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From Roots to Renewal:
An Exploration of Contemplative Life in Community

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Abstract

This project explored how Episcopal congregations can move toward greater engagement with contemplative practice as a means of deepening spiritual formation and fostering congregational vitality. The central research question guiding this project was: How does an Episcopal congregation move toward greater engagement with contemplative practice? The research centered on congregations actively engaged in cultivating a contemplative culture, with particular attention to the challenges encountered, the resources employed, and the critical components necessary for developing a contemplative orientation. This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design with a constructivist approach and included some ethnographic features. Data were gathered through researcher observations and interviews with nineteen individuals from three Episcopal congregations, comprising eight leaders and eleven participants involved in communal contemplative practices.

Findings revealed that spiritual leadership, accessible practices, communal rhythms, and personal accompaniment are key components of cultivating contemplative life within congregations. The research highlighted the communal nature of contemplative engagement, underscoring the importance of shared rhythms and relational support. Contextual factors such as congregation size and community dynamics also influenced how practices were adopted and sustained. This project offered practical insights for leaders seeking to integrate contemplative practice into the fabric of congregational life, emphasizing intentional structures, relational investment, and ongoing spiritual guidance to sustain a flourishing contemplative culture.

Acknowledgments

When I began classes in January 2021, those who knew me weren't surprised. My lifelong curiosity is well known. I got the question, "Why?" a lot, though. I didn't have an answer except that I wanted to finish what I had begun seventeen years prior. After serving the church and non-profits for nearly twenty years, I knew God was calling me to something new, but I didn't have a name for it yet. Four and a half years and three advanced degrees later, I know the "why." The question I receive now is: How do you do it all? This list of people is how I do it. We belong to each other. This work is evidence of that, both in the conclusions my research prompted and by the miracle that this project exists.

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what was possible. It was my time in seminary that gave me the eyes to see my calling to the priesthood. In the process, I found my home in the Episcopal Church and my voice as a preacher and theologian – things I didn't believe I could do and that weren't possible for many women until others took the first steps. It's on their shoulders that I stand, trembling and grateful.

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We would be right to rejoice that God dwells within our own souls, and even more so that our souls dwell in God. Our soul was created to be God's dwelling place, and he who is uncreated is also the place where we dwell. It is a sublime realization to see with inner eyes that God, our Creator, dwells inside us, and it is an even more exalted thing to understand inwardly that the essence of our soul, which is created, dwells in God. It is by this essence that, through God, we are what we are. I saw no difference between the divine substance and the human substance; it was all God. I was able to accept that our essence is in God, that our essence is a creation of God, and that God is simply God. The all-powerful truth of the Trinity is the Father, who created us and keeps us within him. The deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, in whom we are all enfolded. The exalted goodness of the Trinity is our beloved Lord: we are held in him and he is held in us. We are enclosed in the Father, we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit.

—Julian of Norwich

Upon further reflection it would seem that an important function of the exercises is to build an immunity against the confusion and the distractions of environment. They seemed to make a clearing in the woods in which one may be still. They provide the technique for disentangling the mind and spirit from their involvements, that the tryst may be kept with the spirit. They do not guarantee that the spirit will be encountered, but they do prepare the way of response to its movement. Take the dimness of my soul away—this seems to be the central function of spiritual exercises. This is enough. Enough.

—Howard Thurman

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Chapter One: Introduction

Thomas Merton, a leading teacher of contemplative life in the 20th century, urged church leaders to understand that without “contemplative orientation we are building churches not to praise [God] but to establish more firmly the social structures, values, and benefits that we presently enjoy.”¹ One of many prophetic voices calling the American church to strengthen their emphasis on prayer and spiritual formation, Merton’s words point to the average American’s changing relationship with the church and the church’s struggle to pinpoint how to effectively walk the line between worshipping community and organization. As church attendance declined toward the turn of the twenty-first century, Gallup polling revealed that one of the top three reasons people were leaving the church was that they were looking for deeper spiritual meaning not found there, stating churches were more concerned with internal organizational issues.² Continuing this downward trajectory, by 2020, the Barna Group’s research found that 49% of Americans attended church in the last six months, and only 25% attended monthly and said faith was very important.³ Yet, the number of people seeking a spiritual dimension to life is on the rise in polling, with nearly half of people surveyed in 2023 saying they are more open to God after

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York, NY: Image, 1971), 93. Merton, a monk in the Trappist order known for their emphasis on silence and contemplation, played a critical role in bringing conversation about contemplative life to the forefront of Christian dialogue in the twentieth century through his bestselling autobiography and extensive writing and teaching on the subject. His work in interfaith dialogue and social action brought the conversation out of the monasteries and made it accessible, inspiring the modern contemplative movement through figures like Father Thomas Keating, and his work is celebrated through the International Thomas Merton Society that continues to honor and build on his legacy.

² Kenneth J. Collins, ed., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 10.

³ Barna Group, “Five Trends Defining Americans’ Relationship to Churches,” February 19, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/current-perceptions>. The changing relationship of Americans to the church is perhaps most evident in the rise of the religious “nones” who were raised in a religious context but no longer identify with a faith community. As this research is centered in the context of the spiritual growth of those inside the local congregation, addressing this demographic was outside the scope of the research, and yet data arose out of the research that also speaks to the appeal of the contemplative life to the religious nones.

the COVID-19 pandemic and 74% of adults in the U.S. revealing they want to grow spiritually.⁴ These statistics demonstrate that people are looking for spiritual meaning and growth, but they are not always finding it in the Church.

Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

Spirituality, in the broadest sense, speaks of one's lived experience of and response to the divine, while Christian spirituality points to "striving for ever more intense union with the Father through Jesus Christ by living in the Spirit."⁵ Thus, inherent in Christian lived experience is a process or journey, a seeking after growth. For decades, those in the growing field of spiritual formation have been calling for leaders to meet the rising desire of churchgoers for spiritual growth, citing a lack of teaching and direction as a reason people are not growing in maturity in Christ.⁶

In the modern era, there has been confusion around what spirituality and the formation of the inner life of the individual entails in an age that is influenced by philosophy and science and is uncomfortable with the nonmaterial world.⁷ Modern Christian leaders refer to spiritual formation by a variety of concepts including the "with God life," "soul keeping," and "spiritual growth."⁸ Some leaders suggest that spiritual formation is synonymous with discipleship, a term

⁴ Barna Group, "Year in Review," December 27, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/year-in-review-2023>.

⁵ Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, 51.

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 1999), 17.

⁷ Richard J Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 2.

⁸ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 1-3, 117, and 181.

that many suggest has lost its relevance.⁹ The contemporary understanding of lifelong growth toward Christlikeness for the sake of others was brought to the forefront in the twentieth century by Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical thinkers alike in response to growing interest in spirituality from those in their communities.¹⁰ Common threads from these thinkers point to a process of inner and outer transformation guided by the Holy Spirit and undertaken by the individual through disciplines of engaging with scripture, prayer, and other personal and communal devotional practices, with the result being transformation resulting in loving action.¹¹ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. distills these commonalities down to spiritual formation as the “process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.”¹²

⁹ Leo Wilson. “Christian Spiritual Formation.” *Emerging Leadership Journeys* 1, vol. 10 (2017). <https://www.regent.edu/journal/emerging-leadership-journeys/christian-spiritual-formation-2>.

¹⁰ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 17-25.

¹¹ The spiritual formation movement of the twentieth century was guided by works published by several notable thinkers reviewed in this project: Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, A.W. Tozer, Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Henri J. M. Nouwen, and M. Basil Pennington. These figures played a crucial role in shaping the idea of intentionality around faith formation, spiritual disciplines, and contemplative practice. Their works continue to shape the landscape of spirituality and discipleship. As spiritual formation becomes a growing discipline in colleges and universities, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities created a formal definition in 2011, defining it as “the biblically guided process in which people are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit within the faith community in order to love and serve God and others.”

¹² M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 16. This is a widely used definition of spiritual formation in literature, spiritual formation programs in seminaries, and churches in the contemporary Protestant church. Mulholland’s work is seen as unique within the spiritual formation movement because it situates inner transformation as a vital component of the mission of the church.

Spiritual Formation in the Episcopal Church

This project, though applicable to various Protestant churches in the U.S., is centered in the Episcopal church, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.¹³ Anglican spirituality is built on the foundational of interplay between prayer and belief.¹⁴ However, because Episcopal spiritual practice is guided by the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, churches can run the risk of promoting a spirituality that is based on ritual and common life, and parishes can become program-based instead of inviting members into a connection with and participation in the life of God.¹⁵ Spiritual formation and faith formation are more common terms in Anglican circles than discipleship. However, there is a growing understanding across the Episcopal world that a renewal of the Church requires “intentional formation of Christian disciples in community.”¹⁶

While Episcopal parishes have historically focused on common life and active service, leaders in the national church recognized early in the twentieth century that leaders were not always equipping their members with the knowledge and resources to experience an encounter with God that is ever-deepening. In 1934, amid debt and decline in Episcopal churches, the Forward Movement Commission (still functioning as Forward Movement) determined the need to turn “habitual Christians” into disciples and began developing resources to “support ordinary

¹³ The Episcopal Church is a mainline Protestant denomination based in the United States. The Episcopal Church shares roots with the Church of England, which retained much Catholic practice, but not governance. Anglicanism is often referred to as the *Via Media*, the middle way, between Catholic and Protestant. A worldwide family of 42 national and regional churches, the Anglican Communion spans 165 countries. While not in consensus on all beliefs and practices, Episcopal and Anglican are terms used synonymously when referring to most theological issues. To be Episcopal is to be Anglican. (<https://www.anglicancommunion.org>).

¹⁴ Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe, *Walk in Love: Episcopal Beliefs & Practices* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 2018), xii.

¹⁵ Stuart Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness in Congregational Ministry* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2021), 80.

¹⁶ Dwight J. Zscheile, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 107.

Christians in their everyday journeys as followers of Christ.”¹⁷ Traditionally, the daily offices and liturgies for personal and family use in the *BCP* have been the guiding frameworks given to assist the individual in his or her personal connection with God day-to-day.¹⁸ However, this standard is followed by a minority of Episcopalians, with only 22.9% saying they read scripture outside a service at least once a week and 51.8% saying they pray at least once a day.¹⁹

This collective research indicates that the average Episcopal church member either does not have the tools needed to develop a rich inner life guided by the Holy Spirit or does not understand the importance of spiritual formation. While a little under half say their religious life is very important to them, less than a quarter read the Bible daily and only 14.4% participate in prayer or study groups. Because Episcopal spirituality can tend to lean largely liturgical, sacramental, and communal, even those who long for growth can lack understanding of the direct experience of God and where to begin listening for the voice of God.²⁰

Research centered around an invitation to individuals to embrace a renewed vision for the personal spiritual journey was conducted over a decade in more than 100 Episcopal congregations and has revealed three critical needs for spiritual growth.²¹ RenewalWorks, a ministry of the Episcopal church formed in 2013, grew out of the needs identified by the research to make a “concerted effort to make spiritual growth the priority in Episcopal congregations and

¹⁷ “Forward Movement,” accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.forwardmovement.org>.

¹⁸ Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 37-140.

¹⁹ “Episcopal Church (1789-Present),” The Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/group-profiles/groups?D=295>.

²⁰ Thomas Bushlack, “Contemplative Practices,” in *Contemplation and Community: A Gathering of Fresh Voices for a Living Tradition*, eds. Stuart Higginbotham and Jessica M. Smith (Chestnut Ridge, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2019), 10.

²¹ Jay Sidebotham, “Lessons from Unlikely Sources: What a Market Author and a Megachurch Are Teaching a Few Episcopalians about Growing the Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 495.

to build cultures of discipleship in those congregations.”²² The research points to the need for a deeper life of discipleship marked by spiritual practices that reach all areas of life outside the context of the Church.²³ The data revealed that a critical component of spiritual development for Episcopalians “seems to be time spent in solitude and contemplation.”²⁴ However, follow-up research and resulting resources produced by Forward Movement for Episcopal leaders center mostly around engagement with scripture and Episcopal belief and practice.²⁵

Contemplation as a Component of Spiritual Formation

The concepts of mysticism, contemplation, and contemplative practice carry heavy baggage as secular, religious, and spiritual communities mean different things when utilizing these terms. Their very nature as personal and mysterious makes them difficult to define. This project will reference these concepts using descriptions as close to classical Christian teaching as possible. The scriptural and historical foundations of contemplation will be explored in detail in Chapter Two based on these foundations. This project refers to “contemplative life” when referencing an intentional focus on personal and/or communal spiritual practices aiding the ongoing interior journey toward an awareness of God’s abiding presence, seeking always greater

²² Jay Sidebotham, *Signs of Life: Nurturing Spiritual Growth in Your Church* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 2023), 5.

²³ Sidebotham, “Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 495-505.

²⁴ Jay Sidebotham, “More Lessons from Unlikely Sources: When a Market Author and a Megachurch Meet the Episcopal Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 500.

²⁵ “Forward Movement.”

transformation of one's life by God.²⁶ Various literature will call this contemplative orientation, contemplative grounding, contemplative discipleship, or speak of a union of contemplation and action.

Contemplation refers to what the Western monastics called *contemplatio*, what Gregory the Great in the sixth century spoke of as an “attentive regard for God.”²⁷ It is linked to what the Greek fathers called *theoria* and was related to a kind of spiritual knowing or silent gaze at God. Thomas Merton, teaching on this broad tradition, points to the two parts of contemplation, the active and receptive in which one prepares themselves through spiritual practices to receive the grace of an awareness of God's presence.²⁸ Contemplation is not itself the words of the prayer or the active practice but the intention and the resulting “state of realized oneness with God.”²⁹ Therefore, the human side of contemplation can be described as an attentive awareness in which an individual becomes attuned to the divine presence, transcending spiritual practice or the words of prayer. This “experienced relationship with the Trinity who dwells within the one who is praying” is a gift from God one receives, a gift that cannot be earned but can be sought after

²⁶ Carl McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2010), 128. McColman notes that the terminology of contemplative prayer and contemplative life is interchangeable in classical mystical literature. Reference to the contemplative life most often points to “the spiritual practices by which we open ourselves to the mystery of Christ” and one's ongoing commitment to a life centered around receptivity to this knowledge and a life transformed by it. Mystical life and contemplative life are used synonymously throughout the literature reviewed and throughout this project. However, because of the contemporary baggage around the term “mystical,” the researcher prefers contemplative in the research setting for clarity of understanding.

²⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: From Gregory the Great to the Twelfth Century*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1994), x and 56.

²⁸ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 49.

²⁹ James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 16.

through the contemplative life.³⁰ Gerald May describes it this way: “Human beings *do* meditation while God *gives* contemplation.”³¹

Many of those who fled to the deserts and built what became the monastic movements of Christianity focused on the mystical, the mysterious experiential core of one’s relationship with God. To these men and women of the early Church, meditation on scripture, prayer, and contemplation could not be separated from one another. They were all part of a “deep personal integration in an attentive, watchful listening of ‘the heart.’”³² According to Bernard McGinn, throughout the centuries, those who have looked for it have found evidence in scripture and Church tradition that one can become aware of God’s presence “as the direct and transforming center of life.”³³

Mystical themes existed in the earliest Christian communities, flowing out of allegorical interpretations of scripture and the early working out of theology, in close conversation with changing Jewish thought and interwoven with Greek culture and philosophy.³⁴ Pointing to denial in the original Greek, the term *apophatic* refers to the idea that any human concepts or images are inadequate to describe the mystery of God.³⁵ The early Christian mystics taught that because God is beyond the ability of humans to fully comprehend, he is encountered in silence.³⁶ This

³⁰ Thomas R. Ward, Jr., “Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation: An Opportunity for the Episcopal Church,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 50, no. 3 (Pentecost, 2007): 451.

³¹ Gerald G. May, M.D., *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 76.

³² Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 4.

³³ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2006), xvi.

³⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York, NY: Viking, 2013), 25.

³⁵ McGinn, xvi.

³⁶ McGinn, 122.

negative theology is prominent in Orthodox Christianity, appearing in the teaching of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, but it has ongoing strands in Western traditions as well, continuing with the work of influential theologians like John of the Cross and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.³⁷

In terms of how these ideas impact the lineage of contemplative practice, the focus on mystery in apophatic theology helped lay a foundation for the idea that in the darkness of unknowing or suffering, God is present and more readily accessible to the person who embraces the apophatic journey.³⁸ Darkness, as a way of unknowing and surrendering to God, becomes an essential part of the spiritual life, a way of illuminating the path to God.³⁹ The complement to the apophatic tradition is a focus on *cataphatic* theology, which points to God's self-disclosure through scripture.⁴⁰ Therefore, apophatic prayer tends to employ techniques of emptying oneself so that one might be united with God, while cataphatic prayer can focus on meditation techniques that use icons, imagination, words, and liturgy.⁴¹ Pastor and author Eugene Peterson likens apophatic prayer to "praying with your eyes shut," and emphasizes the systematic letting go of ideas until there is only being, while cataphatic prayer is "praying with your eyes open."⁴² Like two sides of a coin, both traditions have yielded spiritual practices for intentional

³⁷ McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 123-124, 281-282.

³⁸ Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 97-98.

³⁹ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 208-209.

⁴⁰ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 55.

⁴¹ Gary Lee Baldwin, "A Personality Theory of Christian Spirituality," DMin diss. (Winebrenner Theological Seminary, Findlay, Ohio, 2012), 286.

⁴² Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*, (Christianity Today, Inc.: Carol Stream, IL, 1989), 92.

encounters with God and, as Peterson notes, the two traditions should “intermingle, mix, and cross-fertilize” to create a balance and yet “the Western church is heavily skewed on the side of the cataphatic.”⁴³

Pulling from and weaving together the apophatic and cataphatic traditions in modern Christianity creates a breadth of contemplative practices that aid the spiritual formation journey. Considering the diversity of needs and makeup of the Church today, contemplative practice spans engagement with various exercises that aim to cultivate inner awareness and stillness which can open one to a deepening communion with God. While contemplative practices often involve intentional space for reflection or silence, more active practices like pilgrimage, labyrinth walking, and music can be considered contemplative practices when the motivation or quality aims toward a deeper connection with God.⁴⁴

Contemplative prayer is a reference to methods of prayer that aim to foster inner awareness and stillness as a means of opening oneself up to an encounter with God beyond words—to enter a state of receptivity to deepening communion with God. Contemplative prayer attempts to engage the whole self and move beyond intellectual engagement.⁴⁵ Classical Christian literature, especially that drawing on monastic traditions, speaks of meditation as preparation for contemplative prayer—a more active use of the mind to imaginatively consider scripture, other spiritual reading, or images. In this sense, discursive meditation is a contemplative practice, leading one into a place of stillness and receptivity present in contemplative prayer. In contemporary writings, the terms meditation and contemplative prayer

⁴³ Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 92.

⁴⁴ “The Tree of Contemplative Practices,” *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 244-248.

or contemplation are often used interchangeably.⁴⁶ Both of these uses are separate from the concept of meditation in Eastern religions, which is not addressed in this project.

The Lost Contemplative Life

This project is focused on the often forgotten and neglected area of contemplative practice in the modern Christian Church, mining the Christian contemplative tradition for vital tools of spiritual formation that can be utilized in contemporary Episcopal congregations. A growing number of Episcopal leaders are looking to past traditions to guide the future of the Church. The Christian mystical tradition has its roots in the early Church, and out of this tradition emerged contemplative practices—methods of fostering inner silence to open oneself up to the presence of God.⁴⁷

A brief look at the origins of Christian mysticism reveals that early Christian life and practice integrated a search for the mysterious, hidden meaning beneath biblical, liturgical, and spiritual life. Allegorical interpretations of scripture in the first three centuries of the Church looked for the meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the words. As Christian community was formed, these mysteries became a part of the common life and of the development of liturgy, ritual, and sacraments.⁴⁸ By the sixth century, the term mystical referred to a way of being in the world and community.⁴⁹ Mystical interpretations of the Bible and focus on contemplative practice continued through the ages, particularly in the Eastern church and the monastic orders of

⁴⁶ Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 16-17.

⁴⁷ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 13.

⁴⁸ Vincent Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 175-179.

⁴⁹ Pizzuto, 177-179.

the Western church. These views and writings reached their height in the late Middle Ages.⁵⁰ Christian mysticism did not arise in a vacuum and was influenced by and developed alongside Greek philosophy, Jewish mysticism, and even Islamic and Jewish mystical exegesis in the Middle Ages.⁵¹

However, by the Middle Ages, what had begun as largely communal had come to be understood in terms of a personal interior encounter with God. New Testament scholar and priest Vincent Pizzuto notes that “what was once the core of the faith was relegated to the sidelines” and that “the emphasis of the church as a mystical entity itself shifted to an emphasis on individuals whose claim to divine access set them apart as spiritually elite members of the church as an institution.”⁵² The impact of modernity and the Reformation on Protestant theology pushed mysticism further from the Western consciousness. The emergence of scholasticism and modern science in the modern era led scholars and church leaders to largely ignore the spirituality of personal experience and elevate obedience to authority and a focus on morality.⁵³ In the sixteenth century, as the Reformation moved Protestant theology toward an elevation of scripture as the sole authority and the importance of preaching moved to the forefront, a further separation between the inner spiritual experience and outward expressions of Church and faith occurred.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Carl A. Volz, *The Medieval Church: From the Dawn of the Middle Ages to the Eve of the Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 1-3.

⁵¹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering., ed. *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 2003.

⁵² Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, 181.

⁵³ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 50-51.

⁵⁴ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Nine Ways to Connect with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 18.

Contemplative Strands in Anglican Identity

There have been strands of contemplative life woven through Anglican history and identity, though not always at the forefront of Church life and teaching. Unlike many other churches during the Reformation period, some within the Anglican tradition continued to produce literature about the spiritual guidance of individuals, including the use of contemplative practices. The *BCP*, first written during the English Reformation era, incorporated daily offices of prayer rooted in Western monasticism. This monastic tradition passed down through the *BCP* to Episcopalians was heavily influenced by mystical literature and practices.⁵⁵ Priest and theologian A. M. Allchin points to the contemplative quality and teachings on the participation in the life of God in the work of key Anglican figures from the 16th century onward: Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrews, and Edward Bouverie Pusey to name a few.⁵⁶ From the seventeenth to the twentieth century, there were various attempts to provide guidance on personal prayer, and members of the tradition have been involved in the modern resurgence of interest in contemplation.⁵⁷ For example, John Henry Newman, one of the most influential Anglican theologians of the nineteenth century, taught that scientific patterns of knowing should not be the only way of seeking truth and that modern rational thought had overlooked some practice of knowing ultimate reality.⁵⁸ However, the daily practice of most parishioners remains untouched by this rich heritage.

⁵⁵ Stephen Burns, "Learning Again and Again to Pray: Anglican Forms of Daily Prayer," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 15, no. 1 (May 2017): 9–36.

⁵⁶ A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Publishing Company, 1988), 7–48.

⁵⁷ John Booty, Jonathan Knight, and Stephen Sykes, *The Study of Anglicanism*, revised ed. (London, UK: Fortress Press, 1998), 351–361.

⁵⁸ Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 171–172.

Seeking to Recover Spiritual Practices

The twentieth century brought a resurgence of interest in recovering past wisdom around an experiential knowledge of God. At that time, many Western Christian writers sought to bring the average Christian to a knowledge of spiritual disciplines and practices long lost to them. Catholic and Protestant thinkers alike delved into themes and writings from the mystical tradition. Some early leaders in the field were A.W. Tozer, Thomas Merton, and Evelyn Underhill. By the 1970s, leaders were calling for a reaffirmation of spiritual practices to help people explore their inner spiritual life. Henri Nouwen, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, and Richard Foster, among others, wrote about spiritual formation for the average Christian. Foster insisted that the modern Christian did not know how to explore the interior life but that this had not always been true, harkening back to earlier practices and the lack of contemporary knowledge of the “vast sea of Christian literature on meditation by believers throughout the centuries.”⁵⁹ Nouwen urged people to look back to the desert fathers and mothers and the Orthodox traditions lost to the West for prayer that would lead them to an experience of resting in God and open them up to God’s active presence.⁶⁰

Some of these Protestant leaders pointed back to the earlier roots of the Christian experience present in evangelical revivals, Pietism, and Puritanism and claim that spiritual theology did exist at the heart of the Reformation.⁶¹ The modern trend of evangelicals moving toward more liturgical traditions, including Anglican spirituality, caused others to call for a

⁵⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 19.

⁶⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016), 71.

⁶¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, expanded ed. (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 95-99.

return to mystery, experiential worship, and sacramental realities. Robert Webber, an early proponent of the Ancient Future Faith Movement, saw the need to return to earlier sources and a vocabulary of experience and transcendence that had been lost in the Western church.⁶²

Situating Contemplative Life in Community

As a result of this renewal movement, there are resources available to the individual who wants to recover ancient contemplative practices for their personal spiritual growth, but these resources largely lie outside of the praxis of the local congregation. The individual may read about contemplative practice, participate in retreats, or engage with centers and organizations that teach one how to seek the contemplative life. Most often, however, the local parish lacks the framework and language around a robust process of spiritual formation that includes personal and communal prayer practices and integrates contemplative practice.⁶³

A reading of recent research about contemplative life provides details of the benefits of practice but reveals a gap in the literature around resources for church leaders and congregations that want to move their members toward greater involvement in contemplative practice.⁶⁴ The RenewalWorks research, established in Episcopal churches, shows that people have a hunger for a deeper relationship with God but do not know how to establish the disciplines that bring about

⁶² Robert E. Webber and Lester Ruth, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 203-206.

