

Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh On Me¹
A Study of Discernment and Spiritual Relationship Through Spiritual Direction
Within the United Church of Canada

By
Janet M. McCormick

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Janet M. McCormick
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Approved by: Dr. Susan Willhauck
Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology
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¹ *Voices United*: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada, (Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), Hymn Number 376.

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0032019
Title of Research Project:	"Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me": A Study of Discernment and Spiritual Relationships Through Spiritual Direction within the United Church of Canada
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Janet McCormick

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 25 August 2019 to 1 May 2020

Dated this 30th day of October, 2019 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Dr. Alyda Faber
Chair, Research Ethics Board
Atlantic School of Theology
660 Francklyn Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3H 3B5

Abstract

This research project explores the understanding of and the experience of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay. This is a Qualitative Research study in general and a Phenomenological study in particular. The goal of the research is to explore participants' lived experience of spiritual direction. Research was conducted through an initial survey followed by personal interviews. Participants were drawn from across Canada and represented fifteen of the sixteen Regions within the United Church of Canada. Participants represented both urban and rural congregations and included male, female and members of the LGBTQ community. Both clergy and lay members were represented equally. Participants were drawn from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This research explored each participant's understanding of spiritual direction, their experience of spiritual direction, and the impact that spiritual direction has had on their personal relationship with God, their community of faith, and their interaction with the wider world. Interviews were also conducted with several former Moderators of the United Church of Canada and several members of faculty at United Church Theological Colleges across Canada. Using the process of phenomenology and the themes of this investigation, the study identifies common experiences from the data and suggests opportunities for the church that affirm the benefits of spiritual direction for individuals and for the church as a whole.

Introduction

The title of this phenomenological qualitative research study is “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me²”: A study of Discernment and Spiritual Relationship Through Spiritual Direction, Within the United Church of Canada.” Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me³” is the title of a hymn found in *Voices United*, a Hymn Book of the United Church of Canada. The words of the first verse are: “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.⁴” It seems to me that this puts all of the responsibility on God. For the Spirit of God to fall on us and be effective, do we not need to be receptive? Do we not need to be open and available, ready to work in cooperation with that Spirit? How might we nurture that possibility?

Spiritual direction has long been a part of a journey of faith. In the Hebrew Testament, God led humanity, through the law and the prophets. The Psalms and Proverbs provide guidance for a faithful life. In the New Testament, Jesus provided guidance and direction through his teachings and parables, and Paul provided spiritual guidance through letters to fledgling Christian churches.

In about 312 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and the Roman Catholic Church came into being. It wasn't long before tension developed between the eastern and western factions of the church, but both factions adopted ascetic

² *Voices United*: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada, (Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), Hymn Number 376.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *Voices United*: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada, (Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), Hymn Number 376.

approaches to the spiritual life. When the Eastern Orthodox Church separated from the Roman Catholic Church, it encompassed the role of the spiritual elder while, in the Roman Catholic Church, bishops, abbots, and abbesses supported the spiritual formation of monks, nuns, and priests whom they supervised.

In the third and fourth centuries, believers travelled to the desert in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to consult spiritual guides known as the “Desert Fathers” or the “Desert Hermits.” By the fifth century early Christian theologians were beginning to write about listening for God’s guidance through prayer and the experiences of daily life.

In Celtic Spirituality, it was traditional for each individual to be assigned a “soul friend” to accompany them on their life’s journey.

Edward Sellner described the Celtic spirituality of “soul friend” or “anamchara,” which originated with the Celts but was adapted to the Christian tradition under Saint Patrick. Sellner wrote: *“for years the people of Ireland participated in those relationships of self-disclosure and guidance. The practice was carried to Britain and the European continent when Irish missionaries travelled abroad. It was also encountered by many other Christians who came to study in Ireland, ... This form of spiritual mentoring gained in popularity as more people found it helpful for their ongoing conversion and spiritual growth. Although initially opposed by Roman church authorities, spiritual mentoring eventually came to be recognized as a necessary part of Christian spirituality.”*⁵

⁵ Edward C. Sellner, *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1990), 70-71.

In the fourth century, theologian John Cassian introduced mentoring in monasteries. He suggested that each novice be mentored by a more experienced monk. Cassian's guidelines were adopted by St. Ignatius of Loyola and by Benedict of Nursia and subsequently became the norm in Jesuit and Benedictine monasteries. A major change occurred following the Reformation. The reformed churches severed from everything related to the Roman Catholic Church. Spiritual direction was amongst the casualties. The Anglican Church, which separated from Roman Catholicism, but retained many Roman Catholic practices, continued to incorporate spiritual direction in the spiritual practices of the denomination.

Spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, spiritual companionship, whichever phrase was used, all were reserved for clergy until just over fifty years ago. Following the Second Vatican Council, known as "Vatican II," which took place from 1962 to 1965, spiritual direction became available to lay members of the Roman Catholic Church. Within a few years, non-Catholic believers were becoming interested in pursuing spiritual direction. Training programs for spiritual directors were created.

Spiritual Direction is the practice of accompaniment on one's faith journey. In individual spiritual direction a trained companion listens for the presence and action of God in a person's life and through reflection and open-ended questions, assists that individual in their discernment of their path forward. Spiritual direction is about listening for the direction of God.

As a qualified spiritual director, I am aware that spiritual direction is strongly recommended for clergy and for church leaders, in some Christian denominations. This is not the case in the United Church of Canada. On a few occasions, members of clergy in

the United Church of Canada, have been referred to me for spiritual direction by Personnel Ministers of a Conference or the Pastoral Care Committee in a Presbytery. In these circumstances, an issue within the pastoral relationship had prompted the referral. In some cases, as soon as the recommended number of sessions had been completed the individual terminated the spiritual direction relationship. Did that individual understand the purpose of spiritual direction? Were they merely going through the motions of fulfilling a requirement? If that individual had been in spiritual direction throughout their career, would the issue have arisen at all? Why is it that individuals, whether clergy or lay, who have sought spiritual direction independently, seem to be more engaged and committed to it? Does this reflect a misunderstanding of spiritual direction in the United Church of Canada? Is there any difference between the understanding and experience of spiritual direction between members of clergy and lay members of the church?

There are three chairs together in a spiritual direction session. One is for the spiritual companion, one is for the seeker of direction, and the third, symbolically, is for the divine presence. Spiritual direction involves two people conversing, discerning, and praying with the intention of developing an awareness of God's guidance in the seeker's life. Spiritual direction is about discerning a path forward, not about one person authoritatively instructing another.

Spiritual direction may also be offered through small group discussion. In some congregations, it is lay congregants who are leading these groups.

What are the understandings and experiences of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both lay and clergy?

This question interests me, as a member of the United Church of Canada, as a spiritual director, and as a candidate for ordination. As ministry personnel, is our ability to teach, preach, and offer pastoral care not grounded in our own personal relationship with God? As with all relationships, communication is crucial. How do we intentionally listen for God's guidance? What are our personal spiritual practices?

In John 14:16-17: Jesus said to his disciples: *"and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."* Jesus continued: *"On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I in you."* (John 16: 20) *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."* (John 16: 23) Jesus' assurance applies to all believers, not only clergy. Are lay persons aware of their personal relationship with God/Jesus? Do they nurture that relationship?

