

A STRATEGY FOR EMPLOYING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL  
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH  
AT GURNEE COMMUNITY CHURCH

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STUART R. MERKEL  
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**A Strategy for Employing Individual and Communal  
Spiritual Disciplines for Spiritual Growth  
at Gurnee Community Church**

Stuart R. Merkel  
Doctor of Ministry  
2008

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

It was the purpose of this ministry focus paper to present a strategy for helping the collective body of Gurnee Community Church (GCC) to have a growing faith in Jesus Christ through personal and corporate integration of spiritual disciplines. GCC has the mission to lead people to a growing faith in Jesus Christ through love, service, and encouragement as the congregation journeys toward full devotion to God. In recent years, the church has desired to fulfill this purpose through a focus on spiritual disciplines.

This ministry focus paper presents plan for pointing spiritually interested people towards discovering spiritual disciplines that will lead them to a deeper understanding and experience of God. Part One is an overview of the church, its history in the community and its present situation describing the church's people and their diverse spiritual backgrounds. It will also examine the impact of church-wide movements, the desire the church has had to form a "roadmap" for spiritual maturity, and the roadblocks that have stalled spiritual growth despite a grand and inspired mission.

Part Two serves as a basic understanding of the nature of individual spiritual growth and maturity. This section will outline a theology of spiritual formation through unintentional and intentional spiritual discipline and show evidence that spiritual growth happens through habits of spiritual activity. The section then identifies the various spiritual disciplines and organizes them into two categories: (1) classical and (2) deeper, more critical spiritual disciplines.

Part Three provides a practical strategy for guiding the Christians of GCC to mature spiritually through intentional spiritual disciplines. It will concentrate on the focused atmosphere necessary to raise the importance of spiritual disciplines and on developing pathways for individuals and groups to directly experience God through spiritual disciplines. This section also presents an implementation timeline and a long-

range vision for spiritual discipline activity as a way of life and distinguishing character of the church.

Theological Mentor: John R. Hull, Jr.

Words: 314

To Lynn, Peter, and Gregory  
And in memory of my parents  
George and Ruth Merkel

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I would like to thank the members of Gurnee Community Church for their support, affirmation and gift of time to accomplish this project and the subsequent degree. Their passion to help people find their individual faith journeys to becoming more fully devoted followers of Christ inspired this vision of a faith community characterized by spiritual disciplines. I would like to thank Dallas Willard who showed me this vision could be reached and challenged me to take spiritual disciplines home to my church. I would like to thank Sharon Henders for proofing; to Kristie Savage for putting on the shine; and to John Hull for pushing me to keep it focused on GCC. Thanks also to Steven Peay for his congregational astuteness and esteemed insight on catholic habit; to the Farrands for housing me and treating me like one of their own family while in Pasadena; to Peter for checking out this book and that from the Marquette Library; to Greg for computer time; and to each of the members of GCC who practiced spiritual discipline with me and listened to me drone on about this monk and that spiritual practice. Mostly, I would like to thank my wife, Lynn, for not giving up on me despite regularly threatening to after every deadline, for saving me from my grammatical incompetence, and for her encouragement, time, and love. And thanks to everyone who prayed for me all along the way and shared with me in this spiritual discipline of study.

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## INTRODUCTION

I own a bike, but I almost never ride it. When I do ride it the tires are always flat from lack of use. I still remember learning to ride a bike. My first bike was a shiny gold “sting ray”-style bike with a big banana seat and high back “sissy bar.” It was a sunny Saturday morning when my dad and I went to pick up the bike from the local bike shop. When we got home I had a thrilling task ahead of me: learning to ride! My best friend, Chucky, already had a bike and he knew how to ride. I remember he was there riding alongside me down the center of the street as my older brother, already in high school at the time, was running behind me helping me to learn. There were no training wheels on this bike and I was being forced to learn to ride cold turkey. I don’t think the subject of training wheels ever was an option in our family. I was going to learn the hard way, the traditional way, the true American way how to ride a bike. It might sound surprising, but as I remember it, after a few short runs down the street, with Chucky cheering me on as he rode alongside, I was off and riding.

That bike became the symbol of my childhood life. I rode all the time with my friends. We learned to pop wheelies and to do jumps, and to do the ever popular “ride-with-no-hands!” Riding my bike was my life. By junior high I had outgrown the sting-ray bike, so I got a hunter green Schwinn ten-speed and my biking world exploded. Not only did I continue to ride often, but now I could really ride distances. I rode the Schwinn every day to school on the other side of town, and as far as the next town over to get my hair cut at our favorite barbershop. My bike was my life, but today I own a bike and almost never ride it.

When I became a committed Christian, it was something I really wanted to do. I had grown up in the church, but making a personal commitment to faith was poorly presented. I remember attending Confirmation meetings at the Reverend Dr. Benton Gaskel's house and that I enjoyed the cookies. If we talked about having a relationship with God, it is far from my memory; but I do remember Mrs. Gaskel's cookies! A few years later my church friends were talking about going to the Friday night concerts at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. After my first visit I could not wait to go a second time because I knew I wanted to affirm my faith publicly, as I had witnessed others do. Three weeks later, with my friends alongside me, I gave my life to Christ and my faith in God became the symbol of my life. I still ride this "bike" with an ever increasing passion. I have discovered that beyond the thrill of becoming a child of God by confession of faith is the drive to become more fully one of Jesus' disciples.

Dallas Willard writes that the Western Church in the last several decades has "not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian," and in fact, "one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship."<sup>1</sup> Willard contends that Christians today have made discipleship "optional" by not stressing the value and necessity of the spiritually disciplined life. Gurnee Community Church (hereafter GCC) is filled with people quite pleased with their relationship with Christ. If living the spiritual life could be equated to riding a bike, then all members of GCC can ride a bike and some even take it out once or twice a week for a short spin. However, only for a very few does the relationship with Christ symbolize their life's passion.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 4.

GCC is a church fulfilling, to a greater or lesser extent, God’s mission and purpose for the Church by making and nurturing followers of Christ. The question remains, however, whether the church can be a community bent on raising more followers who desire to make following Christ their life passion. Clyde Reid wrote in 1966 that the church for all its good intentions has been structured around “evading God.”<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard confirms this, and writes that Reid’s “law of religious evasion” suggests that “we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience.”<sup>3</sup> The well-intentioned efforts tend to fail in the end to push the common believer toward the venture of their personal quest for God. This study will endeavor to find avenues through spiritual disciplines to break the church out of these evasion enabling practices.

In other words, this ministry focus paper will consider whether this church can move people from satisfaction with spiritual activity toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. Robert Webber suggests that the focus of the spiritual life is two-fold. First, he says that believers “contemplate the reality of God incarnate” and they do this through “our personal devotion and in our communal life in the church in worship, in Scripture, in Eucharist, and in prayer.”<sup>4</sup> These are the pathways to a delight in God that bring peace in the soul and satisfaction with one’s life and one’s life in the world. But Webber says that there is a second focus of the spiritual life which is to “participate in the

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<sup>2</sup> Clyde H. Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 1st ed. (New York.: Harper & Row, 1966), 41, quoted in Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 201.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 43.

purposes of God in history.”<sup>5</sup> When followers of Christ transition to a personal recognition of their participation in the purposes of God, they have become so engaged in the spiritual life that they are better characterized as having become disciples. They have moved from the thrill of being in the body of Christ, through the satisfaction and marvel of being on a faith journey, to a fundamental realization that they play a purposeful role in the plans of God.

The Apostle Paul faced this issue as a dilemma and it may be the reason he wrote ahead to the church in Rome, to prepare them for becoming people more accustomed to being disciples of Christ. To the Roman church he wrote: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).<sup>6</sup> These oft-quoted words demonstrate that Paul desired to point the followers of Christ toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. Greater spiritual devotion to God and a clearer recognition of his will leads to a fuller expression of discipleship in the life of the person of faith. It is the focus of this project that at the heart of the discipleship way of life are the disciplines of the spirit that open the man and woman of God to the ways and wisdom of the creator and sustainer of life. It is these disciplines that draw the follower of Christ to the realm of spiritual oneness with God and gives the follower of God the power and wisdom to know his will and to “participate” in the purposes of God as revealed through Christ and inspired today through the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>6</sup> All biblical references will be given in the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

The struggle to help balance one's life of faith with the activity of daily life has been an effort not uncommon to the local church. GCC has a long history of spiritual life in its community. Many emerging disciples have walked through the life of this community and church on their journey to deeper expressions of faith and to a greater recognition of the purposes of God for their lives. Lloyd John Oglivie is the most prominent name among this fellowship's success stories. Today, the typical church attendee at GCC is satisfied to assume that the declaration, "I gave my life to Christ," affords them all they need for salvation. The notion and hope of Christ that everyone can have a deeper understanding and experience of God and that they can share in the purposes of God remains for most an unfamiliar or distant revelation.

