hear the divine whispers, and pay no heed to the deceitful whisperings of this world.

Blessed indeed are the ears that do not heed the voice which is sounding outside, but listen to the truth which God speaks inwardly.

Blessed are the eyes which are shut to outward vanities but, are intent on the things within.

Blessed are they who enter into things internal, and endeavor to prepare themselves daily to receive more and more the hidden inspirations and inward teachings of God.

Blessed are they who seek to give their whole time to serve God and who

rid themselves of every worldly hindrance, (Thomas and Helm 89)

He continues in this chapter of *The Imitation of Christ* to address how God speaks to the heart without words and how he hears God humbly. He closes with a prayer asking for the grace of devotion. The final book of à Kempis' seminal work instructs on the sacrament of Holy Communion. Thomas à Kempis' work places him as one of the most significant characters in the study of prayer, meditation, and spiritual growth, not only of the Middle Ages but for all time.

German theologian Martin Luther launched the period of Reformation when he nailed his work the *95 Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church. Bernard McGinn writes that Martin Luther had a complicated relationship with mysticism. McGinn asserts that there were some mystical aspects to some of Luther's writings, that is, the concept that believers grounded their faith in a direct heart-encounter with their Creator (McGinn, "Mysticism and the Reformation: A Brief Survey" 54). However, unlike other mystics or contemplatives prior, Luther never wrote about contemplative practices as a means by which one could attain a loving union with God (54).

McGinn agrees with the late Heiko A. Oberman, who held that Luther both appropriated and rejected mysticism. Martin Luther maintained a level of respect for Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Gregory the Great. However, like many, he rejected the mysticism of Dionysius as being Platonist (55).

The religious landscape of the sixteenth century changed immeasurably with the advent of the Protestant Reformation. Reformers such as Calvin and Luther "protested" the Catholic Church's political and religious power and the abuses of those powers. This separation from the Catholic Church, to a certain degree, included separation from practices that some would deign as

“Roman.” Some reformers included certain contemplative practices in this category of exercises from which to refrain.

Spanish Contemplatives

Ignatius of Loyola was the co-founder of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. Ignatius’ contribution to contemplative prayer and meditation as it relates to spiritual growth is tremendous. He authored *Spiritual Exercises*, a guidebook of meditations to facilitate sensitivity to God’s presence in one’s life (Silf 14). The specific steps of the *exercises* include: “Discovering who I really am,” “Directing myself toward God,” “Noticing God’s action in my life,” “Responding to the movements of my heart,” “Discovering the nature of my deepest desire,” “Seeking God’s will,” “Becoming free of all that distracts me from my deepest desire,” “Making choices in line with my truest self,” “Connecting my lived experience with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ,” “Responding to God’s love for me,” and “Finding God in all things” (Silf 15).

Ignatius’ exercises focused on two primary methods for praying with the scriptures: meditation and contemplation. For Ignatius of Loyola, meditation was the reflective approach to praying using the scriptures. In meditation, one reflects upon God’s word as if God is speaking that word directly into one’s life today. Ignatius looked at meditation as prayer using three powers; memory, understanding, and will. As one hears or reads the word, one calls to mind the scripture using their memory. Effort is then made to pondering the scripture with one’s mind and understanding. Finally, there is an exercise of the will to embrace the scripture and the truths revealed by the first two steps (Gallagher 29).

Jesuit priest James Martin writes,

[Ignatian spirituality] is about finding freedom: the freedom to become the person you’re meant to be, to love and to accept love, to make good decisions, and to experience the

beauty of creation and the mystery of God's love. It's based on an approach found in [Ignatius'] own writings as well as in the traditions, practices, and spiritual know-how passed down by Jesuit priests and brothers from generation to generation (4).

Thus, centuries later Ignatius remains one of the foremost influences in modern Christian contemplative prayer and meditation movements.

Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila is best known for her work, *Interior Castle*. Teresa, frustrated with a lax state of spiritual fervor, desired to inject greater spiritual depth of prayer within her own order. For Teresa, prayer was communication with a close friend, Jesus, and the way to draw near to God (Humphreys 17). In *Interior Castle*, Teresa uses the image of a palace to symbolize the life of a person who was filled with grace (Humphreys 18). This palace is comprised of seven mansions at the center of which dwells God (Teresa and Peers 43).

The entry to this castle Teresa writes is prayer and meditation. She explains that in addition to vocal prayer, one must devote time to the contemplation of whom they are communicating with (Teresa and Peers 37). The first mansions consist of self-knowledge and one's need for God. The goal of the second mansion is to achieve perseverance in prayer, pushing beyond the distractions of this life to achieve intimacy with God. In the third mansions, one's faith may begin to be tried by the routine of prayer. Through surrender to God and perseverance, one will progress to the fourth mansions. The fourth mansions are the place of achieved quiet, where one finds stillness of spirit. In the fifth mansions, Teresa uses spousal language like Bernard of Clairvaux in the prayer of union. In the fifth mansions, Teresa describes death to self by using the example of the silkworm and its cocoon (Teresa and Peers 114). As one progresses to the sixth mansions, one may experience greater trials but also a great longing for the presence

of God. Finally, in the seventh mansions, one reaches the center where there is only God, pure love; the place where God alone is enough.

Greatly influenced by Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross founded the Discalced Carmelites. John of the Cross, educated in philosophy and religion, was fascinated by how one embarked on the journey of love toward the heart of God. He was imprisoned for his attempts to reform the Church back to its Biblical and historical authenticity. John's two most influential treatise's *The Dark Night* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, were significant to the study of spiritual formation (Ashbrook 78–79). Paul De Jaegher, the author of *Christian Mystics of the Middle Ages*, states, "St. John is the mystical doctor of the Church, and from the psychological side he is unrivaled (191).

Contemplative Prayer and Meditation Renewal in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century

While contemplative practices never entirely vanished from the Christian landscape, contemplative movements lessened, particularly within monastic communities after the Reformation. One of the key figures in the renewal of contemplative practice was Thomas Merton. Merton is often considered to be the father of modern contemplative prayer. Merton's teachings and life give evidence of how contemplative prayer and meditation bears fruit in living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. For Thomas Merton, the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the act of contemplative prayer was the crucifixion of the false self. As the true self is revealed through the burning away of all that is false, Christians can more fully live out their call to discipleship.

Merton himself lived out the transformative work of contemplative prayer "to speak truth to power, cry out against injustice, and remind women and men to recall their divine calling as God's image and likeness" (Horan xxii–xxiii). The conversation around true self and false self encompasses the two terms most linked to Merton. These terms were derived from a uniquely

Christian understanding. Merton understood that the Genesis account of creation revealed the intended relationship between humans and their Creator. Merton also understood from the creation accounts that human beings, beginning with their ancestors in the Garden of Eden, are guilty of alienating themselves from God through their sinful thoughts and actions (Finley 27).

The concept of mortification, death to the false self, is expressed in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” The death of the false self through metaphorical “crucifixion” enables the true self, which is a reflection of Christ, to be revealed. Likewise, Romans 7:14–20 describes the battle between the flesh of the false self and the innermost self, the true self that desires to delight in God. Merton writes:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.

My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. (Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 34)

The “true self” is cultivated through the purifying acts of stillness and prayer. One moves toward “purity of heart” by fully and humbly surrendering to God. The purpose of meditation, writes Merton, is to “penetrate the inmost ground of my life, seek the full understanding of God’s will for me, of God’s mercy to me, of my absolute dependence upon Him” (Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* 46–47).

Henri Nouwen, influenced by Thomas Merton, became a significant voice for the modern contemplative movement. Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, and prolific author, also taught at Notre Dame, Harvard, and Yale Universities. For the last decade of his life, he lived in L’Arche communities in France and Toronto, working alongside the disabled Spiritually, like his contemporary Thomas Merton, Nouwen emphasized a relational theology.

When discussing what discipleship looks like, Nouwen refers to the shared etymology of the words disciple and discipline. Spiritually, Nouwen believed discipline meant creating space in one’s life where God can work. Based on Luke 6:12–19, Nouwen finds three disciplines essential for growth in discipleship; solitude, community, and ministry (*A Spirituality for Living* Nouwen 15).

According to Luke Chapter Six, Jesus spent his nights in solitude in communion with God in prayer. Solitude, Nouwen states, is the place where all other voices are silenced, and one can hear the voice of God calling them beloved (*Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen 20). Intimacy with God comes in solitude, learning, and praying the prayer of the heart. As the scriptures are read contemplatively, in silence before God, they can penetrate through all distractions and speak to the inner heart (*The Spirituality of Living*, Nouwen 136).

Prayer is so important, according to Nouwen, because it is by prayer that the love is formed within one that enables them to minister. The understanding of being beloved by God

allows Christians to go into the world and tell others that they too are beloved of God (*The Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen 22). In silence and solitude, a depth of intimacy with God is experienced that produces gratitude and deep compassion for others that equips one for ministry.