Through my own experience in spiritual direction, and through my experiences accompanying others on their spiritual paths, I have witnessed the various benefits which spiritual direction can offer. I wonder what other members of the United Church, both clergy and lay, have understood and experienced related to spiritual direction. Was their personal relationship with God altered? Did their relationship with others change? Were their perceptions of world issues impacted in any way? This research project has explored the personal understanding and experiences of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the question, “What is the understanding and experience of Spiritual Direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay?”

Theological Basis

God created humans (Genesis 1: 26-27) and God has been present throughout human history. Shortly after Adam was created, God realized that he needed companionship. (Genesis 2: 18) Eve came into being. (Genesis 2: 22) God came into the Garden of Eden in the evening to chat. (Genesis 3: 8-9).

Throughout the Bible we find numerous stories of God’s relationship with people and God’s action and involvement in the lives of those people.

In Genesis 12: 1-2, God called Abram and sent him on a journey: “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.*” Through all the trials and tribulations of the journey, God was with Abram.

Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis 32: 24-31. He was transformed by the encounter, for after the struggle, Jacob was given a new name (Israel) and he walked with a limp.

The entire book of Exodus chronicles the story of God’s relationship with Moses and God’s involvement in the freeing of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, as well as their wilderness wandering on the route to the Promised Land. The story began with the call of Moses in Exodus 3:1 to 4:17. Moses and God were in frequent communication throughout the journey. God guides and instructs while Moses questions and challenges. Moses was the advocate for the Hebrew people. Sometimes he was afraid, sometimes he

was angry, sometimes he was grateful, and through it all, Moses longed to know God. In Exodus 33:17-23 he asked to see God's face. God provided guidelines for living in healthy community in the form of the Ten Commandments. At the conclusion of the book of Exodus, Moses died and was buried by God in an unknown place. This symbolizes the intimacy of their relationship. Throughout the story, Moses continually sought to know God, to understand God, and to act as a mediator between God and the people. Moses' journey might be considered a model for spiritual direction.

The Psalms and the Proverbs both contain instructions for a faithful life and assurance that God is present in all human experience. The Psalms in particular illustrate the gamut of human experience: lament, trust in God, gratitude and praise. In the words of Psalm 25: 4-5: *"Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long."*

God also appointed prophets to act as liaison with the Israelites and to speak on God's behalf. The prophets warned the people when their behaviour was not in line with the Kingdom of God. The prophets re-directed, and reassured the people that God is compassionate and trustworthy.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart," (Jeremiah 29: 11-13a)

When Elijah was fleeing from Queen Jezebel, he took refuge in a cave on Mount Horeb. *"The word of the Lord came to him"* and he was told to go out of the cave and stand on

the mountain, for the Lord was about to “*pass by*”. God comes to us in our fear and in our need. As Elijah stood on the mountain, there came a mighty wind, followed by an earthquake, and then a fire; but God was not in any of those events. God was in the “*sound of sheer silence*” (1 Kings 19: 9b-12)

The Psalmist tells us to be still. Elijah found God’s voice in the silence. It is challenging for people to find stillness and silence in today’s world.

In the Gospels of the New Testament, Jesus is our spiritual director. Jesus’ name identifies him: “*Emmanuel: God with us*”. Jesus teaches and guides through parables, healing, and reconciliation. Jesus called disciples and built community. Jesus calls us to “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (John 13: 34-35). Jesus reassured his followers that he would not leave them: “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28: 20b) Jesus also promised the presence of the Triune God, in John 14: 23-26: “*Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

People are able to know God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit through scripture, through life experience, and through prayer. Often, the prayer form is contemplative, during which time a person is listening for the nudges of God.

The second form of relationship which is of importance in spiritual direction is interpersonal relationship through community. This includes relationships with a partner, with family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and indeed, everyone a person encounters in the course of a day. Jesus has called us to love one another, even those who are hard to love. (Luke 6: 27-36). All aspects of human relationships can arise in spiritual direction conversations: fear, anger, love, hate, grief, forgiveness, sexuality, loneliness, illness, compassion, mortality, joy, gratitude, trust, memory, and much more.

God did not intend that people would live alone. Although periods of solitude are biblically important, Jesus taught about community, while in community. Jesus' relationships model for humanity both friendship and mentorship. Jesus referred to his followers as "friends" in John 15: 12-15. Jesus went to Bethany to visit his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. (Luke 10: 38-42) During this visit, Mary sat and listened to Jesus while Martha busied herself in providing hospitality to Jesus. When she complained, Jesus told her that Mary had "*chosen the better part*" in sitting and listening to Jesus.

In terms of mentorship, Jesus' mentoring of Peter is a prime example. Jesus called Simon Peter and his brother Andrew to follow him and become "*fishers of people.*" (Matthew 4: 18-22; Luke 5: 1-11) Throughout their relationship, Peter questions and challenges Jesus. Through it all, Jesus patiently taught and guided Peter. He trained and empowered Peter to use the gifts he had been given. Jesus focused on Peter's potential rather than his weaknesses. Over and over again in this relationship, Jesus restored Peter and his ministry. Peter went on to preach at Pentecost and spearhead the formation of early Christian church. (Acts 2: 14-42)

A second story of mentorship in the New Testament is the story of Paul and Timothy. Stacy Hoehl wrote: “*Paul’s loving mentor relationship with Timothy began with choosing Timothy as the right person to accompany him in serving the Gospel. From that point forward, Paul mentored Timothy by equipping him for the tasks of ministry, empowering him for success, employing him for effectiveness at the church in Ephesus, and by communicating his love, respect and appreciation for Timothy as a son, brother, and messenger of Christ.*”⁶ Paul then provided a partner for Timothy to work with, in the person of Silas, and together they nurtured the congregation in Beroea. (Acts 17: 10-14)

Through individual, personal relationship and mentoring relationships, people are called to live out their faith in the wider world.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to spread his teachings “*to all nations.*” (Matthew 28: 16-20) Paul provided guidance to the fledgling Christian churches through his letters, which we read in the Epistles. As well as mentorship, another important aspect of spiritual direction is discernment of a person’s gifts and the ways in which that individual is called to use their gifts for the benefit of the world.

Some important theologians and role models are: C.S.Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouwen, and Jean Vanier, to name only a few.

C.S. Lewis wrote of the importance of friendship and community in his books of fiction and also in his book *The Four Loves*. In this book, Lewis defined and described the importance of philial or brotherly love. Lewis influenced the world through his teaching

⁶Stacy E. Hoehl, “The Mentoring Relationship: An Exploration of Paul as Loving Mentor to Timothy and the Application of This Relationship to Contemporary Leadership Challenges,” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3: no 2 (Summer 2011): 41.

at Oxford, through his books, and through his lectures and radio broadcasts. Lewis lived out his beliefs about friendship through his correspondence with particular friends and his weekly meetings with a group known as “The Inklings.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the importance of community in his book *Life Together*. In this book, Bonhoeffer wrote an account of his experience overseeing a clandestine seminary for young ministers in the Confessing Church. In another publication, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer’s friend, Eberhard Bethge, brought together documents smuggled out of prison during the time of Bonhoeffer’s incarceration in Nazi Germany. The documents illustrate Bonhoeffer’s commitment to maintaining relationships with his family and friends. The letters and papers also document Bonhoeffer’s compassion and capacity for forgiveness as he offered pastoral care to fellow prisoners and to his guards.

