

**Flying Fish: The Experience of Members of the United Church of
Canada Who Participate in a Contemplative Prayer Group**

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Research Ethics Board Certificate

Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

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

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Student Investigator	Brian Thompson

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.

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Dedication

Thanks to all who gave me their time and thoughtful reflections on this subject.

Thanks too to my family and friends who supported me in the long hours and dark nights of this project.

*May this work, as far as it indicates the reality of the love of God, help to inspire
love, faith and hope in all who need it. Amen.*

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Abstract
**Flying Fish: The Experience of Members of the United Church of Canada
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Author: Brian Douglas Thompson

“Flying Fish: The Experience of Members of the United Church of Canada Who Participate in a Contemplative Prayer Group” is a transcendental phenomenological study that examines the experience of members of the United Church of Canada (UCC) with both the UCC and the contemplative prayer group (CPG) [Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation, Ignatian Exercises, and others] they attend. The experience inside each group (CPG and UCC) and the combination were investigated, looking for trends or themes. A number of themes emerged: the hero’s journey, the living Christian prayer tradition and the emerging religious movement called “practice-orientated spiritualities.” The research also led to several critical questions: Are CPGs elitist? Is there proper scriptural support for CPGs? Do CPGs promote spiritual utopianism? Opportunities identified by the research include emerging practice-orientated spiritualities, the need for silent practice and, most significantly, the renewed need for teaching prayer.

Submitted: December 9, 2018

Introduction

The Atlantic School of Theology (AST) seemed like the perfect place to answer a question that had been bothering me forever: What is the closest possible interaction we can have with God? That seems like a standard theological question, but it also came from my experience as an interface designer. That is how I approached it, alternately putting on my hat as a student of theology and as a technical specialist. My special interest as an interface designer was in disintermediation—figuring out how to remove as much of the middle part between intention and goal. In the commercial world, work on disintermediation has given us ATMs and self-serve websites. In the world of the church, I found myself drawn to theological language in a new and exciting way. The Word of God seemed the ultimate interface.

“The Word of God, in every case, is larger than the text of the Bible.”¹

Of course, the relationship is not between a human and a machine but a living one—an intimate I-Thou,² as Martin Buber called it—that was found in something called “prayer.” Before I came to AST, I thought I knew exactly what prayer was. After three years as a Licensed Lay Worship Leader, I could write, lead and encourage prayer; I knew a good one from a poor one. That confidence soon dissipated as time went on because a new dimension of prayer became apparent: some prayers were very “alive” and others were not as “alive.” In fact, some seemed to lack any life at all.

¹ United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992), Preface, page iv.

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937. Reprint Continuum, 2004).

That changed when I discovered Centering Prayer and a contemplative prayer group. There was life in this type of prayer and the promise of transcendental awareness, the full experience of the presence of God! I felt that I'd been reading the menu for years and would finally get the meal. God would deliver on God's promises. I would know and be part of the Kingdom of Heaven!

What I experienced was a greater sense of the love of God and being rooted in something very much alive—not a feeling of the ultimate but an experience of more than before, a deepening of the relationship with God and others. It was an ecumenical group and based on practice: a short prayer, twenty or more minutes of silence and a short prayer at the end. It seemed essential to faith formation, so why was it “missing” from my experience in the UCC? I had been to dozens of churches across Canada and not one had a contemplative prayer group. Why? Were there others like me? I wanted to know.

Research Question

My research question was “What is the experience of members of the United Church of Canada in contemplative prayer groups?” Contemplative prayer groups come in many shapes and sizes: Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation and Ignatian Exercises as well as many others from our own and other faith traditions.

I wanted to look at how people engaged in contemplative prayer groups, how they interacted with each other and their experience in the UCC before and after their experience in the prayer group. The research question sought to capture this dynamic

cycle. The participants did not leave the United Church of Canada or abandon the contemplative practice but were living in the tension between the two.

I wondered if their experience was similar to someone trying to describe an experience to someone who had never had the experience, such as describing how a banana tastes to someone who has never eaten one. In this case, the description would be of a received language of religious experience. Did it connect to what Laurence Freeman called the “theology of experience”?³ Was it communicated through a master/student relationship? Are we “learning from our spiritual ancestors how to read the Bible,”⁴ the Word of God—a Word of God that the UCC described as “in every case, is larger than the text of the Bible”?⁵

³ Laurence Freeman, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (London, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2006), 233.

⁴ Robert C. Fennell, *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition), Kindle Location 39.

⁵ The United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992). Preface, page iv.

Literature Review

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to look at the experience of United Church of Canada (UCC) members and adherents as they participate in contemplative prayer groups. The United Church of Canada is a Protestant church in the Reform tradition. This brings up issues around the integrity of the denomination: what is included and what is excluded in the comprehensive solution to the religious questions that a denomination represents.

Is it possible to include practices that are not “native” to a denomination without destroying the wholeness of our own denominational solution? What is gained when we add these practices? What is lost? Is the process of stepping out of denominational practice a way of gaining perspective on and awareness of the aspect of the “hidden” solution in our own church? Do we enter into a secular space when we shop for a custom solution that fits our individual needs? Do we become spiritual but not religious? What is, in the end, the value of a denomination in a secular world?

There is a long history of conflict between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics. It may seem that there is very little difference between the two and that the difference in theology has not been worth all the death and destruction throughout history. It does speak to the value that each church held in its own approach, and the persistence of these churches shows that that value persists. This study involves those who see some value in belonging to the United Church of Canada. These same people see some value in including contemplative prayer, a practice that conflicts with some of the

theology of the UCC. The question that this study hopes to answer is why do they do it and what do they hope to gain?

What is contemplative prayer?

Part of the confusion around contemplative prayer is about communicating what it is. Like many personal experiences, it is hard to share—a received language. Think of the taste of an apple. How would we explain that to someone who had never tasted one? Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who lived at a Kentucky monastery the during the middle of the 20th century and whose many writings are a starting point for those who are exploring the contemplative path, passionately describes the personal experience of contemplative prayer like this:

When your tongue is silent, you can rest in the silence of the forest. When your imagination is silent, the forest speaks to you, tells you of its unreality and of the Reality of God. But when your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God. For now I know that the Creation, which first seems to reveal Him in concepts, then seems to hide Him by the same concepts, finally is revealed in Him, in the Holy Spirit. And we who are God find ourselves united in Him with all that springs from Him. This is prayer, and this is glory!⁶

As a novice master at the monastery, Merton taught the new monks the ropes and tried to clearly define what contemplative prayer was and what it wasn't in his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1953), 343.

being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.⁷

Merton also describes what contemplative prayer is not:

The only way to get rid of misconceptions about contemplation is to experience it. One who does not actually know, in his own life, the nature of this breakthrough and this awakening to a new level of reality cannot help being misled by most of the things that are said about it. For contemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more he empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization.⁸

In *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*, Joel Thiessen

describes this dawning moment in a person he interviewed:

Stephen appreciated the emphasis in his evangelical upbringing on a personal relationship with Jesus, but Merton's book opened his eyes to the sacramental and monastic aspects to the Christian life that he was less familiar with.⁹

Protestant barriers to contemplative prayer¹⁰

J. David Muyskens is a retired minister of the Reformed Church in America and is International Coordinator of the Contemplative Outreach¹¹ Circle of Service. In this capacity, he has compiled a list of what barriers to contemplative prayer have arisen in his conversations with other Protestants. This is his list:

⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New York, NY: New Directions, 1955), 20.

⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 43.

⁹ Joel Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press, Kindle Edition, 2015), 34.

¹⁰ "Protestant Barriers to Contemplative Prayer" Accessed July 23, 2018.
<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/article/protestant-barriers-contemplative-prayer>

¹¹ "Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. The common desire for Divine transformation, primarily expressed through a commitment to a daily Centering Prayer practice, unites our international, interdenominational community." (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/about-us>. Accessed July 22, 2018).

1. Protestants consider contemplative prayer an Eastern practice.
2. Protestants are against Catholics.
3. Contemplative prayer has not been taught in Protestant churches.
4. Prayer consists of talking to God.
5. Protestants customarily use our minds to know truth.
6. Protestants think a lot about the past and the future.
7. Protestants want answers.
8. Protestants are afraid to go deep because demons can dwell there.
9. Protestants worship a far-away God.
10. We are sinners.
11. Contemplation does not appear in the Bible.
12. Scripture is our authority.

Approach to these barriers

As part of the reason for this study is to deal with the barriers to contemplative prayer experienced by the members and adherents of the United Church of Canada, it may suffice to look at two items and the questions they may raise.

Contemplation as an Eastern practice

Contemplation and meditation practice popularly appeared in the West in the 20th century through the teachings of people like Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki¹² and Hindu gurus. It was the realization of Fr. Thomas Keating, when strangers knocked on his door at the monastery asking for directions to a meditation retreat, that the Trappist practise of contemplative prayer, not taught to the lay public since the 17th century, needed to be taught again.

¹² D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. (New York, NY: Stellar Books, Kindle Edition).