It is also in solitude that community begins for Nouwen. Understanding oneself as beloved by God allows people to live with others acknowledging that they are beloved and that others are also beloved. Living in community gives space for the disciplines of celebration and forgiveness (*A Spirituality of Living*, Nouwen 27). Ultimately, silence, solitude, and contemplation of the scriptures forms a deep awareness of the presence of God and the whispers of God's voice (*The Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen 136).

A contemporary of Thomas Merton, M. Basil Pennington was a Cisterian monk and prolific writer on spiritual life. Contemplative Outreach Ltd. states that as a response to the Second Vatican Council's encouragement to renew the Church's previous teaching on personal prayer practices, Pennington, along with Fathers William Meninger and Thomas Keating, met to study the church's history of ancient contemplative practices. The goal was to create a method by which Christians could practice silent, meditative prayer. The result of their work was Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is established on Thomas Merton's premise that contemplative prayer was meant to center oneself wholly on the presence of God (*History of Centering Prayer*).

In his book *Call to the Center* Pennington compares centering prayer to being in the boat with Jesus in the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27). Embarking on the centering prayer experience, one enters the boat with Jesus, trusting him and desiring to be in his presence. Soon, one may feel as if they have left solid ground, a little unsteady and assaulted by their own thoughts. At some point, one may even think, "Where are you, Lord? Save me!" and Jesus answers, "right here, ye of little faith" (Pennington 83–84). Pennington teaches that

faithfulness to the practice of centering prayer helps people experience transformation of spirit and the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Pennington 86).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many religious orders took on the task of renewing their orientation to the contemplative life. Father Thomas Keating was a Trappist monk and prolific author. In the 1970s, Keating, along with M. Basil Pennington and Father William Meninger, endeavored together to introduce ancient contemplative practices to a new generation. Founder of Contemplative Outreach, Father Keating introduced many to contemplative practice through centering prayer (Keating, *Intimacy with God* 204).

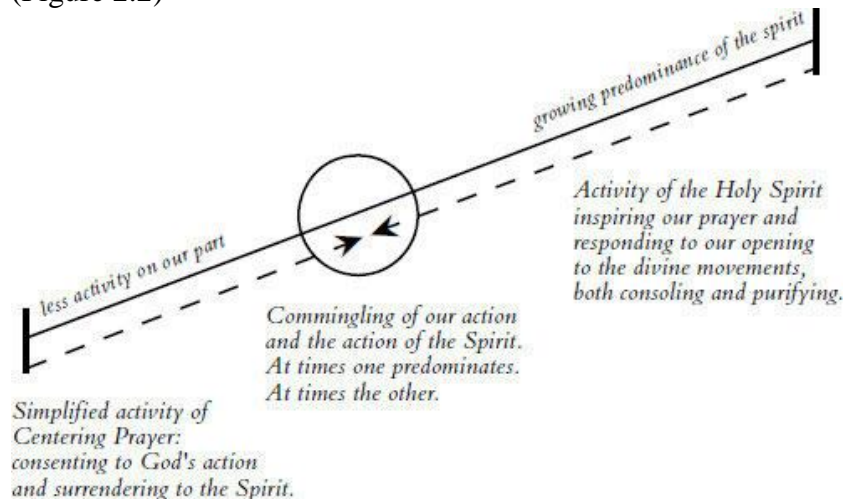
Keating's understanding of centering prayer is rooted in his concept of the Holy Trinity. Within the Trinity, the Godhead lives in relationship with one, with the other, and with humanity. The Trinity includes God the Father, the source of all things, Jesus the Son, the image of self-giving love, and the Holy Spirit, in-dwelling Presence. Keating states that the Trinitarian relationships by their nature invites one into the "stream of divine love that is unconditional and totally self-surrendered (*Intimacy with God* 176). Father Keating's guidelines for practicing centering prayer are as follows:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes

closed for a couple of minutes. (Keating, *Intimacy with God* 39)

Keating illustrates the dynamics of Centering Prayer:

(Figure 2.2)



(Keating, *Intimacy with God* 41)

Continuing the work of Thomas Keating, Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, has founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Rohr refers to the practice of contemplation as “The Tree of Life” (Genesis 3:22). The Tree of Life invites one to things eternal, accessing the “deep ground of God and of the self”(Rohr, *The Naked Now* 105–06). Rohr teaches that contemplation, meditation, and mysticism are about moving one from a belief system to an inner experience of transformation and growth in holiness (Rohr, *The Naked Now* 29–30).

Rohr asserts that daily contemplative practice allows one to surrender entirely to the presence of Christ. Thus, as one submits to the Presence within, the fruits of the Spirit begin to take root. Just as a seed surrenders to the soil around it and dies, thus giving over to the life within that produces life and fruit, so it is when one can be surrendered to the presence of God within (Rohr, *Everything Belongs* 36).

Another influential contemplative voice of the twenty-first century is Dr. David Benner. From Benner’s perspective, Christian spiritual transformation “requires an encounter with the

living God” (Benner, *Surrender to Love* 71). This encounter with God begins with repentance, a turning from oneself, and turning toward Jesus (72). Benner also promotes the practice of Lectio Divina. His understanding of Lectio Divina is that the scriptures are read and meditated on with the purpose of hearing God’s voice, not just for knowledge. In this way, one experiences God’s transformational presence. Benner asserts that God’s Word draws one into silence and becomes a transformational force (Benner, *Opening to God* 60).

Opposition to Contemplative Movement

Although the previous section outlined the history of contemplative, mystical practice throughout Judeo-Christian history, there has also been opposition to Christian contemplative prayer and meditation. The teachings of Clement of Alexandria are problematic for those who deem Platonic or Gnostic thought incompatible with Christian theology (McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* 101). Clement’s pupil Origen was also accused of heresy for his allegorical approach to the scriptures as well as his connection to Platonic thought. Likewise, in the fourth-century desert monk Evagrius Ponticus’ synthesis of Platonic/Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian monastic practice had him denounced as a heretic (Casiday 245).

In the fourteenth century, Gregory Palamas’ teaching and practice of hesychasm drew criticism. Hesychast practice sought to achieve a state of quiet or stillness within one’s prayer. One of the ways one would practice this was through the use of the “Jesus Prayer.” The purpose of the prayer was to experience the presence of God in a way similar to that of the disciples at his transfiguration (Spidlik 342). The Hesychast movement also became connected with Messalianism which favored solitary prayer and the practice of stillness over the monastic traditions of asceticism, manual labor, and liturgy. John of Damascus identified Messalianism, and thus the Hesychast movement, as heresy (John and Chase 131–37).

The Protestant Reformation's emphasis on doctrinal belief over affective practice instigated a decline in Christian contemplative practice. Additionally, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century with the onset of the Protestant Reformation, contemplative practice and monasticism came under scrutiny and criticism. Monasticism was viewed in connection with a corrupt Catholic church, indulgent, and inconsistent with Biblical teaching (R. H. King 26). In the era of protest against the Catholic church, contemplative practice fell into disrepute as a medieval Catholic practice (Rittgers and Evener 1).

During this period in history, contemplative practice not only suffered from Protestant opposition but also opposition within Catholicism. The Society of Jesus, founded by St. Ignatius, under the leadership of Everard Mercurian as Superior General, moved away from the teaching of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. Mercurian thus banned the practice of affective prayer. His concern was that the Jesuits not become a monastic or semi-monastic order (O'Leary 588–89).

Miguel Molinos, the founder of the quietist movement, was initially well-received by his contemporaries. Jesuits, cardinals, and clerics sought Molinos out for his teaching on quiet, inward prayer. Pope Innocent XI hoped that Molinos' instruction could become a source for the renewal of the Church. Criticism later arose that quietism allowed people to engage in quiet prayer without adequate preparation. The argument was that people should first purify themselves of their deficiencies. Molinos was brought to trial by the inquisition, found guilty of heresy in 1687, and imprisoned (Broekhuysen 140–42).

French contemplative Jeanne Guyon was imprisoned on charges of quietism from 1695 to 1703. Part of the accusation against her was that of antinomianism. It was asserted that her teaching of quiet prayer espoused the belief that under grace one was not accountable to any

moral law. The Church was concerned with quietism, emphasis on prayer, and perceived neglect of good works (Baker).

Similar arguments and concerns about contemplative prayer and meditation continue today. Ray Yungen asserts that spiritual formation, sacred space, contemplative prayer, and spiritual disciplines are examples of how the Church has capitulated to New Age philosophy (Yungen 9). He asserts that contemplative prayer is simply Eastern meditation repackaged for a Christian audience (Yungen 33–34). By doing an internet search for “Dangers of the Contemplative Prayer Movement,” one will find many results that echo Yungen’s concerns. Some sites equate contemplative prayer with mind control, centering prayer with Eastern meditation, and Spiritual Formation with Hinduism.

Research Design Literature

The model for this research examining the relationship between the practice of contemplative prayer and discipleship and spiritual growth was an intervention. According to Sensing, intervention research “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (63). The purpose of this project was to identify the perceived spiritual growth that took place in participants after participating in a contemplative prayer project for a period of six weeks.