Through the moving of the Spirit and a few key role models, the present generation of spiritual leaders at GCC has emerged as capable spiritual directors who have poised this church for a venture into discipleship through the pathway of spiritual disciplines. This team of leaders can be instrumental in helping more members of GCC bridge the gap between satisfaction with the contemplative delight of God to possessing more passionate energy to help mentor others toward a deeper understanding and experience of God and to the realization of how they can fulfill the purposes of God for the church community. This study will reveal that the bridge between following Christ and purposeful discipleship has its foundation in the spiritually disciplined life. Therefore, the purpose of this ministry focus paper is to present a strategy for helping the collective body of GCC to have a growing faith in Jesus Christ through personal and corporate integration of spiritual disciplines.

This ministry focus paper will present a guide for the congregants of GCC. It will lay out a formula for introducing the general population of the church to a model of spiritual disciplines that will promote a deeper understanding and experience of God. It will direct the church to prepare pathways that lead to greater discipline. It will guide the church to raise the value of discipleship through spiritual discipline to the highest priority in the lives of those who come to follow him at GCC. This is the faith journey the community is poised to take and it is the pathway they must take towards fulfilling the most challenging focus of the church's mission statement: to "journey towards full devotion to God."

This ministry focus paper will contain three major sections. Part One will explore the context of GCC. It will serve as an overview of the church, its history in the community, and its present situation. The first chapter will describe the church's people, their diverse spiritual background, and the unique spiritual foundation of the present church community. The next chapter will examine the impact of the church-wide "faith journey" movement that began approximately ten years ago. That movement raised a desire for the church to identify a "roadmap" for spiritual maturity. The chapter will also explore potential and realized obstacles or roadblocks that have or appear to have stalled spiritual growth despite a grand and inspired mission.

Part Two will then explore the basic understanding of, and the nature of, individual spiritual growth and maturity. The first of two chapters here will outline a theology of spiritual formation through unintentional and intentional spiritual discipline, and show evidence that most spiritual growth happens through the habits of spiritual activity. The chapter will conclude by demonstrating how every individual participating

in a personally unique variety of spiritual discipline will effectively lead to greater discipleship through life-changing experiences of God. The second chapter will then identify the various spiritual disciplines and organize them into primary and secondary spiritual disciplines for practical purposes. The chapter will also identify biblical expressions of spiritual discipline that are witnesses to direct experiences of God within the community of faith in both the Old and New Testaments and the developing church.

Part Three will provide a practical strategy for guiding the Christians of GCC to discipleship through intentional spiritual discipline. The first chapter of this section will concentrate on the focused atmosphere necessary to raise the importance of spiritual disciplines. It will focus on developing pathways for individuals and groups to directly experience God through the activities of spiritual disciplines. The final chapter will focus on an emerging philosophy of church ministry at GCC. Included in this will be the rethinking of leadership structures, traditional ministry models, and building facility needs in order to foster spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines. This chapter will also offer an implementation timeline in order to avoid short-term trends and conclude with a long-range vision where spiritual discipline activity is a way of life, discipleship is an emerging value, and experiencing God is the distinguishing character of the church.

My desire in writing this paper is two-fold. First, it is my sincere hope that those in leadership at GCC will continue to witness the transformation going on at GCC through the power of the Holy Spirit; that they will see the church as a community of followers of Christ poised for spiritual awakening; and that they will envision the impact the raising of disciples through spiritual disciplines will have on the church's fulfillment of its mission and its vision to reach everyone in its community for Christ. It is my

second hope that this effort will have such an impact that followers of Christ at GCC, new followers in the church, and even some in the greater Church beyond our doors and community would be drawn into the fullness of God through personal participation in spiritual disciplines. I pray that those who follow this “faith journey” to be his disciples through spiritual disciplines will fulfill the hope of Christ that they would delight in experiencing God and be thrilled with participating in the purposes of God.

PART ONE

CHURCH CONTEXT AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTIONS

## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO GURNEE COMMUNITY CHURCH

#### **History, Demographics, and Socioeconomic Analysis of Gurnee**

The first settlement of Warren Township occurred in 1835 along the Des Plaines River. The settlement was at the juncture of two routes: one north-south route connecting the cities of Chicago and Milwaukee, and one east-west route connecting McHenry County to the port of Waukegan. The juncture occurred at an old Indian river crossing. The town that grew up around that junction eventually got its name of Gurnee after the Chicago & Milwaukee Railroad established a train depot in 1854 just east of the original township junction. The depot and later the post office nearby were named after Walter S. Gurnee, a member of the Board of Directors for the railroad and the Mayor of Chicago at the time.<sup>1</sup> For most of its history, the town has remained a crossing, a stop along the journey from one place to the next.

The area around the junction was primarily farmland until as late as the 1970s, when the Illinois Tollway was constructed and the Great America Amusement Park opened at the tollway's exit on Grand Avenue. These events initiated new growth. Gurnee's population over the next thirty-five years soared from 2,738 in 1970 to its present population of over 31,000.<sup>2</sup>

With the growth and development around Gurnee's major junctures, the city became a place of residence for many greater Chicago and Lake County employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Village of Gurnee, "Early Gurnee Area History (1835-1927)," [http://www.gurnee.il.us/history/history\\_early\\_area.html](http://www.gurnee.il.us/history/history_early_area.html) (accessed 23 January 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Village of Gurnee, "Village of Gurnee Historical Population Data," <http://www.gurnee.il.us/admin/census/2006/index.html> (accessed 23 January 2007).

Nearly all the farming land is now gone, replaced by subdivisions and shopping centers. Interestingly, however, the establishment of the amusement park and later the Gurnee Mills Outlet shopping center along the tollway has served to secure Gurnee's future continuance as a destination along the journey. The town has become for many a recreation stop for those who come seeking a fun afternoon at Great America and/or a shopping trip to purchase retail goods for holidays and special occasions.

Gurnee has long been a community primarily Caucasian in race. However, recent trends show both the Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups to each represent 10% of the present population.<sup>3</sup> These groups and other minority groups are anticipated to show growing representation in the community over the next ten to twenty years. However, in all likelihood, the area surrounding the Grand Avenue juncture at the tollway will maintain its neighborhood atmosphere for the next ten to twenty years.

### **Overview of the Church's 145-Year History**

On February 12, 1860, a small group of twelve residents of the original fledgling township gathered in the local schoolhouse near the river junction. There they decided to found a church that they called the Church of God at Gurnee. In 1880, they built a one-room Meeting House that stood as a functional building for the church for some eighty-one years. In 1924, the church building was lifted off its foundation and moved by a team of horses to a new foundation and new location on Grand Avenue a few blocks away from the river, on dryer ground. Over the years, more building projects occurred as

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<sup>3</sup>Village of Gurnee, "Table DP-1. Profile of General Demographic Characteristics for Gurnee village, Illinois. Special Census of Gurnee village Illinois: August 11, 2006," <http://www.gurnee.il.us/admin/census/2006/GeneralDemograhpics.pdf> (accessed 23 January 2007).

additional wings were added around the church. In 1961, with the failing structure of the eighty-one-year-old Meeting House and the availability of the new Fellowship Hall, the time was right for the old original church to be torn down. Afterwards, the church membership met in the Fellowship Hall until 1977, when a new sanctuary was constructed which served the church for the next twenty-five years.<sup>4</sup> In March 2002, a new, state-of-the-art, four-hundred-seat sanctuary was dedicated, and the sanctuary built in 1977 was converted to a gym.

### Membership

Membership in the GCC rose steadily through the years as the community grew. According to the church historical records, in 1888 the original membership role was updated to a new role that included about thirty members.<sup>5</sup> That number steadily rose over the next few years and by the turn of the century the membership was over one hundred.<sup>6</sup> The church continued to flourish and grow into the next century and, despite difficult times of war and the Depression, the church had a membership of 197 by 1932.<sup>7</sup> After World War II, the first village growth spurt began and membership grew steadily as did church activities. Still virtually the only church in town, the membership grew to 385

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Potter and others, *Gurnee Community Church: Inward, Upward, Outward - Building Expansion Dedication*, program booklet distributed at the dedication service for the new sanctuary, Gurnee, Illinois, 17 March 2002, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. William F. Homer, *Our Centennial 1860-1960: Building for God*, the History of Gurnee Community Church written for the church's centennial, Gurnee, Illinois, 1960, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

members by its hundredth anniversary in 1960.<sup>8</sup> By 1986, the community was rapidly expanding and membership soared to 823.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, new churches were getting established in town and membership growth stabilized. During this time, attendance stayed much the same year to year through the 1990s and into the new millennium. In 2005, the church undertook a clearing up of the membership roles and determined that membership was just over 500. It presently stands at 556 in 2007.