Jean Vanier founded the L’Arche community for people living with physical and intellectual disabilities. He wrote: “*people have become more human as they opened up to the weak and to the reality of suffering and death. That is also my personal experience. As the human heart opens up and becomes compassionate, we discover our fundamental unity, our common humanity.*”⁷

Henri Nouwen was a prolific Christian author. In his book *Reaching Out, the Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Nouwen wrote of the spiritual life of the individual, which he termed “*loneliness to solitude*,” the spiritual life as a life focused on others, which he termed “*hostility to hospitality*,” and the spiritual life in relationship with God,

⁷ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2008) 97.

which he termed “*illusion to prayer.*”⁸ For me, personally, another favourite book by Nouwen is *The Wounded Healer*. In this book he proposes that woundedness can be a strength in support and ministry to others.

Spiritual direction has been an important component of spiritual formation and growth throughout history. It has proven to be valuable from an individual and personal perspective as well as from an interpersonal perspective. This translates into congregational life and also in mission and outreach in the wider world.

Review of Literature

In searching the literature pertaining to spiritual direction that might inform my project, it was noted that publications dated earlier than 1980 related to the Roman Catholic, Anglican or Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Tilden Edwards wrote his introduction to spiritual direction, titled *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction*, in 1980. His book was followed by numerous publications which explained the history, practice, and practicality of spiritual direction. Classics in the field such as: *Soul Friend* by Kenneth Leech, *Holy Listening* by Margaret Guenther, *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God* by Maureen Conroy and *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter With God* by William Barry, appeared on library shelves.

It wasn't long before questions arose about the difference between spiritual direction and pastoral counselling or psychotherapy. Gerald May, a Psychiatrist and spiritual director

⁸ Henri J.M .Nouwen, *Reaching Out: the Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), table of contents.

responded to the questions with his book: *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*. In the preface to this book May wrote: “*Psychiatry is a medical specialty, the province of which is the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. Psychiatry --is the one field that attends specifically to matters of disorder (pathology) and cure. In contrast, spiritual guidance can hardly be called a disorder-focused discipline. It attends far more to growth, completion and fulfillment than to correction of deficiency or illness.*”⁹

In a similar vein, Len Sperry addressed the question regarding pastoral counselling in his book *Transforming Self and Community: Revisioning Pastoral Counselling and Spiritual Direction*. In this book, Sperry proposed an “*integrative model of spiritual direction and pastoral counseling.*”¹⁰ Both May and Sperry expressed concern about the “*psychologization of spirituality*”¹¹ which occurred following the work of Freud and Jung. May wrote: “*People still attend church, but for many---especially those in the so-called mainline churches---a schism has taken place. Church still offered fellowship, moral guidance, and a sense of rootedness in tradition, but it was often no longer the source of psychological and emotional guidance it had been for centuries.*”¹² May continued: “*This movement toward counselling was almost entirely a Protestant venture. Relatively few Roman Catholic or Orthodox clergy entered these fields. I have often suspected that one of the reasons was that some traditions of formal spiritual guidance*

⁹ Gerald G. May, *Care of the Mind, Care of the Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), ix.

¹⁰ Len Sperry, *Transforming Self and Community: Revisioning Pastoral Counselling and Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 115-141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Gerald G. May, *Care of the Mind, Care of the Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 3.

had been preserved in Catholicism and in the Eastern church, while Protestants had little, or none.”¹³

A review of the literature garnered many books and articles concerning personal and individual spiritual care, the sustaining of a spiritual life and care of souls. There are references to the hospitality of spiritual direction and use of metaphors such as “*midwife to the soul.*”¹⁴

When the literature search was narrowed to spiritual direction with clergy, the number of publications was reduced considerably. Many of the publications pertained to Roman Catholic, Anglican or Evangelical/Pentecostal contexts. Only one book was identified: *The Pastor As Spiritual Guide* by Howard Rice. This book contains a chapter titled: “Spiritual Direction as a Metaphor for Ministry.” At the conclusion of the chapter, Rice wrote: “*The traditional work of ministry takes on a different perspective when seen through the lens of spiritual guidance. Serving the single purpose of the growth of souls transforms pastoral activity. Through spiritual guidance, pastoral work takes on a different character. Those engaged in pastoral ministry may find new meaning and purpose. As persons attend to the prodding of God’s spirit in the congregation, pastoral life will be transformed.*”¹⁵

A second aspect of “clergy” pertains to the training of clergy in theological courses and seminaries. In *Spiritual Direction in Context: A Spiritual Directors International Book*, there is a chapter titled: “Spiritual Direction With Seminary Students” written by Jane E.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), 82-107.

¹⁵ Howard Rice, *The Pastor As Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 73-74.

Vennard. Vennard had interviewed twelve students. She wrote: “*these students recognize their need to integrate their academic studies and their spiritual journeys and realize that without intentional spiritual practices they could forget the call from God that brought them to seminary in the first place. They long to discover their wholeness so that they can serve God and others from the depths of who they are and who they are becoming. Because seminary is a time of transition and intense transformation, students bring special issues to spiritual direction.*”¹⁶ Vennard concluded: “*When I asked students if they would continue with spiritual direction after graduation, they all told me that they would not consider doing ministry without it.*”¹⁷ While this is a qualitative study pertaining to students who are training to become clergy, my research study will focus on lay and clergy experiences. Students who are attending United Church of Canada Theological Colleges seem to have one foot in each faction of this research. They are lay members, to some degree, but are also, in some senses, members of clergy. Intrigued by the studies which were discovered in the review of literature, a question pertaining to spiritual direction for theological students was added to the interview questions.

The third study discovered in the search was conducted at the Atlantic School of Theology in 2013. A group of students in a United Church Formation class participated in group spiritual direction once weekly and found the experience beneficial.¹⁸ The researcher, Reverend Dr. Shawn Redden wrote that participants found it helpful to “*have the opportunity to experience the benefit of prayerful listening, support and guidance*

¹⁶ Nick Wagner, Editor, *Spiritual Direction In Context* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ Shawn Redden, *Cultivating Soul Companions, An Experience Of Group Spiritual Guidance With Ministry Students In the United Church of Canada* (Chicago: The Chicago Theological Seminary, 2013).

from their peers.”¹⁹ The author concluded her study with: “*The student’s responses about their experience of receiving guidance from their peers confirm there is value in providing an intentional focus on spiritual accompaniment, and developing the skills of deep listening, discernment, and shared prayer that are integral to spiritual community.*”²⁰ One can’t help but wonder why these studies have not had a greater impact in the curriculum at institutions where programs in preparation for ministry are offered.

By the end of the twentieth century, the focus of publications about spiritual direction was changing. Rather than “how to” books, writers began to address specific issues, concerns and groups. In *Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction*, editor Norvene Vest included chapters pertaining to spiritual direction and “abused” persons, “traumatized” persons, addicted persons, homeless persons and incarcerated individuals. There are chapters for various generations and for the dying. There are chapters for the marginalized and the oppressed and chapters for members of the LGBTQ community.²¹ James Empeur delves more fully into spiritual companioning for homosexuals in his book: *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person*. Empeur wrote: “*Spiritual direction helps them to connect to their religious roots.*”²² He cautioned that this does not necessarily mean attending church, in fact many are not interested in connecting with an institutional church but benefit from accompaniment on the path. He wrote about the importance of

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Norvene Vest, Editor, *Still Listening: New Horizons In Spiritual Direction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), table of contents.