⁶³ Ward, "Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation," 452.

⁶⁴ Thomas R. Gardner, "Integrated Spiritual Formation" (DMin diss., Winebrenner Theological Seminary, 2015). Gardner's work provides one example of a wider trend noticed in the research around contemplative practice and spiritual growth. Gardner's findings showed that an integrated model for spiritual formation, including dimensions of quieting, listening, and restoring, reinforced the belief that the primacy of intimacy in the inner condition of a person's life leads to outward behavior consistent with the fruit of the Spirit. While Gardner affirmed that a personal and mystic encounter with Christ showed to be transformative, he noted in his recommendations for further research that the role of community in the formation of Christian life be explored based on the observation in his research that believers grow better when growing together.

that connection.⁶⁵ The data that currently exists shows a gap between people's desire for guidance in spiritual practices and how they see their churches guiding and supporting spiritual growth.⁶⁶

While the work of the Spirit happens within the individual, the Church can be a place of training and equipping and can create a culture that permits people to explore spiritual practices, which allow them to respond to the work of the Spirit. Parishioners are looking to their leaders to help them understand how to grow in their knowledge of and relationship with God. Seventy-three percent of Episcopalians surveyed considered themselves to be in the early stages of spiritual growth and stated they needed clergy and leaders to help, guide, and mentor them.⁶⁷ Where do church leaders get the understanding and tools needed to lead their people in this vital connection with God that can transform individual lives and the life of their congregation?

Episcopal theologian Julia Gatta positions Christian spirituality in the sacramental life of the community, as did the early Church fathers and mothers. For Episcopal congregations whose life is largely defined by common worship and observance of the sacraments, this focus on communal practice is a key component. Gatta notes Christian spirituality "cannot be reduced to learning a few meditative techniques or to cultivating certain habits. . . It is critically shaped at every turn by the vision of faith and sacramental community of which we are a part."⁶⁸

As Jay Sidebotham, the director of RenewalWorks asks, "The challenge for our congregations, for leaders, for every member is: How will we move forward together, toward a

⁶⁵ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 7-8.

⁶⁶ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 41-42.

⁶⁷ "RenewalWorks," accessed March 10, 2023, <https://renewalworks.org>.

⁶⁸ Julia Gatta, *Life in Christ: Practicing Christian Spirituality* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018), xiv.

deeper life with God? How will these variables be put to work among us?”⁶⁹ Stuart Higginbotham, a contemplative leader in the Episcopal church, notes that parish leadership is struggling to make sense of a life of prayer within the institutional Church and is calling leaders and communities to a contemplative reformation saying, “The greatest challenge within the breadth of the Christian tradition ... rests with a loss of spiritual imagination and the willingness to cultivate a practice of faith that harnesses the potential within our own religious tradition.”⁷⁰ If the Episcopal church today is to meet the unique demands of declining congregations and changing attitudes toward the institution of the Church and meet the spiritual formation needs of its people, recovering the contemplative life is key.

Problem and Purpose

Research has shown that Episcopal church members are lacking in knowledge about how to grow spiritually, or they may not even understand the need for ongoing spiritual growth.⁷¹ Survey results conducted by RenewalWorks across Episcopal congregations indicate the need for more transforming encounters with God and deeper spiritual practices and specifically pinpoint a need for contemplation and silence in Episcopal congregations.⁷² Yet knowledge and resources for this spiritual growth are lacking in the average parish. This project fosters a deeper comprehension of contemplative practices that can increase spiritual growth and transformation amongst the Episcopal laity.

⁶⁹ Jay Sidebotham, *Footsteps: Making Spiritual Growth the Priority* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 2021), 42.

⁷⁰ Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling*, 24-25.

⁷¹ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 26.

⁷² Sidebotham, “Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 495-496.

The purpose of this project is to explore how leaders who want to guide their congregations into greater engagement in contemplative practice can be better equipped to do so. The research centers around churches that are embracing the ongoing journey of spiritual growth and the role that contemplative practice plays in a deepening relationship with God and the transformation of one's life. This project explores how these churches are working to cultivate a contemplative church culture. The research investigates where people are encountering challenges to living a contemplative life and how they are overcoming obstacles. It probes where congregations are finding or lacking resources for this engagement and what they are finding to be key elements for building a contemplative orientation in the life of the church.

Research Question

The research question that guides the project is, how does an Episcopal congregation move toward a greater engagement with contemplative practice?

Additional questions include:

- a. What are the key elements for building a contemplative orientation in the life of the church?
- b. How are challenges to a contemplative church culture expressed and overcome?
- c. What resources are needed for a congregation to progress in engagement with contemplative life?

Significance

People are looking to the Church as a place for guidance into deeper spiritual meaning. A key element to this guidance comes from leaders modeling and leading engagement with personal and communal spiritual practices. A desired outcome of the research is gaining a better understanding of how contemplative practice is impacting the spiritual formation of Episcopal

church members and the spiritual vitality of their congregations. Spiritual vitality in individuals should result in congregational vitality.⁷³

The spiritual vitality of a congregation, as measured by the index defined in RenewalWorks research, measures:

- The church's role in the spiritual life of its members: How does the church foster or impede spiritual growth?
- Personal spiritual practices: How do folks deepen their spiritual lives when they are not in church?
- Faith in action: How do people act in service in the world?⁷⁴

Churches that participated in the research were assigned a number indicating their vitality, ranging from a church whose responses revealed them as struggling, average, or thriving. Though there is no guarantee that engagement in contemplative practice is a path to spiritual growth for individuals or to congregational vitality, previous research has indicated a relationship. This research aims to fill a gap by yielding more ideas and resources for church leaders looking to integrate contemplative practice into the life and culture of their churches. It is anticipated that the research will give leaders greater understanding and confidence to engage their churches in contemplative practice in ways that will help their members grow spiritually and their congregations flourish. In the final chapter, the researcher will make recommendations for church leaders looking to integrate a contemplative orientation into the life and culture of their church. It will provide recommended best practices for church leaders to create intentional

⁷³ Sidebotham, "Lessons from Unlikely Sources," 496.

⁷⁴ Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 20.

plans for encouraging and equipping their members to develop a deeper life of discipleship, specifically through engaging contemplative practice.

Research Design

This project explores how Episcopal congregations draw from the Christian contemplative tradition, building a church culture that gives people the understanding and tools needed to attend to the formation of their inner lives by, and in response to, the work of the Holy Spirit. A qualitative research design employs interviews in three Episcopal churches to gain diversity in the data. Research sites were chosen that have congregational programs, services, and teaching aimed at engaging members in contemplative life. The research design will be described in further detail in Chapter Three.

Delimitations

This research is limited to Episcopal congregations, though the applications can be utilized by Christians of other traditions. While the research is centered in a context that embraces a sacramental understanding of church practice and the conversation around the practice of Holy Communion will be sacramental, there will be transferable principles to a congregation with an approach that views Communion as an ordinance. Research participants are limited to leaders and congregants who are engaged with contemplative practices and programming offered at the church level. As the purpose of the interview is to gain an understanding of progressing in engagement with contemplative life, they need to be involved in planning or participating in communal contemplative practice.

Assumptions

The primary assumption underlying this research is that involvement in contemplative practice fosters a connection with God and aids spiritual formation and a transformation of one's life. Based on a survey of literature, recent research findings, and personal experience, this researcher agrees that a contemplative grounding of faith and practice can foster spiritual growth and help revitalize the church.⁷⁵ The researcher accepts the findings of recent phenomenological investigations confirming the spiritual benefits and personally transformative aspects of contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer.⁷⁶ Assuming the psychological, health, and spiritual benefits of the contemplative life helped identify the research gap that exists in best practices for churches to lead engagement with these beneficial practices.

Project Outline

Having touched on the theological and historical framework for the importance of contemplative practices in Christian spiritual formation and their relevance in the contemporary church setting, these foundations will be explored more in-depth in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two will explore the literature focused on spirituality and spiritual formation, the history and theological foundations of the Christian contemplative tradition, the role of contemplative practice in modern Christianity and congregational life, the challenges and impact of integrating contemplation within Episcopal churches, and the role of leadership in fostering spiritual growth and congregational vitality through contemplative practices. Chapter Three will establish the

⁷⁵ Karen Bray, "Contemplative Prayer and Meditation: Their Role in Spiritual Growth" (DMin diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021), 92-93.

⁷⁶ Jesse Fox, Daniel Gutierrez, Jessica Haas, Dinesh Braganza, and Christine Berger, "A Phenomenological Investigation of Centering Prayer Using Conventional Content Analysis," *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 6 (December 2015): 814-822.

research design. Chapter Four will analyze the data, exploring key themes and patterns that emerge from the interviews, and Chapter Five will draw conclusions from the research and discuss recommendations for church leaders based on the data.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Recovering the Concept of Spiritual Formation in Christian Community

While spiritual theology and spiritual formation are relatively new disciplines of study, spirituality is as old as humanity itself and the study of it seeks to explore the conscious human response to God, both personal and communal. Speaking of spirituality then inherently focuses on lived experience and the religious awareness and practices that arise out of belief.⁷⁷ Just as human life is not static but a pattern of growth from birth to adulthood, spiritual life is expressed biblically and theologically as one that grows and changes, often seen as a journey or a set of stages that lead to greater development of experience, understanding, and transformed living over time.

In contemporary Western Protestantism, “spiritual formation” became a buzzword in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, this was not a new discovery but an attempt to recover classical ideas many saw as lost and lacking in contemporary Christianity. A strong push began in the 1970s with the spiritual disciplines movement, seeking to recover past wisdom and largely looking to medieval spirituality as an ideal of theological understanding, religious devotion, and flourishing churches.⁷⁸ A prime example of this movement was Richard Foster’s

⁷⁷ Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), xvi.

⁷⁸ Chris R. Armstrong, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians: Finding Authentic Faith in a Forgotten Age with C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 229-30.

1989 book *Celebration of Discipline*, hailed as a modern classic on the disciplines, which deeply explored contemplative Christian traditions and practices, utilizing spiritual disciplines for the complete transformation of the individual.⁷⁹ Many began looking also to early Christian sources for an understanding of a life of spiritual growth. Unlike many others of this modern movement, M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. sought to place spiritual formation back in the community, fighting against the teaching of privatized individual experience as spiritual formation.⁸⁰ Ruth Haley Barton, expanding on Mulholland's work twenty-three years later in 2016, noted that Mulholland was unique in his integration of spiritual disciplines with communal aspects of faith and for centralizing the idea that "spiritual formation is central to the message of the gospel and therefore central to the mission of the church."⁸¹ What these teachers had in common was a focus on the spiritual life as a progressive journey, a focus on spiritual practices as part of this movement toward growth, and a look back to established tradition.

The Biblical and Theological Foundation of Stages of Growth

Grounded in Old Testament concepts of meditation on the Lord's commands and passing them onto the next generation (such as in Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and in the stories of the faithful journeys of the fathers of the faith like Abraham and Moses, New Testament writers explored ideas about spiritual development as a lifelong movement toward maturity. Throughout Paul's letters to the early churches, emphasis is given to a need for growth in faith and a deepening relationship with God. In Romans 12:2 Paul encourages believers to be transformed by a

⁷⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 62.

⁸⁰ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 18.

⁸¹ Ruth Haley Barton, "Introduction," in *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016): 11.

constant renewal of the mind. He urges the Philippians in 1:6 to continue until the day of Christ, emphasizing a lifelong process. In Hebrews chapter 2 he contrasts spiritual immaturity with maturity. In Ephesians 4 Paul writes about a goal to become mature.

From early Christian teaching onward, a view of the spiritual life as a way of progress clearly emerged. Beyond the imagery of spirituality as a journey, spiritual progress was expressed as having stages of development. This has been expressed throughout Christian literature as stages or states, rungs on a ladder, or ways or paths toward union with God. Clement of Alexandria wrote in the second century of three transitions from paganism to faith, from faith to knowledge, and from knowledge to love. Origen explored the steps of purification, learning, and love in the third century, and Pseudo-Dionysius picks up on this three-fold method. In the thirteenth century, St. Bonaventure, writing of the development of the ordinary Christian, spoke of three ways as well: the Way of Purgation, the Way of Illumination, and the Way of Union.⁸² The journey motif was carried throughout the contemplative tradition, sometimes with different numbers of stages or explanations of how the progression happened; however, the idea of life as a movement to an intended goal persists throughout.⁸³

The Life of Moses and Other Mystical Concepts of the Progressive Spiritual Life

The idea of the spiritual life as a progressive journey, one of development over time and with an ultimate aim of union with God, existed from the earliest Christian thought. After the time of the Apostles, when the Church entered the Patristic period, the fathers of the Church emerged as the burgeoning community sought to establish its theology and dogma through

⁸² Leech, *Soul Friend*, 204.

⁸³ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 149-184.

creeds and councils.⁸⁴ The early Church employed both a literal interpretation of the Bible and a deeper, allegorical approach to interpretation, which emerged from the Alexandrian school of theology in the mid-2nd century.⁸⁵ This approach leaned on the Jewish Midrashic mode of interpretation that investigated and looked for meaning behind a text. Philo the Jew influenced this school of biblical exegesis, marrying the spiritual meaning of the text to Platonic philosophy that was influential in Hellenistic Alexandria. Clement and his student, Origen, were the first major scholars of this school of theology, and their scholarship was influential through the high Middle Ages. Clement was an early teacher of apophatic theology, focusing on the unknowable essence of God and the hidden secrets of God in scripture.⁸⁶ The other major school of exegesis arose in Antioch in Syria and was more concerned with a historical understanding of the text.⁸⁷ It should be noted that early Church fathers, including Origen, looked to Paul as an allegorical or spiritual interpreter of the life of Christ and modeled their own thinking after his approach.⁸⁸ The weaving together of changing Jewish religion, the themes of silence and mystery prominent in Graeco-Roman philosophy and culture, and emerging ideas such as Gnosticism, which focused on mysterious knowledge being revealed, helped shape a form of Christianity interested in silence and contemplation in the first four centuries after Christ.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Charles Kannengiesser, "The Spiritual Message of the Great Fathers," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. McGinn, Bernard, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 61.

⁸⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Scripture and Spirituality," *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. McGinn, Bernard, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 9.

⁸⁶ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 48.

⁸⁷ Schneiders, "Scripture and Spirituality," 9-13.

⁸⁸ Ronald E. Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 4 (1984): 360.

⁸⁹ Maccullough, *Silence*, 57-58, 62.

A prominent mystical theologian of the 4th century known as Gregory of Nyssa, who was heavily influenced by Origen, appealed to Jesus' own mysterious images and sayings and looked to Paul's approach as a model. He called this approach the *anagogical theoria*, in which one looks for the underlying meaning hidden in the symbols and teachings of scripture. This concept of *theoria* was borrowed from Platonist teaching, where Greek philosophers initially used it to refer to an intellectual seeking of truth. He added to this concept an additional focus on experiential knowledge that comes from love.⁹⁰

While Gregory of Nyssa is often called the father of Christian mysticism, Carl A. Volz notes that he put into words what even earlier Christians already emphasized as the three progressive stages of the Christian life: purgation, illumination, and union with God. The youngest of the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century (along with Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus), he is known for his doctrine of *epektasis*, or perpetual progress, which is most clearly executed in his work *The Life of Moses*. Volz argues that Gregory's written word captured what early Christians were already cultivating in their interior lives through the rites and rituals of the Church they understood to be established by the Bible.⁹¹ Gregory's allegorical interpretation of Moses' life represented the soul's journey toward union with God. Though allegorical exegesis of the biblical text can be a stretch for those used to the modern historical-critical disciplines of interpretation, there was a need, even in Gregory's time, to respond to criticism. His work interpreting the Song of Solomon directly responds to Diodore and Theodore, two critics of his exegesis.⁹² The longevity of his work speaks to the acceptance of

⁹⁰ Ward, "Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation," 444.

⁹¹ Volz, *The Medieval Church*, 14-18.

⁹² Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," 366.

allegorical interpretation in orthodoxy. Medieval theologians relied heavily on his work, and his influence stretches to modernity. One notable modern scholar who drew on this work was French patristic scholar Jean Daniélou, who saw the ongoing search for Christ in Gregory's work. The resulting contemplative focus was the work of becoming more human, the ongoing work of life since a soul would always be seeking greater fulfillment of the desire to know God.⁹³

An early commentary of the book of Exodus, Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* sets up Moses' experience with God as a model for the stages and goals of a contemplative life.⁹⁴ Gregory expressed the contemplative life as a process of progressive growth in knowledge and love of God, from initial encounter to transformation and transfiguration. He employed the burning bush as symbolic of the contemplative life that is set afire with the divine presence but not consumed. Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai was expressed as a metaphor for the contemplative journey, where one ascends toward God, with the pinnacle being a unique vision of God. Just as Moses' face shone after encountering God, Gregory implied transformation will occur in a soul that comes face to face with God's divine light.⁹⁵

It is evident, as Robert W. Jenson suggests, that Gregory used scripture to always move the individual toward God—the end goal of the Christian spiritual practice being the fullness of God himself. Jenson highlights that Gregory used the Bible to emphasize both the path and the ultimate goal of the Christian life, portraying the vision of God as an endless pursuit. This vision involves an eternal yearning to see God, without ever fully reaching it, due to God's infinite

⁹³ Hans Boersma, "Becoming Human: Gregory of Nyssa's Unending Search for the Beatific Vision," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17 no. 2 (April 2015): 140.

⁹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 33.

⁹⁵ Abraham Malherbe, Everett Ferguson, and John Meyendorff, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 107-119.

nature.⁹⁶ Gregory used the life of Moses to illustrate the way each person can ascend the mountain, seeking an ever-deepening experience of the transforming presence of God. He tied the life of Moses to the contemplative life only made available through Christ as he pointed to three theophanies Moses experiences on Sinai, revealing Christ as the word made flesh.⁹⁷

The Need for Formation in Community

The focus on community as an essential part of spiritual development and progression was established in the earliest Christian communities, highlighting the need for instruction, guidance, and companionship on the spiritual journey. The New Testament writings themselves were a method of teaching the faith: the Epistles were written for the purpose of further instruction of early churches in life and godliness. The letters contain instruction as well as exhortations to listen to teachers, continue to meet together, and grow in personal holiness and unity as a community.

Catechesis, the formation of new followers of Christ in preparation for baptism, became more formalized as early as the second century, coming into its full form as the catechumenate in the third and fourth centuries.⁹⁸ The catechumen, or new convert, was instructed on a life of prayer, a proper understanding of baptism, articles of faith and belief such as the creeds, and the scriptures, especially the gospels. They were guided in ascetical preparation for baptism through fasting, silence, prayer, and confession.⁹⁹ Ascetical teaching emerged early on as activity within

⁹⁶ Robert W. Jenson, "Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses," *Theology Today* 62 no. 4 (2006): 537.

⁹⁷ Patrick E. O'Connell, "The Double Journey in Saint Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 no. 4 (1983): 308.

⁹⁸ Lawrence D. Folkemer, "A Study of the Catechumenate," *Church History* 15, no 4 (December 1946), 286.

⁹⁹ Folkemer, 287-295.

the community using “methods, techniques, and principles which will aid the growth of the life of prayer.”¹⁰⁰ These methods were to be learned in companionship, a concept that carried on throughout Christian history through the development of monastic communities and spiritual direction.

The work of the early desert mothers and fathers is full of stories of disciples seeking out the advice and guidance of holy people. As early monastic communities developed, they included methods for confession and spiritual direction by an experienced brother.¹⁰¹ This concept deepened in Celtic Christianity, which was heavily monastic in origin, into the concept of an *anam cara*, or soul-friend. Moving direction out of the monastery and into the community, all people were encouraged to develop spiritual mentorships for confession, reconciliation, and healing.¹⁰²

In the contemporary church, the modern professionalization of spiritual direction has attempted to recover this companionship that many have found lacking in the spiritual journey. This direction can supplement the work of the church, but the foundation of walking alongside each other on the journey began in the Christian community. Some see spiritual direction as the church’s central task, “midwifing the integrity of each individual’s theological quest into individual and communal accountability.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 57.

¹⁰¹ Leech, 63.

¹⁰² Esther De Wall, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1997), 132-135.

¹⁰³ W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 237.

The Christian Contemplative Tradition: Historical and Theological Foundations

A Renewal of Mystical Theology and Interest in Contemplative Life

Over the past few decades, a significant resurgence of interest in mysticism has emerged largely around individual engagement in contemplative practices across world religions and among secular communities. Practices such as mindfulness, yoga, and silent meditation have gained widespread popularity, creating a surge in the availability of apps, programs, and books encouraging participation.¹⁰⁴ The Christian response to this interest has ranged from resistance to embrace. Some believe that contemplative prayer is tied to pantheistic worldviews, making it incompatible with biblical or historical Christianity.¹⁰⁵ Scholars like Episcopal priest and systematic theologian Mark McIntosh have unearthed rich biblical and historical support for contemplation. While the term “mystical” is a modern academic classification, it is used to describe the intimate and transformative life with God that was integral to the early Church. Early Christians understood this transforming knowledge of God as the foundation of life, describing it as a “process, an itinerary or journey to God, not just a moment or brief state of what is often called mystical union.”¹⁰⁶

Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Contemplative Tradition

Key concepts that have defined the contemplative life for centuries are embedded throughout scripture. Silence or stillness is one key ingredient of the contemplative life that can be mined from the Bible as a concept and an approach to connecting with God that is both active

¹⁰⁴ Adam Burke and Autumn Gonzalez, “Biofeedback,” *Lawrence* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 49-50.

¹⁰⁵ John Coe, “The Controversy Over Contemplation and Contemplative Prayer: A Historical, Theological, and Biblical Resolution,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7, no 1 (Spring 2014): 142.

¹⁰⁶ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, xiv.

and receptive. The Hebrew word *dumiyyah* carries with it the connotation of a stillness pregnant with trust.¹⁰⁷ Often translated as “silence” in English, this word holds the meaning of a quiet trust, repose, or still waiting, and it is seen four times in the Psalms (Psalm 22:2, 39:2, 62:1, and 65:1).

Prayer is most often thought of in the Western mind as talking to God—an exercise of the intellect. But as Ruth Haley Barton asserts, there comes a time when “intellectual considerations of the mystery of God and our wordy responses no longer feel very satisfying.”¹⁰⁸ Henri Nouwen argues that prayer as only an intellectual exercise neglects the other side of a full life in prayer found in scripture: that which engages the emotional being, the prayer of the heart, and watchfulness that engages all the self to listen, instead of only speaking. The desert fathers and mothers did not separate speaking and listening in prayer as the modern interpreter of scripture does. They saw solitude not as a life alone but as a life with God, focused on the seeking of silence as a way into the experience of resting in God’s active presence.¹⁰⁹

This integration of action and rest, of the mind and heart, was modeled in the life of Jesus and the early Church throughout the New Testament. Jesus continually retreated from engagement with others to be alone with the Father and commanded his followers to do the same (as in Mark 1:12, 1:35, Luke 6:12-13, Matthew 14:13, and Luke 11:1, to name a few examples). Jesus encouraged his followers to be alert (Mark 13:33) and urged his disciples to stay awake with him, to watch and pray (Matthew 26:41). The early Church followed Jesus’ example and

¹⁰⁷ Carl McColman, “How to Foster a Contemplative Church,” AnamChara blog, September 23, 2015, <https://anamchara.com/unknowing/contemplative-church/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 63.

¹⁰⁹ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 71.

taught this same kind of commitment to devotion in prayer, asking members of the early Church to devote themselves to watchful prayer (Colossians 4:2), to stay alert against spiritual attack (1 Peter 5:8), to stay awake and engaged in prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:6), and to pray in the Spirit on all occasions and with all kinds of prayers (Ephesians 6:18).

Carl McColman posits Ephesians 3 as the most important chapter in the Bible for understanding the basis for mysticism; this passage sets the foundation for the Christian tradition from the earliest of times to seek to enter the “mutual indwelling of the soul in Christ.”¹¹⁰ In this passage, Paul described a mystery that had not been available to former generations but has been made available by the indwelling of the Spirit. This union with Jesus was made available to all people, including the Gentiles. He went on to pray for the young church at Ephesus to have a deeper understanding of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, an understanding that goes beyond the intellect. Paul prayed for the believers to be filled with the fullness of God, a true union with Christ.

Historical Overview of the Christian Contemplative Tradition

As Christianity became established as part of empires, individuals and segments of the Church began to reject the values of those empires and retreat from city centers. Movements of asceticism, those choosing to break away from society to lead lives of self-discipline and denial, arose in North African, Syrian, and Coptic communities. In the early fourth century, organized monasticism began to emerge as these movements solidified. Following the model of biblical events that occurred in the desert, some Christians retreated to the desert to live in solitude and simplicity.

¹¹⁰ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 34.

Western Christians sought out the wisdom of the desert fathers and brought the monastic and mystical teachings into the West. John Cassian was instrumental in this movement and began an Egyptian-style monastery near Marseilles around 415 AD. Egyptian monasticism became the standard for most of the Western church.¹¹¹ Cassian's writings influenced Benedict of Nursia, perhaps the most influential figure of Western monasticism. Benedict wrote a rule to guide monastic communities in 530 AD that is still practiced in monasteries around the world today. Benedict's Rule emphasized the importance of balance between prayer and work. The first word of the Rule instructs brothers to listen, establishing prayer as a way of life not only in assigned liturgical daily prayers but also emphasizing a spirit of attentiveness and openness.¹¹²

Monasticism played an important role in the development of contemplative prayer as a way to pray unceasingly, as commanded by Jesus in Luke 18:1 and by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Choral prayer, community prayer, and private prayer of the heart were established as means to promote prayer without interruption in the monastery.¹¹³ Established choral or liturgical prayer was set out in the Rule for seven prayer times a day. This "work of God" set out in the Rule was the foundation upon which more contemplative prayer practices were then laid. The Rule of Benedict instructed that after completing their liturgical office, the monks would depart in silence, ensuring that any brother who wished to pray privately would not be disturbed by the actions of others. And at other times also, if anyone wished to pray secretly," he would be allowed to "just go in and pray and not in a loud voice but with tears and fervor of heart."¹¹⁴ This

¹¹¹ McGinn, *Christian Spirituality*, 89-113.