Protestants are against Catholics

The uncomfortable truth of the religious conflict¹³ between the Protestants and Catholics has been a barrier in the United Church of Canada connected to the prejudices of its founding denominations.

The term “Antichrist” was used commonly here as elsewhere to denote the Roman Church and, more specifically, the Pope. The Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine published in Toronto in May 1856, contains a serious article discussing the exact date when the Pontiff would fall so that the Revelation prophecy of the fall of the “wild beast” Antichrist would take place.¹⁴

Since 1975, The United Church of Canada has been involved in a Roman Catholic–United Church Dialogue.¹⁵ This may be one of the reasons that the practice of contemplative prayer, part of the Roman Catholic tradition, has become more accessible to members of the United Church of Canada.

Interest in small groups

Perhaps part of the interest in contemplative prayer is the size of the groups, which tend to be small (fewer than ten). Joel Thiessen, in *The Meaning of Sunday*, describes the way small groups feel more intimate and authentic to participants. Jennifer Reed, a 20-year-old Protestant, talks about the benefits of a small group:

¹³ “*European wars of religion*”. Wikipedia. Accessed July 22, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_wars_of_religion

¹⁴ Franklin Arthur Walker, *Protestant Reaction in Upper Canada to the “Popish Threat”* by CCHA, Report, 51 (1951), 91-107. Accessed July 23, 2018 http://www.umanitoba.ca/colleges/st_pauls/ccha/Back%20Issues/CCHA1951/Walker.pdf

¹⁵ Interchurch Relations. Accessed July 23, 2018. <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/interchurch-relations>

Accountability in our small group because we're really honest with each other. Gain friendship. People who will support you when you need it... you get just a sense of peace about things... when you pray and do your Bible study and you're being consistent and you're being faithful... you can handle life's problems."¹⁶

From this quote (and others like it), active affiliates see their involvement in the religious community as an insurance of sorts that someone will be there to help in times of need, and vice versa.

Getting perspective

The language of one denomination may bring understanding, and getting perspective may lead to clarity. Here, Adam Major, an elderly gentleman in the United Church of Canada, makes this point:

The points in Scripture have often been difficult to understand, and the guys at [Alpha Church] have been just tremendous in giving different insights into the meaning of Scripture.¹⁷

Another participant found a new way of being together:

Brooklyn proceeds to offer her thoughts about trusting others in her congregation. She could if she were to ask them, however her perception is that this is not a "Catholic" thing to do – Catholics are very private people. This stood out to her when attending an American evangelical church when she was in her 30s. She had a fall out with her family that contributed to her moving locations and trying to do everything opposite to what her family wanted, which included going to an evangelical church. There she experienced people who, unsolicited, got to know and help other people. She also learned to value scripture, which she repeatedly referenced in our interview as a deficiency in Catholic settings: "You know, it's like going to the lecture all your life and then finally reading the text that goes with the lecture."¹⁸

¹⁶ Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

Yet, for Brooklyn, the security of being in a familiar denomination provides a home away from home:

I thought, “Gee, you know, this is really interesting, because, no matter where I am in the world, they still do the same thing in this church.” So you feel comfortable. It’s sort of like going to McDonalds except it’s not McDonalds.

Everyone does the same thing in whatever language or whatever culture, so that’s a real common point... I know when to stand up, when to sit down, when to kneel, what he’s going to do now, when it’s communion... So that’s kind of... nice, especially when you feel like you’re a stranger.¹⁹

Religious and private practices

Religious practice restricts the individual practise:

The pursuit of religious practices such as Bible reading, prayer, meditation, and church attendance are all intended to help active affiliates to discern God’s will for their life and to act obediently to what they believe God calls them to do, even if it means following paths in life that they would not otherwise choose on their own.²⁰

Religious practice also provides a foundation for understanding social roles:

They believe that the combination of regular church attendance, belief in God, along with a host of private practices (e.g., prayer, Bible reading, and meditation and reflection) provides a source of meaning in life. It gives them a framework to interpret their social roles in the home, at the workplace, and as a citizen of the world.²¹

Religious or social affiliation?

Further on in Thiessen’s study, he examined the participants’ views of religion as primarily an individual or social phenomenon, and, out of 90 participants, discovered that

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹ Ibid., 45.

29 active affiliates “indicate that religion is primarily social in nature or that it is a combination of an individual and social activity.”

Religion as an individual phenomenon, is reflected in Bibby’s observations in *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (1987) and *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (1993) and Michael Adams’ *Sex in the Snow* (2006). Most believe that religion is a customizable private matter where religious beliefs are a matter of choice:

Sometimes I don’t agree with them. Sometimes I agree with them. Sometimes you cherry-pick, like everything in life ... There’s not a lot of black and white... You pick what you like: ‘I like that. That one would be suitable. I’ll keep that’ ... Whereas before, years ago, it used to be you couldn’t cherry-pick. It was all inclusive. You got what you got.²²

Yet, there is a marshalling effect of denominational life. Smith and Snell, in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, point out:

The emerging adults who do sustain strong subjective religion in their lives, it turns out, are those who also maintain strong external expressions of faith, including religious service attendance. Most emerging adults, by contrast, who significantly reduce their external religious participation also substantially reduce their subjective, private, internal religious concerns.²³

Steve Bruce, in *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory*, echoes this finding:

[T]he privatization of religion removes much of the social support that is vital to reinforcing beliefs, makes the maintenance of distinct lifestyles very difficult,

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Christian Smith, and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 252.

weakens the impetus to evangelize and encourages a de facto relativism that is fatal to shared beliefs.²⁴

Bibby restates in *Unknown Gods* that the size of the congregation affects the members and adherents. It is “not just the drop in the number of practising [people but] also the impoverished faith of the participants.”²⁵

Bibby sounds a note of hope in later writings. In *Restless Gods* and *Restless Churches*, he suggests that there is a latent need in those who attend religious services less than once a month but “desire greater involvement.”²⁶

The Sacred Marketplace

In Stark and Finke’s *Acts of Faith* (2000), they look at how and why people make religious decisions. They propose three propositions:

The first proposition:

... people make religious choices in the same way that they make other choices, by weighing the costs against the benefits... within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices”²⁷.

The second proposition:

... among religious organizations, there is a reciprocal relationship between expense and the value of the rewards of membership... to the extent that one is motivated by religious value, one must prefer a higher priced supplier. Not only

²⁴ Steve Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

²⁵ Reginald Bibby, *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada*. (Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 1993), 93.

²⁶ Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. (Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 2002), 220.

²⁷ Rodney Stark, and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 85.

do more expensive religious groups offer a far more valuable product, but in doing so, they generate levels of commitment needed to maximize individual levels of confidence in the religion.²⁸

And finally, the third proposition, that the religious organization's main purpose is:

... to create, maintain, and supply religion to some set of individuals and to support and supervise their exchanges with a god or gods.²⁹

Finke explains the softening of boundaries around denominations as their practices and beliefs liberalize to gain a larger market share:

Religious pluralism (the presence of multiple suppliers) is important only insofar as it increases choices and competition, offering consumers a wider range of religious rewards and forcing suppliers to be more responsive and efficient.³⁰

Summary

There is ample research on how belonging to a congregation benefits the stability of the participant's life as well as the movement towards participation in the sacred marketplace as an individual. This study's focus on the experience of participants and adherents in the United Church of Canada and the mutual benefit to both the individual and the church of participating in a contemplative prayer group combines and reveals an interplay that has not previously been investigated.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776– 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 200.

Theological Perspective

“Be still, and know that I am God!” - Psalm 46:10a (NRSV)

What is contemplative prayer?

Contemplative Outreach, one of the primary promoters of contemplative prayer, defines it as:

“prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.”³¹

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and a source of many writings on contemplative prayer, tried to capture the complexity of it like this:

Contemplation ... is the experiential grasp of reality as subjective, not so much “mine” (which would signify “belonging to the external self”) but “myself” in existential mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God.³²

Identity and practice

What is a church denomination outside of its practices—sacred and social, private and communal? The research question “What is the experience of members and adherents of the United Church of Canada in participating in a contemplative prayer group?” looks at how individuals from one denomination—in this case the United Church of Canada, a

³¹ “*What is Contemplative Prayer?*” Accessed July 25, 2018.
<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer>

³² Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 8-9.

Protestant church in the Reform tradition, with its collection of practices that constitutes a complete solution to the religious questions—seek out a practice from another denomination, in this case contemplative prayer (a practice from the Roman Catholic Church and the Contemplative tradition).

Practices have a foundation in scripture, theology and history; the presence or absence of a practice is significant, and important questions arise. Does the inclusion of a practice not available in the person's denomination replace a "hidden" practice? Does it conflict with the scriptural foundation, theological approach or historical identity? Does it enlarge or diminish an individual's spiritual life or denominational identity? What is the effect on the denomination? What about the boundaries between the denominations?

In the end, the experience of members and adherents must affect their denominations because these denominations are composed of members and adherents. Yet, it is a balancing act. The experience of being in a denomination, with its biblical, theological and historical foundations, limits the practices of its members and adherents while providing identity, stability and a way of being in the world.