The researcher employed a mixed-method approach to this study. Abbas Tashakkori and John W. Creswell define mixed methods research as that “in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry” (Tashakkori and Creswell 4). Qualitative research gives attention to “...how people interpret their experiences, how they

construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam 5). The qualitative aspects of this study researched how the participants perceived their spiritual life and relationship with God before and after participating in the program. Quantitative research can also be defined “as any approach that uses systematic observations to account for and generalize about human behavior. By systematic observation, we mean that which is (a) intentional, (b) replicable, and (c) valid” (Allen et al. 6). In this research, surveys, including Likert scales, were the means by which quantitative data were collected.

As Tim Sensing states, the pastor-researcher “already lives and works within the context” (64). Thus, there is the danger of unintended influence over the outcome of the project. Care was taken in this study to ensure that the participants did not feel undue pressure for the research to yield a specific result. It is important that a researcher remain open to being surprised and challenged by the data.

Summary of Literature

Throughout the Old and New Testaments there is evidence of God’s desire to be in relationship with humanity. Even as humans rebelled against God, God continued to provide redemption and means by which the relationship could be restored. Throughout the Holy Scriptures, people have communicated with God through the means of prayer. Prayer can take many forms such as supplication, petition, and repentance. Communication with God also happens in the midst of silence and solitude. In silence and solitude, contemplation, and meditation, humans find the silence they need to hear the voice of God speaking into their lives.

The practice of contemplative prayer has been practiced in various forms throughout the scriptures, and they speak of meditating and focusing on God and the scriptures. Additionally, there is historical evidence that contemplation and meditation were practiced throughout the

history of the church. The testimony of those in the past bears witness to the effect contemplation had upon their perceived relationship with God and their spiritual growth. The evidence points to the ability of contemplative prayer and meditation to further one's growth in spirituality and relationship with God.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter covers the research methodology for the ministry transformation project that studies the role of contemplative prayer and meditation in spiritual growth. It provides the context of the project, background on the participants, and a description of the instruments used to obtain the data for the project. Covered topics include the nature and purpose of this project, how the data collection instruments provided data to answer relevant research questions, ministry context, the selection of participants, ethical considerations, expert reviews, the reliability and validity of the research designs, and the procedure for collecting and analyzing the data.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The Church in the United States has been in decline for the last several decades. Meanwhile, young adults confess that they are looking for meaning and purpose in their lives. Many people are looking to be part of something bigger than themselves, and it is not clear why they are not coming to the Church to find these things. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ could answer their longing for meaning and fulfill their desire to be part of something with lasting impact and significance. Many Christians do not understand what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and their spiritual lives are anemic. When looking for meaning, purpose, and significance many look elsewhere and not to the church.

The practice of spiritual disciplines is given to the Church by God as a means of grace. Spiritual disciplines, including the study of the scriptures, participating in the sacraments, fasting, prayer, and other practices, aid in the spiritual growth of the Christian. Unfortunately, many Christians expend minimal effort in the practice of spiritual disciplines. Those that do often are

discouraged when their practices do not yield many results. They are disheartened that they have not experienced the abundant life Jesus promised his followers. When speaking to people about areas in their Christianity where they may feel frustrated, two areas usually come up, the depth of their spiritual growth and their prayer life. This project sought to explore the connection between the two.

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of contemplative prayer and meditation on spiritual growth among participants in the program. The analysis of the data gathered led to a better understanding of the role of contemplative prayer and meditation in promoting spiritual growth and depth of discipleship in the lives of those who practice these forms of prayer.

Research Questions

This project developed three research questions to evaluate the effect of contemplative prayer and meditation on one's spiritual growth and understanding of Christian discipleship. The participants' spiritual well-being was assessed before and after project participation. The research tools were designed to assess the participants' perception of their spiritual life and to evaluate contemplative prayer and meditation's role in spiritual well-being and spiritual growth. The research tools implemented in this study included pretest and posttest questionnaires, and participant journal entries.

RQ #1 How would participants assess their prayer life and spiritual growth prior to participating in the program?

The purpose of the first research question was to determine the level of satisfaction the participants had with their spiritual life and growth before participating in the project. A pre-test survey via Survey Monkey and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale questionnaire was used to assess

how the participants viewed their relationship with God and their sense of satisfaction in their connection with God (Paloutzian and Ellison).

RQ #2 How would the participants describe the change in their prayer life and spiritual growth after participating in the program?

The answer to this question determined the overall efficacy of contemplative prayer and meditation in fostering spiritual growth. The comparison of pre-and post-test answers to questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 19 on the Spiritual Well-Being Scale help answer this research question. Participants received a weekly journal prompt asking them to reflect on their prayer experience for that specific week. The participants' journal entries from the beginning of the program and the end of the program were also compared to assess whether they believed that practicing contemplative prayer and meditation had affected their spiritual growth. Finally, the questionnaire with open-ended questions assessed participants' perception of their spiritual growth both before and after participating in the program.

RQ #3 What were the least helpful and most helpful aspects of the program?

This question was intended to assess the most and least helpful portions of the program. This assessment was needed in order to evaluate what specific parts of the program did or did not aid the spiritual growth of the participants. Additionally, if the program is to be replicated in another local church environment, it is essential to adjust or eliminate the least helpful aspects of the research project. After the program, the participants completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed them to name and discuss the portions of the program that were most or least helpful to their spiritual growth and why.

Ministry Context

The ministry context of this project was College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. The church is situated on the campus of Ball State University but not affiliated with the University. Many members of the congregation are on faculty or staff at Ball State. Thus, the majority of the members have at minimum, bachelor's degrees, while many have completed master's and doctoral degrees. The economic demographic of church membership is middle to upper-middle class. Spiritually, the congregation ranges from long-term Christians to new Christians. The amount of spiritual depth, understanding, and experience are equally varied.

College Avenue is part of the United Methodist denomination. The United Methodist Church shares with other denominations Wesleyan theology. Two distinctions of Wesleyan theology emphasize the work of grace in the life of the Christian and the experience of grace through the practice of spiritual disciplines. However, as with Christians from various other backgrounds, spiritual disciplines are not practiced with regularity. In addition, spiritual disciplines may be practiced by rote without the experience of inner transformation or spiritual growth.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

Participants were members of College Avenue United Methodist Church. The group was a mix of self-selected and invited participants. The purpose of this selection process was to ensure an appropriate cross-section of spiritual experience and demographics. The congregation was issued an open invitation to participate in a contemplative prayer and meditation program. The invitation outlined that the duration of the program would be six weeks and would cover a variety of contemplative practices. The announcement indicated that the program was open to participants of

all experience levels. People who had previously participated in contemplative prayer and meditation and those who had no previous knowledge of contemplative practices were all welcome.

After reviewing the pool of applicants, invitations were extended to others who did not reply to the open invitation. The invitation was given to a cross-section of individuals of various ages, genders, and spiritual experience levels. The purpose of this direct invitation was to ensure that the study spanned a breadth of experience levels, ages, and genders. Sensing writes, “*Purposeful samples* select people who have awareness of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to your research” (83). All of the participants are laity members of College Avenue United Methodist Church. In this study, all participants will be identified by pseudonyms.

Description of Participants

There were fourteen original participants in the Contemplative Prayer Program. After a few weeks, one person dropped from the program due to time constraints and technical issues using the Zoom platform. The group that completed the six-week program consisted of eleven women and three men. The participants were Caucasian, except for one bi-racial woman.. The majority of the participants were over the age of sixty. The remainder of the participants were between the age of forty-six and fifty-nine. Only one of the participants had been a Christian for less than twenty-five years. However, that participant responded that they had been a Christian more than sixteen years. The majority of the contemplative prayer program participants had some experience with contemplative prayer. Only four of the respondents had no experience with any type of contemplative prayer.

Ethical Considerations

All the participants in this research project gave informed consent by agreeing to the terms of the project and signing the Consent Form (see Appendix A). Those signed forms were returned to the researcher before the distribution of any research tools. The signed consent forms, upon receipt, were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's locked office. The researcher was in possession of these keys for the duration of the project.

All research tools were coded to protect the confidentiality of the research participants. All surveys, questionnaires, and other notes were kept in the researcher's office in the locked file cabinet. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research project. All participants were made aware from the outset of the project of this strict confidentiality through a cover letter that was presented to them when they received the informed consent forms. Finally, as stated previously, all research tools were coded to maintain confidentiality, and the researcher was the only one in possession of the key to these codes.

Instrumentation

Three research instruments were used for the purpose of this study. The first instrument utilized was the Spiritual Well-Being and Quality of Life Scale. The second instrument used was participants' journals. The prompts for these journals were researcher-designed. The third instrument used for this study was a questionnaire that was also researcher-designed. The purpose of these instruments was to assess the perceived depth of spiritual health and satisfaction of the participants before and after participating in the research project.