¹¹² Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 10-14.

¹¹³ McGinn, *Christian Spirituality*, 415.

¹¹⁴ Ward, "Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation," 445.

pattern of prayer moving from structured prayer to unstructured, silent, personal prayer became the monastic practice known as *Lectio Divina*.

Lectio Divina was the first recorded method of prayer proposed for use by both lay people and monastics. In the monastery, “contemplation was regarded as the normal development of listening to the word,” according to Thomas Keating, who lived in the lineage of St. Benedict’s Rule, establishing Centering Prayer as a modern re-establishment of contemplation at the heart of Benedictine prayer.¹¹⁵ The four steps of this divine reading of scripture include a slow reading called *lectio*, then reflection on the reading referred to as *meditatio*. The next movement, *oratio*, is what modern Christians generally call prayer—the spontaneous response to the meditation on scripture and God’s character, words spoken to God.¹¹⁶ *Contemplatio* moves the reader from meditation on the words to a posture of waiting on God to speak through the words to the heart of the person, what Robert Mulholland calls “a posture of yieldedness to God.”¹¹⁷ Thomas Keating calls this stage of contemplation “resting in God” and a “process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union.”¹¹⁸

Celtic Christianity, a unique form of contemplative life that has been highly influential in a modern resurgence of interest in contemplation in the West, developed among the Celts of Britain and Ireland. Christianity came to Britain in the early third century, and Celtic Christianity began to flourish after the missionary efforts of the fifth century spread a distinctly monastic

¹¹⁵ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York, NY: Amity House, 1992), 20.

¹¹⁶ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 20-21.

¹¹⁷ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 132.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Keating, *Father Thomas Keating Papers* (Pitts Theology Library: Special Collections, Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA).

Christianity onto the islands. The isolation of the islands from the rest of Europe, which was influenced by the Roman Empire and the church, meant a Christianity that developed outside empirical influences and retained pre-Christian ritual, imagery, and identity.¹¹⁹ Because Celtic Christianity was monastic in origin, much of the English-speaking Christianity that emerged in the Anglo-Saxon world was influenced by contemplative thought, monastic prayer, and communal spirituality. This contemplative nature can be seen as a thread that continues throughout the development and reform of later Anglican spirituality and a contemporary interest in a return to the simple, prayerful, embodied spirituality of Celtic Christianity.

Elsewhere in Europe, a heightened interest in mysticism emerged from the twelfth into the seventeenth centuries, evidenced by a wave of contemplative figures and literature in the late medieval period. A resurgence of monasticism in the West and the development of the new orders of the Cistercians and Victorines, accompanied by a systematic mystical theology, brought the ideas of union with God as the goal of life again to the forefront of Christian thought.¹²⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory the Great, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of the Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich, for example, emerge from this golden age of mystical theology as examples of those who left behind substantive work on the contemplative life. The mystical theology that flowered in this time developed the paradoxical ideas of the unknowability of God and the accessible love of God.¹²¹ As monastic orders flourished again during the Counter-Reformation, they renewed interest in contemplation, and the renewal of the Carmelite order in Spain produced considerable revival, including the

¹¹⁹ Nora Chadwick, *The Celts*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 114-236.

¹²⁰ Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity," *Church History* 56 no. 1 (March 1987): 8.

¹²¹ McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity," 12.

long-lasting works of John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila.¹²² Medieval religion can be seen as a “religion of the heart” as this is the time when affective devotion came of age, especially in the English mystical tradition.¹²³ This affective focus of the medieval mystical teachers is seen in their emphasis on love as the bond with God and the driving force behind all movement toward union with God.¹²⁴ During this time, a significant shift occurred as mystical theology progressed from a story about the life of the community to a story about the mystic, the individual religious person, and a stronger emphasis on ecstatic mystical experiences emerged.

The Decline of Mystical Theology

The Middle Ages, from the fifth to the eleventh century, were dominated by a fourfold interpretation of scripture: literal, allegorical, tropological (focused on the moral benefit), and anagogical (pointing toward eschatological fulfillment). However, the foundation of cathedral schools at this time also heightened biblical scholarship, and theology and biblical studies were separated into two distinct disciplines. Interest in the Hebrew language brought a literal interpretation of scripture back to the forefront at the height of the medieval period.¹²⁵ The late Middle Ages collided with the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and the Scientific Revolution, which many consider the beginning of the early modern era.

As Protestant and Roman Catholic churches responded to the changing times, they each sought to establish an authority to which their people would look and respond. Catholic teaching focused on the authority of the church, while Protestant theology established the Bible as the

¹²² Maccullough, *Silence*, 155.

¹²³ Armstrong, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians*, 126.

¹²⁴ McGinn, “Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity,” 22-23.

¹²⁵ McGinn, “Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity,” 16.

ultimate authority. Rather than a focus on the personal experience of God, both wings of Western Christianity moved to a focus on personal behavior in response to the authority of the church or the scriptures. The move toward an emphasis on moral response to God and behavior change resulted in the active move against a spirituality of experience and mystery.¹²⁶ Writings about private devotions largely became centered around Bible reading rather than prayer practices, which had dominated earlier teaching.¹²⁷

The medieval emphasis on the mystical individual and ecstatic experience increasingly sidelined the contemplative dimension of spirituality from communal life. By the mid-seventeenth century, with the European intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, a shift toward what could be known through reason and evidence further removed mystical interpretations from favor.¹²⁸ The rise of scholarly inquiry and the Scientific Revolution were perhaps the final blows to broad acceptance of allegorical interpretation of the biblical text and cemented suspicion of mystical teaching throughout the Western world.¹²⁹

Contemplative Life in Contemporary Christianity

Continuing Strands of the Contemplative Life into Modernity

Contemplative strands of faith and practice were not altogether lost after their height in the medieval period. In the seventeenth century, as spiritual theology was abandoned, the Calvinist Puritan and Lutheran Pietist traditions retained an emphasis on personal experience of salvation. As spirituality was neglected in scholarship, many Reformers and resulting

¹²⁶ McColman, *Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 51.

¹²⁷ Maccullough, *Silence*, 138.

¹²⁸ McColman, *Big Book of Christian Mysticism* 50-52.

¹²⁹ McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity," 19.

movements turned away from personal spiritual practice as a means to spiritual growth.

Exceptions existed, such as the focus on personal experience of God that remained alive in the streams of evangelical revivalism.¹³⁰ It can be argued that the Anglican tradition did not follow the pattern of other churches of the Reformation as it continued to produce literature seeking to develop the Christian life.¹³¹ Quakerism arose in the mid-seventeenth century in England, stressing a direct experience with Christ. Contemplative practices continued in existing streams and traditions that branch off in the modern era. A focus on experiencing God can be seen in Anglican, Holiness, and Charismatic streams in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries.¹³² Liberation and Social Justice traditions also focused on the transformational power of the direct experience of God. Notably, Howard Thurman studied Quaker scholar of mysticism Rufus Jones and discussed the contemporary ethical implications of a mystical experience with God and their relevance in the quest for peace and non-violence. Thurman's influence in the American Civil Rights movement and impact on leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought together ideals of the mystical tradition with a uniquely black Christian experience and social change.¹³³

Modern pushback against contemplative practice in Christian life has been largely from more conservative and evangelical protestant scholars, with Catholic and mainline traditions being more accepting of experiential spirituality, though not universally. However, even some in the Anglican communion have raised concerns about the Roman Catholic origins of

¹³⁰ Richard F. Lovelace and Timothy Keller, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 20-22.

¹³¹ Kenneth J. Collins, ed. *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 35.

¹³² Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 134.

¹³³ Walter Earl Fluker, ed. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?, April 1936-August 1943* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), xix-xx.

contemplative practice. This concern has already been addressed by showing the early origins of the contemplative tradition (even as early as Paul) before Roman Catholicism's origins. Critics have claimed there is a tendency to devalue Jesus Christ and the atonement and that there is a marginalization of scripture in the contemplative tradition.¹³⁴ Again, one only needs to look at the deeply scriptural and Christocentric foundations of the contemplative tradition, as examined briefly in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, to negate these claims.

Others claim contemplation is part of a worldview completely foreign to scripture, linking it to pantheism or panentheism and drawing from Eastern, new age, or occultic worldviews. Rooting contemplation in early Christian tradition combats criticism which states contemplation is not biblical or has no place in orthodoxy. Evangelical scholar John Coe effectively argues against contemplative practice as a pantheistic worldview. His work points to the Nicene theology of the fourth century that already addressed these concerns that some modern scholars want to rehash.¹³⁵

Modern Resurgence of the Contemplative Life

As already seen in the renewed interest in spiritual disciplines, heavily borrowing from classical mystical teachings, the twentieth century saw a resurgence of focusing on the contemplative life in Western Christianity. Beyond the interest in spiritual formation, a variety of shifts in religious and secular society created an openness to these ancient teachings made new. Postmodern thinkers saw a shifted away from what they saw as a failed search for certainty and

¹³⁴ Tom Schwanda, "'To Gaze on the Beauty of the Lord': The Evangelical Resistance and Retrieval of Contemplation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (2014): 62.

¹³⁵ John Coe, "The Controversy Over Contemplation and Contemplative Prayer," 150.

back to an interest in mystery, experience, and beauty.¹³⁶ The Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965 moved the Catholic church toward greater involvement in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, and greater cooperation between Catholic and Protestant thinkers arose. The rise in new translations and new scholarship of early Christian sources brought widening interest in contemplative thought, moving it out of the monasteries and seminaries and into the mainstream.¹³⁷

The look back to direct, experiential knowledge of God began in the academy, influenced by the contributions of theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teaching from notable figures within the Christian tradition, beginning primarily in monastic and Catholic orders, brought a marked rise in interest in contemplative spirituality. Thomas Merton was the pioneering voice of this movement, calling for new monasticism, exploring the relevance of the institution for the modern world, and bringing conversations about contemplation out of the monastery through his widespread writing and interfaith dialogue. This call met the rising interest of lay people in the slower, more focused way of monastic life amid increasingly frantic twentieth-century life.¹³⁸ The revival that began in these foundations became more mainstream by the end of the century with the establishment of centers and institutes designed to offer resources and training for spiritual formation.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 212.

¹³⁷ Alexandra Slaby, "The Christian Meditation movement: A Critical Perspective," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 108, no. 431 (2019), 317-18.

¹³⁸ Paul R. Dekar and Paul M. Pearson, "Stirrings of a New Monasticism," In *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011), 3-4.

¹³⁹ Examples of these organizations include The Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation (established in 1973), Contemplative Outreach (1984), The Center for Action and Contemplation (1987), and Renovaré (1988).

Early resources arising from the Christian meditation and new monastic movements targeted pastors and church leaders but then branched out as resources for individuals and church small groups began to emphasize spiritual formation and the contemplative life. A resurgence of the monastic practices of *Lectio Divina*, the Ignatian exercises, and other contemplative practices made their way into mainline and evangelical popular writing and churches by the end of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁰ One of the most widespread movements was the emphasis on daily contemplative prayer through a practice called Centering Prayer pioneered by Trappist monks Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington. Building on the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* and influenced by *The Cloud of the Unknowing*, the simple practice was popularized through teachings, retreats, and the development of prayer groups around the world.¹⁴¹

Contemplative Life and Episcopal Spirituality

Churches in the Anglican tradition have historically occupied a space of openness to the influence of experience, springing from their monastic origins, spirituality centered on communal prayer, and reforming efforts to reclaim early patristic commitments. Following the Reformation, some in the Anglican tradition sought to balance intellectual rigor with inner spiritual life, and mystical elements continued to appear in the preaching and writing of key Anglican thinkers. However, it was not until the Oxford movement within the Church of England

¹⁴⁰ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Pierre Wolff, trans. (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1997), vii-x. The Spiritual Exercises were developed by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, in the early sixteenth century. They are a set of meditations and contemplative practices typically undertaken by individuals on a directed retreat over a period of four weeks and are intended to help individuals discern God's will. During the modern resurgence of interest in contemplative retreats, the Ignatian exercises received renewed interest.

¹⁴¹ Tilden Edwards, "Introduction," in *Contemplation and Community: A Gathering of Fresh Voices for a Living Tradition*, ed. Jessica M. Smith and Stuart Higginbotham (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2019), xi.

in the nineteenth century that Anglicans more broadly began to look back to the first five centuries of the Church for guidance.

One key figure who contributed to the resurgence of mystical theology in the twentieth century in Anglicanism was the Bishop of Oxford, Kenneth Kirk. Credited with reviving moral theology, his writing occurred during a time of reprinting the contemplative classics and a renewed interest in personal holiness and an ordered prayer life.¹⁴² In the latter twentieth century, scholarship began to recognize the importance of the fourteenth-century mystics in the development of English Christianity.¹⁴³ Many in the Episcopal Church embraced the modern renewal of contemplative practice, evident in the widespread teaching and practice of Centering Prayer in its congregations since the early 1980s.”¹⁴⁴

While the theological roots of contemplative life are deep in Anglicanism, and there have been attempts to recover spiritual practices to the average Episcopalian, the reality in daily practice is less wide-reaching. The on-the-ground reality in Episcopal congregations, based on RenewalWorks’ research in hundreds of communities, reveals a different picture of Episcopal spirituality, one in which 73% of Episcopalians identified themselves at a less mature stage of spiritual development. A small number (14%) said they reflected on scripture daily, and research indicates a lack of satisfaction with or confidence in most people’s prayer lives. Based on the spiritual lives of respondents, three primary church archetypes emerged from the research. Only 23% of churches fell into the Extroverted archetype defined by a commitment to service in the

¹⁴² Jane Shaw, “Ethics and Mysticism: The Work of Kenneth E. Kirk and Some Other Modern Anglicans,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 16, no. 1 (May 2018): 33-35.

¹⁴³ Allchin, “Anglican Spirituality,” 351-363.

¹⁴⁴ Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boad Slocum, eds., *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), 79.

world. The remaining 77% were identified as Troubled, defined by restlessness and hunger for spiritual growth, or Complacent, with low expectations of transformation and resistance to change.¹⁴⁵

Communal vs. Individual Contemplative Practice

Proponents calling for a contemplative renewal in the Church show how the relegation of contemplative practices to an optional activity or a fringe movement within the Church has contributed to the current spiritual hunger, lack of growth, and decline in Church vitality. Mark McIntosh notes how the modern removal of contemplative theology from the life of the Church has limited the understanding of the mystical to a single moment and extraordinary inner conditions rather than understanding the contemplative as a way of life. Drawing on Bernard McGinn's suggestions of speaking of a mystical consciousness rather than mystical experience, he suggests the Church recover the idea of contemplative life as a part of a life-long journey with God that is sought in community.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Kenneth Leech insists that the Western suspicion of mysticism and relegation of it to a minority vocation is a misunderstanding of the mystical way defined by "paranormal levels of experience" rather than an understanding of it as a union with God and the path to spiritual progress open to all.¹⁴⁷

The call for contemplative revival presents a need and an opportunity for the Church. Thomas Merton famously said, "The most dangerous man in the world is a contemplative who is guided by nobody," reflecting the broader Christian understanding of theology worked out

¹⁴⁵ Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 18-19.

¹⁴⁶ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 30-31.

¹⁴⁷ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 182.

within the guide rails of scripture and community, accountability, and guidance.¹⁴⁸ Carl McColman insists healthy congregations will provide all people some opportunities to learn and practice silent prayer.¹⁴⁹ Tilden Edwards notes that people within the Church, as well as the religiously unaffiliated, are spiritually searching, and many are searching outside the Church because they are not finding a place there for authentic spiritual growth in the community. He emphasizes that this rise in spiritual seeking presents a unique opportunity for churches to serve as spaces for personal and spiritual transformation.¹⁵⁰

The Theology of the Communal Contemplative Life

A clear opportunity for the Church emerges when reflecting on the biblical and theological grounding of the spiritual life as a progressive journey and the modern attempts to return to this concept. The individual Christian needs guidance, instruction, and accountability on the path of spiritual growth. The intentional focus on personal and communal spiritual practices inherent in the contemplative life provides a unique opportunity for Christian communities to refocus on the path of lifelong growth toward Christlikeness for the sake of others. Reclaiming mystical theology as a grounding force for contemporary discipleship practices in the Church can help recover the intrinsically relational and communal aspects of spiritual growth. The essential Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and deification have been relegated as confusing or controversial but can be mined for a clearer foundation for contemplative life within the congregation.

¹⁴⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 198.

¹⁴⁹ McColman, "How to Foster a Contemplative Church."

¹⁵⁰ Tilden Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth: Gifts for Contemplative Living* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010), 70.

Theology of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Deification

Jean Daniélou argues that the whole Christian life hangs on the doctrine of the Trinity. This foundational idea that God's self is defined by relationship has implications for how people understand the nature of God but also the nature of community.¹⁵¹ God's very identity is relational; thus, to know God is to enter into a relationship that is progressive and not static. Exploring the classical doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the Christian's participation in these spiritual realities, A. M. Allchin argued that in abandoning these realities, the Church can only talk about God without showing people a way to enter God's presence, and that has turned people toward other traditions that offer an experiential knowledge of God.¹⁵² Mystical theology sees the purpose of the incarnation of Jesus, the pre-existent and eternal second person of the Trinity, as the means to raise humanity to share in the divine triune life, an idea integral to early Christian teaching.

While a resurgence in scholarship around deification has emerged in the last half-century, much of the focus in the Protestant West has construed deification as the human desire to *be* God. Some of these ideas liken deification with the transhumanism movement and the desire to transcend humanity and mortality.¹⁵³ Contrary to these views of deification, McIntosh clarifies his theology through the lens of the teaching of Maximus the Confessor in his history of mystical theology, noting that Maximus "seems to conceive of deification very much as the soul's ascent, through formation in Christ, to the Father."¹⁵⁴ Departing from certain views of Maximus, which

¹⁵¹ Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, Translated by Walter Roberts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 216.

¹⁵² Allchin, *Participation in God*, 1.

¹⁵³ Michael M. C. Reardon, "Becoming God: Interpreting Pauline Soteriology as Deification," *Currents in Biblical Research* 22, no 1 (2023): 83.

¹⁵⁴ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 60.

suggest leaving behind one's humanity, McIntosh's teaching on participation in the life of the Trinity emphasizes being drawn into harmony with the mission of Jesus rather than becoming less human. He notes that the key to understanding this concept in the modern era is "steadfastly to remind ourselves that such a transformation of human perceptivity makes it more fully human, not less."¹⁵⁵ Vincent Pizzuto insists that deification is not based on human achievement but places this participation in the life of Christ as something made "whole and entire by the incarnation."¹⁵⁶ Echoing the scriptural imagery of abiding in Christ and Christ in us, deification is understood in this view as a way of describing our transformative encounter with God. Pizzuto calls it an "inevitable outcome of the incarnation—a union that is mystical precisely because it is embodied" and notes that Christ continues to be embodied as a risen Lord living in his people.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, this is a foundational idea to the concept of spiritual growth, a lifelong movement of transformation by God. Tilden Edwards notes that "many Western churches would come closest to expressing this process in the word *sanctification*, our gifted evolution toward holiness: wholeness of life in God."¹⁵⁸

Refocusing on union with God as a union of wills, not a dissolution of human personality, situates contemplative prayer as a means to the goal of union with God, one that can aid in the lifelong progressive movement toward that union.¹⁵⁹ Further, clarifying that contemplative prayer does not achieve union with God, but helps deepen the realization of

¹⁵⁵ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 60-61.

¹⁵⁶ Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, 13.

¹⁵⁸ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 27.

¹⁵⁹ Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 47.

intimacy with the Triune God that already exists, establishes a greater understanding of the place contemplative practice can have in the spiritual growth of an individual.¹⁶⁰ It is this concept of abiding in the Triune God that motivates the Episcopal leaders who are putting contemplative theology into practice in today's parishes. In Higginbotham's insistence that the current time is rich with opportunities for renewal of the ideas of mystical theology in congregational life and leadership, he notes that to do so requires that common life be grounded in the Trinity. It is only in understanding "our common life through the lens of God's dynamic and triune nature rather than persist[ing] in rigid patterns of behavior" that will move congregations toward this renewal.¹⁶¹

Partaking in the Mystical Body of Christ

An essential part of embracing a renewal of mystical theology is understanding that it is through the life of the Church that members of Christ's body come to understand the mind of Christ. Just as each part of the human body is required for the proper functioning of the whole, understanding the mysteries of God is possible by sharing in the Body of Christ left on earth after Christ's ascension to the Father—the Church established to function as a whole.¹⁶² Pizzuto speaks of the Church as Christ's "continuing incarnation" through the Church.¹⁶³ Participation or union with God, then, is not for experiential fulfillment but to become for others the extension of Christ's ongoing presence in the world.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ May, M.D., *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 26-27.

¹⁶¹ Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling*, 24.

¹⁶² McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 102-103.

¹⁶³ Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, 14.

This understanding of the community as a continuation of Christ's incarnation, becoming the mystical Body of Christ, forms the foundation of the Church's role in embracing contemplative renewal today. The sacramental nature of Episcopal worship and identity fosters a continual encounter with both Christ and others. Like other liturgical traditions, the heart of Anglican and Episcopal worship lies in the celebration of the sacraments. Bernard McGinn names the sacraments as "the ritual acts that Christians believe were established by Christ and that transmit his saving grace to subsequent believers."¹⁶⁵ McIntosh points to what he calls the "two-beat pulse of the church's sacramental heart" as the two-fold way the Church invites the Spirit to bring Christians deeper into participation with God. It is the "baptismal moment" that brings believers into participation with the dying and rising of Christ and the "eucharistic moment" in which the Church participates in the ongoing self-offering of Christ.¹⁶⁶ Jean Daniélou explains that baptism incorporates an individual into the Church, transforming their soul into a dwelling place for the Trinity, as the Trinity resides within the Church. The Eucharist is listed in the *BCP* as the principal act of worship for the Church. In *Welcome to the Episcopal Church*, Christopher Webber says this "reminds us that spirituality, in the Anglican tradition, begins with life shared in the church" and that Episcopal spirituality is defined by church members finding their center in common worship so they can go out into the world in service.¹⁶⁷

Working out this theology in the context of the local parish translates to seeing the Christian life as a journey from baptism (initiation into the new identity one has in Christ and into the community of faith) to an ongoing discovery of that identity in relationship with God

¹⁶⁵ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 79-80.

¹⁶⁶ McIntosh, *Mysteries of Faith*, 162-163.

¹⁶⁷ Christopher L. Webber and Frank T. Griswold III, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 87.

and other members of the Body of Christ as celebrated in the eucharist.¹⁶⁸ The flow of Episcopal life and worship, from font to table, invites people to participate in the divine relationship of the Trinity within the context of communal life.¹⁶⁹

Contemplative Life in Community

Just as the community gathers together for the liturgy of the Word and sacrament, they gather for prayer, study, and other practices that aid in personal and communal growth. All these elements together make up the rhythms of gathering the community together and then sending them out into the world, which is part of the journey of spiritual growth. Gathering under the guidance of spiritual leadership and together with other members of the Body of Christ are essential in the progressive movement of the contemplative life.

Current Challenges in Community Spiritual Formation

A clearer picture of the current challenges facing communities emerges from the research of RenewalWorks, which made a “concerted effort to make spiritual growth the priority in Episcopal congregations and to build cultures of discipleship in those congregations.”¹⁷⁰ The research findings have shown an overall culture in Episcopal congregations of relatively low levels of spiritual practice, complacency, and spiritual inertia.¹⁷¹ Most respondents were on the lower half of a spiritual growth continuum, as in Figure 1 below.

¹⁶⁸ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 32-33.

¹⁶⁹ McIntosh, *Mysteries of Faith*, 37.

¹⁷⁰ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 6.

¹⁷¹ Sidebotham, “More Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 498.