### Pastors

For the first forty years of the church, the pastoral leadership came from within the church's membership and was supported by various students in seminary. The term "pastor" did not enter into the church records until the year 1900. In one case, a carpenter, Brother Wilson Collins, led the church, serving the church well as it undertook the building of its first "meeting house."<sup>10</sup> Through these early years, most of the ministers who served the church were students at the University of Chicago. The church was an "attractive student preaching point" for these motivated young men, most of whom stayed one or two years.<sup>11</sup> This arrangement continued until 1948 when another student pastor, Rev. Selsor, prepared to leave and the church board decided to engage a full-time pastor. Following this action, the Rev. Robert Wilkerson became the first

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, "How Big?" assessment report of Gurnee Community Church, Yokefellow Institute: A Center for the Renewal of Church and Society, 14 July 1993, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Our Centennial*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

resident pastor.<sup>12</sup> In December 1951, Rev. Lloyd John Ogilvie became the pastor and thus started the momentum in the church referred to as the “Fabulous Fifties.” Ogilvie served GCC full-time while he completed his divinity degree at Garrett Biblical Institute, taking an eight-month leave of absence to study at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Ogilvie left the church after his ordination to the Presbyterian Church in November 1956.<sup>13</sup> After Ogilvie, the church enjoyed having pastoral leadership that generally stayed longer, on an average of six to ten years each. Beginning as early as 1981, several assistant and associate pastors were also called to serve alongside the senior pastors of this growing church. Many of these, like so many before them, were divinity students or those seeking advanced degrees.

In 1991, the church called Pastor William L. Genda, whose spiritual leadership and dynamic preaching style would sustain and grow the church for over thirteen years until his retirement in 2004. Then, in 2006, harkening back to one of its earliest historical traditions, the church called one of its own members, Pastor Christopher Stephens, to be Senior Pastor. Stephens, who joined the church in 1992, received his call to the ministry through his participation in the ministry of the church, entered seminary part-time, and changed careers in order to lead the church at present. I, the present associate pastor, was called in 2000 for the purpose of developing spiritual formation opportunities for the adult population of the church. In addition to the two pastors, the church also now employs three full-time ministry directors who support the ministries of worship, children, and youth.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18-22.

For the first ninety-three years, the church was functionally the only church in the town that slowly grew up around the river crossing and junction. Being the only church in Warren Township for so many years has had much to do with the church's present community character and limited affiliations. One interesting example is the various name changes the church went through in the first hundred years. The legal name of the church, The Church of Christ at Gurnee, which exists to this day was taken in 1879.<sup>14</sup> However, under the leadership of the Rev. Ralph Hoffman in 1919, the church left the Disciples of Christ denomination with which it had originally been affiliated and became a community church without denominational affiliation.<sup>15</sup> The name of the church at that time became the Gurnee Christian Church, which it had popularly been referred to since before the turn of the century. Finally, at the annual meeting of 1925 the church officially took its present name of GCC.<sup>16</sup> The church remained unaffiliated for the next seventy-five years, yet had denominational influence from its denominationally affiliated pastors. Reverend Wilkerson, the first resident Pastor, desired the church to rejoin the Disciples of Christ but this was rejected and as a result the pastor left in 1951.<sup>17</sup> Many Presbyterian pastors, including Lloyd John Ogilvie, led the church while seminary students. In the last part of the twentieth century, the church took on affiliation with the "Community Church" denomination which lasted through to the year 2000. However, after hiring several Congregational pastors, the church decided to become a member of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in that same year. This

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 18.

action allowed the church some affiliation, while maintaining its long-standing local autonomy.

### **Impact of Population Growth over the last Twenty-five Years upon the Community of Gurnee and upon GCC**

In the early 1980s, when the building boom began to occur in Gurnee, the church faced some new realities. Many new people were visiting the church regularly, a fact that continues even to this day. Many of these new families moving to Gurnee fill corporate positions or are stationed at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. As a result, the community is now much more transient, and a portion of the church membership is regularly changing. Also, for nearly the first time during this period, new churches were planted throughout the village, mostly to the west nearer the tollway. Some of these brand new churches grew quickly with the growth of the village. A few, including the Village Church of Gurnee (Missionary Church), Saint Paul the Apostle Roman Catholic, and Immanuel Baptist Church, have outpaced the membership of the GCC over the last twenty-five year period. With the growth and newness of the west-side subdivisions, these new and vibrant churches have been attractive to young families who make up this new percentage of the population. Another reality was that GCC was quickly becoming the “old guard church” with many of the long-time families and community servants comprising a strong proportion of its membership. Some people in the community refer to the church as “Gurnee’s Church” because its history and location continues to afford the church prominence and influence that is very significant to the community.

The Village of Gurnee has seen widespread transition in those twenty-five years because of the accelerated growth. As late as 1993, the community was still getting over

the shock of no longer being a farming community. This is evident in the first point of a report submitted to the church by Dr. Lyle Schaller. Schaller, a prolific writer on church ministry and an expert parish consultant, was invited to GCC to do a church assessment in 1993. In the first sentence of his report to the church, he noted that “one of the signs of the times in Lake County is the decrease in the number of farms.”<sup>18</sup> Schaller’s point was that the community was still grieving over a significant shift in the nature of the community.

However, now more than ten years later, the county has turned its grief over losing the farming into enthusiasm for growth and development and change. During this same time, the Warren Township area has embraced the notion of being a bedroom community and has focused on social and economic development that affirms the neighborhood atmosphere. The three school districts in the township have competitively risen to high academic ratings and nearly all students graduating are going on to higher education of some sort. During that same period of time a shift has been seen in business and industry in Lake County. In 1980, manufacturing was the highest employment category in Lake County, and most people in Gurnee were working for Johns Manville Corporation (insulation and roofing materials) and Outboard Marine Corporation (outboard motors). However, by 2000 these companies no longer existed in Lake County and only 25% of the county worked in manufacturing of some sort. Management and professional occupations account for 50% or more of all occupations today. Companies like Abbott Laboratories (medical supplies), Hewitt Associates (human resource

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<sup>18</sup> Schaller, “How Big?” 1.

associates), and Motorola (electronics), along with the Great Lakes Naval Training Station (military) are by far the largest employers nearest to Gurnee (See Table 1).

<u>Company</u>	<u>Employees in 1980<sup>19</sup></u>	<u>Employees in 2000<sup>20</sup></u>
Abbott Laboratories	7,000	23,000
Johns Mansville Corp.	700	0
Outboard Marine Corp.	5,000	0
Hewitt Associates	No Data	5,570
Motorola	No Data	5,000
Great Lakes Naval Trn. St.	No Data	23,000

If there is one change most evident on the horizon, it is the change in the ethnicity of Gurnee. During this recent period of growth, much of the middle-class establishment of the neighboring city of Waukegan transitioned to the out-lying suburbs, the closest of which is Gurnee. Consequently, the vacated communities of Waukegan became ideal for a growing minority population including African American, Hispanic, and Asian. This growth continues today and is now a recognizably growing population in older sections of Gurnee adjacent to Waukegan, where the GCC is located (see Table 2). This will become an increasingly important issue in the next twenty years.

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<sup>19</sup> Lake County 1980 Census Composite, prepared by the Lake County Department of Planning and Zoning & Environmental Quality, Waukegan, Illinois.

<sup>20</sup> United States Census Bureau, "American Fact Finder," available from: <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Accessed on 26 June 2007.

	<u>1970</u>	<u>1980<sup>21</sup></u>	<u>2000<sup>22</sup></u>	
<b>Gurnee Population</b>	2,738	7,179	28,834	
Median Age		29.9	34.2	
Age 65 and Older		5.5%	7.2%	
H.S. Graduates		86.1%	90.9%	
Median Income		\$30,189	\$88,932	
<b>Race</b>				
White		6,889	95%	24,204   84%
African American		99	1%	1625   5.6%
Native American		11	0.1%	166   0.6%
Asian		121	1%	2600   9%
Hispanic		109	1%	1738   6%
Other		45	0.6%	872   3%

### **Demographics and Socioeconomic Analysis of GCC**

Through the years, the church's demographics have mirrored those of the Gurnee village. Today, the church is still very much a community church, in that it is a broad representation of the established community. Membership is evenly spread across all age groups: young adults, young married, the middle-aged, and seniors (see Table 3). The congregation is a Caucasian fellowship with less than 7% of Asian, African American, Native American, and Hispanic members (see Table 4). Most are married, but there is an average participation of singles, divorced, and widowed for a church like this (see Table 5). Children and youth ministries are healthy with over one hundred children between

<sup>21</sup> Lake County 1980 Census Composite, 11-17.