Scriptural support for contemplative prayer

There are three main interpretations of scripture that Catholic theologians see as supporting contemplative prayer: 1) seeking God, especially with the "heart," 2) having the mind of Christ, and 3) resting in God.³³

³³ "A Biblical Apologetics for Contemplative Prayer." Accessed July 25, 2018. <https://imagodeicommunity.ca/apologetics-for-contemplative-prayer/a-biblical-apologetics-for-contemplative-prayer/>

Seeking God with heart

Knowledge comes from knowing with the heart:

“From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.” Deuteronomy 4:29 (NRSV)

“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:13 (NRSV)

“so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.” Ephesians 1:18 (NRSV)

God is near...

“From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:26-27 (NRSV)

Having the mind of Christ

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8 (NRSV)

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 12:2 (NRSV)

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Colossians 3:1-2 (NRSV)

“For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ. 1 Corinthians 2:16 (NRSV)

Resting in God

One of the main proof texts for contemplative prayer is the words of Jesus to Mary in Luke 10:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Mary is contemplating what Jesus says while Martha is busy with the things of the world.

Theological support

One of the foundations of Reform Protestant theology is the three solas.³⁴³⁵

Sola Scriptura, learned from Scripture alone

Sola Gratia, by grace alone

Sola Fide, through faith alone

Sola Scriptura

The Reform's "Formal Principle"³⁶ was that the Bible alone was the ultimate authority. When Luther was interrogated (Diet of Worms) on this issue, he responded:

³⁴ Two other solas are sometimes added: *solo propter Christum* (for the sake of Christ alone) and *solī Deo Gloria* (to God alone the glory).

³⁵ *The "Solas" of the Reformation* (PDF). Lmsusa.org. Accessed July 25, 2018. <http://www.lmsusa.org/sola.pdf>. Pg. 1.

Unless I am overcome with testimonies from Scripture or with evident reasons—for I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils, since they have often erred and contradicted one another—I am overcome by the Scripture texts which I have adduced, and my conscience is bound by God's Word.³⁷

Sola Gratia

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Romans 3:28 (NRSV)

Luther translated Romans 3:28 as “*allein durch den Glauben*”—by faith alone.³⁸

It is the act of justification by God that produces the righteousness of the faithful. No work by a person is needed to complete this work, either before or after becoming Christian. Christ's atonement for us is a free gift and we are “declared righteous.”

Where does that put contemplative prayer? Is it an act of faith or a coming into awareness?

Sola Fide

Lutheran confessors, looking at the late writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Trappists, see a change in Bernard's understanding around justification that mirrors Luther's:

There is need that you must first believe that you cannot have forgiveness of sin except by the grace of God; next that thereafter you cannot have and do any good work, unless God grants it to you; lastly that you cannot earn eternal life with your works, though it is not given to you without merit” and exclaiming, as he

³⁶ Gregg Strawbridge, *The Five Solas of the Reformation*, 1993. Accessed July 25, 2018
<https://www.fivesolas.com/5solas.htm>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *The “Solas” of the Reformation*, 10.

looked back on a life of all manner of work for the church, “*Perdite vixi!* I have lived a sinful life!”³⁹

When reflecting on the interpretation of the scripture as per contemplative practice, it is understandable that from this point of view, contemplative practice is not clearly described or promoted in the text.

Historical

For the Early Church Fathers, one of the first monastic communities located in the Egyptian desert, contemplation was central. John Cassian⁴⁰ (C. AD 360-C. 435), credited with bringing Christian monasticism to the West, wrote about the value of contemplation:

So then the merits of all the virtues, which I enumerated above, though in themselves they are good and precious, yet become dim in comparison of the brightness of contemplation. For they greatly hinder and retard the saints who are taken up with earthly aims even at good works, from the contemplation of that sublime good.⁴¹

Evagrius Ponticus (c. 346-399), a contemporary of Cassian, was another monastic writer who informed an understanding of the contemplative prayer experience. Gabriel Budge, in *Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus on Acedia*, described Ponticus’ understanding of the contemplative experience:

This state of mystical “enlightenment” is what Evagrius means most profoundly by “knowledge” (gnōsis). Here “prayer,” “contemplation” (theōria), and

³⁹ *The "Solas" of the Reformation*, 8.

⁴⁰ “John Cassian”, Accessed July 25, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cassian

⁴¹ John Cassian, *The Works of John Cassian* (Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 16914-16917).

“knowledge of God” are one. For what is meant is that condition of the most perfect and intimate oneness which is possible only between persons who “know” one another. Accordingly also, the union between Christ and his Father is the “model” of the life of grace for us, the eschaton (last thing) of the promised union between God and creation, which the one who prays already experiences “in the state of prayer.”⁴²

Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, saw the seeking after God as having an ultimate telos:

Whether Man's Happiness Consists in the Vision of the Divine Essence? It is written (1 John 3:2): “When He shall appear, we shall be like to Him; and [Vulg.: ‘because’] we shall see Him as He is.” I answer that, Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. To make this clear, two points must be observed. First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object.⁴³

The history of the conflict of Catholics and Protestants is a long and complex one but two events stand out:

Henry VIII, with Oliver Cromwell, had suppressed all the religious orders, closing the small monasteries in 1536, most larger ones in 1539 and the last one, Waltham Abbey, in 1540.⁴⁴

Carthusian (Trappist) monks were forcibly expelled from France after the French Revolution because contemplative Orders were deemed “useless to society”.⁴⁵

⁴² Gabriel Bunge, *Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus on Acedia*. (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 62-63.

⁴³ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II (Pars Prima Secundae) EIGHTH ARTICLE [I-II, Q. 3, Art. 8] The Complete American Edition (2012 Kindle Edition).

⁴⁴ “Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries” Accessed July 25, 2018. <https://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-09.htm>

This history still has present effects. J. David Muyskens, a retired minister of the Reformed Church in America but involved with promoting contemplative prayer, considers the historical religious conflict⁴⁶ between the Protestants and Catholics as one barrier⁴⁷ to participation in contemplative prayer among Protestants.

The United Church of Canada has tried to bridge the ecumenical gap of relationship and understanding and has been involved in a Roman Catholic–United Church Dialogue⁴⁸ since 1975.

Summary

The understanding of contemplative prayer has ranged from “useless” to an ultimate concern. Part of the challenge is the breath of definition and experience, but that is also part of the promise. The description falls short of the experience, but the length of time the practice has been considered a valuable—some would say most valuable—spiritual practice is a testament to its importance in the early Christian tradition, the modern Catholic one and, perhaps, with a theological understanding, may have some place in the Reform churches.

Methodology

⁴⁵ “The French Revolution and the Carmelites of Compiègne” Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/stephaniemann/the-french-revolution-and-the-carmelites-of-compiegne>

⁴⁶ “European wars of religion”. Wikipedia. Accessed July 22, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_wars_of_religion

⁴⁷ “Protestant Barriers to Contemplative Prayer” Accessed July 23, 2018. <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/article/protestant-barriers-contemplative-prayer>

⁴⁸ United Church of Canada. “Interchurch Relations.” Accessed July 23, 2018. <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/interchurch-relations>

This study uses a variation of phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology, because it tries to purely describe the experience of the other without imposing external bias or judgement.

The goal of this study is to help the reader consider the reality of a world that is invisible to the ordinary senses but real and dependent on self-report. It is based on “the intentionality of consciousness,”⁴⁹ the attention of the conscious mind; it is, by nature, not a matter of subject and object. It considers that “there is an essence or essences to shared experience”⁵⁰ to be discovered and described. It depends on the independence of the reports to validate a common experience.

Because I belong to the group under study (I am a member of the UCC and participate in a contemplative prayer group), I needed to enter into *epoche* or to “bracket”⁵¹ my bias and interpretation to be able to observe and interpret the phenomena as clearly as possible. To help with this, my participants were unknown to me, were not part of any group I had been in, and were from various parts of Canada—from Halifax to Vancouver—but not from the Ottawa area where I live. To avoid possible association, the invitations to participate were sent out to all UCC conferences except my own.

The invitation went out to the UCC conferences across Canada; because the study was restricted to members of the UCC, the respondents all fell within the Christian

⁴⁹ John Creswell, and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 2017), Kindle Edition, 76.

⁵⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2009), 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

tradition. Each had found their own path and ways to integrate the practice into their lives, but there were some strong similarities. Each found value in contemplative practice, value that they enthusiastically wanted to share.

The transcendental phenomenological reduction⁵² was to the experience, as defined by the research question, of individuals who were not associated with each other, that is, not part of the same group. Because I was looking for the essence of the experience of the individual, having some geographical distance between participants was preferred.

This is not to say that the participants were not selected at random. The first people who responded to the invitation and returned the signed letter of consent before the deadline were included in the study. Initially I had planned for four participants but ended up with six in case one or two dropped out as the study proceeded. Accidentally, these six did come from all over Canada and were not part of the same groups, which worked out very well in terms of the kind of participants I had sought.