Spiritual Growth Continuum

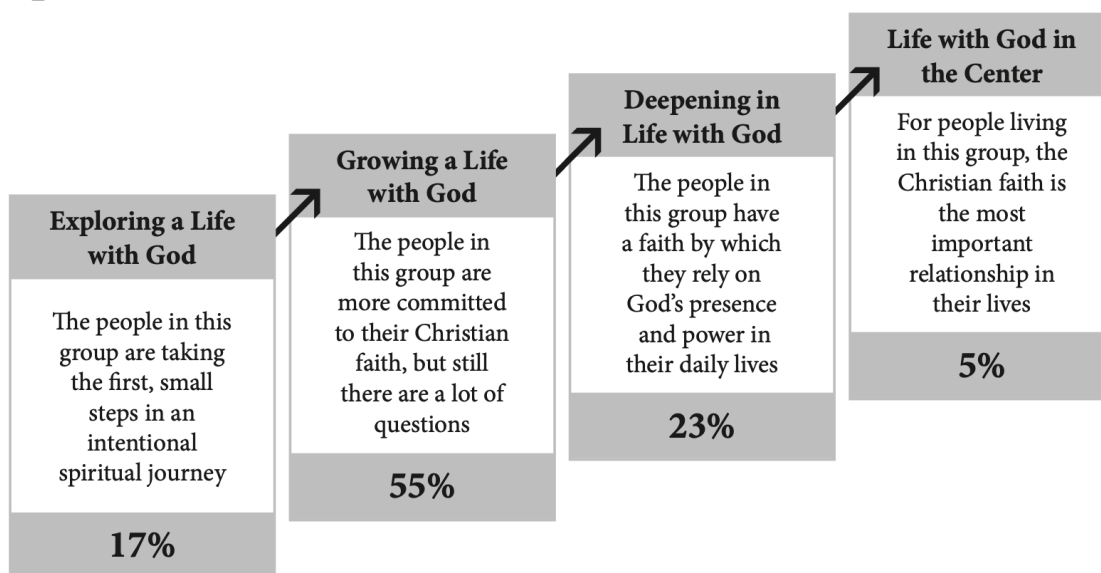


Figure 1. RenewalWorks spiritual growth continuum.¹⁷²

On the other hand, results indicated that many Episcopalians do have a hunger for spiritual growth and an eagerness for a deeper understanding of the sacraments and how to make faith a part of their daily lives, but neither lay people nor clergy always know how to address that desire.¹⁷³ Advocates of renewing the Church's contemplative tradition argue that it is essential for addressing people's spiritual needs, questioning the potential consequences of the Church neglecting this aspect of its mission.¹⁷⁴

Those calling for a contemplative reformation in the Church point to the need for leaders to address the program-based model and frenetic activity in many churches that mirror

¹⁷² Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 22.

¹⁷³ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 8-10.

¹⁷⁴ Gustave Reininger, ed., *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), 117.

post-modern secular society.¹⁷⁵ If the Church is going to move beyond simply being a social program or volunteer society into the realm of nurturing spiritual growth, awareness of and support for contemplative discipleship is needed.¹⁷⁶ Proponents of this culture shift in the Church point out that this does not mean new or different programming and possibly even means less activity; it means more teaching about the importance of attending to the transformational nature of spiritual life, a move from nominal Christianity to committed belonging, and to faith that is grounded in healthy community dynamics.¹⁷⁷ There are suggested practical steps of incorporating teaching about and engaging in a variety of individual and communal contemplative practices suggested in the literature reviewed, such as introducing periods of silence in liturgy and incorporating silence and contemplative practice in worship, meetings, and other parts of community life. Yet, the overarching theme that emerges in the literature is that meeting the challenge lies more in a holistic grounding of the community in “a shared commitment to cultivating an intimate relationship with the God who is revealed in scripture... encountered in the person of Jesus Christ, and especially present vis-a-vis the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁸

Both a commitment to spiritual disciplines or practices and a commitment to a common or shared spiritual life are needed. One challenge to this movement toward a contemplative community is understanding that some people will be committed to the contemplative life and

¹⁷⁵ Higginbotham, *Heart of a Calling*, 80.

¹⁷⁶ Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ*, xiv and 139.

¹⁷⁷ Robert D. Duggan, “Parish as a Center for Forming a Spiritual People,” *New Theology Review* 11, no. 4 (November 1998): 21-24.

¹⁷⁸ Bushlack, “Contemplative Practices,” in *Contemplation and Community*, 13.

others will not. An understanding of community dynamics and flexibility is required.¹⁷⁹ It is up to leaders and members in congregations to move forward together toward a deepening spiritual life and figure out how embracing a focus on spiritual growth with an emphasis on contemplative life works out in their specific context. The tendency is to focus on programs and “doing,” when research suggests the shift in spiritual culture is about a change in perspective to see every area of church life can be an opportunity for deepening relationships with God and others.¹⁸⁰

There is a challenge of balancing tradition and innovation. While seeking to recover the deep roots of mystical theology, one must recognize that the shifting times call for contextualization of these ideas and not just a return to what once was. The danger of traditionalism can lead to complacency and leave churches full of people with no aspiration for spiritual growth. RenewalWorks’ research found that in complacent churches, representing 23% of the research sample, initial conversations about spiritual growth were met with resistance.¹⁸¹ Congregants in these churches were defined by spiritual apathy with little interest beyond Sunday morning attendance and being too busy with other matters to think about developing their faith. While challenges exist in moving congregations toward an understanding of the transformational spiritual life, research has found key catalysts for responding to these challenges as shown in Figure 2 below.

¹⁷⁹ Bushlack, “Contemplative Practices,” 35.

¹⁸⁰ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 95.

¹⁸¹ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 26.

Catalysts for Spiritual Growth

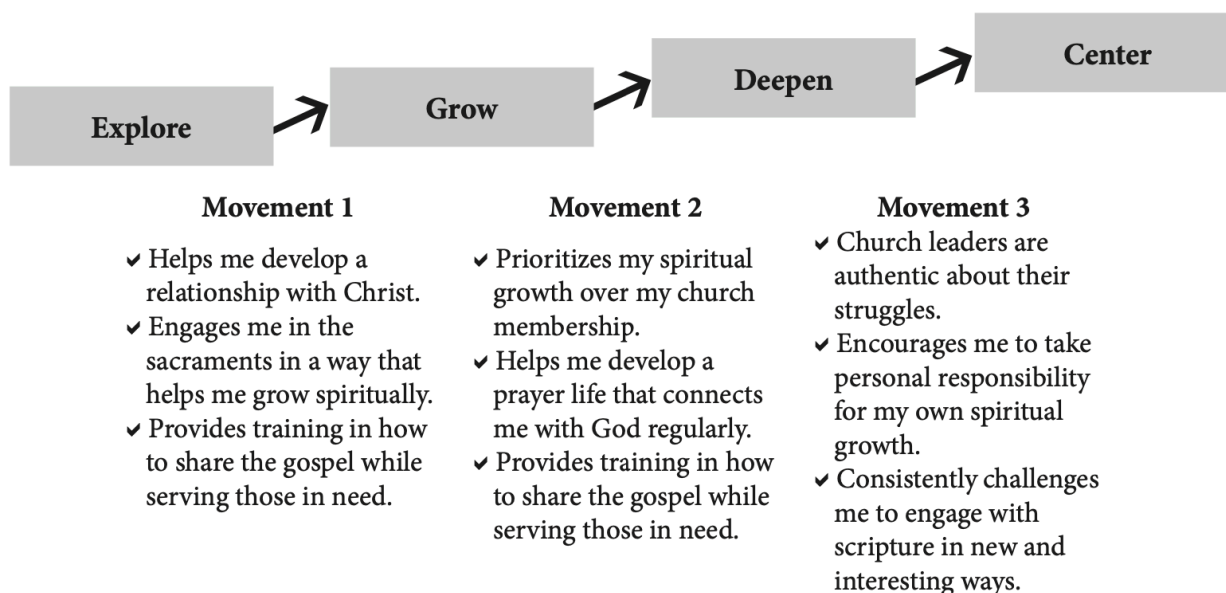


Figure 2. RenewalWorks catalysts for spiritual growth.¹⁸²

Some of the key elements for spiritual growth are prayer, spiritual disciplines like reading the Bible, reflection, and time with God. The frequency of these spiritual practices marked a difference between people who were in deeper stages of spiritual growth.¹⁸³ Another finding was that faith must move beyond Sunday into the realm of daily life, reflected in personal spiritual practices that showed a sense of ownership people had for their own journey along a continuum of spiritual growth.¹⁸⁴ Scripture and prayer were noted as the most catalytic of any behaviors in indicating a depth of spiritual development in individuals. Contemplative practices that integrate scripture and prayer, such as *Lectio Divina*, can be used to address this need in complacent communities. Another key aspect of spiritual growth highlighted by the research was dedicated

¹⁸² Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 31.

¹⁸³ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 27.

¹⁸⁴ Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 32 and 37.

time for solitude and contemplation, recognizing the Episcopal tradition's emphasis on stillness in the presence of the divine.¹⁸⁵ A wide range of teaching around and engagement with contemplative practices can address this critical component to move people along the continuum of development.

Leadership's Role in Spiritual Formation

Across the spectrum of literature and research reviewed, a key component that emerged as vital to the spiritual growth of people in congregations was the spiritual life and leadership qualities of those in charge of churches. Respondents in RenewalWorks' research consistently noted a gap between their need for guidance in spiritual practices and the actual support they have received from church leadership.¹⁸⁶ Research shows that Episcopalians who have been in church for many years remain in the early stages of spiritual growth and that those in the first two stages of the continuum (as seen in Figure 1 above) are highly dependent on clergy to help them learn how to grow spiritually. If the value of spiritual growth is not preached or taught, people will remain spiritually immature. Sidebotham suggests that clergy leaders begin with establishing the expectation for personal spiritual growth in their lay leadership, speaking regularly about the value of spiritual growth, and providing on-ramps for the community to nurture a deepening sense of God's presence in their lives; this means not leaving people to search outside the Church for understanding a life of prayer and meditation but leadership prioritizing this guidance.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Sidebotham, "More Lessons from Unlikely Sources," 500.

¹⁸⁶ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 42.

¹⁸⁷ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 84 and 183.

Leading a church into spiritual growth begins with the spiritual growth of the leader, “who must model that life of discipleship with humility and transparency.”¹⁸⁸ Beyond modeling a transformed life, leaders must empower people with education and opportunities to engage in corporate worship and personal spiritual practices that guide them on their own journeys. This means church clergy must understand their role as “Chief Spiritual Officer” to model a life of discipleship and draw people into an understanding of how to live a life of spiritual growth.¹⁸⁹ Sidebotham noted two critical needs that emerged in his research: for church leadership to help their people understand and develop a relationship with Christ at a deep level and to help with developing a prayer life and more engagement with scripture as part of church activities.¹⁹⁰ Another study conducted by Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Steward-Sicking in mainline denominations from 2002 through 2005 engaged with congregations integrating ancient practices of mystical Christianity in their current contexts. This study also revealed that a church’s life reflects that of its leaders, emphasizing that when leaders are deeply committed to experiencing God, the congregation follows suit.¹⁹¹

Recognizing the need for change to begin in the heart of the leader, many are addressing the need for training at the seminary level and the development of leadership models based on contemplative living which forms leaders in critical ways to be able to guide congregations into contemplative discipleship. One such model, proposed by Stephan Alan Hulsey, calls for church leaders to meet the spiritual needs of the twenty-first-century Christian out of the depths of their

¹⁸⁸ Sidebotham, “More Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 503.

¹⁸⁹ Sidebotham, “More Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 504.

¹⁹⁰ Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 30.

¹⁹¹ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 32.

own contemplative life of prayer, noting the lack of understanding of spiritual formation in the Western Protestant church that is found in contemplative spirituality.¹⁹² Looking to the paradigms of ancient spirituality, Hulsey points to the fruit produced by contemplative life as necessary for leadership within a community of faith.

For leaders committed to their own spiritual journey and seeking to cultivate a contemplative culture within their congregations, recommendations focus on intentional teaching about the lifelong nature of spiritual growth, providing communal opportunities that establish the church as a place for spiritual formation, and making a conscious choice to define membership based on intentional faith rather than cultural affiliation.¹⁹³ Part of this shift entails church leaders making themselves available as spiritual mentors and building up lay leadership to serve in this capacity. RenewalWorks' research indicated that 42% of Episcopal respondents never met with clergy to discuss spiritual matters, and almost half never spoke with any spiritual mentors before.¹⁹⁴ Understanding that the clergy can only accomplish so much on their own, the research shows that the healthiest congregations are the ones in which spiritual leadership is shared among lay leaders who all become champions of spiritual growth and spiritual coaches for the congregation.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Stephan Alan Hulsey, "The Contemplative Life: An Ancient Paradigm for Modern Christian Leadership" (DMin diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001), 6 and 96.

¹⁹³ Duggan, "Parish as a Center for Forming a Spiritual People," 14.

¹⁹⁴ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 40.

¹⁹⁵ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 63.

The Need for Spiritual Accompaniment

The need for accompaniment along the spiritual journey can be met by clergy guidance, lay leadership, and the development of mentors, spiritual directors, and soul friends within churches. Within classical Christian understanding and embedded in the mystical tradition is the concept of spiritual direction or accompaniment. Seen in monastic models of spiritual direction and the Celtic idea of the *anam cara*, this personal guidance takes place as part of the corporate framework of the early and developing Church, establishing the idea of the spiritual life as a way of progress.¹⁹⁶ The modern concept of spiritual direction developed alongside the spiritual disciplines and retreat movements of the twentieth century, and spiritual direction training programs emerged, professionalizing the role of a spiritual guide or friend. As with other contemplative programs and organizations outside of the congregation, this model requires church members to look outside their spiritual home for the resources they need and divorce their spiritual growth from their relationship with their fellow church members, and thus many leaders are calling the Church to revitalize this practice within the congregation.¹⁹⁷

As church leaders look to develop a contemplative awareness and spiritual growth in their members, providing avenues for direction will be a vital part of moving a congregation toward contemplative orientation.¹⁹⁸ Spiritual direction combines elements of prayer, pastoral care, discernment, confession and absolution, and teaching. While programming and communal offerings are part of the movement toward a church that values contemplative practice as part of its identity, the personal cannot be neglected as people need guidance. Personal guidance and

¹⁹⁶ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 16 and 203.

¹⁹⁷ George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, "Foreword," in *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 5.

¹⁹⁸ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 73.

accompaniment are vital to the individual contextualization needed in contemplative churches. Communal practices benefit the whole community, provide on-ramps for people into new spiritual practices and engagement with contemplative life, and help people understand the legitimacy and importance of a broader spiritual life. Bass notes that exposure to various practices and traditions outside one's "home base" helps the entire community recognize that not everyone is on the same place in the journey but gives a holistic vision of many paths to spiritual growth.¹⁹⁹ Individual or smaller group mentoring and direction help one go deeper in their own experience with spiritual practice and the path to spiritual growth. Paul Jones, in his work on helping individuals discover their own theological worlds and ways in which they navigate their spiritual growth, insists churches must recover the spiritual direction of individuals as their central task.²⁰⁰

Personal Transformation and Congregational Vitality

The beginning point for many congregations who want to move toward deeper engagement with contemplative practice may be to meet the spiritual needs of their congregation that are not currently being met. The natural outcome should be growth on the individual and congregational levels, and much research and anecdotal evidence are finding this to be the case. Jay Sidebotham of RenewalWorks notes that the most compelling insight their research has shown is that "the spiritual vitality of any congregation flows from the spiritual vitality of its members," proving that personal spiritual growth does lead to healthier congregations.²⁰¹ Tilden Edwards, Episcopal priest and founder of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, notes that

¹⁹⁹ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 134.

²⁰⁰ Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 237.

²⁰¹ Sidebotham, "Lessons from Unlikely Sources," 496.

people who are willing to gather together for contemplative prayer over time and build structured spiritual communities see positive effects in other dimensions of the community's ongoing life, including changes in the way leadership decisions are made, liturgy is expressed, and education and mission projects are carried out.²⁰² Adam Bucko, a leader in the new monastic movement, found that people were leaving the Church because they found it increasingly difficult to meet God in the Church. Leaders must focus on helping people experience God in their communities; however, this is not for the sake of a mystical experience that removes one from the world but to help people be transformed by experiencing God and then "be sent into the midst of human suffering to be God's partner in transfiguring the world."²⁰³ The transformation of the individual naturally flows into the transformation of the community and a transformed mission in the world.

Tilden Edwards' experience in the parish and in designing and leading contemplative programs since 1979 has yielded key insights into how a contemplative life transforms communities. He has seen core groups of spiritually disciplined and committed people move a community from organization to organism, fostering a sense of community led by committed leaders that flows out into the entire congregation. In his view, the Church is the place for this kind of transformation, rather than a specialized spiritual center or retreat house, because of the unique makeup of the congregation as a family or body where different people bring unique gifts and contributions to congregational life.²⁰⁴ Edwards notes that what he calls the contemplative consciousness has been restricted to a small number of people in congregations for many years, and while this has value, as the Church moves toward a deeper engagement with contemplative

²⁰² Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 61 and 73.

²⁰³ Adam Bucko, *Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide: Lessons in Engaged Contemplation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2022), 104 and 130.

²⁰⁴ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 72.

life on a larger scale, there is opportunity for more potential fruit and growth.²⁰⁵ One warning he gives to leaders is to understand that a move toward contemplative orientation takes years to develop and absorb. It is not a quick fix but requires commitment over the long haul.²⁰⁶

More compelling evidence of personal spiritual growth and congregational vitality as a result of contemplative life emerged in the research Bass and Steward-Sicking conducted in contemplative mainline congregations. They witnessed churches fostering a renewed sense of identity and mission, which they came to define as “pilgrimage congregations,” who were utilizing spiritual practice to move toward the goal of knowing God.²⁰⁷ They observed congregations that became more involved in hospitality, welcoming in more strangers, who then became integrated into the community and lives of discipleship. Church growth followed, and Bass noted that “pilgrimage congregations birth Christian pilgrims.”²⁰⁸ In their research, they saw churches rooted in the classical Christian tradition but welcoming and nurturing individual spiritual autonomy as a counterpoint for “postmodern homelessness,” giving people a destination to walk toward and someone to accompany them on the journey. Bass noted that integrating growth into a community rooted in the sacrament of baptism that defines them as members of the Body of Christ aided in a communal identity; this baptismal call to mission compelled people to grow in other practices like “hospitality, peacemaking, justice, and charity.”²⁰⁹

Recalling the monastic and Celtic models of the community as the center of spiritual life, which provided worship, education, hospitality, and a structured rule of spiritual life,

²⁰⁵ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 74.

²⁰⁶ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 126-27.

²⁰⁷ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 152.

²⁰⁸ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 153.

²⁰⁹ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 154-155.

congregations are returning to the value of spiritual community for personal growth.²¹⁰ As churches increasingly become the base for spiritual formation, leaders are finding ways to guide their people into a lifetime process of maturation and growth and are “providing an opportunity for further personal and congregational spiritual awakening.”²¹¹

Conclusion

Spiritual formation, though often perceived as a modern concept, is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, traced back to biblical teachings, and evolving through centuries of historical and theological developments. A survey of this evolution of thought and church practice shows spiritual formation to be a dynamic, lifelong process aimed at deepening one’s relationship with God, traditionally understood as a journey of both personal and communal growth. Tracing the historical and theological development of the Christian mystical tradition helps establish the long history of contemplative practice as an integral part of Christian theology and praxis.

The recent revival of interest in contemplative life, both inside and outside of the Church, driven by a desire for authentic spiritual growth, provides an invitation to congregations to revisit traditional practices often lost to the modern Church. By prioritizing a contemplative orientation in churches, leaders can foster communities that model spiritual depth and intimacy, drawing people into a shared, dynamic faith journey that revitalizes both personal and congregational vitality. Will the Church heed the “urgency about this call to a new way of being and doing church, a call to a new vision for the individual spiritual journey, for the sake of the church we love”?²¹²

²¹⁰ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 66

²¹¹ Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 69-70.

²¹² Sidebotham, “Lessons from Unlikely Sources,” 495.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes a primarily constructivist approach to a phenomenological research design and includes some ethnographic features. Employing a constructivist grounded theory model, a qualitative design process was created to gather data that would be analyzed before progressing to building categories.²¹³ Data were gathered from an initial personal information form and interviews with participants.

In a phenomenological research design, a researcher attempts to understand human lived experiences through observations gained from participant interviews. This study focused on personal accounts of experience with the phenomenon of engagement in contemplative life in a congregational setting. Because these congregations constitute culture-sharing groups that experience this phenomenon in a common setting, the study also employed ethnographic research elements.²¹⁴ This study engaged in ethnographic practices of research as defined by Mary Clark Moschella, involving fieldwork and immersing oneself in the life of a group to learn something about them.²¹⁵ The research included qualitative observations of communal contemplative practices that the researcher attended in the research settings, recording observations and reflections on these practices.²¹⁶

²¹³ Uwe Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022), 459. In constructivist grounded theory, multiple phases of open and focused coding and memoing are utilized throughout the research process. This allows for themes to emerge from within the participants' experience, and the resulting theory is grounded in this meaning.

²¹⁴ Flick, 278.

²¹⁵ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2023), 2.

²¹⁶ Flick, 246. The qualitative observations consisted of field notes the researcher took on behaviors and activities of the individuals at the research sites, and these notes were coded along with interview data.

Research Sample

This study employed interviews in three Episcopal churches in an attempt to gain diversity in the data. These three churches had varying sizes of staff and membership, and each offered established contemplative teaching, programs, or services. The churches were located in different geographic regions of the United States: a large urban church in the southeast with multiple clergy, one clergy member whose role was dedicated to contemplative programming (identified as Church One in the research). Another was a medium-sized church in a small town on the west coast with one priest on staff and several volunteer clergy members (Church Two). The final research site was a small, single-priest church in the southern United States (Church Three). An understanding of the underlying patterns of the participants' constructions of the phenomenon of participation in communal contemplative practice emerged in each setting. By following the principles of the saturation theory set out for an ethnographic study, the sample size was not as vital as gaining an "interpretive understanding of the culture."²¹⁷

The ideal sample outlined in the research plan was one to three staff and three to four lay leaders per church, depending on size, resulting in approximately seven staff/clergy member interviews. However, upon identifying those leading and participating in contemplative practice in each church, it became clear that the identified number of leaders would vary between the churches, and not all leaders were clergy or staff members. While Church One, the large urban site, had multiple clergy staff, only one staff priest was involved specifically in contemplative programming. They relied on lay leadership and a retired clergy volunteer for the rest of their program leadership. Churches Two and Three only had one full-time paid clergy member. The

²¹⁷ Flick, 278.

resulting sample make up was eight leaders, four of whom were ordained clergy and four who were lay leaders, and eleven participants of contemplative practices.²¹⁸

Research Procedures

First, three churches were identified based on the criteria of contemplative programming as identified on their websites and by word-of-mouth referral from known contemplative leaders in the church. The researcher connected with a staff member at each church to get more information about their demographics and programming and to gain permission to use the site for research. Then, a purposive sample, defined as a procedure by which subjects are selected “based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study,” was identified based on suggestions of the staff member.²¹⁹ The predetermined criteria considered were the potential participants’ known understanding of contemplative life or practice. A random or convenience sample was not sufficient as the interviews needed to be with people involved, to some extent, in contemplative ministries to give meaningful data about their experience of these practices and make meaning of the interview questions related to contemplative life. Thus, while a staff-identified sample may create a limitation, it allowed for connection with participants who each had some knowledge of and participation in contemplative church programming.

The initial personal information form, included in Appendix C, was sent to possible interview participants. The initial form collected the following demographic information:

²¹⁸ Those who participate in contemplative programming, but were not identified leaders, at the church were labeled participants. The researcher did not ask them to clarify their status as church attenders or members and thus they were not defined as church members in the data set.

²¹⁹ Sharon Vaughn, Jeanne Shay Schumm, and Jane Sinagub, *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology* (SAGE Publications, Ltd, 1996), 58.

- Name
- Contact information
- Church
- Age range
- Length of engagement in contemplative practice
- Initial interest in contemplative life
- Current level of interest in contemplative practice
- Frequency of participation in personal contemplative practice, regular church worship, and communal contemplative practice
- Brief description of personal contemplative practice

Twenty-five people across all three churches returned a completed form and nineteen were interviewed based on availability and on the demographics identified through the form responses to give the greatest possible diversity of gender, age range, and length of engagement with contemplative practice.²²⁰ The researcher visited two research sites in person in April and May 2024. Interviews at Churches One and Two were conducted primarily in person, in a private setting, and recorded for transcription purposes.²²¹ The interview with the priest at Church Three was conducted via video call in June 2024 due to scheduling difficulties for the participant. This

²²⁰ One of the challenges of this study is limited variability in the sample based on the majority white, middle-class demographics of the Episcopal Church. There was also limited variability in age due to the makeup of the congregations. Of the six who did not participate in interviews, three were not present when the researcher was on site. Three were not chosen because they were in the age range highest represented in the data, so others were interviewed to give more age variability.

²²¹ All participants who were able to be interviewed on-site indicated a high current interest in contemplative practice. In order to address questions of challenges to a contemplative church culture, more understanding of those resistant or less interested in contemplative life was needed. Thus, another interview was added during the research coding phase to address this gap in data, and this interview was done via video call in July 2024.

interview revealed the reality that, while contemplative programming had been more robust in the past, offerings at the church had shifted online during and after the pandemic in 2020. A unique opportunity to observe online contemplative services emerged, thus, the site visit was conducted virtually in June 2024 to gain a greater understanding of how a church can utilize online formats for contemplative practice. Two participant interviews were conducted at Church Three via video call in July 2024.

The research design utilized an interview outline for each person interviewed, with some flexibility for clarifying questions. The questions asked in the interviews were:

- Can you tell me what made you interested in participating in this research?
- Tell me about your spiritual life—your relationship with and experience of God over time.
- Can you describe your church experience and participation in the different churches you have been a part of?
- Tell me about your participation and roles here at the church.
- Describe what sparked your interest in contemplative practice.
- What kind of training or education (if any) have you received in engaging with contemplative practices from people or organizations outside of this congregation?
- Describe challenges you've encountered to your growth in contemplative life and practice.
- How has contemplative practice impacted your faith and spiritual growth?
- What resources, training, or support do you feel were missing or wish you'd had in your journey with contemplative practice (and in leading your congregation if you are a leader)?