<sup>22</sup> United States Census Bureau, "American Fact Finder," <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed 26 June 2007).

infancy and sixth grade registered in Sunday school, plus another thirty teens in seventh and eighth grade confirmation, and a core group of yet another thirty high school teens.

**Table 3. Age Groupings of GCC<sup>23</sup>**

14-18	3%
18-25	4%
25-35	10%
35-45	19%
45-55	16%
55-65	20%
65 and over	27%

**Table 4. Ethnic Origin<sup>24</sup>**

Caucasian	93%
African American	0.5%
Hispanic	3%
Asian	1.5%
Native American	2%

**Table 5. Marital Status<sup>25</sup>**

Single	11%
Married	73%
Divorced	7%
Widowed	9%

The religious background of the congregation is varied as well. The independent community atmosphere has been a welcoming feature of the church. The congregation is

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<sup>23</sup> Gurnee Community Church Demographic Survey, conducted 1 and 2 July 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

made up of many people who were raised Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Congregational (see Table 6).

Number responding to one or more out of 207 respondents	
Attended Gurnee C.C. only	26
Non-Denominational	31
Roman Catholic	46
Methodist	37
Presbyterian	23
Baptist	23
Congregational	13
Lutheran	29
Disciples of Christ	4
Nazarene	2
Christian	2
Brethren	1
Episcopal	1
Evangelical	1
Pentecostal	1
Church of Christ	1
Evangelical Free	1
Reformed	1
UCC	2
Assembly of God	3
Covenant	2
Moravian	1
Russian Orthodox	1
Jewish	1
Agnostic	1
None	3
Other	2

Most people come to the church seeking fewer denominational ties as the data in Table 6 suggests. They find at GCC an autonomous community that freely makes its own decisions and develops its own worship liturgy and style. They find a friendly

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

environment and a casual atmosphere. For the most part, worshippers drive less than ten minutes to attend worship; but the church has a growing population of those who drive about thirty minutes from as far away as Ingleside, Spring Grove, and Lake Villa, Illinois as well as Kenosha, Wisconsin (see Appendix A).

### **The Nature and Diversity of the Church's Evangelical Community**

To this point, the “life” of the church has been described as it has grown up over the years in Gurnee. An additional element important in understanding the nature and diversity of the church is the “spirit” of the church, how the church lives and interacts with God. The earliest records of the church reveal the evangelical spirit that drove the young fellowship. On at least three occasions, various spiritual leaders from the church led the congregation in ten-day to two-week long evangelistic “meetings.” Church records state that as a result of each of these meetings there were several (sixteen in 1861, nine in 1866, several more in 1870) new confessions of faith followed by baptism in the Des Plains River behind the church.<sup>27</sup> While the church demonstrated a significant evangelistic emphasis in its early years, records of these kinds of evangelistic efforts are absent from historical records during the entire twentieth century. Emphasis in the historical records during the twentieth century was primarily focused on the activities of the church and its various building efforts. In fact, the slogan for the hundredth anniversary celebration in 1960 was “Building for God” which coincided with the dedication of the Fellowship Hall and education wing. The spiritual emphasis during the twentieth century at GCC shifted its focus towards spiritual nurture for the decidedly

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<sup>27</sup> Homer, *Our Centennial*, 4.

Christian of the community. This shift mirrors the general shift in emphasis across most mainline established churches during this same time period.

In 1960, Pastor Ross Ludeman noted in his centennial introduction titled “Looking to Jesus” that “the potential for this church in the community is practically unlimited to those who have the eyes of faith.”<sup>28</sup> In paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 2:9, Paul’s reference to Isaiah’s prophecy, Ludeman revealed the inner spirit of the church. Despite the church’s lack of reference to its spiritual activity, Ludeman helped bring to the surface the spiritual life blood that was the energy driving GCC through the years. However, despite Ludeman’s observation, for the next thirty years the church was functionally and spiritually complacent, a friendly community church. The pastoral leadership during this time was theologically liberal. Members of the church gathered for social purposes more often than they gathered for spiritual purposes. The notion of making disciples and the disciplined spiritual life was far from the central focus of the church.

Not until the approaching new millennium did the spirit of the church’s evangelical heritage begin to be seen again on the surface of church activity. Beginning with a spiritual movement from within the church, led by the dynamic spiritual leadership of Pastor Bill Genda, the church participated in a spiritual awakening. Signs of the transformation are visible in the church’s decision to join the Willow Creek Association in 1995 as a demonstration of the desire to follow the evangelistic movement started by Bill Hybels. More recently, in 2005, the pastors joined with other evangelical church pastors in Lake County in participating in a movement called “Catalyst.” “Catalyst” is a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2.

shared effort aimed at “mobilizing churches for spiritual revolution across Lake County.” This upstart fellowship of churches has the strategy of Acts 2 to: “1) Renew the hearts of God’s people; 2) Reposition the Church to move with God; 3) Restore the reputation of Christ in our culture; and 4) Reconcile people to God.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the pastors of the several west side churches were cautious in accepting GCC as a participant in Catalyst because of its reputation of being more liberal, a notion that was far from the truth.

Participation in the Willow Creek Association and Catalyst has awakened many from within the church and outside the church to appreciate the church’s evangelistic spirit. It is accurate to identify the church at present as “Evangelical Protestant.” The church fits the definition used by the Baylor Institute for Religious Studies, which states that Evangelical Protestants will “emphasize the authority of the Bible, salvation through personal relationship with Jesus Christ, personal piety, and the need to share the ‘good News’ of Jesus Christ with others.”<sup>30</sup> In the years prior to this century, some might have labeled the church more “mainline” because as a community church it has always been “accommodating of mainstream culture.”<sup>31</sup> While some might want to place GCC somewhere between these two religious traditions, at present the church desires to be evangelically minded in its efforts. Ongoing ministries such as the ALPHA Course, participation in “Sharefest” (a Lake County Community action event sponsored by Catalyst), and a sermon series using Bill Hybels “Just Walk Across The Room” materials

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<sup>29</sup> “Catalyst: One Community One Church” brochure, Lake County, Illinois, [http://www.catalystweb.org/pdf/The\\_Catalyst\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.catalystweb.org/pdf/The_Catalyst_Brochure.pdf) (accessed 1 October 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Bader and others, “American Piety in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US,” in *The Baylor Religion Survey*, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, September 2006, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

are examples of GCC's evangelical spirit. This shifting of emphasis is an example of the rich diversity that exists in the church membership with many coming from various religious traditions but all seeking a closer, more personal relationship with Jesus Christ and desiring the same for others. The causes and implications of this emerging evangelical spirit will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **The Mission of the Church**

In the 1993 church assessment report presented by Lyle Schaller, one of the most striking but subtle recommendations was that for the church to initiate change it would need to have a “compelling vision of a new tomorrow that will challenge today’s members.” Schaller emphasized that this might be the “number one” issue facing the leadership of this “comfortable and contented community church.”<sup>32</sup> As a result of this report, the most compelling tool that carried the church to make some radical change and to emerge from a long period where the evangelicalism of the church was relaxed was the creation and dissemination of the church’s mission statement. Shortly after Schaller’s study was concluded, the leadership of the church began several initiatives. A long-range plan was created and new faith and mission statements were developed. The faith and mission statements were developed by a Constitution Review Committee and presented to the church in 1997 (see Appendix B).

The more significant of these two documents was the mission statement that was brief and to the point, something everyone would have the chance to remember easily and embrace. It stated: “It is the mission of this church to lead people to a growing faith in

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<sup>32</sup> Schaller, “How Big?” 10.

Jesus Christ, through love, service, and encouragement, as we journey toward full devotion to God.” The mission statement became a compelling picture of the church’s desired future. It was set alongside the newly developed faith statement and the preexisting church covenant. Then in 1998, on the heels of the new mission statement, the congregation adopted a more detailed vision statement that gave even more definition to the desired picture the church had for its future (see Appendix B). The mission and vision statements became a driving force for church leaders, and all of the efforts and movements in the church’s next ten years were motivated by these convictions.