²² James L. Empeur, *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), 57.

the image of God for a gay person, the importance of non-judgemental scripture and the importance of recovery from suffering.

All of these different groups represent a specific community. Many recent publications explore spiritual formation in communities and congregations. In her book: *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, Elizabeth Liebert includes a chapter titled “Congregational Spiritual Guidance.” Liebert wrote: “*Spiritual guidance employs all the means, including spiritual direction, that the church offers for the healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling and nurturing of its members.*”²³ Gil Stafford also wrote about spiritual direction in a congregational setting in his book: *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet: Stories and Reflections for Congregational Life*. In the closing chapter, Stafford writes of leadership in a discerning community. In *Uncovering Your Church’s Hidden Spirit*, Celia A. Hahn outlines a process of discernment intended to assist congregations in visioning for their future.

From congregations and communities, the affects of spiritual guidance began to have an impact on the wider world. As a spiritual seeker becomes less self-focused and more-community focused, a greater awareness of the needs of others evolves. Hope can be found in the midst of chaos.

This Literature Review garnered many resources, but it also revealed several obvious gaps. First of all, there is a significant discrepancy between the number of publications related to spiritual direction in general and spiritual direction as it relates to clergy and theological students. The second gap noted relates to the United Church of Canada. A

²³ Elizabeth Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 139.

search of the United Church of Canada website under the heading “spiritual direction” produced articles concerning Indigenous spirituality, possible spiritual practices, and life-work balance. The ministry of spiritual direction is not mentioned. A search of articles listed under “United Church Commons” on the website yielded a report titled “Resources On The Isolation In Ministry Project.” In response to a request to the 37th General Council in 2000, investigation into the issue of “Isolation in Ministry” began. Final recommendations were presented at the 41st General Council in 2012. The recommendations in this document do not mention spiritual direction. In the Literature Review, the search of spiritual direction in the United Church of Canada produced the report of Shawn Redden’s study: *Cultivating Soul Companions*, Jean Stair’s book *Listening For the Soul: pastoral care and spiritual direction* and nothing else.

Through more than fifty years of availability and a preponderance of information relating the benefits of spiritual direction, why are people not more interested in engaging in spiritual direction? What is the understanding and experience of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay? The Literature Review seemed to suggest that spiritual direction is not a priority in the United Church of Canada.

Method

The first step in this research project was consultation with the authors of United Church publications discovered in the review of the literature. The researcher was fortunate to speak with Reverend Dr. Jean Stairs, author of *Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction*, Reverend Dr. Shawn Redden, author of *Cultivating Soul Companions, An Experience of Group Spiritual Guidance With Ministry Students in the United Church of Canada* and Reverend Dr. Peter Short, who initiated a

focus on “Isolation in Ministry” during his term as Moderator of the United Church of Canada. This subsequently led to a study and a report to General Council in 2012.

The second step was to determine the participants for this research study. A letter of introduction was sent. This letter explained the purpose of the study, the type of research study and the question being researched. In the letter, recipients were asked to indicate their personal interest in participating and to forward the letter of introduction to others whom they thought might be interested. Introductory letters were sent to members of General Council of the United Church of Canada whose job titles included terms such as: “faith formation” “pastoral relationships” or “personnel.” Similarly, letters of introduction were sent to ministers in all sixteen Regions, whose job title included similar terms. Because of the question about spiritual direction for students preparing for ministry in theological colleges, noted during the review of the literature, letters of introduction were sent to members of faculty at each of the United Church Theological Colleges and training centers across the country, whose area of expertise was pastoral theology or chaplaincy. As the Moderator of the United Church of Canada is the spiritual leader of the denomination during their term, it seemed appropriate to contact past Moderators of the United Church of Canada. A letter of introduction was sent to the Chairperson of the College of United Church Chaplains, Canadian Armed Forces and, lastly, to each member of the researcher’s personal network of fellow AST students, clergy colleagues, and spiritual direction colleagues.

A copy of this letter is Appendix 2

The third step in this research was a survey. The survey was created through Survey Monkey and consisted of four simple questions. This survey was sent to every person who responded to the introductory letter.

A copy of the survey is Appendix 3.

One-to-one recorded interviews were then arranged. The interview questions were designed to explore the understanding and experience of spiritual direction among participants and also to explore the gaps in the literature review which have been identified earlier in this document.

A copy of the Interview Questions is Appendix 4.

Participants to be interviewed were selected from the survey respondents. The researcher selected an equal number of male, female and members of the LGBTQ community, representing both urban and rural congregations. An equal number of clergy and lay participants were selected, representing fifteen of the sixteen Regions within the United Church of Canada. An effort was made to include a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

This left a significant number of individuals who had shown interest in, and support for, this research project, but who were not being interviewed. This researcher felt that these individuals should not be ignored. After consultation with Dr. Susan Willhauk, authorization was given for those individuals to receive the interview questions in the form of a document, which they were invited to complete and return.

Because participants were being drawn from across Canada, the provision of pastoral support became a concern. The researcher was not comfortable approaching unknown

individuals in a distant location with a request for the provision of pastoral support.

Reverend Kevin Steeper, Pastoral Support Minister in Horseshoe Falls Region, Western Ontario Waterways Region and Antler River Waterway Region was asked and agreed to provide pastoral support as required to participants living in those Regions. Reverend Dr. Graeme Carruth, Chaplain at the Atlantic School of Theology, was asked, and agreed to provide pastoral support to all other participants. The Invitation to Participate Letter was revised appropriately.

A copy of the revised Invitation to Participate is Appendix 5.

Each person interviewed was asked to sign an Informed Consent Document.

A copy of the Informed Consent Document is Appendix 6

Data collection

One hundred and twenty letters of introduction were initially sent. From the five letters sent to members of General Council of the United Church of Canada, no responses were received. From the twenty-six letters sent to staff members of Regional Councils across Canada, seven responses were received.

Letters of introduction were sent to seven past Moderators of the United Church of Canada, five responses were received.

Eight letters of introduction were sent to members of Faculty at United Church Theological Colleges, six responses were received. Faculty at Atlantic School of Theology were not included, as the researcher perceived a conflict of interest.

A response was received from the Canadian Armed Forces offering to send the letter of introduction forward to the Director-General, Military Personnel, Research and Analysis, which functions as the ethics board. This process was going to require more time than was available for the completion of this study, consequently, it was not pursued.

Many members of this researcher's personal contact network forwarded the letter of introduction to others.

From 120 letters of introduction sent, 193 responses were received, all of which indicated an interest in this research project.

As a result, 193 surveys were distributed through Survey Monkey. 94 surveys were completed. In answering the survey questions, 12 people declined to be interviewed and 82 volunteered to be interviewed.

These statistics do not include past Moderators of the United Church of Canada or members of Faculty at United Church Theological Colleges. Conversations with these groups were considered separately.

A total of twenty-eight interviews were completed one-on-one, either in person or on the telephone or using FaceTime. These interviews were recorded.