Four of the participants were interviewed in person in the second week of September 2018; the other two, from the coasts, were interviewed remotely by phone (televideo interviews were not possible) in the same period. All interviews were recorded, then transcribed. The transcriptions were put into QDA Miner Lite and open coded, followed by axial coding. The resulting themes that emerged were then interwoven into a narrative arc.

⁵² Ibid., 26.

This being a transcendental phenomenological study, I tried only to describe the phenomena without bias but struggled as experience that resonated with mine came out in both the excitement of discovery and the frustration of communicating that discovery. Multiple coding runs helped to remove some bias.

In some ways, their paths reminded me of the Hero's Journey, the monomyth detailed by Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell describes the arc of the journey:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁵³

I did not use themes related to the hero's journey because I was concerned that this would impose an external structure, with its bias, on these experiences. I therefore selected themes that spoke of the journey in open terms: Seeking, Discovering, Sharing, Deepening, Frustration and Transformation.

The variation of this study was that the participants were involved in three interconnected experiences: their own experience as members of the UCC, their experience as members of a contemplative prayer group and their experience as a member of both. This is the reason the study has the somewhat whimsical supertitle "Flying Fish." The image of fish (ichthys) is related to early Christians,⁵⁴ but in this study, the "fish" seemed to be disposed to leap from one environment to another then back into the one as flying fish leap from water to air to water.

⁵³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 23.

⁵⁴ "Ichthys". <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys> (Accessed December 4, 2018).

So the phenomena under study involve this cycle of movement: the experience in the UCC, the experience of the contemplative prayer group, and the experience of the UCC after the experience of the contemplative prayer group. Because this is an ongoing process—something that may happen, in some small way, every week but also over a lifetime—I was interested in the interaction of the experiences. I wanted to discover how participants’ experiences were conflicted/complementary or destructive/constructive with respect to their experience of the community of the UCC and how that might be communicated in the summary of this study. As a result, I developed *imaginative variations*.⁵⁵ The variations are as follows: 1) a journey between two poles but within a larger bounded social and religious environment; 2) this experience as a continuation of the Christian contemplative tradition; and 3) the emergence of a new form of religious affiliation—called by one participant a “parachurch”—that is, “practice-oriented spiritualities.”⁵⁶

Background

Reform Tradition

Everyone I interviewed was a member of the United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Canada is a Protestant church in the Reform tradition. What does this mean? To answer that question, we need understand the history of that tradition.

⁵⁵ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 26.

⁵⁶ Jesse Fox, et al., “A Phenomenological Investigation of Centering Prayer Using Conventional Content Analysis.” *Pastoral Psychology* 64:803. (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-015-0657-1> (Accessed December 4, 2018).

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustine friar, posted his 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg's town square. The big issue was indulgences, something you could buy from the Roman Catholic Church that would, for a fee, provide some relief to souls in purgatory. For Martin Luther, this was an abuse of power. It was a corruption of the church because it was largely a way to make money for the church, and it was a practice created by the church and not found in scripture. This conflict grew into the Protestant Reformation through many theologians, not least John Calvin (1509–1564).

Calvin thought that the Bible derived its authority from God and that the church was just the receiver—not the creator—of the Bible. As soon as it was written, scripture became canon, not after the church recognized it as canon. The Bible, not the church, had authority that needed to be recognized and submitted to. Concerning *Sola Scriptura*, that by scripture alone we have an infallible and complete guide to salvation, Calvin wrote:

Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction, that the power of judging Scripture is in the church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the church receives it, and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but acknowledging it as the truth of God, she as in duty bound, shows her reverence by an unhesitating assent.⁵⁷

The Scottish Reformer John Knox (1513–24 to November 1572)—who had spent time with Calvin in Geneva after Mary Tudor came to the English throne and re-established Roman Catholicism (1554-56)—returned to Scotland and was summoned in

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 69.

1564 to Holyrood Palace by the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots to defend Protestantism in Scotland. In his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Knox recounts part of the dialogue:

Queen Mary. ‘Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they in another. Whom shall I believe? Who shall be judge?’

John Knox. ‘Ye shall believe God, that plainly speaketh in His Word; and further than the Word teacheth you, ye shall believe neither the one nor the other. The Word of God is plain in itself. If there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to Himself, explaineth the same more clearly in other places; so that there can remain no doubt, but unto such as obstinately will remain ignorant.’⁵⁸

For Knox, the Word of God is “plain in itself”; it is self-explanatory and does not require an external warrant or claim. Moreover, our faith should be in God as the source of our understanding and the Holy Ghost as the one to clear up any misunderstanding. All we need is the Holy Scripture, *Sola Scriptura*.

If we jump ahead two hundred years, we come to John Wesley, an Anglican, whose theology grew into Methodism, one of the founding denominations of the United Church of Canada. At AST, we were introduced to the four main tenets of Methodism, called by some the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Reason, Experience and Tradition. But once again, reason, experience and tradition only as validated in Scripture.

In 1992, the United Church of Canada published an official position paper called *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*. The preface of that position paper states this conviction: “God calls us to engage the Bible as foundational authority as we seek to

⁵⁸ John Knox, *The History of the Reformation in Scotland* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 271-272.

live the Christian life.”⁵⁹ It has been over four hundred years since Luther, and there is still this constant idea that “the Bible is a foundational authority.” This is important to consider as we look at the data.

The Age of Collisions

One of the first things that came out of the research was an awareness of the new opportunities that came out of the revolutionary social period of the 1960s. Joseph Campbell described it as an age of collisions:

There were formerly horizons within which people lived and thought and mythologized. There are now no more horizons. And with the dissolution of horizons we have experienced and are experiencing collisions, terrific collisions, not only of peoples but also of their mythologies.

...It is an inevitable, altogether natural thing that when energies that have never met before come into collision—each bearing its own pride—there should be turbulence.⁶⁰

This was intensified by what Marshall McLuhan called The Global Village:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.⁶¹

Ideas and concepts, both secular and religious, from all over the world flooded in, including yoga, Zen and transcendental meditation, among many others.

Old, familiar institutions were also changing with the times. With Vatican II in the 1960s, the life of the Holy Orders of the Roman Catholic Church was now more

⁵⁹ The United Church of Canada. *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992). Preface, page iv.

⁶⁰ Joseph Campbell, *Myths To Live By* (San Anselmo, CA: Stillpoint Digital Press, 1972), 219.

⁶¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8th printing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, ©1964).

accessible to the greater public. After Vatican II, the writings of Trappist Thomas Merton on the monastic life found a much larger audience, and there was renewed interest in the contemplative practices such as the Ignatian Exercises.

In the 1970s, and on the heels of Vatican II, came the development of Christian Meditation by Dominican John Main in England. Before joining a holy order, John Main had been in the English diplomatic corps in Malay and had, in the course of his duties, come across a Hindu swami who taught him to meditate using a mantra. When Main became a Benedictine monk, he discovered that Cassian, a fifth-century Christian monk, had promoted the use of a mantra and that meditation was part of Christian tradition.⁶²

In the same period, Centering Prayer was developed by Trappist Thomas Keating and other monks at St Joseph's Abbey in Spenser, Massachusetts. Father Keating tells the story about a small group coming to the Abbey looking for directions to a Buddhist meditation retreat. Keating, aware of the Christian contemplative tradition and seeing the need, decided to work to make it more available to the general public.

The Christian contemplative tradition is where we join the participants in the study. This is reflected in an observation by one of the participants:

“The presence of the contemplative tradition, even though it was mostly held in Roman Catholic monasteries and convents, was coming into the mainstream and there was a strong social action presence of the Spirit changing the world in a rather strong and transformative kind of way.”
(Aaron)⁶³

⁶² Paul T. Harris, *John Main: by Those Who Knew Him* (Ottawa, ON: Novalis Publishing, 1991), 196.

⁶³ To protect their privacy, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Other identifying information, such as names of communities, has been suppressed.

Aaron's experience as a minister in the UCC and his connections with local Buddhist groups mirrored Father Keating's:

“What was very interesting is most of the people that were in the Shambala community had to come out of an experience of Christian community... that wasn't satisfying. It wasn't meeting their needs, so they ended up in Buddhism and the fault is ours. The Christian tradition...allowed this expression of the spirit to be cloistered!” (Aaron)

Marion, too, saw the roots of her experience with contemplative prayer groups in the same historical period:

“But, from Vatican II, the door began to open that laypeople could be trained in spiritual direction and, so that has happened in the Catholic Church and has begun to happen in other Protestant churches...”
(Marion)

Data Analysis

From coding my interviews, several themes emerged around the search for and discovery of contemplative prayer groups and the integration of this practice into the spiritual lives of the participants. Initially, the participants became aware of a deep undefined need, a general lack, and came upon the practice accidentally, either in written form or as some social experience. There was some sense of a delightful surprise when they found some satisfaction—that this deep undefined need of theirs had a name and a place in spiritual practice. Similar to when we find some great source of something of value like a good place to eat, there was an enthusiastic desire to share with others. But a practice, like a good restaurant, may not be to everyone's tastes, so participants' enthusiasm took a variety of forms, from curiosity to indifference. But just as a well-balanced diet that includes a variety of foods is necessary for general physical health, the experiences of these participants suggest that integrating some practices may be required for a healthy prayer and spiritual life.