- How has the leadership of this congregation guided and impacted your education about and engagement with contemplative life?
- How do you see ordained leadership emphasizing a contemplative spirit in the day-to-day worship, events, or organizational life of the congregation?
- Have you seen the congregation move toward greater involvement in contemplative practice or a more contemplative culture?
- How has the church's teaching and leadership on contemplative life impacted your spiritual growth and your everyday life? (If the subject is the church leader, this pertains to the Episcopal church more broadly.)
- How do you see an emphasis on contemplative life impacting the vitality and mission of the church – such as in areas of worship, giving, service, and outreach or justice?
- What else would be helpful to know and who else would be helpful to connect with?

Ethical Considerations

To mitigate risk to the interview participants, the researcher provided biographical information along with the initial survey to introduce the researcher, ensured interviews were conducted in a private setting, and confirmed the participants understood the purpose of the interview. All participants signed an informed consent form confirming their voluntary participation in the research and were informed they could withdraw participation at any time.²²²

The interviews were audio recorded via Zoom and a secondary audio device as a backup. Two transcriptionists were employed to turn the audio recording of each interview into a final transcript for coding purposes. The original audio files and transcripts were stored securely and

²²² Refer to Appendix B for a sample informed consent form.

given anonymized names to protect confidentiality. Participant names and genders have been changed, and specific locations of the churches were not used in describing the data. The research design was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Winebrenner Theological Seminary in January 2024.²²³

Research Site Observations

In April 2024, the researcher visited Church One, the large urban church in the southeast, for a period of three days. The communal practices observed included a Sunday morning worship service, a planning meeting for the evening Celtic worship service, a Celtic service, choral Compline, and a contemplative prayer group.²²⁴ The visit to Church Two, the medium-sized church on the west coast, occurred in May 2024 over five days and consisted of observations of a meditation/contemplative prayer meeting, a lecture on a contemplative topic given by a guest speaker, a Celtic worship service, a contemplative-series lecture by a staff member, and a special music event. In June and July, the researcher attended online services at Church Three including Morning Prayer and a choral Compline service.

Analyzing the Data

Using an inductive approach, defined as a “‘ground-up’ approach, using observations and conclusions to formulate a theory,” the data collected were coded and analyzed to allow for key

²²³ Refer to Appendix A for the IRB approval.

²²⁴ The Celtic service as expressed by Church One includes the Eucharist, periods for silence, calming music, candlelight, a meditation by a lay person in place of a sermon, and opportunities for prayer with healing intercessors. The service is intentionally structured to be contemplative in nature. Choral Compline is a service in which a choir chants the Order for Compline, the daily prayer service for the end of the day, as found in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

themes and patterns to emerge and inform theory construction.²²⁵ The process of analyzing data occurred through coding the interview transcripts and field notes of the researcher. Following the coding process for qualitative analysis, a researcher looks for words or short phrases that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” for portions of the data.²²⁶ This coding process allows the researcher to translate the data and attribute meaning, identifying patterns of repetitive, regular, or consistent data.²²⁷ The researcher utilized qualitative research software to assist in the coding and analyzing process.²²⁸

First and second-cycle coding was utilized throughout several passes of coding the data. First-cycle coding can be seen as analysis or “taking things apart,” in which the researcher looks at the data to identify meaning and trends in and between the interviews, while second-cycle coding includes analytical memos, a reconfiguration of the codes, and “putting things together into new assemblages of meaning” or a synthesis of the data.²²⁹ In the first pass of coding, all data were analyzed using initial or open coding, looking for “participant-inspired rather than researcher-generated” data, allowing meaning to emerge from the interviews.²³⁰ Open coding includes a line-by-line reading of the interview data, identifying codes that categorize common themes in the data.

²²⁵ Milred L. Patten and Michelle Newhart, *Understanding Research Methods: An Overview of the Essentials*, 10th edition, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 9.

²²⁶ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th edition, (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2021), 5.

²²⁷ Saldaña, 10.

²²⁸ The researcher used the software package available at Dedoose.com

²²⁹ Saldaña, 6.

²³⁰ Saldaña, 140.

The researcher then read through each interview again to refine the codes and add any new codes that emerged. The second cycle of coding employed focused coding, enabling key codes to evolve into categories and themes. This process is essential to grounded theory, as it involves conceptual abstraction, allowing relationships between concepts to surface and explain meaningful behavior within the studied social context.²³¹ In this second-cycle focused coding process, an adaptation of axial coding in grounded theory, codes are grouped into conceptual categories.²³² Forty-eight codes in five categories were identified from the data.

As the researcher was interested in how the individuals made meaning of their contemplative practice and how each congregation understood their contemplative culture, a qualitative design was essential. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with the world, emphasizing the social and contextual nature of this process. It adopts an interpretive or constructivist perspective to explore how people interpret their social environments at specific times and in specific contexts.²³³ The research methodology provided a structured approach to investigating the phenomenon. By employing a constructivist grounded theory model within a phenomenological research design, supplemented with ethnographic elements, the study was able to capture the lived experiences of participants across Episcopal church contexts. The emergent themes and categories provided insights into the lived experiences of participants, contributing to the development of a grounded theory that reflects the essence of contemplative life in congregational settings, the findings and implications of which are detailed in the subsequent chapters.

²³¹ Saldaña, 302.

²³² Saldaña, 213.

²³³ Sharan B. Merriam and Robin S. Grenier, eds., *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 4-5.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Introduction

This project investigates how church leaders can effectively guide their congregations toward deeper engagement with contemplative practices. It focuses on churches that are actively working to cultivate a culture of contemplation, exploring the challenges they encounter, the resources they utilize, and the key elements necessary for fostering a contemplative orientation. The goal is to provide leaders with the insights and tools needed to integrate contemplative practices into their congregations, promoting both individual spiritual growth and overall congregational vitality. This research is guided by the central question: How does an Episcopal congregation move toward greater engagement with contemplative practice? Additional questions explore the key elements required to build a contemplative orientation within the church, how challenges to cultivating a contemplative culture are identified and overcome, and what resources are necessary for a congregation to deepen its involvement in contemplative life. This chapter will provide an overview of the data collection and analysis process, participant demographics, and the themes that emerged from the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study involved qualitative observations of communal, contemplative practices across three churches, with the researcher attending a variety of services and events both in-person and online. These observations provided insights into the unique ways each congregation engaged in contemplative practices and integrated them into the life of the church.

Data were collected from eight leaders (four clergy and four lay leaders) and eleven participants in contemplative practices, for a total of nineteen subjects. To protect the confidentiality of the interview subjects, data will be reported in the following chapters referring

to subjects as leaders (without identifying their staff or clergy status) or as participants. Names and genders of subjects will be anonymized, and the church locations will only be referred to by region; the name of the church will not be identified. Data were gathered via a personal information form (see Appendix C) and interviews. Interviews were conducted mainly in person and some via video calls. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data was analyzed through a coding process of the transcripts, focusing on identifying key themes related to the implementation and experience of contemplative practices within the congregations. See Chapter Three for additional details regarding this process.

Demographic Profile

Each interview participant completed an initial personal information form designed to collect contact information, demographic details such as age range and gender, and information about their involvement in church activities and their interest in and engagement with contemplative practices. The following profile details the demographic data provided by the nineteen participants who were interviewed. Of the nineteen people interviewed, thirteen were women and six were men. Participants were asked to disclose their age range, and all reported they were at least thirty-six years old, with the breakdown as shown in figure 3 below.

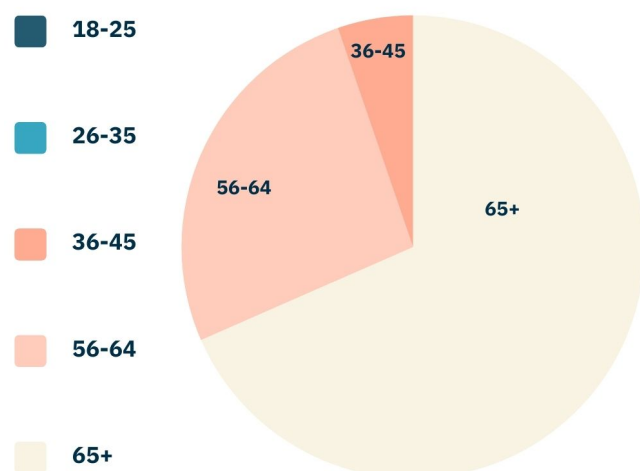


Figure 3. Research participant breakdown by age.

Regarding their interest, the personal information form asked participants to choose an adjective to describe how they felt about contemplative life before they were introduced to it, to state their current level of interest in contemplative practice, and to indicate how long they had been engaged in contemplative practice. One person reported being cautious about contemplative life before their introduction to it by church leadership. Five stated they were curious about contemplative life, and thirteen reported they were interested. No respondents stated they were resistant to contemplative life before they participated in church-led programs.

Of the nineteen interviewed, none reported a low current interest in contemplative practice. Two (one participant from Church One and one participant from Church Three) stated they were moderately interested, and the remaining seventeen reported a high level of interest in contemplative practice.

The shortest time anyone had been practicing was two years, while the longest practice was fifty years. The breakdown of the number of years participants listed they had been engaged in contemplative practice is shown in figure 4.

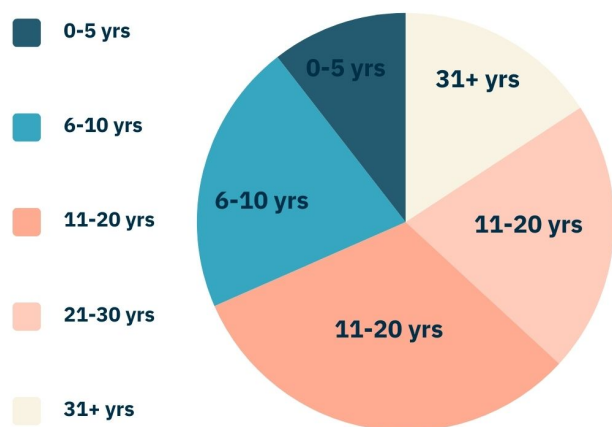


Figure 4. Research participant breakdown by years engaged in contemplative practice.

Three questions probed the participants' frequency of participation in various practices or church services. When asked about their participation in practices or services, participants could choose between the options of daily (for personal practice only), several times a week, weekly, several times a month, monthly, or sporadically. A majority of 63% (twelve participants) reported having a daily personal contemplative practice. The breakdown of the remaining seven participants was five participating in personal contemplative practice several times a week, one weekly, and one several times a month. This is expressed in figure 5.

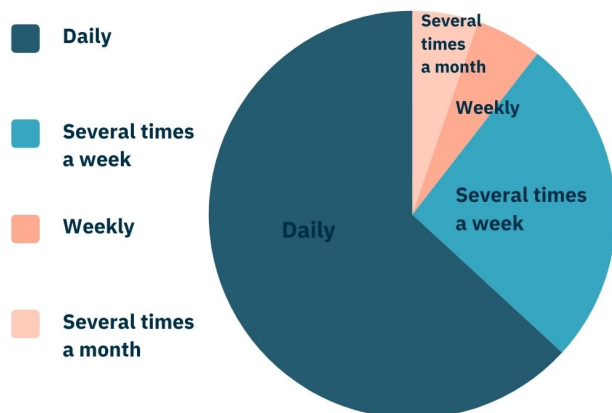


Figure 5. Research participant frequency of personal contemplative practice.

A majority (95%) of participants stated they attended church worship (Sunday eucharist, adult formation, or daily prayer) weekly or several times a week, with fourteen reporting weekly attendance and four stating they attend several times a week, as displayed in figure 6. Only one participant reported sporadic church attendance and added on their survey form that this had only been true since the shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

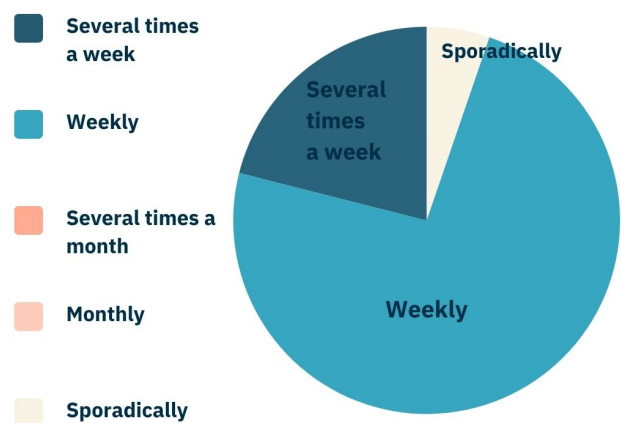


Figure 6. Research participant frequency of church worship attendance.

Finally, the participants reported their frequency of participation in contemplative church programs such as workshops, events, classes, or services, as seen in figure 7. The results were three with sporadic participation, two monthly, five weekly, and nine people participating in programs several times a week. Of those twelve participants with a daily personal contemplative practice, 67%, or eight participants, reported involvement several times a week, and 33% participated in programs weekly.

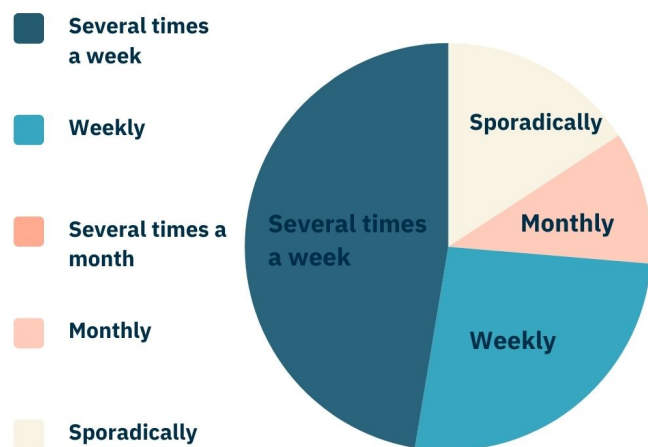


Figure 7. Research participant frequency of contemplative program attendance.

Participants were then asked to describe their personal contemplative practice in their own words. They described a variety of solo and communal practices. Of the communal practices mentioned, some were church-related activities while others were in small or virtual groups. Four people mentioned Morning Prayer or one of the other daily offices from the *BCP* as part of their daily practice. A wide variety of descriptions showed the diversity of what people consider their personal practice, from “walking meditation,” to “living into a rule/rhythm of life,” “weekly Lectio Divina,” “an icon guild that meets weekly,” “reading a reflection, occasionally poetry and other,” and “homespun prayer.”²³⁴ The most common practice mentioned, by nine of the nineteen participants, was some form of sitting, silent prayer. References to this practice included “sitting meditation,” “a 25-minute morning sit,” “a contemplative daily sit,” and “Centering Prayer.”²³⁵

²³⁴ The icon guild mentioned is a group that meets together weekly to write (paint) icons.

²³⁵ Teachers and practitioners of Centering Prayer often call a prayer session a “sit” because the primary physical posture practiced during this form of meditation is simply sitting in a comfortable position, allowing for a focused inward attention and quiet reflection. The code “sit” is used synonymously in the research with a session of Centering Prayer practice.

Categories and Codes

Common phrases and ideas emerged from the interviews that emphasized how each congregation collectively navigates the journey of integrating contemplative practice into their spiritual lives. The emergence of these commonalities developed into forty-eight codes divided into five categories that encapsulate the process of individuals and the congregation starting, sustaining, and deepening engagement with contemplative practice, as detailed in Appendix F.

The codes that emerged in this research are used as subheadings throughout this chapter, developing a picture of the contemplative practice of each of the research sites. The codes in the “Getting Engaged” category focus on initial motivations and causes for engagement, foundational to understanding how contemplative practice begins. The “Key Components” category highlights elements that emerged in the interviews as important for initiating and sustaining engagement with contemplative life. The “Practices” category details the specific practices people mentioned regarding engagement within their interviews, showing the various means through which contemplative life is expressed. The codes categorized as “Challenges” address obstacles and how they are overcome, crucial for understanding the dynamics of engagement. Finally, the “Growing” category explores the motivations for and impacts of continued engagement, looking at how people stay engaged and grow in their contemplative practice.

Research Findings: Church One

A Snapshot of Church One

The church referred to in the research as Church One is a large church in an urban setting in the southeast United States. The contemplative programming is well-established and supported by a clergy member and experienced lay leaders. The church website describes the

contemplative services as especially inviting to newcomers and lets visitors know the services incorporate periods for silence, stillness, and contemplation. It further described the music as being drawn from Celtic, folk, and classical traditions, and in place of a sermon, a reflection from a lay member of the congregation is given.

The researcher's visit included attendance at the regular Sunday morning service, a planning meeting for the weekly Sunday evening Celtic service, the Celtic service, the Sunday evening Compline service, and a Monday morning contemplative group meeting. These observations revealed meticulously planned and designed services, a robust team of volunteers involved in leading the services, and spaces that were specifically designed to offer a more reflective atmosphere conducive to the contemplative focus of the services. This included lighting extra candles, dim lighting, and special music, including stringed instruments. Even the planning meeting had an intentionally contemplative focus on both the space and layout of the meeting, including the lighting of candles and a time of silence together as a group. The Compline service was sung in its entirety by a choir, and the congregation was given direction to use the service as an opportunity for prayerful reflection. Expectations were communicated through the printed bulletin and announcements during the service that extra silence was held after readings, and people should enter and exit in silence.

Both contemplative Sunday services were well attended. While the church is large and the contemplative services are long-standing, those attending the contemplative service are sometimes spoken of as a separate group from those who attend the Sunday morning services. In the interviews, mention was made of a distance between those who attend the contemplative services and those who do not, especially in the past. One participant noted that previously, "the perception was that 'It's what those Celtic people do and not what we do,' but that 'something

has shifted, and I think that's because of the leaders. There's been a lot of inclusion of the Celtic service."²³⁶

Getting Engaged

Those interviewed at Church One reflected on feeling an internal call that compelled them toward contemplative practice and an emphasis on an invitation to involvement from trusted leaders. Another strong theme emerged around the search for deeper meaning and a new understanding of the contemplative dimension embedded in the Christian tradition that people did not know about previously. Interview participants most readily expressed surprise that they did not know about contemplative practice previously, with six out of eight mentioning this. The next most frequent motivator to getting engaged was a leader's influence, showing up in five interviews. Finally, a spiritual hunger that was met by engaging in contemplative practice was expressed by half of the participants.

A recurring insight was the desire for new understanding or practices that were not previously accessible to participants in their previous religious experiences. Some expressed needing to look outside the Christian tradition for what they ended up finding at Church One when they got involved in contemplative practice, while others expressed a deepening understanding of Christianity by what they discovered. "Why didn't I know this before?" asked Participant N, who noted at age 65+ he had only been introduced to contemplative practice twelve years prior.²³⁷ One participant described being introduced to contemplative practice as a "gateway" that made "this tradition actually acceptable" for him. He said that exposure to contemplative practice when he was younger would have been preferable, saying, "I had to go to

²³⁶ Participant R, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²³⁷ Participant N, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

other traditions to find language around body, around meditation, around the direct experience of spirit and connection in your life. I had to go find those in other traditions. I didn't feel like they were being talked about in this tradition."²³⁸ One of the leaders interviewed noted that the contemplative programming draws people who had previously left the church or who have not been in church before, saying, "There are a lot of people who come to the Celtic service that end up finding something that they haven't found elsewhere. Some have come out of another tradition. Many have left their tradition and haven't been worshipping anywhere."²³⁹

Similarly, when expressing a spiritual hunger that drew them to contemplative life, participants reported practices that ignited or restored their faith. A common theme was the search for spiritual nourishment and wanting to connect more deeply with a sense of God in their lives. One leader described telling a clergy person he wanted spiritual direction, telling him, "I'm just hungry for something."²⁴⁰ Several people used words around missing something or an awareness that there was something else out there besides what they were currently experiencing in their faith. Akin to spiritual hunger were themes of curiosity and feeling compelled to be involved in contemplative life. Similar language across these three codes described something, with some participants particularly naming that something as the Spirit, drawing them to that deeper experience they were looking for.

Twelve mentions were made across all interviews of a church leader's influence or invitation that moved them to become involved in contemplative life at the church level. Participants consistently cited their admiration for the leadership of clergy and spoke of their

²³⁸ Participant Q, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²³⁹ Participant P, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁴⁰ Participant M, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

spiritual guidance as what fostered their engagement in contemplative practices. Leaders were said to be the driving force in making contemplative practice a priority in the church, building a contemplative spirit among the people, and inviting people into involvement. One participant noted a particular leader was “very interested in contemplative things. And he was the one who enabled the speakers to come and enabled the Centering Prayer group.”²⁴¹

Key Components

Key components of the contemplative life at Church One revolved around grounding in contemplative liturgical practices and the creation of an intentional community and opportunity for communal practices. Again, focusing heavily on leadership, participants spoke about the character of leadership as an important factor, the impact of contemplative teachers, and the need for spiritual direction in supporting individual and communal growth. The top component that emerged as influential in sustaining contemplative life was the liturgy, with 100% of participants mentioning it in their interviews. Groups or communal practices were mentioned eleven times by six out of eight participants as an important factor. Finally, half of the participants spoke about the importance of spiritual direction, the heart of their leaders, the influence of contemplative teachers, and utilizing virtual methods of contemplative practice.

The Celtic service emerged as central to the liturgical experience at Church One, with participants sharing how the service’s quiet, sacred atmosphere, created through liturgy, music, and lighting, invited participants into meditative forms of worship and spiritual depth. A corresponding code that highlighted the importance of the elements in the liturgy was “intentionality,” as people spoke of the care taken in preparing for contemplative services and

²⁴¹ Participant L, interview by author, in-person, April 15, 2024.

commitment to creating sacred spaces. One participant noted people come to the Celtic service for “the silence and beauty.”²⁴² Another noted that the Celtic service was an entrance into contemplative life for him, saying the service allowed him to be “exposed to a different language system, a different simple system, rooted in the same meaning but a different spirit and way of embodying Christianity, or at least worship.”²⁴³ The intentionality around liturgy focused on keeping the service inviting, compelling, and focusing on meeting needs, with one leader noting experimenting, keeping things fresh, and listening to feedback. He noted the importance of “offering a lot of on-ramps at different times” for people to get involved and “figuring out what people need, what’s the next step that would be helpful for several people.”²⁴⁴

A focus on community and the need for communal practice permeated the interviews with participants participating in or organizing contemplative group practices, such as weekly Centering Prayer groups or monthly meetings. The importance of small, intentional groups that train people and support the ongoing practice of contemplation emerged as a key factor in raising up new leaders. One participant noted her “whole orientation is to be contemplative but in community,” so the opportunities to meet together were key for her.²⁴⁵ Several participants noted that practicing in a group provides essential support, such as Participant O, who said, “I feel the presence of everyone I’ve ever sat with. We’re all supporting each other.”²⁴⁶ Another noted

²⁴² Participant Q, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²⁴³ Participant M, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁴⁴ Participant M, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁴⁵ Participant P, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁴⁶ Participant O, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

difficulty of practicing alone but said, “If I’m with other people at all, I can give myself permission to surrender, and that feels like what God has always wanted me to do.”²⁴⁷

Leadership being deeply aligned with the contemplative ethos was a key element highlighted by the interviews, focusing on the personal authenticity of the leaders and their commitment to building an intentional contemplative spirit in the church. A participant noted that one of the leaders in the church’s aim is to live as a contemplative leader, saying, “You see and feel him live it. And for me, that is contagious and inspiring.”²⁴⁸ Beyond leadership from the church leaders, people also mentioned being led by the teachings of several contemplative teachers and writings like Richard Rohr and John Philip Newell. Several participants noted the impact of the leadership bringing in teachers in the past, and some noted that they connect to leaders through books, podcasts, and outside events. Others noted having spiritual directors who offered personalized guidance in navigating their contemplative journeys.

With so much focus on community and personal interaction with leaders and each other, a surprising theme of virtual practice emerged. Nine mentions of virtual practice were made, all centering around sustaining practice through virtual means during the pandemic, which allowed people to stay connected to the community when they could not meet in person.

Practices

A diversity of practices mentioned by interview participants demonstrated a varied engagement with contemplative spirituality in Church One. More than the other churches, an abundance of codes was identified in the data referring to specific personal and communal contemplative practices, forty-two in total. The foundational contemplative practice across most

²⁴⁷ Participant P, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁴⁸ Participant R, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

of the interviews was that of Centering Prayer, with participants sharing personal and group experiences and sharing how this practice had a sustained influence over many years in their lives. Six out of eight participants noted participating in Centering Prayer, with fourteen occurrences of centering or the corresponding mention of a “sit” happening across the interviews. The other practices referenced by half or more participants were silence, retreats, and Lectio Divina. Finally, iconography, the arts, and nature were noted practices for three of the eight participants.

Common themes that emerged from descriptions of these contemplative practices were the need for a personal commitment to individual practice, the importance of communal practice, and a focus on embodied spirituality. While most participants highlighted traditional Christian contemplative practices, three people noted the integration of Eastern practices like yoga and Eastern meditation, highlighting practices outside of the tradition and outside of communal church practice. The role of nature and the arts as contemplative practices, noted by several participants, highlighted another layer of practice outside of structured prayer and services at the church, which people experienced individually.

Challenges

The overall challenge that emerged in Church One centered around the desire for community, support, and a cohesive vision of what it means to be a community engaged in contemplative life. The presence of the code “need for/lack of community” was the most prevalent, with seven occurrences. Five mentions of loneliness in one’s contemplative orientation also highlighted a lack of community. Five instances of difficulty in understanding contemplative practice across the community were also present. The only prevalent code that did

not connect to this overarching idea of community was a consistency in the challenge of time constraints noted by five interview participants.