These recorded interviews included: 9 clergy, 9 lay members

5 past Moderators, 5 members of faculty

Sixty-two people were invited to complete interviews in document form. Twenty-nine completed documents were received. In the final analysis, a total of fifty-seven interviews were completed. A fairly widespread cross-section of members of the United Church of Canada was documented as fifteen of sixteen Regions

were represented. Unfortunately, there were no participants from Newfoundland and Labrador (Region 16), nor were there participants from the far north.

Data analysis

The data is biased toward those who believe that spiritual direction is important and beneficial. For the most part, people who are not familiar with spiritual direction, or don't see its value either did not receive the letter of introduction or chose not to reply. Responses were received from a few individuals who were not familiar with spiritual direction. Three of those individuals were interviewed. From the outset, this researcher received many statements of support and encouragement concerning this research topic. *"This is very important work that you are doing."* *"I am so glad that you are doing this research."* But the response from individuals in positions of governance within the United Church of Canada was disappointing.

Twenty-two participants reported that they experienced spiritual direction for the first time through a Roman Catholic center or program. Nineteen participants reported that they experienced spiritual direction for the first time through a United Church of Canada program. Three participants reported that they experienced spiritual direction for the first time through an Anglican Church program, and thirteen people reported that they experienced spiritual direction for the first time through family, friends, books, or *"a happy coincidence."*

Common themes in participant's responses:

It is important to make the distinction between counselling and spiritual direction. The difference is not well understood. One participant said: *“I had seen a psychologist and a psychiatrist in my younger years. As a struggling and searching young person, I was made to feel that I had a problem. When I discovered spiritual direction, I discovered that my struggles were because I was alive, not because I needed to be fixed.”* Another stated: *“All of our life and our struggles are spiritual.”* And a third said: *“We can talk about struggles that I have been having through the lens of faith.”*

Many participants articulated a belief that spiritual direction is misunderstood, underused and undervalued in the United Church of Canada. Comments such as: *“The United Church is missing out on an opportunity”* and *“spiritual direction is a virtual non-entity in our denomination”* as well as *“I wish more colleagues in ministry would take advantage of spiritual direction”* were heard. One participant, a member of faculty at a United Church Theological College said that they had *“not much experience, not much knowledge”* of spiritual direction. The person continued that spiritual direction was *“never recommended nor part of the terrain”* and concluded: *“I don’t know anyone within the United Church—perhaps we think of it as outside United Church traditions.”*

Like the prophets in the Hebrew Testament, members of the United Church of Canada who were pioneers of spiritual direction within the denomination in the late 1970s and early 1980s reported having experienced resistance, scepticism, or have *“felt ignored.”*

A number of participants noted that the term “direction” is problematic. People often interpret it to mean that the spiritual director is going to tell a person what to do and how to live. The concept of the direction coming from God is difficult for people to grasp. Several participants spoke of a preference for terms such as “spiritual companionship” or “spiritual accompaniment” or even the Celtic term “soul friend”. However, “spiritual direction” has been the term used throughout history. It is used and understood throughout the world. The governing body is Spiritual Directors International. Most of the literature uses the term. It is difficult to move away from it. Also, the term “spiritual director” confirms that the individual has completed a recognised training program. One person commented that “*spiritual companionship or spiritual accompaniment could happen in a hot tub with a friend!*”

The word “trust” was mentioned several times. “*I don’t know who I could trust*” “*I needed to find someone I could trust*” “*Who do I trust in the United Church?*” and “*How could he be fully open if he couldn’t completely trust that the things shared couldn’t be used against you in a disciplinary issue?*” Some spoke about feeling more comfortable seeking spiritual direction outside the United Church, while others felt that a person from another tradition did not “get” the issues that they were dealing with.

Many participants described the United Church of Canada as “*an academic, intellectual church*” and as “*a social justice- oriented church.*” There was a suggestion that the denomination has lost touch with spirituality. The following comments are just a few that the researcher heard from participants: “*very*

possible to be ordained in the United Church without any spiritual depth.” “We have been busy being a religion and have forgotten to be spiritual.” One person quoted a Buddhist friend as saying: “Over the years I have been to lots of United Churches, never once have I heard Spirit or spirituality mentioned.” Another commented: “As a United Church minister I didn’t feel enough emphasis on the spiritual side of life.” And another: In large part in the Protestant tradition—the Word is more important than the Holy.”

Many members of the United Church of Canada feel that their faith is private and express discomfort at the possibility of talking about faith. One participant said: *“One of the challenges for us as a denomination is our inability to speak about our faith.”* Another stated: *“People seem embarrassed to acknowledge that they have a spiritual aspect.”*

The majority of participants found spiritual direction due to a struggle in their life—either a struggle of a personal nature or a struggle concerning a pastoral relationship.

No one reported a difficult, inappropriate or upsetting experience in spiritual direction. Several people reported needing to try more than one spiritual director before they found a “comfortable fit.”

Three Indigenous members of the United Church participated in this research project. Two had experienced spiritual direction and found it beneficial. One person was not aware of spiritual direction but was curious. All spoke of the compatibility between Christianity, the United Church in particular, and Indigenous spirituality. All three spoke of the connectedness of all created life in

Indigenous spirituality and noted that a sense of separation from the Creator would not be understood. Connection to the Creator is embedded in life. *“Our ceremony is our prayer. Our dance is our prayer.”*

Evaluation of findings

All participants reported that they had benefited from spiritual direction in terms of the development of a deeper and more meaningful personal relationship with God, which made an impact in their community of faith, and in their interactions in the wider world. One participant stated: *“I can only imagine what our world would look like if everyone took time to stop, look, listen, and connect to our Creator in an intentional, deepening way!”* People spoke of being more compassionate, less judgemental, less anxious, more grounded in their faith, more accepting of self and others. One participant expressed the following: *“It has made me a better dance partner. To be a good dance partner, you have to listen to the music, which guides you gracefully, and respond to the nudging of your partner. It is harmonious. Spiritual Direction has moved me back to work with God as an intentional partner. ‘Yes, I want to be guided by you.’ ”*

All participants felt that students in training for ministry at United Church Theological Colleges would benefit from spiritual direction. Most participants also agreed that this should be a recommendation and an invitation, but not a requirement. One participant stated: *“Anyone who is serious about their spiritual journey is in spiritual direction.”*

Several participants spoke of the high incidence of stress and burnout among clergy in the United Church of Canada. One minister said that he had been

academically very well trained but that *“the divine, spiritual world was left out.”* He went on to say that he had felt *“completely eviscerated”* in the first years of his ministry. Another member of clergy stated: *“Ministry is so hard, and we didn’t think that it would be this hard.”* The person continued: *“I don’t know a single minister who is not dealing with PTSD in some form.”*

Another participant articulated a perception that members of the United Church tend to see things from a negative point of view. *“We mistake as a problem what is actually an opportunity to challenge us and force us to grow.”* It was this individual’s opinion that participation in a spiritual direction relationship assisted an individual to see opportunity in the challenges and thereby feel less overwhelmed and discouraged.

A number of participants mentioned that we prioritize the wrong things. We think that we are too busy to fit spiritual direction into our schedule. *“No Anglican priest would ever think that spiritual direction was cutting into his or her time.”*

Implications for Ministry

Participants felt that theology students would be better prepared for ministry if they began spiritual direction during their years of study. Once a student became aware of the benefits of a spiritual direction relationship, they would probably continue throughout their ministry.