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale was designed by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Craig W. Ellison. This survey is published in Hill and Hood's *Measures of Religiosity*. This instrument can be used to measure loneliness, quality of life, and spiritual well-being. A copy of this instrument

can be found in Appendix B. Paloutzian and Ellison provide instruction on how to use the instrument to assess aspects relevant to a particular study. The tool measures one's perceived "sense of well-being in relationship to God" (Peplau and Perlman 231). Additionally, it measures one's perceived "life's purpose and satisfaction" (231). This instrument was used as a pre-test and a post-test to evaluate change in spiritual well-being after participating in the study.

Participants' journals consisted of one question prompts that were emailed to the participants on a weekly basis. Each participant received an identical question relating to the contemplative prayer practice for that week. These journal prompts can be found in Appendix C. The prompts consist of a question specific to that form of contemplative prayer and meditation and the participants' response to the practice.

Questionnaires were sent to participants via email. The creation of these questionnaires was done with the use of SurveyMonkey software. The software aided in the collection and analysis of the data. One questionnaire was sent both prior to and after participation in the contemplative prayer and meditation program. The questionnaires included both open-ended questions and Likert scale responses relevant to the research questions. The questionnaires provided a comparison between pre-and post-study attitudes and perceived spiritual well-being and growth. A copy of these questionnaires can be found in Appendix D.

Expert Reviews

The researcher-designed questionnaires and journal prompts underwent expert review. The experts reviewing these instruments were the researcher's dissertation coach, Dr. Randy Jessen, as well as Dr. Ellen Marmon. These reviews served to evaluate and adjust the questions for maximum effectiveness in the study.

Reliability and Validity of Project Design

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of a contemplative prayer and meditation program to effect spiritual growth. The perception of spiritual growth is based on the depth one feels in their relationship with God. To assess this perception, questions must be asked that relate to how one feels practices of contemplation and meditation aid in furthering this relationship. These perceptions cannot be measured by statistical analysis. Therefore, this study was based on qualitative research.

The instruments used in this study were developed to assess one's perception of their relationship with God. The questionnaires and the pre-and post-tests were designed to assess how the participants viewed the depth of their relationship with God before and after participating in the study. These research tools also assessed how the contemplative prayer practices affected that relationship. All the participants in the program received the same instruments in the same manner. Factor analysis on The Spiritual Well-Being Scale resulted in a test-retest reliability coefficient of .93 (Peplau and Perlman 233).

Data Collection

The type of research in this study is intervention. Sensing states that this type of research happens when “the researcher becomes a coparticipant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (63). The purpose of intervention research is to “effect change through the specific plans of action they have in mind”(63). This project will employ qualitative research. In The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln write,

Qualitative research is a situational activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world

into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln 3)

This research project consisted of a six-week contemplative prayer and meditation program at College Avenue United Methodist Church. Before participation in the program, all participants signed informed consent forms and then completed the pre-test and questionnaire. They were informed that they would receive a weekly email with a journal writing prompt for that week's contemplative practice. Laurie L. Hyers writes of the practice of reflective journaling for qualitative research,

The diary method is distinguished in the qualitative methodological canon for its unparalleled potential to capture the details otherwise time-sensitive and context-specific phenomena...Just as the one-on-one interview harnesses the intimacy of conversation and the focus group harnesses the energy of interaction, the diary harnesses the power of immediate personal witness. (Hyers 27)

The program began with an orientation retreat of two hours. During this retreat, the participants were introduced to the program, presented with an abbreviated history of contemplative prayer and meditation. They were also given a brief overview of the practices of Lectio Divina, Solitude and Silence, Jesus Prayer, Centering, and Welcoming prayer.

Each week the participants learned about one of these practices. Each session covered the history of the practice, experiencing the practice together, and the instructions for the coming week. The participants completed weekly journal entries about their experience with the practice.

At the end of the six weeks, the participants completed the post-test, The Spiritual Well-Being Scale, and a researcher-designed questionnaire. The post-test and questionnaire's purpose was to assess what changes the participants experienced during the contemplative prayer program. The questionnaire was designed to assess changes in the participants' spiritual growth, discipleship, or perceived relationship with God.

Data Analysis

The data was collected in a qualitative research approach, using pre- and post-use of the Spiritual Wellbeing Scale, questionnaires, and participant journals. The purpose was to analyze whether the participants had experienced any perceived change in their spiritual growth or relationship with God by participating in the contemplative prayer program.

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale items were scored on a scale from 1 to 6. Higher scores represent greater perceived well-being. Items that are negatively worded are reversed scored. The odd-numbered questions are specifically written to assess religious well-being. These questions assess one's positive connection and sense of satisfaction in their relationship with God.

Scores of 10 – 20 indicate feelings of an unsatisfactory relationship with God; 21- 49 indicate moderate feelings of religious well-being, and scores of 50 – 60 indicate feelings of positivity in one's relationship with God (Paloutzian and Ellison 6). The scores from the pre-test and the post-test were compared to see if there were changes in perceived spiritual well-being. The participants' journal entries were categorized according to contemplative practice. They were

then reviewed, and codes were created to represent recurring words and themes. They were assessed for indicators of change in perceived spiritual growth and relationship with God.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

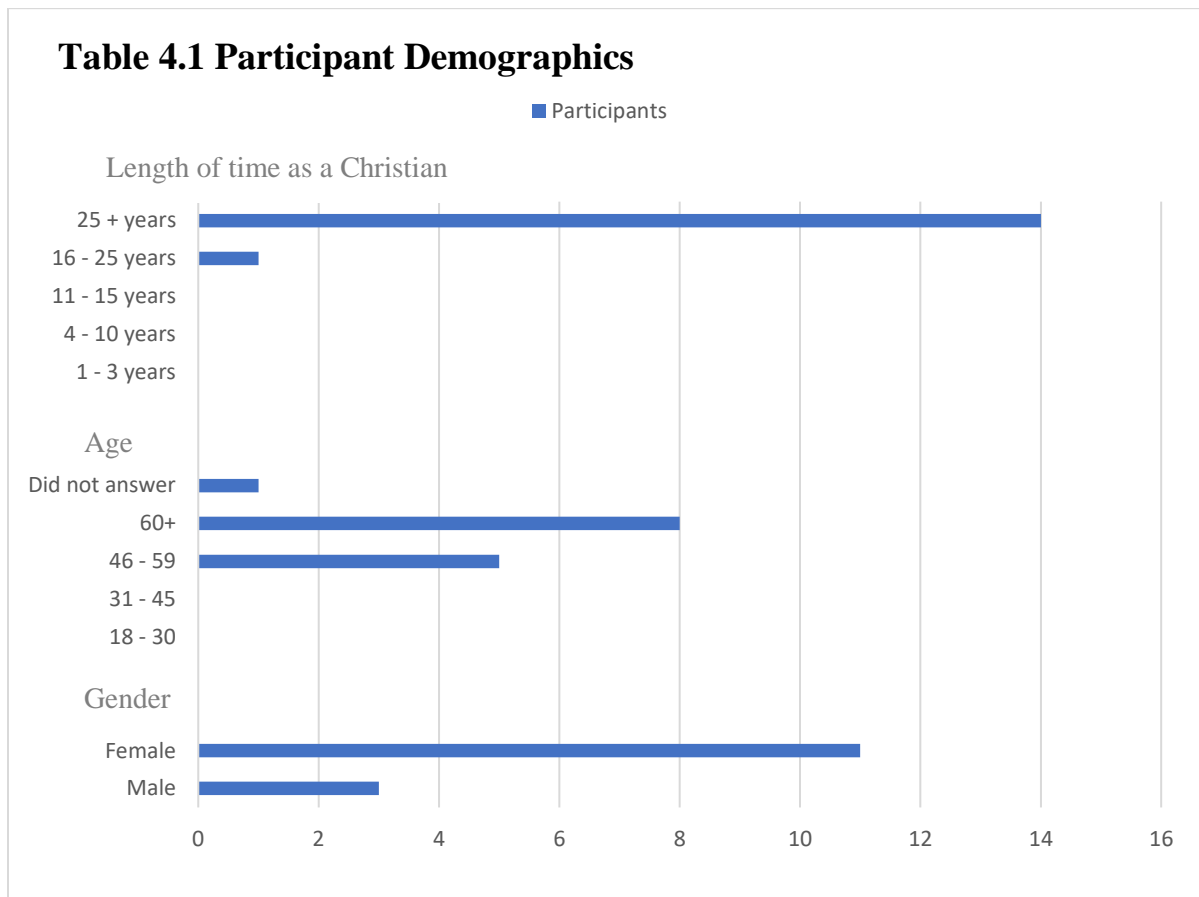
Most Christians would state that prayer is essential to one's spiritual growth. Most Christians also express some level of discontent with their prayer life. Additionally, when believers engage in prayer, they are accustomed to talking to God. Talking to God is vital. Talking to God, Christians confess, repent, express gratitude and praise. However, they may not often listen to what God has to say to them. This is difficult when people's minds are so preoccupied with all the minutiae of daily life. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of a contemplative prayer and meditation program to effect spiritual growth among a self-selected group of members of College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana.