The mission statement has three primary thrusts; the first of which is “to lead people to a growing faith in Jesus Christ.” This demonstrated a commitment on the part of the pastors, elders, church council, and ministry boards of the church to concentrate the church’s effort on assisting people in their personal faith journeys. The church acknowledges in this mission statement a clear sense that spiritual formation is an ongoing and developing process. This line alone has been a driving force in the church’s effort to lay out a spiritual roadmap. This roadmap, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, is the impetus for developing an effort towards incorporating spiritual disciplines into the life blood of the church.

Second, the mission statement suggested that the means to spiritual growth was going to be through three primary roles of the church: “love, service, and encouragement.” At the time of the writing of the mission statement, these three activities were strong characteristics of the GCC fellowship and remain so today. However, as time has gone by, the church has been able to see that these three movements easily correspond to the three distinct commandments and commission given

by Christ himself: first, to love, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37); secondly, to encourage, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39); and thirdly, to serve, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The final phrase, “as we journey toward full devotion to God,” pointed directly at a desired goal. Again the image of the journey is clear, and this theme of a “faith journey” became a popular theme the church would continue to reference even into the present. The journey’s goal is “full devotion to God.” This stated objective was intended to communicate that GCC desires to guide its community of Christ-followers to greater spiritual maturity through promoting more spiritual growth. While most would acknowledge full devotion to God is an unattainable venture, at the same time it is a statement of the desire for people of faith to be journeying from where they are now to the place where God desires them to be. The statement should not be confused with a desire to achieve “sanctification” as is common in some traditions. Rather the clearest images of this full devotion would be in efforts to become spiritually mature or more sharing of a character consistent with that of Christ and his disciples. Overall, the power of this statement has been compelling, and since its inception, the leadership of GCC has constantly referred back to it for affirmation of its present and ongoing ministry. The purpose of this paper will be to show that the intention of the church towards making fully devoted followers of Christ is in fact a venture into spiritual disciplines that leads to

a deeper understanding and experience of God and carries with it a vision for accomplishing the purposes of God.

### **The Nature and Activity of GCC**

Today, GCC has an active ministry all around. Each Sunday morning there are two distinct worship services. At 8:00 a.m. is the traditional worship service attended by an average attendance of 125 people. At 10:30 a.m. is the contemporary worship service, characterized by its singing of popular Christian music, and it is attended by an average of 190 people. Both worship services are “God-exalting” and engage the hearts and minds of worshipers through prayer, Bible reading, and biblical preaching.<sup>33</sup> In between worship hours, the church holds an educational hour where spiritual formation opportunities are available for all generations -- children, youth, and adults. The adult spiritual formation opportunities are a mix of small group Bible studies and discussion groups like the “Community Café” led by the Pastor of Educational Ministries.

In 2000, the church endeavored to strengthen spiritual formation opportunities for adults in the church by hiring an Associate Pastor of Adult Ministries (presently Pastor of Educational Ministries). As a result, the church has seen growth in the numbers of those participating in spiritual formation opportunities. The initial thrust of this movement was to plan, develop, and implement a small group ministry that would have the potential of giving every member a place to experience community life. Since that time, the church has seen small group life grow exponentially from an initial five groups to now some fifteen active and healthy groups. These groups range in size from six people to fifteen

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 41.

people and amount for about 35% of the active congregation. Today, this emphasis placed on small groups has been influential throughout the church and has become an important value in many of the church's ministries and incorporated into the regular activity of ministries like the youth group, confirmation class, and women's retreats. The church likes to think, and rightly so, that it has become what Bill Donohue of Willow Creek Association refers to as a church "of" small groups."<sup>34</sup>

Along with the development of the small group ministry, there has also been growth in more general spiritual formation ministries. Since 2002, spurred on by a growing interest in evangelism, the church has offered each year two or three ALPHA courses to members of the church and friends of the community. A significant level of spiritual renewal and assimilation of new guests has occurred through this ministry. In addition to ALPHA, for those seeking greater spiritual growth, there are regular opportunities for in-depth growth through spiritual retreats with the *Walk to Emmaus* (Cursillo) ministry, *Precept upon Precept* inductive studies, and up until recently, through the *DISCIPLE Bible Study* course. These growth groups are well established and are attended by numerous individuals throughout the year.

Another area of significant activity in the life of the church is in mission and outreach. The church participates in various outreach ministries like serving at PADS, (the local shelter), the local *Crop Walk* (a walk-a-thon to fight hunger and poverty in the county), and "Sharefest" (a county-wide day of service) sponsored by Catalyst. For some fifteen years, the church has sent numerous high school teens on week-long mission trips in the USA and/or Mexico and Latin America. Most recently, the church has expanded

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<sup>34</sup> Bill Donohue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 14.

this effort and sent adults to Mexico to do mission work at Mission Mazahua, sponsored by the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Because of the increased emphasis on evangelism, the church has been involved in various big events that are an outreach to the community. In particular, on Thanksgiving Day, the church provides a full Thanksgiving-style dinner free to the community and hosts at the same meal some two-hundred Navy recruits stationed at the nearby naval training station.

Today, just as it has been true for most of the church's history, the church has been a lay-led congregation. The church has remained fully independent and autonomous for all of its existence and the polity of the church remains strongly congregational. To govern this independence, the church has relied on a strong core of lay leaders who work in conjunction with the pastors to guide and direct the church. At present the church is governed by a church council which is made up of representatives of the six primary boards of the church (elders, Christian education, trustees, missions, membership, and worship). The church elects a moderator and a moderator elect who chair the church council for a two-year term. While each of the boards has a primary function, the elder board at times runs in parallel with the church council by serving as the spiritual overseers of all the movement of the church. The elder board works closely with the pastors who are as well acknowledged as elders of the church. All major decisions of the church, including the hiring of pastoral staff, budgeting for the year, maintenance and building of facilities, election of officers of the church, and decisions that impact the worshipping community of the church, are brought to the congregation for affirmation and approval.

All of this activity of church life is evidence of a healthy church community that is striving to live out the Great Commandments, the Great Commission, and its God-inspired vision. The challenge the church faces in the future is the sustainability of this spiritual health while turning the corner towards increased personal discipleship development through spiritual disciplines. Many churches with this type of history find it hard to shift focus effectively and for a sustained period of time due to pastoral transitions, long-standing tradition, spiritual complacency, and a lack of role models of spiritual growth. As an example, Israel's inability to sustain its spiritual passion, as illustrated in the Old Testament historical texts and echoed in the voice of the prophets, is demonstrated over and over again. In addition, the Apostle Paul becomes a prolific writer of letters to churches for the purpose of correction and spiritual guidance all because the health of the church and its ability to stay engaged with God's intended purposes is an ongoing challenge. GCC has risen to a state of health in the recent decade much like an athletic team might have a small string of winning seasons. The challenge that faces this church is the ability to adjust emphasis towards spiritual disciplines in order to raise more spiritually equipped leaders and to establish this emphasis as a sustaining value of the church. This ministry focus paper will demonstrate that shifting emphasis towards nudging individuals to personal spiritual growth at GCC is dependent on raising the value of discipleship under girded by spiritual discipline. Thus, the inspired pathway to continued and greater spiritual growth at GCC is dependent on the church's ability to accept, own, and participate in the journey to discipleship through spiritual disciplines. This ministry focus paper will serve to direct GCC towards that end.

This first chapter has served to set the framework of the church and illustrated the character of the community throughout the church's history to the present. The next chapter will examine the impact of the church-wide "faith journey" movement that began approximately ten years ago. That movement raised a desire for the church to identify a "roadmap" for spiritual maturity. The chapter will also explore potential and realized obstacles or roadblocks that have, or appear to have, stalled spiritual growth despite a grand and inspired mission.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE “FAITH JOURNEY” MOVEMENT AND THE “GROWING FOR CHRIST” CAMPAIGN TOWARDS SPIRITUAL MATURITY

#### **The Hatching of the “Faith Journey” Movement**

In July 1994, a long-range plan was completed and approved by the church. The approval of this plan put into motion several initiatives which included a master plan for the physical plant needs for the coming decade. Included in the language of this long-range plan was a soon-to-be-popular term at GCC. The term used frequently to refer to the spiritual walk of each person of the congregation was “faith journey.” The phrase implies that faith in Christ is not something one simply assumes as one might possess a diamond ring or a Mercedes Benz. Rather, the “faith journey” is an experience that each person interacts with through his or her participation in life and spirituality. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, who have written about the “faith journey,” contend that by recognizing the spiritual life as a journey one understands spirituality as “the way in which we live out our response to God.”<sup>1</sup> Hagberg and Guelich also explain that “faith is a verb” which is dynamic and life-giving to one’s relationship with God, and that the journey is a “process” of change that comes out of life’s experiences while in relationship with God.<sup>2</sup> This understanding of “faith journey” caused the phrase to grow in popularity at GCC.