Many participants spoke of the importance of a routine of daily spiritual practices, which improves spiritual, emotional and physical health. Perhaps there would be a decrease in the number of referrals to the Employee Assistance Program for

ministry personnel who are experiencing stress- related illnesses if spiritual direction was more widely understood and accepted.

A second benefit participants noted was improved pastoral care. Reverend Dr. Jean Stairs wrote of the benefits and compatibility of spiritual direction and pastoral care in her book *Listening For The Soul: pastoral care and spiritual direction*. One participant observed: “*Our model of ministry is broken--- a lot of ministers are working from an empty vessel. Why would somebody want to follow us if the leader is depressed, and depleted?*”

Many participants spoke of relationships within the community of faith being strengthened and deepened through spiritually- based group discussion.

Many participants spoke of increased openness to acceptance and understanding of others as an outcome of spiritual direction. They spoke of this having an impact on ecumenical relationships as well as mission and outreach initiatives.

Several participants noted that decisions made through praying together and spiritual discernment helped to move a faith community forward positively.

Author Celia Hahn wrote about this in her book *Uncovering Your Church's Hidden Spirit*.

In an increasingly secular world, individuals who have had no experience of any religious denomination do not want to be told about God. They are looking for an experience of God. “*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*” (Psalm 42: 1-2a)

One participant said: “*Without spiritual direction we have a tendency to move into an intensely intellectual realm or an intensively bureaucratic realm.*”

American theologian and teacher Glenn Hinson articulated a similar idea in his book *Spiritual Preparation For Christian Leadership*: ” *Healthy spirituality requires a balance of experiential, intellectual, social and institutional dimensions. These are like four legs of a table. Take away one leg and the table will wobble. Take away more than one and it will fall. All too often, Americans try to maintain their relationship with God by standing on one leg, or, at best, to make a spiritual table with one long leg and three shorter ones, each perhaps of different lengths.*”²⁴

Conclusion

One participant in this research project referred to spiritual direction as “*a gift we give ourselves.*” Another said: “*We open up to another and we open up beyond one another. it is where our faith meets life.*”

French philosopher and priest Teilhard de Chardin once said “*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.*”²⁵

And yet, it seems that in our world and in the United Church of Canada, we have tended to neglect our spiritual selves. Those who participated in this research study, who have experienced spiritual direction personally, spoke very highly of their experiences and recommended spiritual direction with passion. All participants expressed a significant deepening of their personal relationship with God, a significant strengthening of community involvement and interaction, and a more compassionate bond in the wider

²⁴ E. Glenn Hinson, *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), 94.

²⁵ Notes from Ontario Jubilee Program Faith Formation studies, no source identified

world as a result of participation in a spiritual direction relationship, either individual or as part of a group.

There was no difference detected between the experience and understanding of spiritual direction among clergy or among lay members of the United Church of Canada. The focus was different in that members of clergy made reference to an impact on their preaching, their pastoral care and their ministry in general, while lay members referred to the effect spiritual direction had on their congregational involvement, volunteer work and relationships at work. Both clergy and lay members spoke of the impact of spiritual direction on their personal relationship with God, as well as family and personal relationships, and the effect of prayer and discernment on their sense of purpose and direction in life.

This research indicated that, with a few exceptions, participants understood spiritual direction clearly and experienced it positively. However, many participants indicated that this was not the norm within their congregation or throughout our denomination. Why are people not more interested in engaging in spiritual direction? The research seems to suggest that spiritual direction is not spoken about or encouraged within the denomination and therefore many members are unaware of what it is, or how they might benefit from a spiritual direction relationship. This lack of awareness, a reported reluctance to speak about faith, combined with the lack of focus on spiritual aspects of faith within United Church of Canada, all seem to contribute in the answer to this question.

The term “direction” is misunderstood and may be off-putting to some who hear it. Perhaps the idea of spiritual direction is dismissed due to the connotation the word “direction” suggests.

One passionate student at a United Church Theological College said: *“The problems we have in the church are spiritual problems, but they are named as attendance or financial problems. When people start to look at numbers, it’s a clear sign of spiritual issues. Every church can solve the attendance/financial issues if they choose to. --- I would like the United Church to find its joy and its gratitude again. We are capable of so much!”*

Perhaps the findings of this research project will stimulate some discussion among members of the United Church of Canada, leading to clearer understanding and increased acceptance of spiritual direction. May the Spirit of the living God open us to be melted, moulded, filled and used both individually and also as members of communities of faith within the United Church of Canada.

*All biblical passages referenced in this paper are from the New Revised Standard Version

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Research Ethics Board Proposal

Name of Student Investigator: Janet(Jan)McCormick

Title of Research Project: “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh On Me”²⁶ A Study of Discernment and Spiritual Relationships through Spiritual Direction, Within the United Church of Canada

Summary of Proposed Research

Description

Spiritual direction has long been a part of a journey of faith. In the Old Testament, God led humanity, through the law and the prophets. The Psalms and Proverbs provide guidance for a faithful life. In the New Testament, Jesus provided guidance and direction through his teachings and parables, and Paul provided spiritual guidance through letters to fledgling Christian churches.

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and the Roman Catholic Church came into being, there was tension between the eastern and western factions of the church, but both factions adopted ascetic approaches to the spiritual life. The Eastern Orthodox Church encompassed the role of the spiritual elder while, in the Roman Catholic Church, bishops, abbots, and abbesses supported the spiritual formation of monks, nuns, and priests whom they supervised.

In the third and fourth centuries, believers travelled to the desert in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to consult spiritual guides known as the “Desert Fathers” or the “Desert Hermits.” By the fifth century early Christian theologians were beginning to write about listening for God’s guidance through prayer and the experiences of daily life.

²⁶ *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada*, (Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), Hymn Number 376.

Spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, spiritual companionship, whichever phrase was used, all were reserved for clergy until just over fifty years ago. Following the Second Vatican Council, known as "Vatican II," which took place from 1962 to 1965, spiritual direction became available to lay members of the Roman Catholic Church. Within a few years, non-Catholic believers were becoming interested in pursuing spiritual direction. Training programs for spiritual directors were created.

Spiritual Direction is the practice of accompaniment on one's faith journey. In individual spiritual direction a trained companion listens for the presence and action of God in a person's life and through reflection and open-ended questions, assists that individual in their discernment of their path forward. Spiritual direction is about listening for the direction of God.

This proposed research will investigate the question, "What is the understanding and experience of Spiritual Direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay?"

As a qualified spiritual director, I am aware that spiritual direction is strongly recommended for clergy, and for church leaders, in some Christian denominations. This is not the case in the United Church of Canada. On a few occasions, members of clergy in the United Church of Canada, have been referred to me for spiritual direction by Personnel Ministers of a Conference or the Pastoral Care Committee in a Presbytery. In these circumstances, an issue within the pastoral relationship had prompted the referral. In some cases, as soon as the required number of sessions had been completed, the individual terminated the spiritual direction relationship. Did that individual understand the purpose of spiritual direction? Were they merely going through the motions of fulfilling a requirement? If that individual had been in spiritual direction throughout their career, would the issue have arisen at all? Why is it that individuals, whether clergy or lay, who have sought spiritual direction independently, seem to be more engaged and committed to it? Does this reflect a misunderstanding of spiritual direction in the United Church of Canada?