Some of these challenges for finding support centered around other people not understanding or being interested in contemplative practice, as when one participant noted, “Nobody knows what I’m talking about, and my peers don’t want to do this. So, I’m trying to get my friends involved, and I’m having conversations with my peers.” For this participant and others, the lack of support centered around the fact that some people at the church were involved with the contemplative practices, but a large number of people were not, as when one participant noted the difficulty of understanding between the two groups who are “not doing the same thing at all.” He said, “We’re not talking about faith and spirituality in the same way at all. There’s some overlap, but it’s a completely different experience.”²⁴⁹ Some noted this challenge was a part of the reality of communal life, saying things like one participant who noted, “I just don’t know if I think contemplative practice is for everybody. . . . Not everybody’s suited to do that. That’s not good or bad. It’s just, I think it’s different, you know.”²⁵⁰

Those who expressed the challenge around time constraints expressed a struggle to find the time or discipline to maintain a regular practice. Most noted that their struggle to practice resulted from the pressure of external factors like family, jobs, and other commitments vying for their time. One person noted that internal resistance was also a factor, saying, “You do have to sit down and put yourself in the chair. . . . I mean, the challenges haven’t come from outside of me. They’ve come from inside of me, and you have to take the time to do it.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Participant Q, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²⁵⁰ Participant O, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²⁵¹ Participant L, interview by author, in-person, April 15, 2024.

Growth

When participants spoke about what helped them grow in contemplative life over time, many noted how practice had sustained them through life changes and provided grounding, transformation, and a deep connection to God. They described their engagement with contemplative practice as a source of peace and healing and a way they experienced God and community. Six of eight participants spoke about contemplation as a source of transformation and a way of connecting with or experiencing God. Half of the participants spoke of themes of grounding or centeredness and of the role of contemplation in sustaining peace amid the chaos of life. Finally, while only two people noted official training from a source outside the church on how to engage in contemplative life, half of the participants noted the role of gaining experience through participating in practice, and how they learned through the process through doing it.

Many occurrences of language around growth and gradual transformation emerged in this category, with people calling contemplative practice a “game changer” and “transformative.” One participant noted, “It’s a continuing process. It’s a continuing journey.”²⁵² Tied to the theme of transformation, people spoke about how the practices deepened their faith. However, as opposed to a deepening, some noted that contemplative practice resulted in a new connection to God, such as when Participant M said, “And I had a really profound experience of God’s love and grace in a way that I’ve never conceived of. It was an experiential feeling state, very short-lived, but it feels profound.”²⁵³ Another noted, “It’s hard to articulate. I think that progress is that

²⁵² Participant N, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²⁵³ Participant M, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

movement from one place to another. It's like a connection. It's like a new connection to God, and a disconnection from the busyness of the world is the best way I can describe it for me.”²⁵⁴

Research Findings: Church Two

A Snapshot of Church Two

The church described as Church Two in the research is a medium-sized congregation on the west coast of the United States that views itself as a distinctly contemplative community. When asked about how they saw contemplative life impacting the church, one participant noted that contemplative life “permeates everything, absolutely. Emphatically, by design, it permeates everything.”²⁵⁵ As both a church and retreat house, they offer contemplative programming through their weekly liturgy, group opportunities for contemplative practice, guest speakers and lectures focusing on contemplative themes, and contemplative-focused in-person retreats that draw people from outside the local congregation. The researcher observed a mid-week meditation service, a guest lecture, preparations for the Sunday morning service, a Celtic Sunday morning liturgy, and a concert.

Attention was given to setting up a quiet and reflective atmosphere in the physical space, specifically with candles and the placement of traditional Christian icons. A chapel for meditation was available for use by any member of the church or visitor to the retreat house twenty-four hours a day. In the smaller group meditation time, *Lectio Divina* was utilized for reflection on a passage, and time was given for silent contemplative prayer and reflection as a group on the experience. In the Sunday liturgy, ample explanation of the contemplative nature

²⁵⁴ Participant N, interview by author, in-person, April 13, 2024.

²⁵⁵ Participant I, interview by author, in-person, May 1, 2024.

and elements of the service was given in the bulletin. The liturgy was specifically designed based on Celtic contemplative traditions and to offer participation by the attendees in silence and reflection. A communal *Lectio Divina* time was built into the service after the reading of the Gospel passage.

Getting Engaged

The process of getting engaged in contemplative practice at Church Two was highly relational. Five interview participants reflected on the influence of a leader, and half noted the personal invitation from a leader to participate in church activities, conversations, or leadership roles, which initiated involvement in contemplative life. A recurring theme of spiritual yearning, whether a return to faith or a search for new depth, was reflected in six of the eight interviews.

Many participants credited the priest specifically as the person who drove the contemplative spirit of the church and drew them to attend the church and its programs. One participant named the priest as “a draw for a lot of people to be here. For me, it’s been in terms of his leadership or his gifts, both with scholarship and how he shows up. I really love that and respect that.”²⁵⁶ The contemplative events are not described as different than other services, but the church as a whole is credited as a community that seeks to live out a contemplative Christian vision in the world. Participants equated getting involved in the church with being involved in contemplative life. Invitations from a leader to become more involved by serving or leading often carried a connotation of going deeper.

The recurring theme of spiritual hunger and of being compelled or pulled into something they did not have words for yet appeared across interviews, with several participants describing a

²⁵⁶ Participant K, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

long period of absence from Christian practice before returning to the church. One participant said about contemplative practice, “Maybe it’s an overstatement that nothing in my life has influenced me so strongly. Not just my spiritual path, but my personal growth path. It’s really beautiful.”²⁵⁷ Some described discovering practices they had engaged in independently had deep roots in the Christian tradition, which validated their engagement in them, as with Participant D who said, “That was a really important recognition for me that there is a deep, meditative, or contemplative tradition that I had somehow intuited, had no name for, and then in encountering it, learned I could go deeper.”²⁵⁸

Key Components

Engagement in contemplative practice at Church Two was deeply intertwined with the guidance of leadership, structured liturgy, access to contemplative teaching, and communal belonging. People spoke of these key elements as creating an ecosystem in which people were supported in the contemplative life. The top code present across interviews was ten mentions, from seven of the eight participants, about the influence of a leader, plus three specific citations of sermons as a way of teaching about contemplation. Contemplative engagement was also deeply encouraged through worship, with eight comments from six participants about liturgy. Finally, half of all participants spoke of the importance of access to contemplative teachers, the support of the community, intentionality in building a contemplative life, a contemplative spirit that permeated the church, the importance of group practice, and spiritual direction.

The guidance of a deeply contemplative leader was frequently cited as vital to sustaining engagement in contemplative life, describing leadership as both a provider of teaching and a

²⁵⁷ Participant I, interview by author, in-person, May 1, 2024.

²⁵⁸ Participant D, interview by author, via Zoom, September 6, 2024.

model of authentic spiritual practice. One participant said a leader's "spirit is there guiding us. We start with prayer. We end with prayer. Just his whole attitude and his passion about this church and about what he's trying to bring here, it seeps into things."²⁵⁹ Many attributed their participation in contemplative life to a leader's pastoral presence and ability to hold space for questions and to offer guidance.

Several elements of the liturgy were mentioned as contributing to the contemplative life of the church, including Celtic liturgical rites, sermons, and time for silence in services. Intentionality around weaving together liturgical elements in a manner conducive to contemplation was another code that pointed to liturgy as an important component of life at Church Two. "One of the big things I've noticed is there's breathing room and there's beauty," said one participant, "like there's that *selah* moment throughout the liturgy and I've never really experienced that in a formal church setting."²⁶⁰ Another noted the importance of "things like just allowing for a pause and silence and to be present without having to fill it. Like, before a response or even instead of a response, and in church, between readings, after the sermon, and after communion. It's not unintentional."²⁶¹

Many spoke about the community as an important support for creating an environment that sustains engagement in contemplative life, and they highlighted the relational aspect of Christian life, expressing appreciation for the community's ability to hold open discussions and a commitment to growth. Participant K said, "Being in relationship with people here who also take

²⁵⁹ Participant J, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

²⁶⁰ Participant F, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

²⁶¹ Participant I, interview by author, in-person, May 1, 2024.

their spiritual life seriously is nourishing to me. Maybe it's more than anything else."²⁶² In conjunction with speaking of the community, the theme of a contemplative spirit that flows through the community was prevalent. The participant also noted, "A lot of people have their own meditation practices, so they are practiced in silence and solitude. I feel like that affects the culture. I'd say that this community also knows, from what I can tell, how to reflect together. So, I see that as an outpouring of contemplative life."²⁶³

Practices

In Church Two, eighteen mentions of specific contemplative practices emerged from the interviews, with silence and nature occurring the most frequently in three interviews each. The church's emphasis on natural and environmental issues was noted as a specific interest for several people, like one participant who said, "So, I've just kind of continued on in this community, not necessarily because it's Episcopalian, because that's not a specific draw for me. It's the contemplative practices, here in nature and yet so engaged in the world. That matters to me, as well, you know—the environment."²⁶⁴

Overall, the interviews spoke more about communal experiences of liturgy, silence together, and retreats than individual practices. Also mentioned were Centering Prayer, the practice of praying the Jesus prayer, Lectio Divina, and Eastern practices as experiences that eventually led participants back to Christian contemplative practice. Along with silence as a practice present in the liturgy and people's private meditation, the practice of silence in retreats emerged as a key theme. A church leader pointed out the unique position of Church Two as one

²⁶² Participant K, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

²⁶³ Participant K, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

²⁶⁴ Participant K, interview by author, in-person, May 2, 2024.

that also has a retreat house that uses it for “purposes such as leading retreats, as things are upcoming now on eco-spirituality, or the weeklong one we’re doing on silence.”²⁶⁵

Challenges

Challenges to building a contemplative life in community were the least prevalent codes in the data from Church Two. Most people spoke of the strength of the community, but several mentions of personal challenges to contemplative practice were elevated, such as time constraints, distractions, or lack of commitment. Two participants noted that they felt a lack of community previously, but that need was met by the church, including a church leader who said, “There was no real communal support for a young man who wanted to live a deeply Christian contemplative life. I couldn’t find a parish where that was the way they did ministry, right? That also planted a seed, I think, to try to create what I longed to have, what I sought and couldn’t find.”²⁶⁶

Growth

Interview participants from Church Two spoke about a continued engagement with contemplative life that was deepening over time, characterized by experiences of connection with God, grounding or centering experiences, and transformed lives resulting in action. Each of these themes showed up in three out of eight interviews. The most common theme, though, was that of engagement with a regular personal contemplative practice outside of communal events. Five of the eight interviewed spoke about their private practice, with one participant who said, “I

²⁶⁵ Participant D, interview by author, via Zoom, September 6, 2024.

²⁶⁶ Participant D, interview by author, via Zoom, September 6, 2024.

meditate a lot on my own.”²⁶⁷ Another described her daily practice as a “25-minute morning sit in solitude at home and as often as it occurs to me throughout every day.”²⁶⁸

Participants spoke of being sustained by an increasing awareness of the divine presence in their daily lives. One individual described contemplative practice as a means of communication with God, saying, “It’s that sense of a connection to this greater energy outside of yourself. And for me, it was God.”²⁶⁹ Alongside experiences of connection, participants described contemplative life as a stabilizing force in their spiritual lives. One stated, “That is the Christ in you – who you are. And as distracted and as mental as I can get, I also feel there are moments when I know that I know that I know.”²⁷⁰ The centering effect extended beyond the individual, influencing how participants said they engaged with the world. As one noted, “We need to move from looking at everything that isn’t human as objects to seeing them as sacred subjects. And how do you get there if you don’t have a contemplative grounding?”²⁷¹ This flowed into the way participants spoke about contemplative practice as shaping their engagement with other people in the world, as an impetus to social and environmental action. One participant explained, “There’s an awareness and involvement here around care for the planet. We might be able to draw the line from contemplative life to this because it nourishes and sustains vocation.”²⁷²

²⁶⁷ Participant H, interview by author in person, May 1, 2024.

²⁶⁸ Participant I, interviewed by author in person, May 5, 2024.

²⁶⁹ Participant E, interview by author in person, May 1, 2024.

²⁷⁰ Participant F, interview by author in person, May 2, 2024.

²⁷¹ Participant G, interview by author in person, May 5, 2024.

²⁷² Participant K, interview by author in person, May 2, 2024.

Research Findings: Church Three

A Snapshot of Church Three

Church Three is a small church in a rural area in the southern United States. Contemplative services are offered in person weekly through a Centering Prayer group, online through daily Morning Prayer services, and monthly through a choral Compline service. One participant noted that the services at Church Three are “grounded in prayer, which some people find easier without words or more meaningful without words. And that’s the contemplative nature of it.”²⁷³ The researcher attended the Morning Prayer and Compline services online through streaming on the church’s Facebook page.

The Morning Prayer service was led by a layperson who filmed from their home. People who joined the service interacted with the leader and each other through the comments section, adding their prayers in this way. When the researcher visited the recording three days later, the service had been viewed one hundred and twenty times. The Compline service was streamed online and filmed live in the church. A bulletin is offered to those attending so they can follow along at home. The service opened in silence for about five minutes, and then the choir, comprised of seven singers and one leader, entered the space in silence. The space itself was utilized in such a way as to create a reflective atmosphere, with the altar covered in candles and the sanctuary dimly lit. The choir sang the service and exited the space in silence once it was over. Within one week of the service, one hundred and sixty-eight people had viewed the recording on Facebook.

²⁷³ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

Getting Engaged

One unique aspect of Church Three's contemplative practice is that regular offerings are held online through live streaming on Facebook, while there is also a weekly Centering Prayer practice in person. While the medium of the practice may be different, similar themes around engagement arose in the interviews. A leader's influence was the strongest component shaping engagement with contemplative life. One participant reflected that the only training in contemplative practice he'd ever received was the guidance from²⁷⁴ his church leader. He also noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person worship was not possible, the role of spiritual leadership was significant, and connection to the church online deepened his involvement, saying a leader "offered all the, you know, services and everything through Facebook. And it was really kind of cool to fall in love with the church without being at the church. And she drew me in."²⁷⁵ Beyond being guided by leadership, a longing for something more in their spiritual lives led them to seek out contemplative practice, naming spiritual hunger as a factor in getting engaged. One participant described an experience of being on a contemplative retreat as an experience that awaked her to the reality of that spiritual hunger, saying it "really opened my eyes to the community, the focus of prayer, and just so many things that I was thirsting for."²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

²⁷⁵ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

²⁷⁶ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

Key Components

The key components of contemplative life at Church Three that emerged in the interviews were the importance of groups and communal practice, virtual practice, the liturgy, and the influence of contemplative teachers. Both the church leadership and the practice participants spoke about the importance of the liturgy in creating space for contemplative practice. The prayers of the Episcopal Church were seen as inherently contemplative, with one participant reflecting that “through the structure and the prayers that have been prayed for a long, long time, there’s space for God in a different way.”²⁷⁷ The practices, including Morning Prayer and Compline, both specific liturgies in the *BCP*, were made more contemplative in nature by intentionally designed elements such as adding bells and additional time for silence.

Communal practice, both in person and virtually, provided support for participants. One person described how practicing in a group helped manage distractions, saying, “I find Centering Prayer most effective for me in terms of taking care of my monkey mind when I have other people in the room and the energy that other people provide. I’m not good at it by myself.”²⁷⁸ Outside teachers also contributed to engagement with contemplative practice. Some participants sought out teachers on their own, and others noted that the leadership of the church engaged other teachers to guide them in their practice together. One participant noted that her interest was sparked when “Some people came to the church and gave a talk. They were representing self-realization fellowship,” and noted she continues to learn from that group’s online teachings.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁷⁸ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁷⁹ Participant A, interview by author, via Zoom, August 2, 2024.

Practices

A diversity of contemplative practices was mentioned by the small number of interview participants, seven different practices in total. The most often engaged practice was Centering Prayer, which was supported by a weekly group practice together in person. Silence was the next most mentioned aspect of contemplative practice, which was met with positive reception. The church leader noted, “I never get any pushback when I add silence into the services.”²⁸⁰ One participant was introduced to contemplative practice through Eastern traditions, which she still regularly practiced. Another named excitement about a planned pilgrimage to a notable location in the Christian contemplative tradition. Finally, the arts played a significant role in the community’s contemplative engagement. The church hosted a Celtic spirituality event that incorporated artistic elements, and a participant mentioned an ongoing iconography practice: “Yes, we do iconography. This fall will be our third workshop.”²⁸¹

Challenges

The challenges that were named for deeper engagement with contemplative life were different for the participants than for the church leader, reflecting the difference between personal and communal challenges. A participants noted a persistent challenge in finding time and commitment to engage in contemplative practice consistently, saying “I don't devote the same amount of time to it I used to.”²⁸² They cited personal distractions, such as grief and life transitions, as well as naming the demands of busy lives as obstacles, such as when Participant B said, “There's just a lot in my life, so I want to sit and do this, but then there were the recent

²⁸⁰ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁸¹ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁸² Participant A, interview by author, via Zoom, August 2, 2024.

deaths of our parents and handling estates and trust in lawyers.”²⁸³ The church leader named the lack of resources and support as a small church: “Maybe something like a brochure or materials that would describe a wide range of contemplative practices that we could explore, and that might make a good Sunday school class.”²⁸⁴ Another challenge she noted was the recognition that contemplative practices are not well understood and need more definition and teaching. She noted, “I think a lot of people are doing it and not knowing what they’re doing.”²⁸⁵

Growth

The most common experiences of growth outlined by interview participants occurred through feelings of connection with God and the experience of contemplative practice, grounding or centering participants, which were named by all three participants. One participant described contemplative prayer as a time to feel more connected to God and self, saying, “When I get there, I feel like it’s more of my true self, more of what God wants me to be, more of opening up my inner self to be guided instead of me being in charge of myself. It’s knowing God is always there to guide me, but I don’t consciously think that way. I just, I know that when I do the prayer, Centering Prayer, I feel more of an opening up in my mind and my thoughts towards the spiritual rather than worldly.”²⁸⁶ Several other mentions were made of tangible results from contemplative practice that sustained and grew their involvement, such as greater patience, the desire to serve others, sustaining peace, and healing from anxiety.

²⁸³ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

²⁸⁴ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁸⁵ Participant C, interview by author, via Zoom, May 16, 2024.

²⁸⁶ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

Emerging Themes

While distinct pictures of engagement with contemplative practice arose from the three research sites, commonalities emerged when looking at the highest-frequency codes across all interviews. Several core themes emerged in each category that illustrate the common experiences of participants engaging in contemplative practice across different church cultures. These themes reflect the common motivations, structures, challenges, and impacts of contemplative life across different communities. The research results are indicated in the following emerging themes, showing the number of times a code appeared across all interviews. Chapter Five will provide more insight into conclusions from these themes.

The Role of Leadership in Invitation and Formation

Leadership emerged as playing a central role in engaging individuals in contemplative practice. The influence of leaders (17 code occurrences) was the most frequently cited factor in getting engaged, often with a direct invitation from a leader (7) or mention of the influence of a leader (10). Many participants expressed a spiritual hunger (13), leading to a realization that there was something they had been missing in Christian spirituality: Why didn't I know this before? (13). While people may be led by their interest and desire for more spiritual experience, this theme suggests that strong, spiritually grounded leadership is essential to introducing and sustaining contemplative engagement.

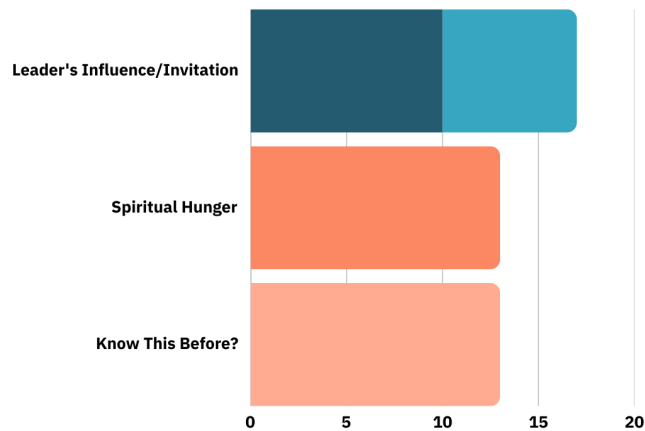


Figure 8. Emerging themes in the getting engaged category

Liturgical and Communal Structures as Key Components

The highest frequency code in the Key Components category was liturgy (28), indicating a need for structured worship and sacred rhythms to provide a space for contemplative engagement. Beyond common worship, people frequently indicated the need for mentorship and guidance in deepening their engagement with contemplative life. Contemplative teachers (20) and spiritual direction (14) were commonly cited as essential to growing in the understanding and the practice of contemplative life. Alongside guidance, support of the community was a common need. Group practice (19) and community (13) were named frequently, suggesting that while personal practice is important, contemplative life is deeply shaped by collective participation.

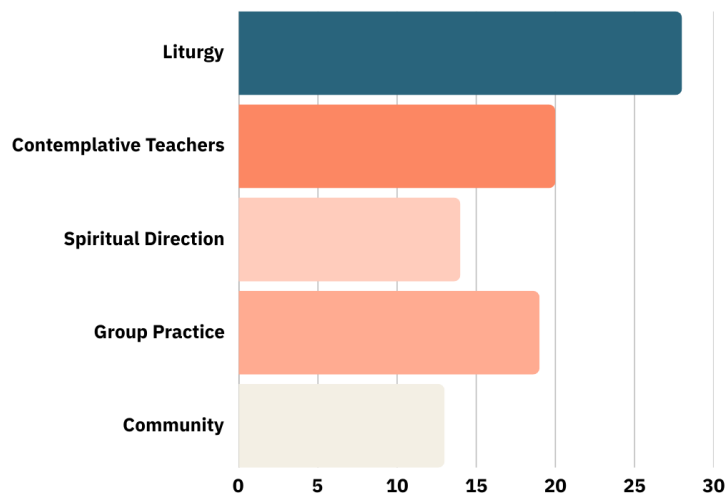


Figure 9. Emerging themes in the key components category

The Importance of Silence and Stillness

In terms of practices, the most frequently cited were Centering Prayer (14) and its companion code, sit (7). These were followed by silence (11) and Lectio Divina (8). These codes reflect a strong inclination toward practices that emphasize silence and stillness, as well as a focus on practices with deep roots in the Christian contemplative tradition. However, nature (6) and Eastern-influenced practices (9) were also highly cited, highlighting how engagement extends beyond traditional Christian frameworks, drawing from broader contemplative traditions.

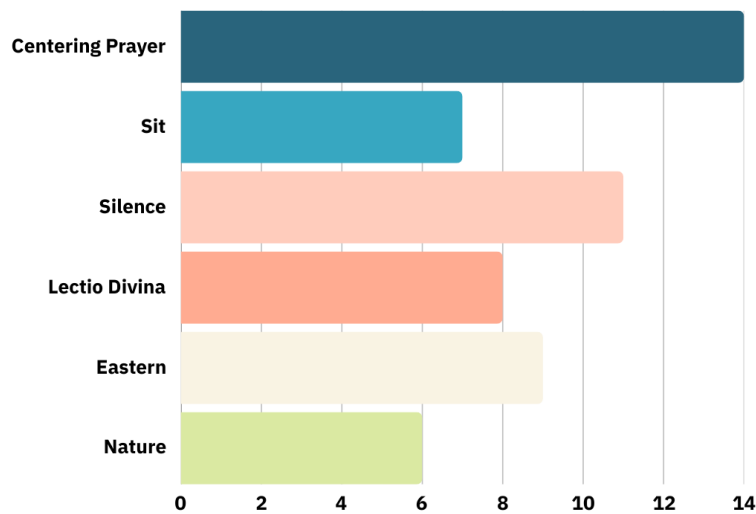


Figure 10. Emerging themes in the practices category

The Tension Between Desire and Commitment

The most frequently cited challenges were time constraints (9), the need for community (9), and community struggles in defining contemplative life (8). These were followed by a lack of interest/understanding in the community (6) and distraction (6). While community and group practice emerged as a strong key component of growth, many participants seemed to face barriers to connecting to that community support. While people named being drawn to the contemplative life, a common theme was the personal struggle to commit, and the time needed to engage in personal and communal practice.

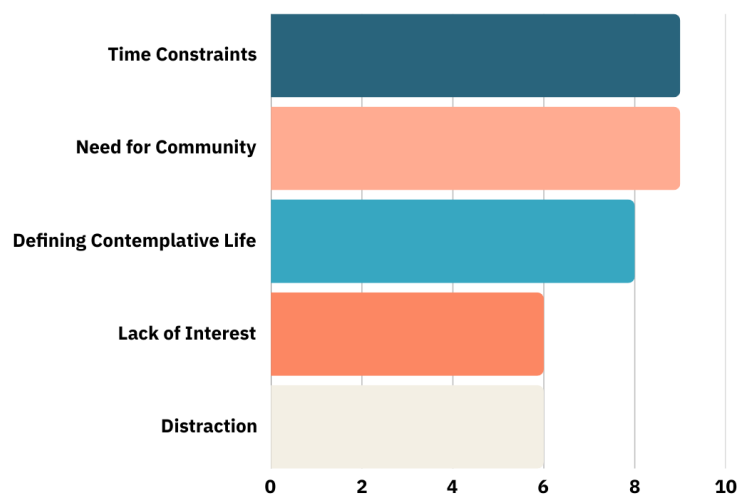


Figure 11. Emerging themes in the challenges category

Transformation for Sustaining Engagement

The most cited themes around growth and continued contemplative engagement were themes of transformation (15) and connection/experience (15). People cited being continually drawn to contemplative life by a desire to connect to God and a life change that resulted from their involvement. Similarly, grounding/centering (9) and sustaining peace (8) were common codes, highlighting the stabilizing effects of contemplative practice in one's inner life. The most common sustaining factors for people were the personal and spiritual changes they experienced, which continued to draw them to the practices that resulted in this inner growth. Life change/action (7) followed closely behind these results, suggesting that engagement in contemplation often leads to outward shifts in behavior and experience. These themes together point to the idea that contemplative practice is an inner journey but also inspires outward transformation.