The church elders, pastors, and the core church leaders began to use the term “faith journey” exclusively as an indicator of the church’s effort as a community of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

The idea seemed to resonate with the spiritual awakening that was emerging under the leadership of Pastor Genda. His Sunday messages soon began to compliment the “faith journey” concept and it became apparent to the congregation that it was the desire of Christ and the hope of the church’s leadership that everyone would move closer to God and closer to where he wanted them to be. This movement was so inspired that it can only be assumed to have been led by the Holy Spirit. The concept was simple enough for the average person to grasp, yet inspired enough to have impact on even the most mature believers in the congregation. The spiritual impact of this simple concept was tremendous. This movement gave birth to and nurtured several initiatives that would occur in the church’s next ten years. Included in those initiatives are the development of the new mission and faith statements; the “Growing for Christ” campaign and building effort; the hiring of additional pastoral staff to assist in spiritual formation for all; and a quest by the church elders to identify a “Faith Journey Roadmap” as a resource for the general population of the church. All of this activity and the spiritual growth that followed are reminiscent of Judah’s rediscovering of the covenant under the leadership of King Josiah. After finding the covenant, witnessing its intention, and re-pledging themselves to it, the Bible records that “the inhabitants of Jerusalem acted according to the covenant of God” (2 Chronicles 34:32). At GCC, a new spiritual fervor was infecting the community of God during this movement. The church began to join together to fully live out the real mission and hope of God for the church.

### **The Spiritual Impact of the “Growing for Christ” Campaign**

Philosophy professor Diogenes Allen suggests that there are three stages in the spiritual journey of faith: “1) repentance or conversion; 2) the development of virtue or human excellence, which includes the redirection of the emotions or passions; and 3) love of neighbor.”<sup>3</sup> In many ways the inspired leadership of GCC was advancing through these stages at an accelerated pace. In Allen’s second stage, he references that there is a “redirection of emotions or passions.” To summarize, this is the deep-seated transformation that goes on within followers of Christ once they allow the spirit of God to infuse their being. It is the transformation from being satisfied with being a part of the created order to being excited by the relevance of the Creator himself. During this time in GCC’s history, the spirit of the Creator began this transformation in a widening set of leaders. Their passions were becoming redirected from a comfortable and self-centered focus to a heightened concern for making the life of faith relevant. At the same time, there was also a desire for sharing that same value with the community outside the church, which, according to Allen is “love of neighbor,” the final stage of the faith journey. As tradition would have it at GCC, the best way for this expression to be realized was through a building effort.

As early as April 1994, the groundwork for the “Growing for Christ” campaign was put into place with the formation of a team to assess the physical plant needs of the church. Then, on October 1, 1995, the church held a one-day campaign to raise funds for the physical plant needs of the church. Known as “Miracle Sunday,” the church raised \$215,000, enough to finance the basic improvements needed at the time and also provide

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<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), 10.

seed money for future building planning. By 1997, land adjacent to the church had been purchased and the Master Building Committee had been re-formed. Then in December, 1998, the same committee presented a design concept and shortly afterward begun the architectural work. By the same time the following year, the church was prepared for the launch of its biggest effort ever. On December 12, 1999, forever to be known as “Celebration Sunday,” the “Growing for Christ” campaign was launched into motion and over \$1.25 million in pledges was raised. As a result, in March of 2002, the church proudly dedicated its new sanctuary and expanded facilities.

While one might look at all this effort as nothing more than a simple building effort, nothing speaks better of the spiritual impact of this campaign than the account of the spiritual transformation that inspired it. The following is an excerpt from the dedication booklet distributed on the day the new sanctuary was dedicated, March 17, 2002.

**Looking Inward:** The planning of this expansion required much inward soul searching. As individual Christians, we examined whether our hearts would allow us to give, sacrifice and see the needs of others beyond our walls and time in history. God reminded us often of the overflowing blessings in our lives and we determined how that overflow should be used for His glory. Our church leadership struggled with the question of whether our physical plant was sufficient to meet the spiritual needs of the people that currently call Gurnee Community Church home. We prayed the prayer . . . Lord, what do you want to do through me to accomplish your will for our church?

**Looking Upward:** The planning of this expansion required looking upward to God in worship, devotion and prayer. We consistently looked to God for the next step that He wanted us to take. We prayed that we were doing what God wanted rather than what we wanted. We prayed for direction when things didn’t go so well and we gave thanks when they did. We listened as God prompted us to join ministry teams, sacrifice resources, and be quiet so that we could hear his still small voice say, “wait.” We look upward especially on this dedication day, when we joyfully say, “This is God’s church in Gurnee.” We dedicate this building as a house of praise built on the one and only foundation of the church, Jesus Christ.

**Looking Outward:** The planning of this expansion required looking outward to a community that needs the precious Good News we have been blessed with. We had to ask “How big should we be?,” and then realized that until the people in our community had all found the Savior and a loving church family, the question answered itself. We needed to look outward to the future of our church, beyond our slice in history, just as countless others have in our own heritage of faith. We looked outward to the needs of the people of all ages and spiritual maturity in designing the components of the architectural plans. . .”<sup>4</sup>

The spiritual impact of this campaign upon the church had everything to do with how important the basic questions, restated in the dedication booklet, became to the momentum of the campaign. Underlying the whole campaign was the perfect tension created in the campaign title itself. “Growing for Christ” spoke to two parallel efforts of spiritual transformation: 1) the spiritual quest of an individual expanding and becoming what the Lord desired; and 2) the visible expression in a new building that gave testimony to a community being spiritually challenged to expand, grow, and change. Through this effort, the notion of “growing for Christ” became an important value expected and anticipated along the journey of faith.

### **The Spiritual Impact of Desiring to Become a Church of Small Groups**

Another value that became important to the faith journey movement is the value placed on community life. Not long after the creation of the new faith and mission statements, the church was afforded the opportunity to fill the recently vacated Associate Pastor position. After prayerful discussion, the church determined to hire an associate to focus on adult spiritual formation and community building. This was an inspired vision as stated in the church’s information form about the position: “This change reflects our

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<sup>4</sup> Potter, *Gurnee Community Church*, 5.

perception of God's plan for GCC and a move on our part to a greater commitment in the area of adult Christian Education and a desire to expand our current programs in the areas of small group ministries and spiritual gifts.”<sup>5</sup>

In March of 2000, the church filled this position and embarked on a concerted effort to build the spiritual lives of its adult population through small groups and expanded opportunities for spiritual formation and education. While the church had a functioning system for Bible study on Sunday morning as well as a few mid-week options, there still existed a longing to build the community life of the church through small groups. Under my leadership as the new Associate Pastor, along with several dedicated elders, the church explored the growing trends of small group ministry. The primary source of inspiration came from the church's connection to the Willow Creek Association, sponsor of an annual small groups' conference at the Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois. Those in leadership of the small group movement at GCC attended these conferences over the years and molded the small group ministry around some of the basic principles espoused by the association. The most important value was the desire of the faith community to be transformed from being a church “with” small groups to a church “of” small groups. Essentially, Donahue explains that this is a change in focus where group life is no longer just “one of our programs” but is an integral part of church life for everyone.<sup>6</sup> Thus, every age group, every form of gathering from study groups to boards, and so on would be organized to promote basic group values and authentic community. The church eagerly wanted to embrace this value

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<sup>5</sup> Gurnee Community Church, Church Information form for the position of Associate Pastor of Adult Ministries, September, 1998, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 14.

of healthy community life. As a result of some hard work as the new Associate Pastor and the inspired vision of the church elders, the church launched several “Growing Together Small Groups” with the primary vision that these groups would be gatherings of people interested in growing in their relationship to God by growing in their relationship with one another. The impact had broad implications for the church. Those in the Growing Together groups were taking valuable principles of community life and applying them to their church boards and ministry teams. The impact was broad enough that small group values and efforts were also adopted for use in the ministries to children and teens. Because of all this effort, community life at GCC became an important value in each member’s faith journey.