This chapter describes the participants in the researcher-designed contemplative prayer and meditation program. It then presents the quantitative data from the pre-and post-test surveys as well as the qualitative data obtained from the pre-and post-test surveys and the participant journal entries. Finally, the chapter identifies major findings gathered from the data.

Participants

The participants in the study were all members of College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. Several months prior to the start of the contemplative prayer and meditation program, church members were informed of the program through bulletin announcements, newsletter articles, and verbal announcements. In the month before the start of the program, a letter was sent to all church members on the church's email distribution list to inform them of the dates of the study, the nature of the study (i.e., a doctoral research program), and a general overview of the program. Church members were invited to contact the researcher

with their interest in participating. Twenty people expressed interest initially, but due to family and other commitments, fifteen signed up to participate. During the study, one person dropped out due to time and technology constraints. Figure 4.1 illustrates the demographics of the participants.



Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

RQ #1: How would participants assess their prayer life and spiritual growth prior to participating in the program?

Two tools were used for collecting the answer to this research question. The tools were a pre-test survey administered through Survey Monkey and the Spiritual Well-being Assessment. In the Survey Monkey survey, question # 3 asked, “How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your spiritual growth in this current season of life?” The responses ranged from “feeling as if I have backslid the last couple of years” to “still groping” to “I am happy with a

more mature experience.” More of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction than satisfaction with their spiritual life at this time. The details of their responses can be found in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Pre-test Responses

Survey Monkey Pre-test Q #8 How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your spiritual growth in this current season of life?	
Negative Responses	Positive Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as strong as I would like • I think I need to make some changes. Hopefully, I will find greater satisfaction moving forward • Still groping, trying to find out what it is God wants me to do. • I feel as if I have backslid the last couple of years. It is not where I want it to be. • I have felt and continue to feel dismayed at the number of my fellow humans who have chosen a path of resistance and selfishness r/t the Covid virus and the need to protect each other. I do feel this had a somewhat negative impact on me. However, I do find some comfort in my daily spiritual readings, and though I feel my overall spiritual growth could use an overhaul, I try and focus on being positive and placing all of this in God’s hands. • Stuck, not hearing from God. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pretty good. There is time in my life to search, learn and practice spiritual growth. • Good but room for improvement • I am happy with what feels like a more mature experience. • 8/10 <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel satisfied with my spiritual growth in this current season of life as I have seen it increase over time while going through life’s trials. So I’m encouraged that it can continue to strengthen as I seek ways to increase my understanding of God and his will for us. <div style="background-color: #f2f2f2; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">Neutral Responses</div> <p style="text-align: center;">Contemplative prayer would be a different aspect of my spiritual experience.</p>

Question # 10 on the Survey Monkey pre-test survey presented the respondents with a Likert scale to respond to questions assessing their attitudes toward prayer and contemplative prayer. The following statements were answered using a 1 – 4 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly disagree). This data can be seen in Table 4.3

Table 4.3 Pre-test Likert Scale Responses

Q. 10	Respondents	1=strongly disagree	2=disagree	3=agree	4=strongly agree	Mean
I value prayer as a way to feel close to God.	14	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	42.86% 6	57.14% 8	3.57
I think prayer and meditation are the same thing.	13	7.69% 1	69.23% 9	23.08% 3	0.00% 0	2.15
I think contemplative prayer is above my pay grade as a Christian.	14	42.86% 6	35.71% 5	21.43% 3	0.00% 0	1.79
I believe anyone can learn how to pray contemplatively.	14	0.00% 0	21.43% 3	35.71% 5	42.86% 6	3.21
I usually sit down to pray.	14	7.14% 1	21.43% 3	50.0% 7	21.43% 3	2.86
I pray about little things all day long	14	14.29% 2	14.29% 2	50.0% 7	21.43% 3	2.79
Prayer is a discipline I practice several times each week.	14	14.29% 2	35.71% 5	35.71% 5	14.29% 2	2.50
I understand the purpose of prayer.	14	7.14% 1	14.29% 2	57.14% 8	21.43% 3	2.93
I'm comfortable praying silently with other people in a group.	14	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	50.00% 7	50.00% 7	3.50
I'm comfortable being quiet in God's presence (by myself).	14	7.14% 1	7.14% 1	14.29% 2	71.10% 10	3.50

The Spiritual Well-being scale is graded on a scale from 1 to 6. A higher score indicates a greater perception of well-being. Questions that are worded in the negative are reverse scored. The odd-numbered items are directly related to religious well-being. The questions are intended to evaluate one's feelings of positive connection and feelings of satisfaction in their relationship with God. Scores of 10 – 20 indicate feelings of an unsatisfactory relationship with God. Scores of 21 – 49 indicate feelings of moderate spiritual well-being; scores of 50 – 60 indicate positive feelings about one's relationship with God (Paloutzian and Ellison 6). The results of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale Pre-test are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.4

Spiritual Well-Being Scale Pre-test	
Responses	8
Score	Level of Perceived Spiritual Well-Being
36	Moderate
39	Moderate
45	Moderate
47	Moderate
49	Moderate
54	Moderate
55	Positive
60	Positive
Mean Response	48.13

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

RQ #2: How would the participants describe the change in their prayer life and spiritual growth after participating in the program?

Three instruments were used for collecting the answer to this research question. The instruments included a post-test survey administered through Survey Monkey and a re-test of the Spiritual Well-being Assessment. Additionally, the participants provided journal entries in response to each of the prayer techniques taught as a part of the contemplative prayer program. The Survey Monkey survey, question # 4, repeated question # 8 of the pre-test, “How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your spiritual growth in this current season of life?” The responses to this question can be seen in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Post-test Question 4 Responses

Survey Monkey Post Test Question # 4
Negative Responses

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like it to be more consistent and stronger • Average. not consistent but instead growth, then plateau
Positive Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8/10 • My spiritual depth has grown over the past months • I feel that I am very satisfied in this season of life. Turning to God for love and support in dealing with loss and disappointment has strengthened my relationship with God. I turn to Go throughout the day for support, direction, and wisdom. • I feel my spiritual growth has been strengthened and reinforced after learning the new and various forms of contemplative prayer. CP has been a different way for me to connect and feel closer to God and allow myself to be more open to God's presence. • I have a long way to go, but this study has given me tools to make good progress. I am very hopeful. • Improving • Good but need further growth with study and discipline. • My prayer life has grown with new prayer practices

Question # 5 on the Survey Monkey post-test survey presented the respondents with a Likert scale to respond to questions assessing their attitudes toward prayer. The following statements were answered using a 1 – 4 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly disagree). This data can be seen in Table 4.6

Table 4.6 Question 5 Post-test Responses

Q. 10	Respondents	1=strongly disagree	2=disagree	3=agree	4=strongly agree	Mean
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I value prayer as a way to feel close to God.	11	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	9.09% 1	90.91% 10	3.91
I think prayer and meditation are the same thing.	11	9.09% 1	63.64% 7	27.27% 3	0.00% 0	2.18
I think contemplative prayer is above my pay grade as a Christian.	11	90.91% 10	9.09% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	1.09
I believe anyone can learn how to pray contemplatively.	11	9.09% 1	0.00% 0	9.09% 1	81.82% 9	3.64
I usually sit down to pray.	11	0.00% 0	18.18% 2	54.55% 6	27.27% 3	3.09
I pray about little things all day long	11	0.00% 0	9.09% 1	45.45% 5	45.45% 5	3.36
Prayer is a discipline I practice several times each week.	11	0.00% 0	45.45% 5	27.27% 3	27.27% 3	2.82
I understand the purpose of prayer.	11	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	27.27% 3	72.73% 8	3.73
I'm comfortable praying silently with other people in a group.	11	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	27.27% 3	72.73% 8	3.73
I'm comfortable being quiet in God's presence (by myself).	11	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	100.00% 11	4.00

The Spiritual Well-being scale was administered again after participating in the contemplative prayer and meditation program. As before, the scale was graded on a scale from 1 to 6. A higher score indicated a greater perception of spiritual well-being. The questions that were worded in the negative were reverse scored. The odd-numbered items are those that relate directly to religious or spiritual well-being. These questions evaluate one's feelings of satisfaction and positive connection to God. Scores of 21 – 49 indicate feelings of moderate spiritual well-being; scores of 50 – 60 indicate positive feelings about one's relationship with God (Paloutzian and Ellison 6). The results of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale Post-test are shown in Table 4.7

Table 4.7

Spiritual Well-Being Scale Post-test	
Responses	7
Score	Level of Perceived Spiritual Well-Being
28	Moderate
34	Moderate
45	Moderate
46	Moderate
51	Moderate
53	Moderate
60	Positive
Mean	45.29

The participants in the contemplative prayer and meditation program were given a journal prompt to respond to each week after attending the session and having the opportunity to practice the technique in the coming week. Each prayer prompt was alike, with the exception of the name of the technique for the week. As an example, one of the prompts was, “This week we learned about the practice of Lectio Divina. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?” Responses that indicated some sort of change or shift in the participants’ prayer life are recorded in Table 4.8