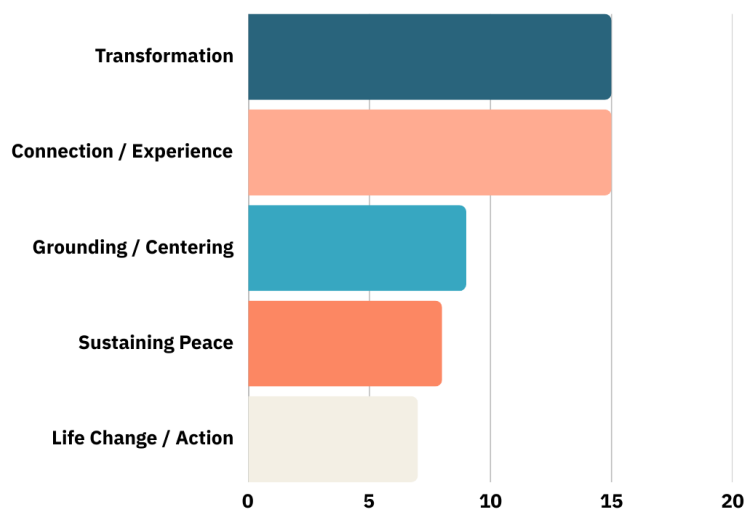


Figure 12. Emerging themes in the growth category

Summary

The questions motivating this project were always rooted in the local church, situating the lifelong movement of spiritual formation within the community. Addressing the observed lack of understanding and resources for transformation, the desire was to understand how to respond to a longing among people for deeper spiritual meaning and guidance. Previous research had revealed a need for a greater emphasis on silence and contemplation within Episcopal congregations, but it highlighted the gap in understanding how to make this shift. While there's no guaranteed formula for spiritual or congregational vitality, previous research suggests contemplative engagement to be a meaningful path and emphasizes the role of church leadership in modeling and fostering a vibrant, contemplative church culture.

The research presented in this chapter confirmed that leadership is a primary factor in drawing individuals into contemplative engagement. The data also revealed a tension between the desire for contemplative engagement and the challenges of sustaining it. Despite these obstacles, deepening spiritual engagement and life transformation kept people engaged in

contemplative practice for many years, and even many decades. The results showed that contemplative engagement takes different forms in various congregational contexts. Leaders will need to engage their context and culture in understanding the way forward into deeper engagement with contemplative life. Chapter Five will explore how these insights can best inform practices for fostering a culture of contemplation in Episcopal congregations.

Chapter Five: Research Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Spiritual formation is not intended to be pursued in isolation. As congregations gather for prayer, study, and practices that support personal and communal growth, the journey inward to God is connected to the journey outward to the world. The rhythms of gathering and sending, solitude and community, are integral to a life of spiritual transformation. If church leaders long to see greater engagement with contemplative practice among their people, this is best nurtured within the communal life of the Church under the guidance of spiritual leadership and through shared commitments and mutual encouragement.

The widespread spiritual inertia and low levels of spiritual practice among Episcopal parishioners create a number of challenges that hinder the vision of spiritually vibrant, contemplative communities. Many people remain at early stages of a spiritual growth continuum with limited ownership over their own spiritual journeys. Yet, a genuine spiritual hunger also exists, with many longing for a deeper connection with God, a fuller understanding of the sacraments, and an integration of faith in daily life. The contemplative life provides tools for a path forward, and yet clergy and laypeople alike struggle to know how to engage or lead others in the ancient tradition that has been pushed to the fringes of the church.

Proponents of a contemplative reformation argue that a paradigm shift is needed away from overreliance on programming toward a holistic view of church life as an opportunity for transformation. Entry points into contemplative practice and ongoing community support for practice are essential. But more than any particular practice, the literature and research point to the need for a shared commitment across the congregation to cultivate an intimate relationship with God. A deep attentiveness to the presence of God in worship, meetings, and daily rhythms supports this paradigm shift.

This movement requires leadership to both model the contemplative life and guide their people through it. However, the work cannot rest on the clergy alone. The research shows the need for spiritual mentors and companions. A lack of spiritual accompaniment leaves many people searching outside of the Church for direction, disconnecting them from their communities. Personal guidance and mentoring can help individuals move from communal practices to integrating transformative encounters with God into their personal lives. Creating a contemplative community involves both communal guidance and personal commitment. Exposure to various practices and traditions can give people language and imagination for their spiritual journey, even while affirming diverse paths of development within one community.

Finally, a contemplative community requires patience and flexibility. Not all members will be equally committed to a contemplative life, and not all practices will fit every person or every stage of life. Leaders must help their communities navigate this reality with grace and continually ground them in the idea that transformation is a journey with highs and lows and various stages. The work must be grounded in an ongoing invitation to intimacy with God, not an idea of productivity or perfection. In the current culture of busyness and in the face of spiritual complacency in churches, the contemplative tradition challenges people to slow down, listen,

and experience God. The challenge of a contemplative reformation lies in the slow work and commitment needed, the counter-cultural movement away from achievement to process, and the adaptability and contextualization required. The hope of a contemplative reformation lies in the possibility of cultivating lives of presence and transformation.

Summary

This study began with the intent to explore how contemplative Christian practices could be integrated into congregational life in a sustainable way. This chapter seeks to bring together the research question and identified problem with the insights gained from theological reflection, existing literature, and qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations from three research sites engaged in contemplative life. The data reveals both commonalities and variations in how individuals and congregations engage with contemplative life. This led to the conclusion that spiritual leadership, communal rhythms, accessible contemplative practices, and personal accompaniment serve as key components of contemplative engagement within congregations. The research findings support the literature's claims that transformation is gradual and relational. However, the research also reveals that congregation size, context, and the interests and gifts of a community influence how contemplative practices are adopted and sustained – factors not widely addressed in the literature.

The literature emphasized that spiritual formation involves more than individual disciplines and must be embedded in communal life. The research findings confirmed that contemplative life was nurtured within the rhythms of gathered practice, the guidance of leaders, and intentional relationships. While much of the literature on spiritual formation emphasized individual transformation, the findings described personal renewal as well as shifts in congregational culture, highlighting a more communal vision in line with early Christian

traditions. The research findings confirm challenges identified in the literature, such as spiritual complacency and echo warnings about the incompatibility between production-based culture and the slow nature of contemplation. Data suggests that in churches where intentional spaces were made and leaders modeled contemplative rhythms, congregations were able to move beyond these challenges. This study also expands upon existing literature by highlighting the role of virtual practices and the necessity of access to spiritual mentors and companions – factors not explored in depth in prior studies.

The data shows that while the path toward deepening contemplative practice is shaped by the particular context of each church, several key elements emerge as central to fostering a culture of contemplation. This chapter offers a grounded analysis of the ways local church culture shapes contemplative engagement. The study has shown how the path to contemplative engagement looks different depending on the size and context of a congregation. In smaller churches, relational intimacy and organic rhythms can create fertile ground for practice to take hold. In larger congregations, intentional structure and leadership can foster participation and sustain involvement.

In keeping with the structure of Chapter Four, the results were analyzed under the themes that emerged across the research data. Under each of these headings, applications for various church contexts were identified. The findings underscore the idea that transformation is possible, not because every church adopts the same model, but because leadership helps shape practices that resonate with their community's unique rhythms, challenges, and opportunities. The hope is that churches will be able to see some of their own community dynamics within these contexts and glean insight into what could help their own communities slow down, listen deeply, and experience the ongoing transformation of a life of faith.

Key Elements for Building a Contemplative Orientation in the Church

The review of the research around key elements for building a contemplative orientation in the church suggests that leadership, communal structures, and continuing guidance and accompaniment play decisive roles in introducing and sustaining contemplative practice. The interview participants and literature revealed that the invitation of a clergy member, spiritual director, or mentor was a key entry point into contemplative life, underscoring the literature's emphasis on the necessity of a leader who embodies contemplative life and actively guides others into it. While the literature largely focused on the leader's role, the interviews also highlighted that, beyond church leadership, access to outside contemplative teachers and spiritual direction were key factors for growth. Most of the literature on spiritual formation overlooked the need for this ongoing accompaniment, except for literature focused on Celtic spirituality or spiritual direction.

The research bore out that liturgical rhythms and communal structures provide the necessary prerequisite for engagement. Churches that integrated contemplative elements into their worship services, small groups, or educational offerings provided more natural pathways for members to explore and sustain contemplative practice. The most influential elements named were aspects of the liturgy, with a focus on the weekly gatherings of the community, and the support of meeting together as a group for practice. An element not focused on in the literature that emerged from the interviews was the priority of accessibility through virtual practice. The most frequently named spiritual practices of Centering Prayer, silence, Lectio Divina, and retreats highlight the importance of fostering spaces for stillness and attentiveness. These findings suggest that an Episcopal congregation seeking to cultivate contemplative life should focus on integrating these practices into both personal and communal settings.

Challenges to a Contemplative Church Culture and How They Are Overcome

The majority of challenges to spiritual formation and congregational vitality addressed in the literature centered around a lack of understanding of spiritual formation, resistance of the people in the pews to engage with personal faith practices, a lack of guidance from leadership, and the need for a culture shift from a program-driven culture. The research confirmed a greater need for understanding what contemplative life means personally and communally. What seems to be needed is normalizing contemplation within the broader church culture, whether through sermons, liturgical integration, or church leadership modeling the practice.

However, the interview participants expressed a desire to deepen their engagement but struggled with the personal and communal commitment required to sustain it, citing time constraints, distraction, and a lack of community as personal challenges. This could be because these churches have already overcome many of the challenges addressed in the literature, as they are already in the process of building a contemplative orientation in their congregations. The challenges in the beginning stages and the growth stages are not the same. These congregations with established contemplative programming showed how to effectively address the initial barriers to understanding contemplative practice as a means of spiritual formation. They did so through intentional community formation, creating spaces where contemplative life was both taught and modeled. The needs for sustaining engagement that emerged centered around the need for community and accompaniment. The churches that provided structured opportunities for group practice, mentorship, and accessible resources were more likely to sustain engagement.

Resources Needed for Progress in Contemplative Engagement

The findings of this study highlight that moving toward greater contemplative engagement requires a combination of structural, relational, and spiritual resources. For congregations to deepen contemplative engagement, they need resources to intentionally strengthen their spiritual leadership, to build community structures and accessible entry points to and teaching around contemplative practice, and to create models of ongoing spiritual companionship. Leaders need to be willing to invest in resources that foster sustainable structures for spiritual formation and integrate contemplative practices into the ongoing rhythms of community life.

The research confirmed that building a contemplative culture depends on strong leadership. Therefore, pastors and lay leaders need resources to be trained and equipped, not only in the theology of contemplation but also in the practical skills required to model and teach these practices. Educational resources then extend beyond the leadership to the congregation. Teaching on spiritual formation, contemplative traditions, and practices can be woven into the educational life of the congregation. Offering resources such as books, classes, and workshops can introduce and sustain contemplative life. Since the physical and liturgical environments are key to creating sacred space to support stillness and attentiveness to God, leaders can utilize the resources of physical buildings, nature, and liturgical resources.

Individual contemplative practice is strengthened by shared experience. Of the twelve research participants who stated they have a daily personal contemplative practice, all participated in at least weekly communal practice, with 67% stating they are involved multiple times a week in contemplative programming. Some of the communal opportunities, such as small groups and retreats centered on contemplative prayer and reflection, were offered in the

church, and some were with outside groups or leaders. Church leaders can connect with existing organizations and resources to build the communal opportunities and spiritual companionship needed. Providing access to spiritual directors, contemplative teachers, and mentors can be done by building up lay leaders within the community for these roles or connecting with outside resources.

Best Practices: Leadership

Research Insights

When people's spiritual hunger met with an invitation into contemplative life, many had the sense of discovering something they wished they had known before, something that they had gone outside of the Church to attempt to discover. While leadership emerged as the most influential factor in churchgoers getting and staying engaged in contemplative practice, it is key that the leader is both a facilitator and a participant in the contemplative life. The call is first for the leader to enter a contemplative orientation, then to invite others along into this formation, learning to live and lead from their "spiritual heart."²⁸⁷ The findings confirmed the assertion that the life of the church mirrors the life of the leaders, that "if the pastor and leaders are passionate about experiencing God, the church will be, too."²⁸⁸ Church leaders who lead with vulnerability and authenticity will model a life of ongoing formation for their people, like one church leader who noted using his platform as a leader to expose "[his] own vulnerabilities, [his] own interior struggles, [his] own interior triumphs."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling*, 29.

²⁸⁸ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 32.

²⁸⁹ Participant D, interview by author, via Zoom, September 6, 2024.

Beyond modeling a deeply contemplative life, leaders need to work from a vision of contemplative teaching and practice, developing intentionality in education and programming that will invite people into practice and nurture ongoing spiritual formation. The research bears out the need for leadership to be involved throughout their people's spiritual formation journeys. While those in the early stages of growth need help developing a relationship with Christ, those moving from growing to deepening stages require assistance in making spiritual growth a priority, and those in the deeper stages of formation can be helped by church leaders who share their own struggles in formation. People of all stages of growth want guidance in developing a prayer life, engagement with scripture, and knowing Christ at a deep level.²⁹⁰ Finally, leaders who live and lead from a contemplative orientation must be intentional about building up contemplative leaders. The reality of demands on church leaders, the understanding of the Church as a body with many capable parts, and the responsibility to nurture the leadership capabilities of the laity necessitate structures to empower lay leaders to carry on the mission of sustaining contemplative engagement in the congregation.

Contextualization for Churches

The strengths of the leadership at each of the research sites exhibited can help churches of various sizes and contexts learn how they can engage their people in contemplative life. For small congregations, leadership development can lean heavily into relational intimacy; the leader's own contemplative life is particularly visible and influential. Here, the pastor or spiritual leader can model practices such as silence and Lectio Divina within worship services, vestry meetings, and personal interactions. Small churches can foster organic mentorship models where

²⁹⁰ Sidebotham, *Footsteps*, 30.

more spiritually mature members informally accompany others in their journey, creating a web of spiritual friendships. A key strategy for small churches is to start small and integrate slowly, allowing trust and depth to build naturally. Connection with outside organizations, such as Contemplative Outreach, and invitations to engage with existing contemplative teachers, retreats, and resources can bolster the engagement and breadth of knowledge a single leader can offer.

A medium-sized church or one with some established lay leaders or access to volunteer clergy will want to additionally focus on the formation of those leaders to help guide their contemplative offerings. Clergy can identify and invest in a small cohort of lay leaders who demonstrate openness to contemplative practices. Training these individuals in both theological understanding and practical facilitation skills creates a multiplying effect, allowing contemplative rhythms to take root in multiple areas of congregational life.

Larger churches with access to more resources will need intentional systems and ongoing visible commitment from senior leaders. Congregants in larger churches can feel disconnected from pastoral leadership, and loneliness can be more pronounced. Regular sermon series or teachings, visible participation by clergy in contemplative gatherings, and the establishment of ministries explicitly focused on spiritual formation are critical. Additionally, large churches should partner with external contemplative teachers and organizations to provide depth and breadth of spiritual accompaniment. Offering spiritual direction cohorts, silent retreats, and contemplative groups internally and connecting people to external resources for variety, depth, and next steps can create multiple entry points and growth opportunities for a diverse community. Digital offerings such as online contemplative groups or recorded meditations can also extend the reach of leadership influence.

Best Practices: Liturgical and Communal Structures

Research Insights

While liturgy is often thought of as the structure of weekly worship services, it is important to remember that it encompasses all the patterns of activity people use to enter into a deeper relationship with God and each other in the Church. It is truly the work of the people.²⁹¹ The research pointed to the importance of contemplative orientation in creating sacred spaces in structured worship, but also in educational offerings, meetings, mentoring and accompanying relationships, leadership, and management of conflict—virtually all areas of life together. Although the breadth of these areas may initially seem overwhelming, it also reveals a wide range of entry points where churches can begin with small, intentional practices that, over time, cultivate meaningful cultural transformation.

Suggested small changes are to initiate intentional periods of silence in worship, such as before the confession, after the sermon, and during communion. Silence and prayer can be included in meetings, before community decisions, and in other administrative tasks. Beginning with a few simple, corporate disciplines, like beginning a service in prayerful silence or incorporating meditation on the scripture, can ease into new rhythms gradually. The essence of any shift is focused attention on God across community life together.²⁹² The physical environment also plays a vital role in forming a communal sacred space. Music, lighting, artwork, seating arrangements, and natural elements can all communicate theological meaning and create atmosphere. The movement of chairs into an intimate circle, the addition of candles or icons, or a meditative walk can allow for curiosity and experimentation in the liturgy.

²⁹¹ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 133-134.

²⁹² Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling*, 76-77.

As groups emerge and develop for ongoing engagement and growth, it is important to have multiple entry points for engagement to continue to invite new people and new practices. One leader suggested low barrier entry points like book studies and invitations to hear guest speakers, as well as flexible meeting times and methods of engagement, such as the availability of streaming services and online groups.²⁹³ Other groups can be structured around communal practice, like Centering Prayer and meditation groups, classes that explore different practices like icon painting, labyrinth walking, artwork, journaling, and other practices that emerge from the interests of the congregation. Group structures not only address the loneliness and the need for authentic community, but they also meet the need for accountability and accompaniment.

Contextualization for Churches

Smaller churches, and churches just beginning to shift toward a contemplative orientation, can focus on integrating contemplative elements into existing meetings and worship services. Leaders can introduce small group prayer practices, book groups, or studies on contemplative themes, fostering conversation in familiar formats. They can leverage digital resources like streamed prayer services, spiritual apps, and beginning Zoom prayer times that can supplement their limited resources. Developing lay-led groups can create a sense of shared ownership with those committed to contemplative life. As interest grows, they can introduce simple daily offices or Taizé-style gatherings,²⁹⁴ which require minimal liturgical complexity but offer rich contemplative depth.

²⁹³ Participant M, interview by author, in-person, April 14, 2024.

²⁹⁴ A Taizé-style worship service is a contemplative, ecumenical gathering that features simple, repeated chants, scripture readings, silent meditation, and prayer. There is no sermon or preaching. Rooted in the practices of the Taizé monastic community in France, this style of worship invites stillness, reflection, and unity across Christian traditions.

Churches with slightly more resources can develop lay-led groups and begin to build regular contemplative services like Celtic services, the daily offices, and group meditation. They can invite guest contemplative teachers for occasional workshops, organize retreat days, or coordinate pilgrimages to sacred sites. Such shared experiences not only educate but also build communal identity as the congregation grows together. Larger churches with established, dedicated contemplative ministries can explore workshops and multi-day retreats. Providing structured training for leadership and spiritual direction can continue to build a contemplative identity. Larger ministries may have more resources, but this brings additional complexity, in which practices can become stale. Continual feedback and adaptation are necessary, with vision casting and discussion bringing new ideas and new people into the fold. Across all contexts, the essential task is to keep the focus on communal attention to God, both in set-apart sacred times and in the ordinary rhythms of life together.

Best Practices: Silence and Stillness

Research Insights

The research of this study is unique from other studies that focus on churches engaging with contemplative traditions outside the Christian context, perhaps integrating Eastern forms of meditation or practices into their contemplative life. While some interview participants did engage in Eastern practices and a variety of practices and influences made up the church programs, all three research sites uniquely situated their contemplative life in the Christian contemplative tradition, including monastic, mystical, and Celtic influences. Therefore, it is not surprising that the primary practices that emerged from the interviews centered on silence and stillness, including Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina. Amid the dislocation and “homelessness” often associated with postmodern life, many individuals and churches are

finding grounding, identity, and belonging within the deeply rooted sacramental and contemplative life of the Christian tradition.²⁹⁵ A focus on interior, still practices does not exclude active contemplative expressions or engagement with broader traditions, which is an important consideration addressed in the following section. Yet, rooting individuals and communities in the long stream of Christian mysticism strengthens their formation and offers a durable framework for spiritual growth. Teaching about Christian contemplative prayer can emphasize the experience of God's mystery, beauty, and presence, awakening receptivity. The introduction of quiet days, especially around seasons of preparation such as Lent and Advent, can be meaningful inroads, as well as utilizing contemplative daily offices, Centering Prayer, or other meditative sessions. Leaders can physically mark the sacredness of stillness by setting apart chapels, prayer corners, meditation rooms, gardens, or labyrinths as spaces that invite prayerful pause and attentiveness.

Contextualization for Churches

Churches of all sizes and contexts can create quiet spaces within existing worship settings and introduce simple silent prayer practices and guided meditations. Simple adaptations in worship, such as introducing short periods of silent prayer or offering guided meditation moments, can gently form congregations toward contemplative openness. While churches with more staff or resources can offer more contemplative gatherings, host teachers, and plan retreats, all can partner with organizations and retreat centers that have these offerings. Dedicated spaces for contemplation can vary widely; larger churches may build permanent chapels or prayer gardens, but even small congregations can create temporary sacred spaces. Churches can borrow

²⁹⁵ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 155.

or rent a canvas labyrinth for special events. One research site transformed its worship space into a contemplative setting once a quarter for a Choral Compline service, while others utilized outdoor gardens as places for silent prayer. With creativity and flexibility, a church of any size or context can create physical spaces and educational opportunities for stillness to flourish as a foundational spiritual practice.

Best Practices: Navigating the Tensions Between Desire and Commitment

Research Insights

While participants in this study were drawn into contemplative practice by a deep sense of spiritual hunger and a desire for connection with God, they also encountered common obstacles such as distraction, time constraints, and a lack of communal support. Although the universal human experience of struggling to act on one's intentions is inevitable among individuals and congregations, the research identifies tools that can help practitioners navigate these challenges. Once people have embarked on a spiritual journey, continuing to move them toward ownership of their formation, moving them from a consumer model and into deeper connection with community, proves critical for sustaining engagement and growth.²⁹⁶ The tension between desire, commitment, and the essential role of community is illustrated in one participant's statement: "I find I get a great deal of peace and spiritual nourishment from contemplative prayer. It is more challenging for me to carve time in the day at home, a discipline I need to work on because I know the benefits I receive from it. I have tried to stay committed to the weekly church contemplative prayer."²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Sidebotham, "More Lessons from Unlikely Sources," 503.

²⁹⁷ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

While the essential role of accompaniment through individual spiritual direction and communal encouragement is addressed elsewhere in the study, an additional insight emerged in the research related to the movement from initial curiosity to sustained commitment. The interviews revealed that exposure to a diversity of worship styles and contemplative practices supports the transition from curiosity to commitment. Encouraging experimentation, curiosity, and discernment allows individuals to discover practices that resonate personally, acknowledging that different seasons of life and stages of growth may call for different forms of engagement. Recognizing that individuals encounter God in varied ways and that different practices may serve them differently across seasons of life and stages of growth suggests that intentional contextualization is essential for fostering spiritual formation over the long term.²⁹⁸

Rooting participants in a foundational understanding of silence and stillness anchors them in the Christian contemplative tradition. However, as the research and broader literature increasingly emphasize, sustaining growth over time requires innovation and contextualization, attending to individual spiritual temperaments and the cultural and historical location of each congregation. Diana Butler Bass learned by studying thriving practicing congregations that, “As individuals, we can broaden our spiritual life by understanding and experimenting with themes that are not our ‘home base,’ learning at least an understanding and appreciation of each one. As a community, we can recognize that not everyone will be at the same place on the circle as we are, but the perspective and insight of others contribute to a more holistic vision.”²⁹⁹

Traditional contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer have long served as a foundation in Episcopal congregations, yet the research highlights the need to incorporate a

²⁹⁸ Thomas, *Sacred Pathways*, 16-18.

²⁹⁹ Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 134.

range of contemplative expressions, including embodied practices like mindful walking, journaling, gardening, or movement like tai chi. By offering multiple points of entry into contemplative life, congregations can meet individuals where they are and foster deeper participation across a wider range of spiritual temperaments and life stages. Offering tools that integrate contemplative awareness into natural daily interests fosters personalization of practice and deeper engagement. Without intentional guidance, individuals tend to gravitate toward practices that align with their natural preferences and do not understand the variety of practices available to them, potentially neglecting other dimensions of their spiritual growth.³⁰⁰

Contextualization for Churches

The research yielded findings that, just as individuals have various spiritual temperaments and styles, congregations exhibit different inclinations, which leaders can discern and thoughtfully engage. In two of the three research sites, only one participant named nature as central to their practice. In contrast, in the third congregation, where ecological concern was already a community priority, five participants identified nature as integral to their contemplative life. Leadership responded to this community passion by creating programming that intentionally engaged the natural environment and ecological concerns. Similarly, while art was not named by any participants at the small church, the medium and large church sites that intentionally incorporated music, poetry, and visual art into their programming saw participants recognize art as a pathway to contemplative engagement.