Theme 1: Seeking

What do you look for when you just feel an unspecific lack, a missing something? This was the first thing to emerge in the experience of these participants. The participants' explorations resembled some form of treasure hunt, looking for clues and finding the occasional tantalizing bit that kept hope alive.

Seeking includes the sub-codes *desert*, *inadequacy* and *disconnection*.

The theme of *seeking* was based on the participants' sense that something was missing and on their drive, as they identified this lack, to find something that would provide relief. For a couple of the participants, the experience of the *desert* was pronounced:

"I was in my settlement charge in [place] and it was desert-like. A place without. ...That became the first step of the desert experience I ... It defined in one word what I was experiencing as minister in an isolation kind of situation—which it actually was.

"It resonated then and drew my attention to the desert tradition out of which modern contemplative tradition comes and rooted. And that started an inquiry—reading, getting books and reading stories to learn about the practice of contemplation.

"I've read a book, The Desert in the City. The authors of whom, I can't remember, but the whole idea of the desert resonated so much with much of my experience." (Aaron)

For Lilac, the *desert* was a challenge that posed a threat if not handled properly:

"I analogize—that the wilderness, the disruption that happens when change is occurring either externally or internally or probably both and that's the wilderness, and that's where you go, and if you don't have a way of going into the silence, the wilderness can warp you or destroy you." (Lilac)

The sense of *inadequacy* made her feel like an outsider:

"I'm not very good at feeling inadequate and, I guess, that I am by nature self-observing and that I knew that it didn't feel real and people kept talking about it [prayer] and that you're supposed to do it, and I couldn't do it and... What was happening with that?" (Lilac)

For Marion, *inadequacy* was also an issue:

“I was just barely a believer and I was totally intimidated by things like Bible study because I felt like, I hadn’t attended church, I didn’t know anything about the Bible really, so to go to Bible study, I thought I would look stupid because I wouldn’t know anything.” (Marion)

She also had a feeling of *disconnection*, that what she desired was impossible:

“How could that higher power have any interest in me or how could a higher power know, you know, what’s going on in any particular person’s life, because, you know, there’s all these billions of people in the world. How could God know everybody? It’s not possible.” (Marion)

Seeking encapsulates the process of looking for a certain undefined something to meet our undefined need. It is a search full of dead ends and doubt, yet it is fuelled by a hidden hope: an awareness that it is possible that we may find what we are looking for, or perhaps, it will find us. The frustration, both remembered and present, as the participants searched for the some relief for their isolation and confusion was noticeable in the tone of their remembrances.

Theme 2: Discovering

To discover is to pull away the cover and find what is hidden underneath. In this way, our hidden hope has found its object and recognition occurs. We did not know what we were looking for, so the phenomenon is still full of mystery and promise. Here it is, but what does it mean? For the participants, the discovery of this practice came mostly through accident and a personal experience of a strong sense of resonance that this is what they were searching for.

Discovering includes the sub-codes *happy accident*, *unknown alternatives*, *delight* and *crisis of faith*.

For all participants, there was a coincidence—or as Marion put it, a “God-incidence”—in this discovery of the community of contemplative prayer practice. Sometimes it was a *happy accident*, a discovery that there was an *unknown alternative* in what had been a closed set of something called prayer; sometimes it came out of a *crisis of faith*. They found a book, saw something while travelling or became part of a group, such as a women’s group, that incidentally was part of a contemplative prayer group.

Aaron’s inquiry, prompted by a chance find, *The Desert in the City* by Carlo Carretto, led him to books that informed him about the Christian contemplative tradition. There was delight in his voice as he remembered the experience:

“Oh my goodness. This exists? And obviously there was something in me that knew about this, but I never had any sense that it exists as a tradition that was rich and full and within Christianity.” (Aaron)⁶⁴

Sometimes, it was the only group that they could find:

“I kind of fell into this contemplative... Because they were all women and went on this pilgrimage to [place], so I kind of fell into it because of that because I couldn’t find the kind of group I had in [city]. But it really appealed to me—I’m an introvert—rather be sitting in silence, listening and... but first, I think it was just that group of women doing something together.” (Jocelin)

Lilac, frustrated by her inadequacy when it came to prayer, discovered that there were *unknown alternatives*, types of prayer that she could embrace:

“When silent prayer came along—the idea of simply being open—I found that intellectually appealing as well as emotionally appealing.” (Lilac)

Marion, who had been resistant to go to a silent retreat because it offended her sense of reason, returned with a sense of *delight*:

⁶⁴ *The Desert in the City* starts with the words, “I have always been ‘surprised’ by life.”

“The first time I went on a silent retreat... and, I loved it so much that I didn’t want it to end, and so driving back home, I turned off the radio in my car. I haven’t turned it back on ever!” (Marion)

The experiences of discovery that were really surprising were those that came out of a *crisis of faith*. Lilac gave birth to a son with cystic fibrosis.

“I think, I guess that at first, I got very angry with God... and I did a lot of, kind of, internal, in my brain screaming ‘cause that I had this kind of notion that God had sort of done this to punish somebody, which didn’t make any sense to me. So, it helped me... I had a sort of an epiphany, even though I was railing at God, I never, for a minute, doubted something was there, listening to me. And when I realized that, whatever that being was, hadn’t lashed back at me and was just kinda listening—that’s what I felt was happening—so then I found this, contemplative prayer, and I thought, ‘Wow, whatever being that is, I can develop a relationship that is more than being in crisis, screaming.’ And actually, I guess, what was new to me was that I could listen, and receive, rather than do so much talking.” (Lilac)

For Marion, her son’s death, a *crisis of faith*, opened the relationship with God:

This whole thing started for me with our son’s death, and I didn’t believe there was a higher power before the day he died. I had an experience that showed me there absolutely was. (Marion)

And with her son’s death, Marion found in contemplative prayer *“exactly what I needed because I was able to acknowledge and process my grief.”*

Having discovered these valued experiences and after suffering the frustration of years of bearing an unmet thirst, often including some form of isolation from the church, and discovering the practice accidentally, the participants were excited and drank deeply at the well. As sharp as their frustration was during their time of seeking, the enormity of their discovery provided satisfaction for the hope they had carried so long.

Theme 3: Sharing

One of the strongest sustained drives that I experienced in the interviews was a strong sense of compassion for others who are experiencing what the participants had experienced: an undefined need for participation in contemplative prayer groups and that form of prayer. They had some good news for others like them: their hunger and thirst will be satisfied and they are not alone.

Sharing includes the sub-codes *evangelical zeal*, *desire for community* and *leadership*.

The immediate response to this discovery was a desire to share what they had found. There was a kind of *evangelical zeal*:

“So, I guess I jumped in with both feet, I practised for a bit, you know, supported a group meet... and then we started our own practice group.”
(Kim)

The practice, the *desire for community*:

“We had a half-day workshop, then there were follow-up classes. And then there are different contemplative groups here in town of centering prayer, and you were offered which one would you like to attend? ...So I chose one that was done in a Catholic cenacle, run by a United Church person but there were quite a few Catholics in this particular group—this was an ecumenical group. Lots of Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, you know, all over the map.” (Kim)

Sometimes it was a willingness to take on *leadership*:

“I then became, because of my work with the week of guided prayer, became a member of the listening ministries at [retreat centre]... I led silent retreat weekends as well... I volunteered to be the leader for what they called the day away, which was one Wednesday a month where people could come and have a silent retreat for the day.”
(Marion)

Sharing became necessary because of their compassion for others. Most of the participants were leaders in the church, and so it made sense that they should provide some leadership by running workshops, speaking during Sunday service or promoting events hosted by the larger community. These participants acted as a bridge between their church and the larger community and, as specialists in contemplative prayer practices, acted as liaison and resource for both the congregation and the larger contemplative community.

Theme 4: Deepening

As the idea of flying fish suggests, the participants lived in a cycle of participation in the environment of the congregation, in the environment of a contemplative prayer group and back into the environment of the congregation. The cycle is a dynamic one, with possible new value accrued through the process. The participants worked to deepen their experience and understanding through reading, study and practice.

Deepening includes the sub-codes *meditation*, *lectio divina* and *single-minded*.