Table 4.8 Participant Journal Responses

Prayer Practice	Comments
Lectio Divina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I thought the passage was all about worrying. That’s not something that I struggle with, so I was doubting that would discover much from those verses. Then I got to the phrase, “desire first and foremost,” and I knew that was the phrase about me. It’s not about worrying but rather that I need to re-focus and shift what is first and foremost with me.” • “[This practice] does not allow you to superficially “gloss over” a word, phrase, verse, etc. and allows me to be more receptive to communing with God.” • “I have found more depth of meaning to the overall scripture and to also feeling more connected to God in receiving his message.” • “...this prayer, really focusing on a small amount of scripture was very powerful.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have noticed that hearing myself read [the scripture] slowly outloud (sic) slowly I catch different nuances that I didn’t catch reading it silently.”
Silence and Solitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Going into this prayerful practice is very comforting knowing that God’s presence is already with me in the moment. I also feel that God is certainly listening to me...I am expressing to God my cares and concerns, worries, as well as feeling some hope.” • “My sacred place is working out well. I felt peaceful and calm.” • “I found myself becoming anxious as I focused on the things I needed to release to God. Then, I realized that it wasn’t that I didn’t trust God, but that I didn’t trust myself. It is the feeling of a lack of control. The practice was uncomfortable but it brought to light some self-work that needs to be done.” • “I was able to share some roadblocks to God. It felt freeing to let these go for now. And I was grateful for being able to release these to God’s care and seek his will for direction. During this process, I felt at peace and loved and care for by God.” • “I felt like I was praising God. Yes, submitting before him and praising him.”
Jesus Prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This works well for me. I am journaling. Here are some prayers that I have been praying as I walk and in my quiet time: Jesus Christ, Son of God, protect us for we are vulnerable. Jesus Christ, Son of God, gather me in, for I am afraid. Jesus Christ, Son of God, forgive me for I have lied. Jesus Christ, Son of God, lead me for I am lost...” • “I was able to consistently clear my mind of errant and unwanted thoughts and “clutter” and focus on this prayerful recitation to Jesus. I also listed various request for Christ mercy and intervention at the end of the prayer. I found myself coming away very positive and fulfilled.” • “I find it peaceful and calming. I have used the prayer daily, often throughout the day and as a part of my daily devotions. • “I have found myself using [this prayer] to seek God’s mercy and direction in areas of my life that I need to improve, in and to let go of things I have no control over. [This prayer] helped me feel connected to God in the moment and to experience his presence.”

<p>Welcoming Prayer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I thought that this [practice] would be one that wouldn’t grab me like the other practices. However, when I spent more time experiencing it, I found it very meaningful.” • “I was able to ACKNOWLEDGE my needs, my sin, my powerlessness, and my unworthiness. I WELCOMED God’s presence, wholeness, cleansing, forgiveness, and acceptance. • I welcomed God’s control over my thoughts (this is hard). • I let go of my neediness and my control. • Owning my issues, accepting them, and welcoming God’s perspective on everything is very powerful.
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The comments made by the participants in the research study revealed several trends and themes. The participants may have come to a particular practice with certain assumptions only to find those disproven. Additionally, there may have been hesitancy about a practice, thinking that this practice would not work for them. Afterward, to their surprise, they found the prayer practice very useful. Many common themes surfaced in the study, particularly “peace,” “calm,” and “comfort.”

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

RQ #3 What were the least helpful and most helpful aspects of the program?

The tool used to collect this data was the participants’ journals. The most helpful and least helpful aspects of the program were coded and lifted from the weekly responses. There was also a dedicated journal prompt asking the participant to give feedback on the most and least helpful aspects of the program. Ten people responded to this prompt. Overall, they expressed appreciation for the format of the sessions and the new practices themselves. Two people expressed that they found that portion of the session covering the history of the practice the least helpful. Ironically, two people also identified this as helpful, indicating that this likely attributed to personal preference.

Table 4.9 Least and Most Helpful Aspects of Program

Weekly Practice	Least Helpful	Most Helpful
Lectio Divina		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I liked the steps to follow.” • “The steps outline for us to follow in our homework helped me to receive God’s message for me.” • “The presentation in class helped me to learn about Lectio Divina and how to practice.”
Solitude and Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This practice didn’t work well for me.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Enjoyed Zoom session.” • “Group Practice gives me structure in my prayer life.” • “Glad that we have the recordings if we miss or need to see the instruction again.”
Jesus Prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Didn’t work well for me. I tend to self-judge and self-doubt with this practice.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This practice works well for me.” • “I really like this practice.”
Welcoming Prayer		
General Remarks		

Summary of Major Findings

Several major findings became evident after analyzing the data provided by the research tools.

1. Participants' level of satisfaction with their prayer life increased after a focused time of instruction and practice of new prayer techniques.
2. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with their overall spiritual well-being.
3. The participants found that focused instruction and practice of prayer techniques helped them to feel closer to God.
4. The participants discovered that the practice of contemplative prayer was available to all Christians and not just to the "superstars" of faith.
5. The participants found that they were able to become comfortable sitting alone in God's presence.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the impact of a contemplative prayer and meditation program to effect spiritual growth among a self-selected group of participants from College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. Churches are filled with people who profess to be Christians, yet many of these people do not understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. They have unfulfilling relationships with God and are dissatisfied with their spiritual growth.

This chapter discusses five findings from this research project and describes how these findings correspond to personal observations, the literature review, and the Biblical and theological framework presented earlier in this dissertation. The limitations of this study will be explored, as will unexpected findings and recommendations for further examination.

Major Findings

Participants' level of satisfaction regarding their prayers lives increased after a focused time of instruction and practice of new prayer techniques.

In the post-test, after participating in the contemplative prayer and meditation program, participants made fewer negative responses about their prayer lives.

As a pastor, the researcher has frequently heard people express dissatisfaction or guilt about their relationship with God, especially regarding their prayer life. Those participating in this project expressed these same things prior to the program. These feelings were reflected in the pre-tests completed by the participants.

As the program progressed, the participants expressed their appreciation of new prayer techniques verbally. They articulated that these new practices were providing new ways to connect with God. Additionally, they expressed a level of hopefulness that this experience would lead to improved spiritual growth.

In the literature review, there were several examples from the lives of contemplatives, both ancient and contemporary, who expressed how contemplative prayer positively affected their prayer life and connection with God. St. Francis of Assisi found joy in the simple act of engaging in contemplation in nature and, thus, experienced peace and satisfaction in his relationship with the Creator (Davis 52,53). Henri Nouwen found that through contemplative prayer one could experience the compassion and forgiveness of God. He wrote that through contemplation, one could see themselves as beloved and extend that understanding to others as well (*The Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen 22).

Psalms 1 records the Psalmist thoughts that one could find delight in meditating on God's word by day and night. Joshua, in Chapter 1 of the same, exhorted the people of God that they would find success and prosperity in meditation upon God's laws. Success and prosperity can be defined as finding satisfaction as one experiences communion with God in prayer.

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently set time aside to spend time with his Father. Jesus was intentional about setting this time aside, as shown in Luke 6. Jesus, God incarnate, found satisfaction and solace in spending intentional time with the other members of the Godhead. In John 15, Jesus describes the intimate, fulfilling, and fruitful relationship with God. This relationship is achieved by abiding in Christ. It can be ascertained, based on the entirety of scripture, that the process of abiding includes a prayerful dwelling and abiding communion with Christ.

The participants expressed dissatisfaction with their overall spiritual well-being. This may indicate that after spending more time in focused prayer, they were more aware of their spiritual deficiency.

The researcher has observed in her years of pastoral ministry that people can become very comfortable in their spiritual lives even if they are spiritually anemic. Christians have become accustomed to spiritual mediocrity. It has been observed that when one begins to be intentional about their spiritual growth by intentionally devoting time to prayer and meditating upon scripture, one's spiritual poverty becomes evident. One of the participants in this research study stated that they became aware of how short they were from attaining God's standard. There was a statement made to the effect that God had shown the participant that they "had issues they needed to work on." These observations would support why the Spiritual Well-Being Scale scores could have decreased after participation in the project.

St. Bernard is recorded as believing that contemplation and meditation were essential to the process of sanctification (Merton, *The Last of the Fathers* 80-81). Merton wrote that meditation allows the Spirit of God to penetrate to the core of the being, illuminating the presence of the false self. The false self is that fleshly part of a person that wants to live outside of the will of God. The practice of meditation has a purifying effect upon the one meditating on God's word and presence (Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 34) .