Gilbert Bilezikian rather boldly suggests that “without community, there is no Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Gareth Icenogle builds on this notion by recognizing that “the natural and simple demonstration of God’s communal image for humanity is the gathering of small groups.”<sup>8</sup> Understanding the value of community life then, it was not surprising that the impact of this movement was far-reaching in the life of the church. Quickly, many people connected to groups and a whole new core group of individuals emerged as the spiritual foundation of the church. Today, when new people connect to the ministry of the church, many seem to immediately recognize the emphasis placed on group life. Most new members are encouraged to recognize community life as an important value in their own spiritual journey, and they are quickly funneled into new groups. This group

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids and Barrington, IL: Zondervan and Willow Creek Resources, 1997), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 13.

movement had a significant impact on more individuals who began to have a growing appreciation of the necessity to consider their personal “faith journey.” It is safe to say that community life contributed to the infectious passion for spiritual growth at GCC.

### **The Quest for a “Faith Journey Roadmap”**

As early as 2002, several elders, in conjunction with the pastors, proposed an initial spiritual growth model which showed a winding road leading from “becoming a believer” to becoming, as GCC’s mission statement espoused, a “fully devoted follower of Christ.” Along the road were benchmark roles in the church such as becoming an usher, moving up through committee roles, eventually arriving at key leadership roles. Also along the road were spiritual benchmarks such as baptism and service experiences. This rather crude model was recognized from the beginning to be inadequate. The elders realized that identifying a roadmap would be very difficult to plot out, since everyone had different experiences and gifts to offer the church. As a result, the elders kept the development of a roadmap as a goal, but waited for further direction from the Holy Spirit to lead them.

With the increased interest in spiritual growth through community life at GCC, there also came an increased interest in identifying a spiritual growth plan. The question that many were asking was similar to the question the elders were asking already: “Is there a faith journey roadmap for the person of faith to follow that would lead to greater spiritual maturity?” or “Is there a pathway or outline that one should follow in order to become what God desires his followers to be?” This hoped-for plan began to be commonly referred to at GCC as the “Faith Journey Roadmap.” Finally, in 2003, the

elders, in conjunction with the church council, organized a team for the purpose of developing a “Faith Journey Road Map.” This team was charged with the task of developing a resource to help people identify benchmarks of spiritual growth. The people of GCC desired a tool to assist in identifying what any one individual might want to be doing through service and spiritual growth activities to move forward spiritually. Empowered by this vision, the church council called for the formation of a team to focus on determining a plan. This team included the pastors, two elders, and a few lay members. They soon became known as the “Faith Journey Roadmap Ministry Team.”

### **The Selection of Seven Spiritual Disciplines**

About the same time, late in 2002, the elders began to discuss the concept of spiritual disciplines as a model for explaining the breadth of our spiritual completeness. They believed that there were primary spiritual disciplines that were essential elements of a life of faith. This idea began to draw great interest by the Elder Board. With the combination of the Council’s desire to see progress toward a “Faith Journey Road Map,” and the elders’ interest in the spiritual disciplines, two of the elders and the Senior Pastor worked during the early part of 2003 to identify the spiritual disciplines common to the church. Through their efforts, six activities were identified as typical spiritual behavior at GCC. They included Bible study, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship, evangelism, and stewardship. The team put together a rough document filled with literature about spiritual growth in general and information about each so-called discipline. Then, as the elders’ work entered the summer of 2003, the board seemed to get stalled on what the next steps would be. Fortunately, at the same time, the church council was very

motivated about its effort to identify the “Faith Journey Roadmap” and the two efforts quickly merged.

The spiritual fervor was growing passionately in the life of the church leaders. As it would turn out, the Holy Spirit was also working through me, the Associate Pastor, and I desired to lay out a practical disciple-making model for the church. My contention was that people of the congregation would want to know where they ought to go and grow in their spiritual life. At the team’s first meeting, I introduced the newly formed team to a seven-step process for creating a disciple-making plan (see Appendix C).<sup>9</sup> As a group, the new team spent time considering Jesus’ development of the twelve disciples and Paul’s mission in establishing the Church. Most importantly, the group heard the words of Stanley Ott, author of *Vision for a Vital Church*, who states, “Vitality grows in a local church when we apply a biblically based, spirit driven ‘concept of ministry’ over a prolonged period.”<sup>10</sup> Having caught the vision and value a purposeful plan could have, the team spent the next several months working through the seven-step plan in order to produce the desired Faith Journey Roadmap.

At the end of their work together, the Faith Journey Roadmap Team made several conclusions and produced a booklet for the general population of the church. Early on, a working definition emerged for the Faith Journey Roadmap that had its roots in Romans 8: 28-30. It was described as “the process and tools by which we individually and collectively invite God through the Holy Spirit to direct our lives on a continuous path of

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<sup>9</sup> Greg Ogden and Gareth Icenogle, “Disciple-Making Plan” in the course manual for CF765: Growing a Disciple-Making Congregation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 4-15 August, 2003, 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> E. Stanley Ott, *Vision for a Vital Church: Shaping Ministry for Today’s Church* (Decatur, GA: CTS Press, 1994), 5.

spiritual growth as we journey towards full devotion to God.”<sup>11</sup> This definition led the way for the team to work toward developing a statement that best described a follower’s vision for his or her life in Christ. The statement the team developed gave the first clear definition of the long-used “faith journey” term. It stated: “My Faith Journey is a life long adventure of transformation by which my faith grows from spiritual birth towards spiritual maturity in Christ, who is the rock solid foundation of a relationship with God.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, the team added a personal purpose statement that they hoped could be embraced by all and would help give members a sense of direction for their “faith journey.” It read: “My heart for God is ever growing towards spiritual maturity as I desire to know God’s perfect love; to become more like Christ; and to live all aspects of my life through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup>

In this process of evaluating the spiritual journey of various individuals of the congregation and by looking at various saints of Christendom, it became clear that no one pathway is sufficient to produce the desired spiritual maturity. Rather, it was determined that every individual is different and comes to this journey from a different direction. The target is the same, yet all people approach spiritual maturity from different backgrounds, cultures, conversion experiences, and more. This observation will be discussed further in Chapter 3 as a critical value of this project.

At this point, the spiritual disciplines previously identified by the elders and the pastors emerged as an alternative approach toward spiritual maturity. The concept of “a

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<sup>11</sup> This definition was not included in the published booklet, but was formative in helping the team to develop their ideas.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart R. Merkel, ed., *My Faith Journey: A Guide to Growing Closer to Christ*, booklet, printed by Gurnee Community Church in Gurnee, Illinois, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

way” to spiritual maturity was replaced with a belief that there were certain values and habits that were necessary to help followers of Christ draw closer to the spiritual maturity they desired. To the original six so-called spiritual disciplines – Bible study, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship, evangelism, and stewardship – the team increased the list by one, adding “service.” These seven spiritual disciplines were determined to be the seven activities that, if participated in, would serve to bring more balance and help make one more well-rounded spiritually. Also it was believed that these seven disciplines would give the Christ-follower at GCC the best chance to move closer to the goal of spiritual maturity. Looking to God’s Word for affirmation of this idea, the team wrote: “The practice of spiritual disciplines fits us for running the spiritual race of faith to receive the crown of Christ which the apostle Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 when he says, ‘We do it to get a crown that will last forever’ (v. 25).”<sup>14</sup> These seven spiritual disciplines became the means by which the church could encourage individuals to reach the goal of spiritual maturity.

The final task the ministry team completed was to publish a guidebook that was to be available to and understandable by the general population of the church. The team created a simple guidebook titled *My Faith Journey: A Guide to Growing Closer to Christ*. The twenty-five-page guidebook included the church’s mission statement; the simple definitions mentioned above, a brief outline of the stages of the spiritual life from birth to maturity, an explanation of each discipline, various opportunities common to GCC, a self evaluation tool, and a detailed bibliography. This document is the best resource available for the person of faith at GCC, and it is very helpful in understanding

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

the “faith journey” model the church promotes for everyone. Initially, the guidebook was widely distributed and today is generally used for new member groups and as the welcome link on the church’s web site.