In the contemplative prayer groups, the focus is on practice. John Main, for example, gives this instruction of meditation to the Christian Meditation group:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase “marantha.” Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Ma-ra-na-tha. Listen it to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to

simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.⁶⁵

There is little or no instruction, so the experience is expressed in common terms without special language. When I asked about the difference between *meditation* and contemplation, Serenity said:

“Meditation is like, focusing on your breathing. Just relaxation. Like, if I did meditation, I would be doing contemplation” (Serenity)

In the practice of *Lectio Divina*, part of the Ignatian Exercises, Jocelin describes the particular experience of scripture versus other writing:

“There is something special about Scripture that is not there in poetry or prose. Like, you can contemplate a poem but, to me, Scripture is something special that I think that is coming from inside of us and how you relate to it.” (Jocelin)

In a general way, the approach is intuitive and is a quest to understand the nature of the experience. It is restrictive; the goal is to be *single-minded*. Kim tried to describe the general feeling she had when she practised quiet meditation:

“...a trying to find who am I? Why am I here? How am I in relation to God? [A] looking for something bigger. Unity with that...the holy.” (Kim)

Entry into spiritual practice had been for these participants part of a virtuous cycle, not always a linear improvement but a marked deepening of the richness of experience over the arc of the time they had been practising. Their estimation of the value of the practice was undiminished, and that helped to give them more hope and faith as they continued their journey.

⁶⁵ Paul T. Harris, *Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation* (Ottawa, ON: Novalis, 2001), 21.

Theme 5: Disappointment

Participants' initial experience of being outsiders during their seeking did not disappear but returned in the form of disappointment as they sought to share the value of their experiences in contemplative prayer groups with their home congregation and the larger church. One of the great values that a congregation brings is stability, a resistance to change. Participants had a life-changing experience, but they returned to find things in their congregations just as they left them.

Disappointment has the sub-codes *unusual*, *low status* and *dissonance*.

The study is about members of the United Church of Canada and their experience with contemplative prayer groups, so I thought it would be important to see how the participants felt about their place in the UCC. Generally, they felt that they had something of value to give but that it was considered outside the necessary core of the UCC.

Aaron, who spent most of his life as a UCC minister, worked to actively promote contemplative prayer in every charge he led. He felt it was valued there because it was promoted by leadership but that it was *unusual* for it to be promoted in other charges:

“There is a sadness about that because it’s such a rich tradition and I believe that there are many people who would respond to it positively if it was being offered.” (Aaron)

Serenity took part in the contemplative group in the church only while there was a minister who promoted it:

“So he’s gone now, we’ve lost him as a minister and I don’t see me doing anything like that without an environment or situation there.” (Serenity)

She wanted to be part of the UCC and found it the best fit for her in a small town, but still...

“... it’s a disappointment. But the philosophy of United Church, the social consciousness etc. is something, I guess, I like.” (Serenity)

Marion suggested contemplative prayer was *low status* and required special staff in a time of tight budgets:

“I wouldn’t say that the United Church embraces the idea of... I mean, I think it would be great to have a person on a church staff who was able to offer contemplative groups, contemplative prayer, offer companionship to people on their spiritual journey. That is different to the minister but, it is not in the budget for most—they don’t see the need—and so it is not a priority.” (Marion)

For Jocelin, the group also has *low status* in the church:

“...we almost feel as if are doing this clandestine thing on the side and begging for space.” (Jocelin)

For her, the double experience of the contemplative prayer group and participation in the UCC service resulted in *dissonance*:

“It made it harder to be in worship and even harder to lead worship. Praying out loud, praying on behalf of people out loud that you know what they need you to say. GACK... That’s very daunting to me.” (Jocelin)

Stability in the congregation is a good thing, but the participants found it frustrating that the change that they are able to make is incremental; that is, they have changed the congregation by being a changed member of it and opening to it some possible avenue of change. Individuals have speed, flexibility and mobility that act as a foil to the stability of the larger group. There is still some of the frustration and conflict that the participants experienced in the seeking phase, but now it is ameliorated with the

knowledge of contemplative prayer practices and the participants' place in the congregation as resources and influencers.

Theme 6: Transforming

Of the six participants, only two seem to integrate their contemplative prayer practice into their larger spiritual practice in a systematic way. It is not too surprising that these two had formal theological training, one as a minister in the UCC and the other as a UCC theological student in the ordination stream.

Transformation has the sub-codes *integration* and *prayer life*.

Aaron, who in his vocation saw contemplative practice as having an important place in ministry, did not relegate it to some special place and time in the church but worked for its *integration* into the life of the church:

“[Contemplative practice] has given depth and breadth to prayer as I understood it earlier in my life and that prayer is indeed a large area of inquiry—it’s not just one or two words to say a word before you go to bed or a pulpit on Sunday. It’s a way of being prayerful. You know, it’s integrated and it’s integrative.” (Aaron)

Before this study, I had thought of contemplative prayer as something distinct, separate and “special,” so I found it one of the hardest things to overcome in my bias. It was just one active and valuable part in the greater *prayer life*, the spiritual ecosystem.

“I was always interested in prayer and I think that was a predisposition for being open to contemplative prayer as a form of prayer among other forms: liturgical, formal prayer, contemplative prayer, personal prayer, those kinds of things. But the difference in it, as you probably know, is that it’s more about listening, it’s more about resting in, it’s more about rumination than it is about vocalization.” (Aaron)

The United Church of Canada is a very flexible organization, and every church that I have ever been in has taken on some particular flavour of the local community. It seems that the successful leadership of those congregations is a melding of those four elements of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: tradition, experience, scripture and reason within the context of community. The participants in this study who have become primary leaders in the congregations (in this case, ordained ministry) are able to bring the value of contemplative practice to their charge in a measured way. With the knowledge that it is important but not central to most people in the congregation, they are able to act as agents of transformation, adding a complementary and integrative element to congregational life.

Issues Arising from Research

Contemplative Prayer Practice as Elitist

Are contemplative prayer practices elitist? Although this question was first raised in the discussions we had in our graduate project seminars, it came up again in my contemplative prayer group after a few members had returned from a retreat given by the Center for Action and Contemplation at the Garrison Institute in Garrison, New York, in November 2018. During the retreat there had been a long discussion around the current demographics of the participants, who tended to be older and fairly well-off, and a question about possible ways to broaden the value of their work to a larger audience. No official report or discussion paper from the session at the Garrison Institute is available.

There are no readily obtainable statistics existing for the exact groups I was looking at; however, there is a 2015 study, “Engagement in Mindfulness Practices by U.S. Adults: Sociodemographic Barriers,”⁶⁶ which included more than 69,000 people. If we look at the 5000 of that group who meditated, 70% had some post-secondary education and a higher income. I see this demographic in every contemplative prayer group I have attended as well.

Although this may be related to the need for the availability of time to practise and the present luxury that time has become in our society, awareness of this fact should help us stay awake to the reality of this practice: it is not an escape from the unpleasantness of the world but an invitation to care for it more deeply.

⁶⁶ Henry A. Olano, Diana Kachan, Stacey L. Tannenbaum, and Ashwin Mehta, “Engagement in Mindfulness Practices by U.S. Adults: Sociodemographic Barriers.” *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, Number 2, 2015: 100-102.

Scriptural Support

Rev. Michael Tutton, another student in the M.Div. program at AST, has been involved in Christian Meditation for a decade but recently has taken a critical look⁶⁷ at the scripture used to support it. He encouraged me to do the same.

Tutton notes that John Main, in his book *Moment of Christ*,⁶⁸ refers to John 10.10: “I have come that men may have life and have it in all its fullness.” Main connects this in terms of “Union with God” and states that this being “open to Life’s Source” (God) through meditation is what Jesus proclaims in this passage.

One of John Main’s favourite passages was John 8:31–32: ‘If you dwell within the revelation I have brought, you are indeed my disciples; you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ Although other translations of this passage read “If you hold to my teaching” (NIV) and “If you continue in my word” (NRSV), the particular invitation to “dwell within” was to Father John a “dwelling” in the meditative state.⁶⁹

It must be understood that the focus of most contemplative prayer groups is on one particular form of practice, Christian Meditation or Centering Prayer. The scripture referred to serves the particular purpose of the group.

Consider this example:

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. –Matthew 6:6 (NRSV)

⁶⁷ Michael Tutton, *The Christ in John Main's Works*. Paper for a course in Christology. Atlantic School of Theology, 2015.

⁶⁸ John Main, *Moment of Christ* (London, UK: MedioMedia, 1984), 31.

⁶⁹ Paul T Harris. *John Main: by those who knew him*. Meditatio. Kindle Edition.

Fr. Thomas Keating's commentary is this:

Pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will bring your whole human nature to full flourishing and blooming. This we call, following Matthew 6:6, "the inner room," that is, the spiritual level of our being, which we deliberately move to in the method or practice of Centering Prayer, by letting go temporarily of all our external concerns, and then all our interior dialog, or the concerns or the conversation we have with ourselves and reaction to what's happening within and around us.⁷⁰

The exegesis is valid but bounded by the reference to the practice. As I will show in the next main section, "Opportunities Identified in the Research" (subsection Teaching Prayer), the issue is the isolation of this particular practice within the larger prayer life, not the practice itself.

Spiritual Utopianism

Augustine, at the start of his *Confessions*, stated that we have a telos, an end goal in our lives. "In yourself you rouse us, giving us delight in glorifying you, because you made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁷¹ The promise of contemplative prayer is this "transcendental awareness," this "resting in God."