From the Biblical/Theological framework, those who surrender themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit do not always find it to be a comfortable experience. In 1 Samuel 3, the scriptures record God calling young Samuel in the middle of the night. The message God had for Samuel was a word of warning, correction, and judgment upon the house of Eli, the High priest. The Apostle Paul in Romans Chapter 12 states that the mind is renewed, and one is transformed by

presenting oneself as a living sacrifice. Contemplative prayer is presenting oneself to God in an act of surrender and submission. In this way, the renewal of one's mind and the work of transformation takes place. As one's mind is renewed and transformed, they might discover that they are not as far along in their spiritual journey towards Christlikeness as they had previously thought. In this way, the scores on the spiritual well-being scale may have been lower after the program than prior to the program.

The participants found that focused instruction and practice of prayer techniques helped them to feel closer to God.

The number of those responding "strongly agree" to the statement: "I value prayer as a way to feel close to God" increased after participating in the prayer program.

It has been the researcher's observation that people are often intimidated by prayer. They do not feel as if they pray enough or pray well-enough. Because they do not feel confident in their ability to pray, they may pray even less. These people do not feel as if prayer enables them to feel close to God. The participants in this research study expressed the same sentiments. However, the number of respondents answering that prayer did help them feel closer to God increased after the research project.

When people are introduced to new prayer practices, they feel as if they have been given a framework and new tools to improve their prayer life. The participants in this study expressed an appreciation of having a structured means by which to pray. Often neglected in the practice of prayer is the aspect of listening. Participants discovered that they experienced God's presence as they made the time to sit in God's presence for verbal prayer and also for listening prayer. Being encouraged to journal these experiences seemed to help them process them. They expressed sensing the presence of God and feeling comforted and at peace.

Gregory of Nyssa made a significant contribution to the Church in the understanding that God was both transcendent and immanent. God is both “unknowable” and “knowable.” God, the Creator of all things, is totally “other” than humanity but at the same time desiring relationship with humans. This understanding is consistent with Augustine’s understanding of the human ability to grow in the knowledge of God through contemplation. This is also reflected in St. Bernard’s experience of *Lectio Divina* as the “kiss of God.” Julian of Norwich’s writings did not focus on guilt, as was common in her day, but rather on the love of God, which was knowable through contemplation. Ignatius of Loyola taught that one could experience the love and presence of God through prayer, the scriptures, nature, and contemplation (Frykholm 118–119).

Contemporary contemplatives such as Thomas Merton believed that prayer and contemplation were the way of “crucifying” or putting to death the “false self,” the ego that stood in opposition to God’s presence and will (Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 34). Thus, the “true self” was nurtured through contemplative prayer (7). The true self is the person as created by God, living in total dependence upon and surrender to God. Henri Nouwen shared Merton’s understanding. Nouwen taught that in contemplation and prayer, one could experience what it means to be God’s beloved (*Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen 20).

When God created human beings, it was with the purpose of relationship. The Genesis creation stories indicate that God placed man and woman in the Garden of Eden to enjoy its fruits and be in communion with their creator. When sin entered the picture through disobedience, humans fractured the relationship they had enjoyed with their Creator. God, grieved by their disobedience, established the sacrificial system as a way of mending this relationship. The sacrificial system was not just that of animals and produce, but prayers were also offered as sacrificial offerings. In this way, prayer was part of the means of relationship with God.

However, prayer was not just a sacrificial ritual; it was the means of communing with God. In the book of Psalms, the Psalmist often speaks of how he experiences the love of God through prayer, for example in Psalm 69:13. In the New Testament, Jesus serves as the example of prayer as being a means of being close to his Father. Jesus was intentional about taking time in solitude and prayer, for example in Luke 6:12. The Apostle Paul was a great man of prayer and experienced it as a way of being in communion with God, for example in Romans 15: 13 and Ephesians 1: 15-23).

The participants discovered that the practice of contemplative prayer was available to all Christians, and not just the “superstars” of faith.

The number of those responding that they strongly disagreed with the statement: “I think contemplative prayer is above my pay grade as a Christian” increased from 42.86% before the program to 90.91% after the program.

It has been the researcher’s observation that people tend to have lofty images of contemplative prayer and meditation. They tend to think of monastics spending endless hours in their cells in solitude and silence or hyper-spiritual saints caught up in mysterious visions. People think that they do not have the depth of spirituality to practice contemplative prayer or meditation for themselves. Before this research study, roughly over half of the participants believed the same things. This belief was evidenced in their responses on the study pre-test.

During the program, the participants discovered that there are contemplative prayer practices and techniques that they could learn. They discovered that contemplative prayer and meditation does not have to mean just sitting in silence waiting for something to happen. Instead, there are formats, structures, techniques, and practices to learn that can equip anyone in contemplative prayer and meditation.

The literature review revealed that the Desert Fathers and Mothers were ordinary men and women who left their cities and religious institutions to live in simplicity and prayer. They were not contemplatives because they were Christians of exemplary status. Instead, they were contemplatives because they invested time in the practices of solitude and silent prayer (Beasley-Topliffe 6).

The literature review also covered the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius to aid pilgrims on their spiritual journey. The Spiritual Exercises were intended for anyone who wanted to grow in their faith (Silf 14). The literature review also discussed the fact that St. Thomas Aquinas in *On Prayer and the Contemplative Life* indicated that the contemplative life was the natural outcome of one who was dedicated to their spiritual growth (Aquinas loc. 63).

The Psalms are resplendent with the Psalmists' references to prayer and meditation. While many of the Psalms were written by the shepherd turned King, David, it is essential to keep in mind that these songs and poems reflecting his spiritual life were written at various points of his life, even his lowest points. When he writes in Psalm 1 of meditating on God's law, he writes, "Blessed is the one," inferring that prayer and meditation were intended for all those who seek God. There is no indication that only those who are spiritual giants are to contemplate and meditate. Once again, Jesus is the example of intentionally spending time in solitude with God. He gives no indication that this is a practice that is set aside for himself and other spiritual giants. Jesus is the example of what the spiritual life should look like for the typical seeker of God. The Apostle Paul prayed for the believers at Ephesus that they would be given the "spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Ephesians 1: 17). Paul does not suggest that this is intended only for the greatest of believers.

The participants found that they were able to become comfortable sitting alone in God's presence.

Every one of respondents replied "strongly agree" to the statement "I'm comfortable being quiet in God's presence (by myself)" after the program as opposed to only 71.10% of respondents before the program.

It has been the researcher's personal observation that people have difficulty sitting in quiet and solitude in general. They live in a culture that values busyness and productivity. Sitting and "doing nothing" is devalued. It is no wonder that Christians have difficulty sitting in silent prayer and meditation. They are told, "Don't just sit there! Do something!" On the other hand, in Psalm 46:10 God says, "Be still and know that I am God."

The participants in this research study were no different from most other people who find sitting in silence difficult. At the beginning of the study, many commented on how difficult it was for them to sit in silence for any length of time. However, once they were given techniques, prayers to pray silently, and scriptures to meditate on, they found it possible. Many started with a short amount of time, a few minutes, and then gradually increased their time.

Thomas à Kempis wrote in his work, *The Love of Solitude and Silence*, that all people could learn to spend time in silence with God and that they should do so that they could grow in knowledge and understanding of God. Additionally, David Benner wrote that meditation on God's word actually draws people into silence. The literature review also covered the work of Father Thomas Keating and centering prayer. Centering prayer is a practice that focuses primarily on sitting in silence. The practice includes the use of a sacred word to aid one in their focus upon God. This practice, in particular, equips one to sit, with growing comfort, in the presence of God (*Intimacy with God*, Keating 39).

In Psalm 119, the Psalmist frequently speaks of his love of meditating on God's laws. In Psalm 63, the Psalmist writes of meditating on God through the watches of the night. Most Christians today would attribute this kind of devotion to God as that of the superstars of faith referred to earlier. However, by learning new prayer and meditation practices, the participants in this project discovered that they too could feel comfortable sitting in God's presence for increasingly more extended periods.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

1. The first implication is that people can find new satisfaction in their prayer lives and relationships with God through the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation. Most church members express dissatisfaction with their prayer lives. Often, they have preconceived ideas about what prayer should look like, how long one should pray, and what one can expect from a vibrant prayer life. These preconceived ideas manifest in lofty ideals that they think they cannot attain. When taught new prayer practices and techniques, they learn that they too can have a growing, vital, and satisfactory prayer life.

2. The second implication of this study is that contemplative prayer and meditation fosters spiritual growth. The participants in this study found that as they practiced contemplative prayer they became aware of areas in their lives that were not measuring up to God's standard of righteousness. One of the participants stated that they discovered that they had a lot of work to do (Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 34).

3. A third implication of this study is that contemplative prayer and meditation foster a sense of peace and calm. Several of the participants reported feeling calm, peaceful, and loved as a result of practicing contemplative prayer and meditation. Anxiety and stress are prevalent in

today's culture. Contemplative prayer and meditation provide a means by which people can experience the presence of God as a source of peace and comfort, especially in troubling times.