Is there any difference between the understanding and experience of spiritual direction between members of clergy and lay members of the church?

There are three chairs together in a spiritual direction session. One is for the spiritual companion, one is for the seeker of direction, and the third, symbolically, is for the divine presence. Spiritual direction involves two people conversing, discerning, and praying with the

intention of developing an awareness of God's guidance in the seeker's life. Spiritual direction is about discerning a path forward, not about one person authoritatively instructing another.

Spiritual direction may also be offered through small group discussion. In some congregations, it is lay congregants who are leading these groups.

What are the understandings and experiences of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both lay and clergy?

This question interests me, as a member of the United Church of Canada, as a qualified Spiritual Director, and as a candidate for ordination. As ministry personnel, is our ability to teach, preach, and offer pastoral care not grounded in our own personal relationship with God? As with all relationships, communication is crucial. How do we intentionally listen for God's guidance? What are our personal spiritual practices?

In John 14:16-17: Jesus said to his disciples: *"and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."* (NRSV) Jesus continued: *"On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I in you."* (John 16: 20) *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."* (John 16: 23) (NRSV) Jesus' assurance applies to all believers, not only clergy. Are lay persons aware of their personal relationship with God/Jesus? Do they nurture that relationship?

Tierhard de Chardin once wrote: "We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey."

Through my own experience in spiritual direction, and through my experiences accompanying others on their spiritual paths, I personally, have witnessed the various benefits which spiritual direction can offer. I wonder what other members of the United Church, *both clergy and lay*, have understood and experienced related to spiritual direction. Was their personal relationship with God altered? Did their relationship with others change? Were their perceptions of world issues impacted in any way? This research project will explore the personal understanding and experiences of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, *both clergy and lay*.

Proposed Research Field Sites

There will not be a designated research field site. Members of the United Church of Canada will volunteer to participate in this study. Participants could be scattered across this country. Interview times and locations will be arranged based upon convenience and comfort of the participant. Interviews may take place in person but may also be conducted on the telephone or over a video call. (e.g. Skype or FaceTime). When interviews are arranged to be conducted in person, a meeting place will be arranged according to the participant's comfort. Perhaps in a library, coffee shop or church office, at a time when others are present in the building.

Principle Research Consultants

The following people have agreed to act as consultants for this research:

Reverend Dr. Jean Stairs, former principal of Queens Theological College, retired minister in the United Church of Canada, and author of several books including: *Listening For the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction*.

Reverend Dr. Paul Crittenden, retired minister in the United Church of Canada and my Educational Supervisor.

Flora Litt-Irwin, Spiritual Director, former director of Lowville Prayer Centre, Companion for Weeks of Guided Prayer and member of the Week of Guided Prayer Network of Hamilton Conference, United Church of Canada.

Methodology

In order to research this question, a *phenomenological* method will be utilized. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon will be the

understanding of and the experiences of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada.

Other philosophical assumptions are:

- that participants in this research study will believe in God
- that people of faith typically seek a deeper and more intimate personal relationship with God. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42: 1-2a, NRSV)

In this research, information will be discovered through interviews. Both Merriam and Creswell caution that a researcher may enter into the research process with preconceived ideas. Merriam wrote: “the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. This process is called *epoche*, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgement...”²⁷ As a person who has been both giving and receiving spiritual direction over an extended period of time, I am aware that it may be challenging to “bracket” personal experiences so that preconceived ideas do not influence this researcher’s ability to maintain an unbiased approach to the research. True objectivity is the intention and goal of this researcher.

This research project meets van Manen’s description of *hermeneutical phenomenology* mentioned by Creswell and Poth. Hermeneutical phenomenology is research “oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the “texts” of life (hermeneutics). “²⁸ Research data will be derived from the lived experiences shared by participants.

I intend to interview twelve volunteers: six members of clergy and six lay members of United Church congregations.

The questions that participants will be asked can be found in Appendix A.

An invitation will be sent out to United Churches across Canada requesting information about the understanding and experience of spiritual direction among members, both clergy and lay.

²⁷ Merriam, Sharan B., *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* 25

²⁸ Creswell, John W., and Poth, Cheryl N., *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Fourth Edition, Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc., 2018. 77

People will be invited to complete a *short survey* and return it to the researcher. The survey will conclude with an invitation to participate in this research project.

The purpose of this survey is to gain a broader scope of information regarding the understanding and experience of spiritual direction. It will be distributed across all Regions with the hope of reaching the diverse membership of the church—rural and urban, a variety of cultures and ethnic backgrounds, affirming churches, etc. The survey will invite participants to volunteer to be interviewed. These responses will determine the interview participants. The survey will be distributed via an online program which will forward completed surveys to me.

A paper copy of the survey, with stamped return envelope, will be available to those who do not have access to a computer or are not comfortable with an online format.

A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix B.

Potential Benefits from Study

There is increased awareness of clergy “burnout” and stress in ministry throughout most Christian churches in North America and Europe. Exploring the understanding and experience of spiritual direction in the United Church of Canada may be useful in the development of approaches which could counteract that trend. The conclusions drawn from this study could also be of interest to those involved in training ministers at theological schools.

Potential Risks from Study

Little risk is anticipated arising from this study. However, it must be acknowledged that, a participant may recount a negative experience of spiritual direction, which could evoke an emotional response. It is important that participants understand that they may end their participation in the interview at any time. If, in preliminary conversation it has become apparent that the participants experience was unpleasant, pastoral support will be *available* through the appropriate Regional Council. Pastoral support will be arranged prior to the interviews.

Process for Obtaining Informed Consent

Following the analysis of the surveys received, individuals who have volunteered to participate will be contacted. An explanation of the research project will be provided. Volunteers will be advised of the voluntary nature of the project and their ability to withdraw at any time. Participants will also be advised that interviews will be recorded. When this researcher is satisfied that the participant understands clearly the nature of their commitment, the informed consent form will be provided. The participant will be asked to read and sign the form and return it to the researcher. This will take place before the initial interview is arranged.

Interviews will take place either in person or via technology. (telephone, Skype, Zoom, FaceTime)

A copy of the Informed Consent can be found in Appendix C.

Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data
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Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, at the time of the scheduled interview, I will:
 - a) provide one copy for the participant
 - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
 - c) provide one copy for my supervisor, Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Participants will be asked to create a pseudonym. All documentation will be catalogued under that identity.
3. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent until deleted permanently from my device at the completion of the research December 31, 2019.
4. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected

computer from the time of data collection until the final paper is due on December 9, 2019.

5. When the final paper is submitted to my supervisor on December 9, 2019, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
6. My professor/supervisor will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year. After that year has ended, all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing

Appendix 2: Introductory Letter

My name is Jan McCormick. I am in my final year of a Master of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology, and a candidate for Ordained Ministry in the United Church of Canada. I need your help! I am writing to request your assistance with a qualitative research project investigating the understanding and experience of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both clergy and lay.

The initial stage of the research is a brief survey, which optimally will reach a broad cross-section of church members.

I would like to reach members, from urban, rural, multicultural, Indigenous, Affirming, and all other types of faith communities. I hope to receive responses from all age groups within the church. It is also important, I think, that I reach individuals who may have had a negative experience of spiritual direction.