In a short study, "The Benefits of Centering Prayer on Psycho-Spiritual Outcomes,"⁷² there was some frustration that the expectation of "transcendental awareness" as an outcome was replaced by the awareness of "difficult emotions." It is

⁷⁰ "The Inner Room". Contemplative Outreach, <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/video/inner-room> Accessed January 24, 2018

⁷¹ Saint Augustine. *Confessions* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 2017), 3-4. Kindle edition.

⁷² Jesse Fox, "Centering Prayer's Effects on Psycho-spiritual Outcomes: A Pilot Outcome Study", *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 19, no. 4, 2016. doi:10.1080/13674676.2016.1203299.

important to keep in mind that this was only a six-week study yet the unrealistic expectation, of jumping to the contemplation of God by using a technique, was there.

Although we call Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation contemplative practices, they are largely meditative; that is, they are designed to mediate, to centre us or “re-collect,” to bring our projections back from the world.

Teresa of Avila, in *The Way of Perfection*, offers this teaching on the prayer of recollection:

The great thing I should like to teach you is that, in order to accustom ourselves gradually to giving our minds confidence, so that we may readily understand what we are saying, and with Whom we are speaking, we must recollect our outward senses, take charge of them ourselves and give them something which will occupy them.⁷³

The goal, as Augustine suggests, is to rest in God, but this is an ultimate telos and requires serious lifetime effort. This does not suggest that it is not an act of faith or that we are not dependant on God’s grace but that serious intention and willingness to do God’s will are key.

In a time of instant gratification, the fulfillment of the promises of God seems to be those things that produce some easy and almost instantaneous result. But we are creatures with the gift of imagination, of “make-believe,” and we can pursue the things of spiritual materialism with the same fervour that we pursue consumer goods. There is always the danger that we will be victims of a kind of abstract thinking:

A false supernaturalism which imagines that “the supernatural” is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature offers no real support to a genuine life of

⁷³ Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press; Ignacio Hills Press: Kindle Edition, 2009), 87.

meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life.⁷⁴

“Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision.”⁷⁵ In a predominately visual culture, appearance is increasingly important, so managing our self-image—even in its spiritual aspect—is also increasingly important. Merton speaks about this dangerous delusion:

The dangerous abuse of image and symbol is seen, for example, in the case of someone who tries to conjure up the “living flame” by an exercise of will, imagination and desire, and then persuades himself that he has “experienced God.” In such a case, this obvious fabrication would be paid for dearly, because there is all the difference in the world between the fruits of genuine religious experience, a pure gift of God, and the results of mere imagination. As Jakob Boehme bluntly said: “Where does it stand in Scripture that a harlot can become a virgin by issuing a decree?”⁷⁶

In this time of many politicians declaring truth by issuing a decree, where we are assaulted by persuasive media, it is more important than ever that we don’t succumb to the lure of advertising, even on spiritual matters, and find a way through trusted ways—scripture, reason, tradition and experience.

Opportunities Identified in the Research

Practice-Oriented Spiritualities

In *Visioning New and Minority Religions*, Erin F. Johnson of Stanford University proposes the term “practice-oriented spiritualities,” which seek to balance being *dwelling-oriented* (collectivity, tradition and stability) and *seeking-oriented* (negotiation,

⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Kindle ed. (New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group, 1969) 15.

⁷⁵ W.J.T Mitchell, “Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture”, *Journal Of Visual Culture*, 2002, Vol 1(2), 170.

⁷⁶ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 66.

individuality and a personal journey).⁷⁷ Johnson identifies these practice-oriented spiritualities as part of a growing trend. Contemplative prayer groups are a practice-oriented spirituality that focuses on “spiritual formation through apprenticeship,”⁷⁸ bringing together a collective as well as a private practice. There is the goal of moving toward the true self in God, as the authentic self that exists “below the level of social and cultural influence,” especially in a world where “a coherent and stable sense of self is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.”⁷⁹ The dilemma is between a world where social options for identity seem almost limitless and yet the stability and coherence of that identity is increasingly transient.

The solution here is the experience in depth, to discern what is superficial and what is authentic:

Practitioners must learn to *discern* the desires, feelings and reactions that stem from their True Selves – the place where they are united with the divine – and those that stem from a desire to conform to the norms and demands of social and cultural context (akin to ‘institutionalists’) and from instinctual urges and desires rooted in human nature (akin to ‘impulsives’).⁸⁰

The goal is to find the balance between self-responsibility (the response to the guidance of God) and the Grace of God,⁸¹ to “construct the spiritual as socially-shared and yet

⁷⁷ Erin F. Johnston, “Anticipating the Future: The Growth of Practice-Oriented Spiritualities,” in Eugene V. Gallagher, ed., *Visioning New and Minority Religions: Projecting the Future*. (London, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter 12, p. 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Ralph H. Turner, “The real self: From institution to impulse.” *American Journal of Sociology* 81(5), 1976: 989–1016.

⁸¹ Johnston, “Anticipating the Future”, Chapter 12, p. 5.

deeply personal, grounded yet flexible”⁸² and to seek the same universal goal but in a personal and unique way. The “subjectivization” of religious life,⁸³ making the religious fit our personal needs, is balanced by the need for stable social identity and results in a *holistic* identity,⁸⁴ an enveloping worldview that harmoniously contains all other worldviews. In this way, the practice-based spirituality may be integrated into the whole life experience of the practitioner.

The Need for Silent Practice

There is scriptural support for including silent practice, including the divinely ordained need for Sabbath and listening for the “Still small voice of God” (1 Kings 19: 9-13). All participants agreed that making space for silent prayer is not just having an empty room available but becoming intentional in the practice and having trained leaders. Jocelin, a teacher by profession, describes the leadership required:

“What I do know is that people like [name hidden], giving leadership to this stuff—it looks incredibly simple but it’s not—like, you really need someone.” (Jocelin)

The traditions of the church are passed on by the modelling of the community of saints, those who have gained wisdom and want to pass it on. Thomas Merton refers to this “inseparable unity of silence and monastic prayer” as described by one of the Desert Fathers, a Syrian monk, Isaac of Nineveh:

⁸² Ibid., Chapter 12, p. 6.

⁸³ Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).

⁸⁴ Wayne Brekhus, *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Many are avidly seeking but they alone find who remain in continual silence. ... Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within. If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God himself. ... More than all things love silence: it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe. In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then there is born something that draws us to silence. May God give you an experience of this “something” that is born of silence. If only you practice this, untold light will dawn on you in consequence ... after a while a certain sweetness is born in the heart of this exercise and the body is drawn almost by force to remain in silence.⁸⁵

The use of silence as a traditional teaching is a means that, in the experience of these trusted teachers, is effective and should be considered useful as part of our spiritual lives. But more than that, our practice becomes both way and goal. Dr. Gerald May, Methodist, psychiatrist and member of the Shalem Institute, sees it as a meeting place:

I am not very concerned about separating experience of God from desire for experience of God, because when I get right down to it I’m not sure what the difference is. Theologically and psychologically, our very deepest desires are, I believe, indistinguishable from God’s desires within us.⁸⁶

Teaching Prayer

The key discovery in this study has been that there needs to be a renewed understanding of what prayer is. One of the participants, Aaron, identifies prayer as “a large area of inquiry,” not separate, siloed activities but a whole, “integrated and integrative.” The two participants who had some training as ministers in the UCC, Aaron and Marion, were able to integrate contemplative prayer into a larger prayer life. They

⁸⁵ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 5.

⁸⁶ Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind Care of Spirit A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1992; Kindle edition), 206.

saw it as one part of a whole, but the other participants felt inadequate when the subject of prayer came up.

“People kept talking about [prayer] and that you’re supposed to do it, and I couldn’t do it” (Lilac)

It is hard to admit that, as an adult, you don’t understand a primary activity of the church even though you have faithfully attended church for many years, perhaps your entire life.

Aaron, a retired minister, mentioned that prayer was not taught when he was at school in the 1970s, and my experience was the same. We were taught how to write prayers, but the understanding of what prayer is was assumed. Teaching praying as part of our school and church life would help to relieve this lack of understanding concerning a central activity of our spiritual life.

Dr. Robert Fennell, in *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal*, tells us that traditional teaching includes learning from our ancestors in the faith:

If we take seriously the faith claim that we are within a “communion of saints,” as the Apostles’ Creed calls it, then we do well to honour our brothers and sisters who have gone before us, and to listen to how they understood the sacred text that is now handed along to us. There is an uncomfortable hubris among postmodern and late modern people when we imagine that we can work with the Bible quite apart from these theological readings our ancestors wrestled over.⁸⁷

And this is mirrored in Jocelin’s intuitive comment around the practice of contemplative prayer:

⁸⁷ Robert C. Fennell, *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 47-53.