4. A final and perhaps most significant implication for ministry is that the implementation of contemplative prayer and meditation could revitalize the Church, especially the Western Church. In an article for Harper's Magazine, Fred Bahnson writes of the North American Church's reduction of Christianity to a political platform. The conservative faction focuses upon "protecting the Christian family from the 'LGBT agenda'" (62). On the other hand, he writes, on the left, "The drive to stay politically relevant makes it hard to talk about prayer or salvation or Jesus unless it's prayer that everybody at a rally can get behind, a salvation that exists in this world, or a Jesus who is just a political rabble-rouser" (62). He concludes, "What the early monks and Christian mystics who followed sought was union – an intense experience of inwardness that is glaringly absent in what many of us get from American Christianity today. Perhaps this absence is the real reason for the mass exodus from churches. Perhaps it is not Christianity that many followers are disappointed in but Christendom" (62).

The American Church has been in steady decline for decades. During this period, there have been "worship wars" over contemporary versus traditional worship and the polarization of Conservative and Progressive Christianity. What has been missing has been the experience of the love of the Creator, the presence of the living Christ, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Embracing the practices of Christian contemplation and meditation could be the key to the revitalization and renewal of the twenty-first century Church.

Limitations of the Study

This study was done with a relatively small pool of participants. The average attendance of College Avenue Church is approximately 150. Fourteen people initially signed up for this program and participated in the pre-tests. The post-tests had eleven respondents. One participant withdrew because of technology issues, the other two because of conflicting time commitments. One of the most significant limitations was implementing this study during a global pandemic. The program was conducted via the internet platform Zoom. There were benefits and drawbacks to having to conduct the study virtually. One of the significant drawbacks was dealing with technology problems. One participant withdrew because they had difficulty connecting to Zoom. Another drawback was the distractions of being at home. One participant, in particular, moved to a different room each week, trying to find a place where she would not be disturbed during the session.

Unexpected Observations

Surprisingly, there were some benefits to working with Zoom. By participating from home, participants were able to set their space up in a way that felt more conducive. By having the ability to mute microphones and turn off cameras, participants were not distracted by others during the practice time. Participants also found they could pray a blessing over each other by looking from participant to participant without the awkwardness that they may have felt in person.

Contemplative prayer and meditation are not practices that will appeal to every person. Personality types factor into what spiritual practices appeal to various individuals. That being said, the researcher found it impossible to predict who might benefit from contemplative practices and who would not. There were participants in this program who did not seem introspective, and there were participants who seemed too extroverted to appreciate or benefit from contemplation.

These people appeared to enjoy and benefit from the program as much as any of the other participants.

Recommendations

The number of participants in this program was sufficient for the breadth of this study. However, it would be good to see if the data remained consistent with a larger study group. The study should also be done in person rather than virtually. Technology provides its own difficulties and distractions. An in-person dynamic could improve upon the program.

Beginning this program with a one-day retreat might improve it as well. Conducting the study during this pandemic has led to people having what is being referred to as “zoom fatigue.” Therefore, a day-long retreat was not feasible. During a retreat, more time could be spent on the history of contemplative prayer, more group discussion could occur, and some additional practices could be added.

The journal prompts gave the participants the opportunity to reflect upon each of the practices they learned. The prompts could be expanded to provide the opportunity for further reflection. Additional questions could be added to facilitate this reflection.

The program could also be adapted for use with youth. This contemplative prayer program could be added to confirmation classes. Learning such prayer practices could provide young people with a foundation for a meaningful prayer life for the rest of their lives.

The program could be expanded to include more practices. The participants could continue meeting to practice these new techniques. Doing so could provide them the opportunity to deepen their contemplative practice.

Postscript

This research has deepened my appreciation for contemplative practices and has enriched my understanding of this particular aspect of church history. I was drawn to contemplative practices even before I knew anything about contemplative prayer and Christian meditation. I am even more passionate about its role in spiritual growth and discipleship than I was before I started the research.

I am hopeful that with the renewed interest in meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative practices the Church could reclaim her historic practices. If so, the Church could move beyond partisanism and rediscover the transformative power of the living God. The Church could once again become the salvific presence of the Body of Christ in the world today.

APPENDICES

- A. Informed Consent Form
- B. Spiritual Well-Being Assessment
- C. Journal Prompts
- D. SurveyMonkey Questionnaires.

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

The Role of Contemplative Prayer and Meditation in Spiritual Growth and Formation

Researcher: Karen Bray
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Phone: (765) 289-7337

You are invited to be in a research study being done by **Karen Bray** from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you have indicated an interest in the practice of contemplative prayer and meditation.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a six-week program beginning with a three-hour introductory retreat and 1 hour sessions the following five weeks. In these sessions, you will learn about and experience other various practices of contemplative prayer and meditation. These sessions will either be held in Wesley Hall of College Avenue Church or online as deemed appropriate at the time.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked complete online pre-test and post-test surveys, a spiritual wellbeing questionnaire, and weekly participant journals. Names on these instruments will be coded by a research assistant to assure that the researcher receives anonymous information. The researcher will not have access to the names associated with this information.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable while you are in the study, please tell **Karen Bray**. If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want.

You are free to refuse to answer any of the questions.

You are free to withdraw from the program at any time without penalty.

You can ask **Karen Bray** 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

Buyer: Karan Bray (kbray01@gmail.com)
Transaction ID: 6F8665710F053431

SWB Scale

For each of the following statements circle the choice that best indicates the extent of your agreement or disagreement as it describes your personal experience:

SA = Strongly Agree	D = Disagree
MA = Moderately Agree	MD = Moderately Disagree
A = Agree	SD = Strongly Disagree

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 1. I don't find much satisfaction in private prayer with God. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 2. I don't know who I am, where I came from, or where I'm going. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 3. I believe that God loves me and cares about me. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 4. I feel that life is a positive experience. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 5. I believe that God is impersonal and not interested in my daily situations. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 6. I feel unsettled about my future. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 7. I have a personally meaningful relationship with God. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 8. I feel very fulfilled and satisfied with life. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 9. I don't get much personal strength and support from my God | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 10. I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed in. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 11. I believe that God is concerned about my problems. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 12. I don't enjoy much about life. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 13. I don't have a personally satisfying relationship with God. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 14. I feel good about my future. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 15. My relationship with God helps me not to feel lonely. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 16. I feel that life is full of conflict and unhappiness. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 17. I feel most fulfilled when I'm in close communion with God. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 18. Life doesn't have much meaning. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 19. My relation with God contributes to my sense of well-being. | SA MA A D MD SD |
| 20. I believe there is some real purpose for my life. | SA MA A D MD SD |

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Appendix C

Contemplative Prayer and Meditation Program Journal Prompts

To be delivered and answered via email each week of the program.

- **Week 1** – This week we discussed the history of contemplative practice and heard an overview of the practices we will be learning about. What were any key insights you took away from our session?
- **Week 2** - This week we learned about the practice of solitude and silence. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?
- **Week 3** - This week we learned about the practice of the Jesus Prayer. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?
- **Week 4** - This week we learned about the practice of Lectio Divina. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?
- **Week 5** - This week we learned about the practice of Centering Prayer. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?
- **Week 5** - This week we learned about the practice of Welcoming Prayer. What were any key insights you took away from our session and/or your practice this week?

Appendix D

Contemplative Prayer and Meditation Program Questionnaire

*** 1. I have read and signed the Informed Consent Letter**

Yes No

2. Gender

Male Female

3. Age

18-30

31 - 45

46 - 59

60+

4. How long have you been a Christian?

1 - 3 years

4 - 10 years

11 - 15 years

16 - 25 years

25+ years

5. Have you had any practice or experience with contemplative prayer and meditation?

Yes No

6. What expectations do you have in participating in a contemplative prayer and meditation experience?

7. What words or images come to mind when you hear the phrase "contemplative prayer and meditation?"

7. How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your spiritual growth in this current season of life?

8. What do you think would strengthen your spiritual growth or faith at this point in your life?

Rate the following the statements 1 - 4

(1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree)

	1	2	3	4
I value prayer a way to feel close to God.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think prayer and meditation <u>are</u> the same thing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think contemplative prayer is above my pay grade as a Christian.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe that anyone <u>can</u> learn how to pray contemplatively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually sit down to pray.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I pray about little things all day long.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prayer is a discipline I practice several times each week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand the purpose of prayer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<u>I'm</u> comfortable praying silently with other people in a group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm comfortable <u>being</u> quiet in God's presence (by myself).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Contemplative Prayer and Meditation Program Questionnaire (Post-test)

I have read and signed the Informed Consent Form

Yes

No

What words or images come to mind when you hear the phrase "contemplative prayer and meditation?"

How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your spiritual growth in this current season of life?

What do you think would strengthen your spiritual growth or faith at this point in your life?

5. Rate the following statements 1 - 4 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree)

	1	2	3	4
I value prayer as a way to feel close to God.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think prayer and meditation are the same thing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think contemplative prayer is above my pay grade as a Christian.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe anyone can learn how to pray contemplatively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually sit down to pray.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I pray about little things all day long.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prayer is a discipline I practice several times a week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand the purpose of prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm comfortable praying silently with other people in a group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm comfortable being quiet in God's presence by myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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