I will send the brief survey to you in the next few days. In addition to completing this survey, I ask that you would forward this introductory e-mail to others whom you believe would be a valuable source of information for this research study.

The second stage of the research will be individual interviews with a number of respondents from all Regions across the country.

Thank you, in advance, for your participation in the survey and your assistance in extending the number of contacts for this research.

If you have questions or comments, please contact me at janmccormick07@gmail.com or on my cell phone at:

905-630-8202.

Yours sincerely,
Jan McCormick

Appendix 3: Survey

This survey uses the term “spiritual direction.” This term may be used interchangeably with the terms: “spiritual companionship”, “spiritual guidance” or “spiritual accompaniment.” Spiritual direction may be individual or as part of a group.

1. Are you a lay person or a member of clergy?
2. What is your understanding of spiritual direction?
3. Have you ever participated in spiritual direction?
4. Would you be willing to participate in a research project concerning spiritual direction in the United Church of Canada?

If so, please provide your contact information here:

Thank you for your assistance!
Jan McCormick
Researcher and Student Minister
Cell number: 905-630-8202

Appendix 4: Interview Questions

The following is the document which was sent to participants for completion and return to the researcher. The same questions were asked in the one-to-one recorded interviews.

What Is the Understanding and Experience of Spiritual Direction Among Members of the United Church of Canada, Both Clergy and Lay?

Please suggest a pseudonym that can be used to ensure your privacy:

Please answer the following questions, providing as much detail as you are comfortable sharing:

1. **How did you first discover spiritual direction?**
2. **What has been your experience of spiritual direction? (individual, group, other?) (beneficial or not?)**
3. **If you have experienced individual spiritual direction, what motivated you to seek spiritual direction?**

4. How did you find a spiritual director?
5. How long have you maintained a spiritual direction relationship?
6. If your spiritual direction relationship has ended, what prompted you to discontinue spiritual direction?
7. What might have changed your mind and encouraged you to continue?
8. If you have worked with more than one spiritual director, what prompted you to change from one to another?
9. If you were asked to explain spiritual direction, how would you answer?
10. How has spiritual direction (individual or group) affected your relationship with God?
11. In your experience, does spiritual direction have an impact on the church community?
On the wider world?
12. What is your opinion on whether or not spiritual direction would be beneficial for theological students?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 5: Revised Invitation to Participate Document used for one-to-one recorded interviews completed locally:

Invitation to Participate

Date
Dear

My name is Jan McCormick. I am in my final year of the Master of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology, and a candidate for Ordained Ministry in the United Church of Canada. As part of my studies, I am completing a qualitative research project that is investigating the understanding of and experience of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both lay and clergy. Thank you for expressing interest in becoming a participant in this research project. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Study Description

This is a phenomenological study. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with participants. You are invited to complete the attached Interview document, save the document and then e-mail it back to the researcher. The questions will focus on your understanding of spiritual direction and your experience of it.

Participation is completely voluntary. At any time prior to the dissemination of the research data, you can choose to end your participation. If you do so, all documents will be destroyed.

The results of this study will be presented in a public presentation in late November 2019. A written report of the study will be made available in the Atlantic School of Theology library.

Benefits of the Study

I anticipate that participation in this study will be of benefit to you personally, as it will give you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences in spiritual direction. The results of the study may also be of interest to other members of the United Church and Regional Personnel Ministers, as it will provide an enhanced understanding of patterns of common experiences in spiritual direction.

Risks of the Study

I do not anticipate any risks associated with participating in this study. At any time during the study, (prior to the dissemination of the results) if you are not comfortable, you can choose to end your participation.

Confidentiality Your participation in this study is fully confidential. In both the public presentation and the written summary of this research, your name and any other personal identifiers will be changed. The transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

Pastoral Support In the event that answering these interview questions triggers an emotional response in you, please contact your Spiritual Director, your Minister, or Kevin Steeper, Pastoral Support Minister in Horseshoe Falls Regional Council. Kevin can be contacted at 1-833-236-0280 extension 8.

By completing this interview document, you are giving your consent to be included in this qualitative research project.

If you have any further questions related to this study, or if you know someone who would like to participate, I invite you to contact me at janmccormick07@gmail.com or (905) 630-8202.

Sincerely,

Jan McCormick

National: Invitation to Participate used for interviews completed on the telephone or on FaceTime, or in document form

Date

Dear

My name is Jan McCormick. I am in my final year of the Master of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology, and a candidate for Ordained Ministry in the United Church of Canada. As part of my studies, I am completing a qualitative research project that is investigating the understanding of and experience of spiritual direction among members of the United Church of Canada, both lay and clergy. Thank you for expressing interest in becoming a participant in this research project. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Study Description

This is a phenomenological study. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with participants. You are invited to complete the attached Interview document, save the document and then e-mail it back to the researcher. The questions will focus on your understanding of spiritual direction and your experience of it.

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Benefits of the Study

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Risks of the Study

I do not anticipate any risks associated with participating in this study. At any time during the study, (prior to the dissemination of the results) if you are not comfortable, you can choose to end your participation.

Confidentiality Your participation in this study is fully confidential. In both the public presentation and the written summary of this research, your name and any other personal identifiers will be changed. The transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

Pastoral Support In the event that answering these interview questions triggers an emotional response in you, please contact your Spiritual Director, your Minister, or Reverend Dr. Graeme Carruth, Chaplain, Atlantic School of Theology. To arrange a time to discuss your feelings. Reverend Dr. Carruth can be reached through his e-mail: graemecarruth@gmail.com

By completing this interview document, you are giving your consent to be included in this qualitative research project.

If you have any further questions related to this study, or if you know someone who would like to participate, I invite you to contact me at janmccormick07@gmail.com or (905) 630-8202.

Sincerely,
Jan McCormick

Appendix 6: Revised Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form used for interviews done locally:

Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, “Spiritual Direction in Discernment and Spiritual Relationships within the United Church of Canada.” I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process.

I am aware that my participation is confidential. An audio recording of the interview will be made, and field notes may be taken. This recording along with the transcript of the interview and field notes will be destroyed following the completion of the research project. My name and any other personal identifiers will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

In the event that responding to the interview questions triggers an emotional response for you, please contact your Spiritual Director, or Kevin Steeper, Pastoral support minister in Regions 7,8,and 9, to arrange a time to discuss your feelings. Kevin Steeper can be reached at: 1-833-236-0280 extension 8.

This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board.

By signing below, I am consenting to participate in this research study.

Name

Date

Informed Consent form used for interviews completed on the telephone or on Facetime

Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, “Spiritual Direction in Discernment and Spiritual Relationships within the United Church of Canada.” I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process.

I am aware that my participation is confidential. An audio recording of the interview will be made, and field notes may be taken. This recording along with the transcript of the interview and field notes will be destroyed following the completion of the research project. My name and any other personal identifiers will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

In the event that responding to the interview questions triggers an emotional response for you, please contact your Spiritual Director, your Minister, or Reverend Dr. Graeme Carruth, Chaplain at the Atlantic School of Theology to arrange a time to discuss your feelings. Reverend Dr. Carruth can be reached through his e-mail: gaemecarruth@gmail.com. This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board.

By signing below, I am consenting to participate in this research study.

Name

Date