“... that it is ancient and the communion of saints over the ages that have had their hands in it, thought about it, like it joins us, joins you to that.”
(Jocelin)

The disconnection between the experience of prayer in the UCC and the experience of prayer in contemplative prayer groups seems to reveal a lack of understanding of the life of prayer as a whole process. Thomas Merton describes contemplative prayer as “part of a continuous whole, the entire unified life of the monk, *conversatio monastica*, his turning from the world to God,” which includes *Meditatio* (Meditation), *Psalmodia* (Sung Psalms), *Lectio* (Scripture), *Oratio* (Spoken Prayers) and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation).⁸⁸

We can see some of these elements in the UCC Order of Service: Gathering (*Meditatio*), Confession (Penance), Prayer of the People (*Oratio*), Scripture (*Lectio*) and Hymns (*Psalmodia*) as well as that model of prayer which was given in response to the apostle’s request “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)—the Lord’s Prayer.

The form of the prayers are there, but what about the content? Fr. Augustine Baker (1575–1641), a strong influence on John Main, was a Benedictine monk who was part of the English Benedictine Congregation, the first to return to England after the Reformation. He felt that prayer was mostly emotional:

By prayer, in this place, I do not understand petition or supplication, which, according to the doctrine of the schools, is exercised principally by the understanding, being a signification of what the person desires to receive from God. But prayer here especially meant is rather an offering and giving to God whatsoever He may justly require from us—that is, all

⁸⁸ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 4.

duty, love, obedience, &c.; and it is principally, yea, almost only exercised by the affective part of the soul.⁸⁹

Aaron experienced the tension between the social gospel and the charismatic in the church:

“The debate between the charismatic and the social outreach people in the United Church was really getting very loud and tensions were high and so the Moderator called a conference on the Holy Spirit in London, Ontario. And when I read that it was like, ‘Oh, my goodness... I want to go to that,’ and I did. And there were those who spoke out of what we would call the social traditions or social justice movement. And passionately about it—their expression of spirituality was more around celebration and upbeat music and stuff like that. And then the charismatic—who were looking to what we know was the Pentecostal tradition—began tongues lamentations. There was nothing mentioned about the contemplative tradition. That was a surprise and a wake-up call, realizing that I was experiencing some kind of call toward that.” (Aaron)

He felt there must be a “third way” that brought these ways of church together with the contemplative and sought to promote this “third way” in the churches where he was minister:

“So it's hard to kind of pull it [contemplative practice] out of the regular practice of ministry because it informed everything—in form, by exegesis, the hymns I chose, by exposition and sermon—the things of practice and worship. It was inclusive, I was being responsive to the whole of the Christian tradition.” (Aaron)

This “being responsive to the whole of the Christian tradition” is key to understanding the practice of prayer, that we are called to “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’;

⁸⁹ Augustine Baker. *Holy Wisdom: or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation* - Enhanced Version (Kindle Locations 5865-5868). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Kindle Edition.

and to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’⁹⁰ and that requires the whole suite of active and contemplative processes working together. It is something we observe in ourselves and others, and we must let understanding pursue faith when we become aware that the practice of prayer has unnecessarily become empty ritual.

⁹⁰ Luke 10:27 NIV.

Conclusion

What have we learned through this study?

First, that like anything living, the church is evolving and responsive to the times. The fundamental spiritual needs of all the people of this planet have not changed over time even if the conditions under we have pursued the satisfaction of those needs have. Honouring movements such as practice-based spiritualities can be a healthy response to those needs in this post-modern age.

Second, that meditation and silence are necessary parts of the greater prayer life. This is especially true during a time when the age of collision has reached into our lives, where our attention is now a commercial commodity, and where fear and desire continually shout at us and tempt us from every nearby screen 24/7. We come to the growing awareness that the only real freedom is to rest in the reality of God and have faith, especially faith that seeks understanding.

Finally, that all parts of our prayer life, properly ordered and connected to our active lives, inform each other and deepen our relationship with God. As Aaron said, “*it’s integrated and it’s integrative*”—participatory and whole making.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Questions for Interview

1. What is the experience of being in a contemplative prayer group?
2. What drew you to contemplative prayer?
3. How has it impacted you?
4. Contemplative prayer has never really been part of the United Church of Canada. What does this mean for you?
5. How has contemplative prayer affected other parts of your prayer life?
6. Is there anything else with respect to your participation in a contemplative prayer group that you would like to share with me?



Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Are you a member of a United Church of Canada and have you joined a contemplative prayer group? Are you 19 years of age or older? If you answered yes to both of these questions, then I would like to talk with you.

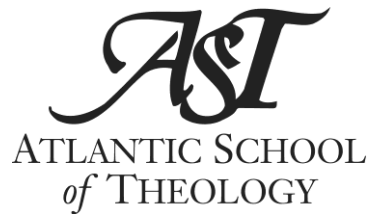
My name is Brian Thompson, and I am a Master of Divinity student at Atlantic School of Theology. I'm conducting research on the experience of members of the United Church of Canada that have joined contemplative prayer groups. Whether you had a positive or negative experience, your input into my research will help shape theories around why people like you have joined these groups.

If you are interested and are willing to be a participant in my research, you can choose to speak one-on-one with me either in person or through an interview over the phone. Either way, your participation will be kept anonymous throughout the analysis and presentation of my research.

This is an opportunity for you to share your experience and insight with the church and add your voice to an informed understanding of this encouraging initiative. If you would like to know more, or if you are interested in participating, I would love to hear from you. I can be reached by phone at 613-552-9208, or by confidential email at humanode@gmail.com.

Please consider participating, and thank you for your consideration!

Brian Thompson



Appendix C: Informed Consent

The Experience of Members of the United Church of Canada Who Participate in a Contemplative Prayer Group

Brian Thompson – Principal Investigator

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

Phone (cell): 613-552-9208 **E-mail:** humanode@gmail.com

I am a student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Program at Atlantic School of Theology. As part of my course work, under the supervision of Rev. Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on how members of the United Church of Canada (UCC) experience participation in contemplative prayer groups.

I will be interviewing people who:

- are 19 years of age or older at the time of this research,
- are members of a United Church community, and
- are willing to speak about their experience of joining a contemplative prayer group.

I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purposes of this work are to examine what ideas and experiences participants may have to share; to increase the body of knowledge on how joining a contemplative prayer group affects the UCC member's life; and to explore how these experiences might filter into the life of the congregation.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. I will ask you a series of questions, in the context of a larger discussion about your experience, and will audio-record your responses. Follow-up interviews, as required, will also be recorded in the same manner.

Should you have any issues that arise during this project, you will have confidential access to Rev. Anne Hoganson, a chaplain at AST, who will be available by phone (902-237-3318) and email (annehoganson@gmail.com).

The recordings and transcripts will be held in a secure environment throughout this study, and after the final project is completed, they will be held in a locked file in Dr. Willhauck's office on the AST campus for one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the end.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined have been explained to me, and that I have been given a copy of this consent form. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at any time should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

I also am aware that, should I elect to be interviewed, my participation will be confidential from the other members of the congregation who may also be interviewed, and will be anonymous in the researcher's reporting and presentation of the findings.

The following is a timeline for the storage and destruction of data:

Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent form from research participants, the researcher will:

- provide one copy for the participant;
- keep one copy, which will be placed in an envelope separate from all other materials and stored in a secure location; and
- provide one copy to the research supervisor, Rev. Dr. Susan Willhauck, which will also be placed in a separate envelope. The supervisor will store these in a locked file cabinet.

Audio files of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device or password-protected computer. These devices will be kept locked and secured at all times during

data collection—from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations—and will be deleted permanently from the device on November 30, 2018.

Within two weeks of each interview, the researcher will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document or pdf. The document transcripts will be kept on a password-protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on November 30, 2018.

The public Grad Project presentations take place in mid November 2018, the recorded video of the presentation will be posted on YouTube shortly after that date, and the final project paper is due on November 30, 2018. On that day, I will delete recordings of interviews and bring all transcriptions and copies of Informed Consent forms to my supervisor. The supervisor will store these documents in a locked file cabinet at AST for one year, at which time they will be destroyed on November 30, 2019.

If you have questions, please contact Brian Thompson, the principal researcher, at 613-552-9208 or humanode@gmail.com.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology in keeping with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber, chair of the Research Ethics Board, at afaber@astheology.ns.ca.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.



Appendix D: Thank you letter to Participants

<Date>

<Name of Participant>

I'm writing to express my heartfelt gratitude for your participation in my research on the experience of contemplative prayer. Whether you leapt at the chance to be involved or not, your involvement has been valuable, beyond measure, to this work.

Deeper understanding can only emerge through many divergent voices sharing stories of personal experiences. I have appreciated your willingness to engage this topic, your integrity in speaking openly and honestly with me, and your trust and grace in opening yourself up and sharing your personal experiences. I do not take this sacred trust lightly, and I am all the more grateful for your involvement because of it.

Your participation in this project has helped me to understand the experience of participation in contemplative prayer. As I move forward with analysis and presentation of my research, know that your contribution will find an important place in understanding the importance of contemplative prayer in other communities of faith.

With thanksgiving,

Brian Thompson
Principal Researcher