These findings suggest that deliberate emphasis on various avenues of spiritual practice can expand understanding of how God might be encountered. Sustaining a life of contemplative

³⁰⁰ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 69.

practice within congregations requires more than an initial desire or isolated practices. It demands an intentional cultivation of diversity in spiritual practice, encouragement of curiosity and discernment, and a commitment to communal structures that both challenge and support individual growth. Through such integrated efforts, congregations can foster a spiritual ecosystem where individuals move from mere interest to enduring commitment in their journey toward deeper union with God. Contextualization for churches of differing sizes and interests may look like smaller churches offering online resources and introducing various contemplative practices through studies, workshops, and quiet days. Congregations with more resources can foster deeper connection through the development of accountability partnerships and small groups, offering contemplative study options on-site or through asynchronous or hybrid means that meet diverse scheduling needs. Across all contexts, congregations can connect people to accessible tools such as short daily meditations, mobile apps, and contemplative tools that fit easily into the rhythms of daily life.

Best Practices: Transformation for Sustaining Engagement

Research Insights

Understanding what sustained people on their journey of faith is a bit like trying to understand an encounter with God in a moment of contemplation. The only data one can go by is the words of someone's testimony. The experience is varied and personal, and it is the intimate things of the inner life that carry a person through trials and grief. The interviews contained the intimate stories of nineteen people who spoke of how contemplative practice brought healing in times of anxiety, took them on a journey with God, restored lost faith, built new connections to God, and built community with like-minded souls. As one participant recalled the journey into communal practice of Centering Prayer, he said, "I'm just now getting into it, and it being

offered at the church, I want to take advantage of it and feel like it's the next step or maybe a beginning step in my spiritual journey.”³⁰¹ Connection to God and life transformation were primary motivators that people named that gave them motivation to continue exploring or deepen their engagement with contemplative practice. Whether the connection to church led to deepened practice or living a contemplative life led to seeking deeper community, the two remained closely linked. Every interview participant, except one who cited post-pandemic challenges, attended worship weekly. The challenges of creating committed contemplative communities mirror those of any Christian community. Faithfulness to private practice and commitment to shared life are perennial struggles. Churches that delve more deeply into contemplative life must navigate the added complexity that some people will engage consistently, while others will need the freedom to participate sporadically.³⁰²

The movement from silence alone toward service, community, and other active forms of spiritual expression was named by participants as a consistent motivator to engage faith from a contemplative orientation. People spoke of the essential intermingling of contemplation and action, that each of these spiritual disciplines feeds the other. Transformation in silent prayer stirred participants to active service, and the difficulties of living faithfully in a complicated world drew them back to spaces of quiet communion with God. Contemplative engagement was consistently framed as an ongoing process of spiritual renewal. To sustain engagement, participants described the importance of deepening through intentional seasons: learning new practices, retreats, pilgrimages, and collective discernment. Churches that built structures to support these rhythms, such as a contemplative catechesis or a shared rule of life, gave their

³⁰¹ Participant B, interview by author, via Zoom, August 7, 2024.

³⁰² Bushlack, “Contemplative Practices,” in *Contemplation and Community*, 35.

members anchors for ongoing evaluation, spiritual growth, and accountability. One church spoke readily about contemplative discipleship, and like any life of discipleship, it is most vibrant when accompanied by structures that support it.

To sustain transformation over time, churches can adopt practices that invite communities to define and refine their collective understanding of contemplative life. Discernment tools like listening circles, weekly conversations designed to foster relationships and find direction, can gather people to use an imagining mindset and bring a contemplative mindset into how life together can be flexible and change as the community's needs change.³⁰³ For churches that need more sustained cultural shifts or accompaniment, tools like the Appreciative Inquiry Process or other group discernment models were named as tools that provide spaces for congregations to reflect together, name their shared experiences, and envision their path forward.³⁰⁴

Leadership development naturally emerged in these communities. Those invited to share their experience often grew through the act of teaching. The beauty of contemplative life in community is that experience is shared, and passion is caught. Personal accompaniment through spiritual direction and mentorship has been mentioned previously, and this personal ministry is essential to sustained and growing practice.³⁰⁵ Without a context of communal life and spiritual struggle, contemplative practices risk becoming isolated rather than transformative. However, programs of accompaniment need not always be formal, but providing people to offer witness of their transformed lives can be a highly effective way of forming both the speaker and the

³⁰³ Higginbotham, *The Heart of a Calling*, 8-13.

³⁰⁴ Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to organizational and community change that focuses on identifying and building on what works well. This was mentioned in interviews as a tool used to cast vision for the direction of the church as a contemplative community. The process typically follows the four phases of Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny to inspire positive action and co-create a desired future for an organization.

³⁰⁵ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 194-199.

hearer.³⁰⁶ The literature confirms the power of allowing people to speak of the change God has made in their lives to transform an organization into a living organism. When people testify to God's work, communities themselves are renewed and reanimated. Regular communal conversations about God's activity are vital signs of a living, growing church.³⁰⁷

Contextualization for Churches

In small congregations, cultivating a culture of storytelling is a natural extension of the relational intimacy that already exists. Leaders can create space during worship services or small gatherings for people to share experiences of challenges and personal transformation through contemplative practice. These practices demystify the contemplative life for others and weave a stronger communal identity around spiritual formation. Small churches can foster an environment of encouragement and hospitality by normalizing the sharing of spiritual journeys and honoring each person's voice. Introducing simple, adaptable practices, such as developing a shared rule of life or establishing monthly listening circles, can provide the communal anchors needed to sustain engagement without overwhelming limited resources. Rather than relying on clergy alone, small congregations can invite members to lead or co-lead short contemplative practices, allowing leadership to emerge organically from within the community. Congregations can utilize existing spiritual growth evaluation tools and resources, like those offered by RenewalWorks. By utilizing tools that evaluate the makeup of the church's spiritual maturity, surveys about interest in contemplative practice, and listening groups as mentioned previously, leaders can help assess a congregation's interest and readiness.

³⁰⁶ Duggan, "Parish as a Center for Forming a Spiritual People," 24.

³⁰⁷ Sidebotham, *Signs of Life*, 29-35.

Medium-sized churches can integrate testimonies of contemplative growth into teaching series, small group studies, or retreats, reinforcing a collective narrative of God's ongoing work. To foster deeper relationships and practice accountability, churches of this size can establish "spiritual companion" pairings or small groups committed to mutual accompaniment. Offering introductory workshops on community-identified contemplative practices or group discernment practices can create easy on-ramps into contemplative life for those at different stages of spiritual development. Seasonal rhythms of retreats or spiritual pilgrimages can further deepen engagement, providing intentional spaces for renewal and reflection.

In large congregations, formal structures become essential to sustaining contemplative engagement across a broader and more diverse community. Digital storytelling projects, including videos, blogs, or testimony libraries, can amplify the voices of those experiencing transformation, helping to foster connection across diverse ministry areas and life stages. Recognizing the need for ongoing support, large churches can develop networks of trained mentors, spiritual companions, or spiritual directors to walk alongside individuals on their contemplative journeys. To maintain a culture of discernment and responsiveness, leadership teams can integrate Appreciative Inquiry, listening circles, and seasonal communal discernment processes into the life of the congregation. Offering multiple invitations like beginner groups, intermediate workshops, and more advanced contemplative communities ensures that people at various stages of their faith journey have accessible pathways to enter into deeper formation.

A Contextual Approach to Contemplative Engagement

One of the most important realizations to emerge from the research is that not everyone in a congregation will be interested in contemplative practice, and the contemplative life of every community will vary. While some may never develop an interest in contemplative practices,

research in more than 60,000 churches in seventy countries has shown that developing an appreciation for spiritual styles outside one's personal preference can help people in a congregation better understand each other and help people grow spiritually. Interaction with a contemplative spirituality, though not someone's natural place of comfort, can complement their natural style of worshipping God.³⁰⁸

Effective spiritual formation acknowledges the reality of different stages of readiness and openness among individuals and communities. Some churches are at a stage where program-based offerings can introduce practices, while others are called to embody contemplative life more deeply within the fabric of the community itself. Both tradition and innovation are necessary tools for the journey. Further, discerning where a church is in its spiritual journey and where individual members are helping leaders shape an approach that is neither too advanced nor too elementary. Congregational leaders must continually ask: What stage is our church in? What stage are our people in?

Contextualization is essential. The research revealed how varied entry points, such as art, poetry, environmental engagement, and embodiment practices, can nurture a connection to God. Recognizing the unique spiritual "charisms" of a community, its particular gifts, inclinations, and hungers, allows leaders to guide individuals into a living contemplative tradition rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach. Different ages and life stages must also be considered; younger generations often seek contemplative paths that are deeply embodied and justice-oriented.³⁰⁹ Some congregations may find resonance with traditional Christian monastic practices

³⁰⁸ Christian Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Your Spirituality* (Carol Stream, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 2009), 77.

³⁰⁹ Adam Bucko and Rory McEntee, *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 20-30.

such as those in the *BCP* or embodied in Celtic spirituality, while others may benefit from a more ecumenical or even interfaith approach to spiritual practice. The key is to offer rootedness without rigidity, honoring the diversity of ways God meets people.

Further Recommended Research

Several areas for future research could build upon the findings of this study and expand into areas where this research was limited by scope or by the sample available to the researcher. One important area to explore would be the impact of age on engagement with contemplative practice. Based on the sample available for this study, due to the nature of the makeup of the research sites, all participants were at least thirty-six years of age. While outside the scope of this study, expanding the age range and focusing specifically on questions related to life experience could help determine whether different generational experiences affect openness to or engagement with contemplative spirituality.

The research uncovered a range of models for contemplative communities. Within the study, some research sites employed contemplative spirituality as one tool among many for spiritual formation, while another site developed its core identity around embodying a contemplative community. The broader literature similarly revealed additional models, including dispersed monastic communities, retreat house-based communities, and communities rooted in post-religious or inter-spiritual frameworks. Future studies could involve exploring the theological foundations, organizational structures, and practices that sustain these diverse models of contemplative life in, as well as examining their impact on individual and communal spiritual formation over time.

Additionally, research focusing on participants with lower initial interest in contemplative practices, or those previously resistant to contemplative spirituality before

participation who overcame resistance to find growth in contemplative life, could also offer valuable insights. Due to the nature of the sample available to the researcher, all participants of this study exhibited an initial interest or curiosity in contemplative practice, with none exhibiting an initial resistance to contemplative life. Studying those initially skeptical or resistant to contemplative practice might illuminate whether and how contemplative practices can foster transformation even among initially reluctant individuals and how churches can aid individuals in overcoming resistance to embrace contemplative life.

Conclusion

In a time when many find themselves spiritually restless, unsure how to grow beyond habitual patterns or shallow faith, the ancient paths of contemplative practice offer a way forward. Contemplation is not a retreat from the world but a deeper presence to it. It is the life Jesus lived, a life rooted in communion with the Father, animated by the Spirit, and poured out for the healing of others. Rowan Williams reminds the Church that “discipleship in the company of Jesus is a trinitarian mode of life, embedded in the relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: that is, it is a contemplative mode of life. Not in the sense that we should all become hermits, but we have to grow into a mature stillness, a poise and an openness to others and the world, so that it can also be a transformative mode of living in which the act of God can come through, so as to change ourselves, our immediate environment, our world.”³¹⁰ This is the vision that calls to the Church today: not a return to old forms for their own sake, but a recovery of the inner life that has always animated true Christian community.

³¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 17.

To cultivate a contemplative culture within congregations is to rekindle the heart of the Church. It is to trust that God is already at work, gently forming souls in love, and to shape common life so that people can encounter the living God not just at the margins of their lives, but at the very center. As the Church stands at a threshold, called to renew its witness in a rapidly changing world, recovering the lost contemplative life may be the key to its deepest renewal. This invitation is for every congregation willing to slow down, to listen, to make space for God in their common life. It is for leaders willing to model stillness and courage. A contemplative renewal offers a pathway toward spiritual maturity, communal vitality, and renewed mission.

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



Institutional Review Board

Research Proposal Recommendations

Principal Researcher: Nicole Walters

Proposed Research Title: Recovering the Contemplative Life: An Exploration of Congregational Engagement with Contemplative Practice

Dear Nicole:

Congratulations! Upon review of your research proposal and related materials, the Winebrenner Institutional Review Board has approved your research proposal indicating that you may begin to implement your research procedures according to the timeline established by you and your research advisor.

The attached document includes comments from Dr. Karen McGibbon and myself. These questions and suggestions in no way affect your permission to implement your research; rather, these notes are included to provide opportunities to edit your work, as needed.

Once again, congratulations and best wishes upon implementing your research. May God grant you His wisdom, knowledge, understanding, strength, and persistence as you carry out this work. In all, may He be praised and glorified.

Please contact me if you have any questions (iiames@winebrenner.edu).

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary S. Iames".

Dr. Mary Steiner Iames

Winebrenner Theological
Seminary Institutional
Review Board Chair

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form



Project Title: Recovering the Contemplative Life: An Exploration of Congregational Engagement with Contemplative Practice

Primary Researcher: Nicole Walters

Primary Advisor: Dr. David Barbee

Purpose of Research: This project will help foster deeper comprehension of contemplative practices that can increase spiritual growth and inner transformation amongst Episcopal laity. The purpose of the project will be to explore how leaders who want to guide their congregations into greater engagement in contemplative practice can be better equipped to do so. The research will center around churches that are embracing the ongoing journey of spiritual growth and the role that contemplative practice plays in a deepening relationship with God. This project will attempt to discover how these churches worked to cultivate a contemplative church culture. This research will attempt to discover where leaders are finding congregational resistance and how they are overcoming obstacles. It will explore where congregations are finding or lacking resources for this engagement and what they are finding to be key elements for building a contemplative spirit in the life of the church.

Description of Research Procedures:

How many research subjects will participate? 16-18

How will subjects be selected? As the sampling needs to be people involved in contemplative ministries to give their experience of these practices, the subjects will be suggested by staff or connected to the researcher through known involvement in church events. Interested people will fill out a screening survey with demographic data. The researcher will select participants based on this initial data to maximize diversity of data (varying age groups, levels of interest and experience in contemplative practice).

How will data be collected: The researcher will utilize a screening survey to gather demographic data on possible subjects. The research design will utilize interview questions. Interviews will be conducted at the research site (church) in a private setting. Interviews will be audio recorded.

Potential Risks of Participation & How Risks Will be Addressed:

- **Risks:** The researcher anticipates that interview subjects may encounter spiritual, emotional, or mental stress during the interview. Interview subjects may share details of a personal crisis, feelings of discomfort, or difficult life events. Staff will be subject to a higher level of risk. If a staff person makes a comment that differs from the opinions of senior leadership or the Episcopal church more broadly, they could be subject to economic or even legal risk.
- **Redress:** In order to address the aforementioned risks, steps to remove or minimize risks include: The researcher will ensure the interviews take place in a private setting with ample time for the subject to respond to the questions. The researcher will make sure the subject is comfortable with

the setting of the interview and understand the purpose of the interview. The subject will be reminded that the interview will be audio recorded and provided with information about how their data will be kept secure. The subject will be offered the opportunity to review the transcribed interview. The subjects will know they can leave the study at any time. Data, including scanned forms and interview recordings, will be kept in Dropbox, an encrypted cloud storage site that is password protected (only the researcher has this password).

Potential Benefits: Participants may feel satisfaction that others will benefit from knowledge gained from their personal experiences and a sense of joy in sharing positive emotional and spiritual experiences of God during the interview. Those interested in seeing congregations grow and individuals develop deeper experience of God and spiritual growth may find joy knowing they contributed to this process.

Society will benefit from the research conducted in this project through churches gaining understanding of how contemplation can aid the spiritual growth of their members. The project will help church leaders understand the growth needs of their members and the possible benefits of engaging contemplative practices for the personal growth of their members and, ultimately the spiritual vitality of their congregation. The research will hopefully yield better understanding of resources needed for church leaders and congregations to engage in contemplative practice and grow in spiritual formation.

Confidentiality of Data:

How will participant identities remain confidential?

Names will only appear on the forms the subject fills out and on the recording of the interview. Everywhere else, data will be anonymized. No names or gender identifiers will be used in describing the data. The name or specific location of the church itself will not be identified in the research. "Code names" (such as Subject 1) will be used when analyzing and describing the data.

How will data be protected and maintained as confidential?

The researcher, one proofreader, one project chair, one external reader, and one academic project advisor will have access to the research data once it is analyzed. None of the parties except the primary researcher will have access to names or other personal information, as all data will be anonymized before they see it.

Where will data be stored and for how long?

The digital data will be stored for three years (per IRB regulation) in the researcher's personal password-protected Dropbox account, which is encrypted. Any print materials will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office for three years.

How will data be destroyed?

Digital data (audio recordings and transcripts of the interview, scanned consent forms, questionnaires) will be deleted from the researchers' network. Print materials (consent forms and screening forms) will be shredded by the researcher.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation: None

Compensation for Injury: Winebrenner Theological Seminary and institutional employees are exempt from any and all charges and/or compensations due to research subjects who are harmed by their voluntary participation in research.

Contact Persons: For more information concerning this research, please contact:

Nicole Walters at 678-340-2896

Dr. David Barbee at 419-434-4200.

If you believe that you may have suffered a research-related injury:

Contact Dr. Mary Steiner Iames at 419-434-4200.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without penalty to yourself nor the researcher. If you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner as described in "Confidentiality of Data." Additionally, if you do not want your information/data included in the research and findings, you may also request to have your information/data destroyed at no penalty to you nor the researcher.

CONSENT: Federal regulations require precautionary measures to be taken to insure the protection of human subjects on physical, psychological, social, and other issues. This includes the use of *informed consent* procedures as stated in this document.

I, _____, **[PRINTED NAME OF SUBJECT]**
have been adequately informed regarding the risks and benefits of participating in this research. My signature also indicates that I can change my mind and withdraw my consent to participate and my shared information at any time without penalty to myself or the researcher. All questions I had about my participation in this research have been fully answered. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

SUBJECT SIGNATURE: _____
DATE _____

I have witnessed the consent process and believe the subject has been fully informed, understands the research study, and has agreed to participate freely in the research.

WITNESS PRINTED NAME (Must be 18 years or older): _____

WITNESS SIGNATURE: _____
DATE _____

Appendix C: Initial Survey Form



Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project. **Please fill out the following brief personal information form (You can scan the form and attach it to an email or type your answers into the body of an email) and return it via email to: waltersn1@findlay.edu**

Interview participants will be selected based on this initial data to maximize the diversity of data (varying age groups, levels of interest, and experience in contemplative practice). For your information, attached is the consent form you will need to sign and return *if* you are selected for the project. This will give you more information about the project and what participation will entail.

Communication about your selection (you will receive an email whether you have been selected) and communication for scheduling interviews at the research site (your church) will be conducted via email from the address listed above. You can expect to receive an email about selection by April 1.

For the purpose of this survey, here are some definitions used by the research:

Contemplation - A state of communion with God beyond words, a wordless gaze of faith fixed on God in loving attentiveness. This state of communion is a gift from God.

Contemplative Prayer - Methods of prayer that aim to foster inner awareness and stillness as a means of opening oneself up to an encounter with God beyond words, to enter a state of receptivity to deepening communion with God. Contemplative prayer attempts to engage the whole self and move beyond intellectual engagement.

Examples of contemplative prayer practices could be: engaging in Lectio Divina, practicing Centering Prayer, walking a labyrinth, utilizing prayer beads or icons, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, the Prayer of Examen, a contemplative church service.

Contemplative Practices - Practices that aim to cultivate inner awareness and stillness and seek to put oneself in a state that is receptive to a deepening communion with God. While contemplative practices often involve intentional space for reflection or silence, more embodied practices like pilgrimage, music, storytelling, or even activism, can be considered contemplative practices when the motivation or quality of them aims to cultivate inner stillness and a connection with God.

Examples of active contemplative practices could be: a pilgrimage to a holy site, dancing or other movement, writing an icon, art, journaling or storytelling, music or singing, etc. The practice itself is not the focus but the inner state and intention of the person engaging in the practice or the stillness the practice leads into.

The Contemplative Life / Contemplative Spirituality – A spiritual life focused on intentionally attending to the ongoing interior journey toward a deeper connection to God, seeking always greater transformation by God. One who leads a contemplative life uses various means of contemplative practice to draw into a deepening communion with God.

Meet your Researcher



I am delighted to be the Seminarian serving at my home Parish (St. Paul's Newnan) during my Episcopal and Anglican studies at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. I am an aspirant for Holy Orders in the Atlanta Diocese. I have responded to God's call to ministry since I graduated from The University of Georgia with a BA in Religion. I am currently a Doctoral Candidate at Winebrenner Theological Seminary, where I completed my MA in Practical Theology in 2022.

That call has taken me to serve the church and non-profits in a multitude of roles and locations for the past twenty years. I have served in volunteer and staff capacities leading ministries with children, women, interfaith and refugee ministries, leading outreach teams, and long and short-term missions. I have a passion for what God is doing in the global church, having lived in the Middle East and South Asia, most

recently living with my family in Bangladesh for two years.

With roots in American Protestantism, but a life-long bent toward the contemplative, I love to explore the diversity of faith traditions and the multitude of ways God is sought and found. I discovered contemplative practice first through the Trappist monastic tradition and have spent the last decade exploring and studying the ways the contemplative life shapes individuals and communities. I long to see more churches empowered to lead their people in a journey of ever-deepening communion with the transformative presence of God.

My belief in the power of story has guided my ministry as a writer at Nicoletwalters.com and as a communications professional. I am a Communications Strategist at Ruby Brick, helping non-profit clients amplify their messages. I am married to Lee, and we have two teenage children and a cuddly dachshund. I enjoy living back in my hometown near family and chatting over a cup of coffee.

Initial Survey Form

Name:

Email address:

Phone Number:

Church:

Age Range (select one): 18-25 / 26-35 / 36-45 / 46-55 / 56-64 / 65+

How long have you been engaged in contemplative practice?

Were you interested in contemplative life before leadership at the church introduced you to it or invited you to congregational contemplative programs/services?

Select one: I was curious / interested / cautious / resistant

Current level of interest in contemplative practice:

Select one: Low / Moderate / High

Frequency of participation in personal contemplative practices:

Select one: Daily / Several times a week / Weekly / Several Times a month / Monthly / Sporadically

Frequency of participation in regular church worship (Sunday Eucharist, adult formation, daily prayer): Select one:

Several times a week / Weekly / Several Times a month / Monthly / Sporadically

Frequency of participation in contemplative church programs (such as workshops, events, classes) or services:

Several times a week / Weekly / Several Times a month / Monthly / Sporadically

Briefly describe your personal contemplative practice:

Appendix D: IRB Report Letter

May 3, 2025

Dr. Kathryn Helleman:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval letter received on February 8, 2024 from Dr. Mary Iames did not include a requirement for submitting a final IRB Report. The approval letter from the IRB is being included along with this letter via email for your consideration.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nicole Walters", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Nicole T. Walters

Appendix E: Copyright Consent to Use



Nicole Walters <tingle.walters@gmail.com>

Copyright Permission Request for Figures from Signs of Life for Dissertation

Scott Gunn <sgunn@forwardmovement.org>

Wed, Dec 18, 2024 at 1:52 PM

To: Jay Sidebotham <jsidebotham@renewalworks.org>, Nicole Walters <tingle.walters@gmail.com>

Cc: Kathy Jose <kjose@forwardmovement.org>

Hi Nicole,

You are welcome to reproduce the images from Signs of Life. Please use, somewhere in the work, a message like this:
Figures from Signs of Life by Jay Sidebotham are copyright _____ [please check the year, I don't have a copy handy]
Forward Movement. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Blessings to you.

Peace,
Scott



Scott Gunn

Executive Director

412 Sycamore Street

Cincinnati, OH 45202

513-721-6659 ext 311

sgunn@forwardmovement.org

forwardmovement.org

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From: Jay Sidebotham <outlook_C14598A13BF7FD8C@outlook.com> on behalf of Jay Sidebotham <jsidebotham@renewalworks.org>

Sent: Wednesday, December 18, 2024 12:44

To: Nicole Walters <tingle.walters@gmail.com>

Cc: Scott Gunn <sgunn@forwardmovement.org>; Kathy Jose <kjose@forwardmovement.org>

Subject: Re: Copyright Permission Request for Figures from Signs of Life for Dissertation

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix F: Categories and Codes

Category: Getting Engaged

Description: This category explores the causes and motivations that led people to become engaged in contemplative practice.

Compelled
Curiosity
Embodiment
Invitation from a Leader
Leader's Influence
Restored faith / religion
Spiritual Hunger
Why didn't I know this before?

Category: Key Components

Description: This category explores elements people mentioned as key to initiating or sustaining their engagement in the contemplative life.

Community
Contemplative Spirit
Group / Communal Practice
Contemplative Outreach
Contemplative Teachers
Heart of the Leader
Intentionality
Liturgy
Sacred Space
Sermons
Spiritual Direction
Virtual Practice

Category: Challenges

Description: This category explores challenges people expressed to personal or communal engagement with contemplative life.

Defining Contemplative Practice
Lack of Interest or Understanding
Resources
Distraction
Loneliness
Need for or Lack of Community
Restlessness
Time Constraints / Lack of Commitment

Category: Practices

Description: This category explores the specific contemplative practices people are participating in personally and communally.

Centering Prayer

- Sit

Eastern

Iconography

Jesus Prayer

Labyrinth / Walking meditation

Lectio Divina

Nature

Pilgrimage

Retreat

Silence

The Arts

Category: Growth

Description: This category explores the impacts contemplative practice had on people's lives and the motivations behind staying engaged and growing in the contemplative life.

Healing from Anxiety

Connection / Experience

Grounding / Centering

Learning by Doing

Life Change / Action

Personal Practice

Sustaining / Peace

Transformation

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