### **The Obstacles to Maneuver in the Spiritual Disciplines Journey**

There are many obstacles to spiritual growth and the spiritual disciplines journey, but nothing is more illustrative of this than reading the convicting words of James in his letter: “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2). Spiritual growth through the spiritual disciplines requires that one have a passionate desire to strengthen his or her relationship with God. The most obvious ways to accomplish this is through the primary activities of spiritual disciplines which are prayer and meditating on God’s Word. But the fact of the matter is that most people in today’s culture are distracted from these essential activities. Sociologist Tony Campolo recently wrote that without these activities “you cannot grow into the type of people God wants you to be,” and he claims that “it is only a matter of time before you drift into spiritual deadness and conformity with the many destructive values that permeate the dominant culture.”<sup>15</sup>

The grand and glorious vision and mission statements that lit the fire under the “faith journey” movement at GCC have faced several unique and sometimes common obstacles. The first and most obvious obstacle to this momentum was a sudden change in pastoral leadership. During the crucial period of time when the Faith Journey Roadmap Team was developing the guide for spiritual disciplines, Senior Pastor Bill Genda resigned his position. Bill Genda, who had served the church since 1991 and through its

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony Campolo, *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 41.

most prolific growth in membership and spiritual life, retired rather suddenly after thirteen years of service. While the health of the church was strong enough to sustain the guidebook's development with my assistance as the Associate Pastor, and while the church quickly filled the role of interim pastor with Pastor Chris Stephens who would eventually become the Senior Pastor, the church lost crucial momentum. The sudden distraction the church faced with having to fill the Senior Pastor role, dealing with the loss of a beloved pastor, and the change of worship leadership and style caused the spiritual leaders of the church to focus on more internal issues and less on the "faith journey" momentum. Despite the passionate efforts of the pastors to focus the church on the spiritual disciplines presented through the guidebook, the enthusiasm that had driven the elders and church council to focus the church toward these efforts did not return. While this momentum was lost, it was indeed fortunate that the new Senior Pastor was identified from within the congregation, as he and I are well suited to continue the "faith journey" momentum. However, until the church settles down from all its recent transition, these efforts will remain mildly stalled. The confidence and clarity of knowing where the church is going is, at present, muddled by some uncertainty of vision and mission under new pastoral leadership. An emerging passion to save the lost and focus on discipleship efforts is in the very early stages of development and may lead the church back onto the "faith journey" path.

While pastoral transition has been an obvious distraction, a broader obstacle is likely the philosophical and practical change necessary to become a church that promotes and empowers people in spiritual discipline activity. The biggest hurdle may be the need for a paradigm shift from traditional patterns of church participation to new emerging

patterns. GCC, just as any long-standing Christian community, faces the reality that they are who they are because of what they do, and the way they do it. A church that continually emphasizes worship as the primary activity and avenue for spiritual growth will struggle to guide individuals to other spiritual exercises. As this ministry focus paper will demonstrate in Part Two, the testimony of most, if not all, great Christian spiritual leaders and saints is that life-empowering spiritual transformation came about through personal endeavors and quests for spiritual growth. Worship is not sufficient in itself to have the transformational impact on the individual who desires to experience God to the fullest. Worship, in its fullest expression, is a celebration of life transformation, and a community affirmation of the individuals' growing relationship with Christ. Worship is an outward expression to God reflective of what one is becoming; it is not the means to becoming. Personal efforts toward spiritual growth in addition to worship must be emphasized in the Church. Most people, however, see worship as their primary resource for spiritual growth and only marginally participate in worship as a celebration of their life transformation. This common misconception of worship's purpose is an obstacle in the spiritual discipline movement at GCC. As long as worship remains the primary reason the church exists, the harder it will be to move toward seeing spiritual disciplines as the primary means toward spiritual growth and maturity.

Another obstacle, similarly related to the tradition of worship, is spiritual complacency. It is often said that Christianity in America is three thousand miles wide (extending from Maine to California), but it is only a half inch deep. Complacency in one's spiritual life is a constant and hard-to-remove obstacle to spiritual maturity and

growth. Most people are satisfied to have accepted Christ into their hearts and acknowledge a sincere love and faith in God. Many of the people of GCC are prone to fall into this trap. The faith statement of the church tends to affirm this with a statement such as “God's grace has been extended to us through our faith in Christ Jesus” (see Appendix B). The language in these core statements of the church and the message of assurance often emphasized throughout the church can be misleading and affirming of an attitude of satisfaction with having acknowledged faith in Christ. Too many people have either been led to believe that faith in Christ is enough for salvation or that participation in a faith community will suffice in fulfilling their spiritual need in life. As noted in the introduction, Dallas Willard contends that churches today have made discipleship “optional” by not stressing the value and necessity of the spiritually disciplined life.<sup>16</sup>

Contributing to this complacency are the cultural distractions of society common to people in the North America. Life in the United States is full of activity which at its deepest roots is driven by a movement towards greater secularization and a consumerist culture with its message that more money will bring greater security. A consumerism culture bombards everyone with the notion that if one is more active, more successful, and has accumulated more, then life will be much more fulfilling. Campolo writes that “advertising, with its pervasive use of sex as a marketing tool, lures us into believing that our ultimate desires will be gratified by the purchase of goods available in our shopping malls.”<sup>17</sup> Most people, inside and outside the church, are finding the greatest fulfillment in life to be the ability to have a growing and active consumer life. The drive towards

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<sup>16</sup> Willard, *The Great Omission*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Campolo, *Letters to a Young Evangelical*, 227.

consumerism is much more interesting and fulfilling than a personal drive towards discipleship through spiritual exercise. This is a great obstacle to the person on a journey of faith and spiritual growth, because the pressure to conform to this consuming cultural value is very heavy. Campolo contends that the evangelical Church will be “doomed by our relentless consumerism.”<sup>18</sup> How can the Church point greater attention towards God when everyone has the culturally ingrained message that everything in life revolves around oneself?

The final obstacle to this movement of discipleship through spiritual disciplines is the lack of role models. GCC is not unique in its lack of role models who demonstrate the benefits of the participation and commitment to spiritual exercises. The role models of spiritual disciplines have always been few and far between. But at times, when these spiritual role models have become visible to the Church, there has been a migration to witness and model what the spiritualists have demonstrated. Jesus himself drew hundreds of followers because of his spiritual wisdom. After him came the Apostles, then the desert fathers of the fourth century through to the Benedictine movement. Later came the “band” meetings of John Wesley, where the role of spiritual discipline caught the eye of the believer and the interested follower of Christ. A clear obstacle towards spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines at GCC will be the lack of discipleship mentors who demonstrate the impact of following Christ through the spiritually disciplined faith journey. Identifying and training disciplined spiritual leaders will be essential to the growth and expansion of this vision for spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 229.

It is the objective of the rest of this ministry focus paper to demonstrate the practical possibilities for how GCC can overcome these obstacles and prevail as a community that fosters growth towards discipleship; the primary means of which will be the active participation in spiritual disciplines that transform lives and draw people to experience and witness God in their life. The plans and objectives of the following pages will show how GCC can unite in overcoming these obstacles of misplaced worship values, consumerism, complacency, and lack of role models in order to prevail as a community that is intent on raising individuals for a life of discipleship. The effort will be difficult; it will be counter to the culture of the typical North American and the established Church; but it can be practical enough to ignite a growing fire towards fuller devotion to God.

PART TWO  
BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

## CHAPTER 3

### SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

#### **Spiritual Fingerprints: Everyone's Faith Journey Travels a Unique Road**

One of the common characteristic of today's consumerism culture is the notion that everything can be captured, boxed, and sold in mass quantities. People can have whatever ever they want in its complete expression, and their neighbors can have the same too. Packaging spiritual growth into a neatly organized plan is nearly impossible because Christian spirituality is a unique expression in each individual and requires personal efforts unique to that individual. Because modernity has driven the world to believe that everything can be packaged or organized succinctly, many people find it difficult to venture too far on the spiritual journey which is much harder to distinctly package because of people's diverse character and backgrounds. The pathway to God is not a scientific journey; it is a spiritual journey on a road less obvious and one particularly unique to the individual, like a fingerprint.

Where a scientific journey has a clear and obvious goal, the spiritual journey is much more mysterious, a venture into the unknown. There is on the spiritual journey always the sense that where believers are at any given time on the journey of faith is not completely where God wants them to be and that where they are going is not fully obvious or revealed. The journey is always advancing as people continually search for God's purposes in their lives. This mystery makes each person's journey very unique. However, while the journey is unique, the destination the Christ-follower desires from his or her journey is the deeper understanding and fuller experience or revelation of God and the quest for clarity to participate in the purposes of God. Consequently, no two journeys

are alike, just as no two fingerprints are alike, and this is often difficult in the minds of those in the present culture who have the embedded expectation of a packaged plan. Hagberg and Guelich, who suggest there are some common stages along the journey, agree that the fingerprint of the journey of faith is unique. They comment that the journey is “not to be duplicated, because of the particular people and events along the way.”<sup>1</sup> All too often the Church fails to recognize this and has difficulty launching people towards the exploration of their personal and unique journeys.

Allen has observed this and may know why it is difficult; he suggests that all the great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and others agreed that “life was a movement away from illusion, error, or sin toward enlightenment, truth and renewal.”<sup>2</sup> Thus he says Christian spirituality should not be a “personal hobby” but rather entered into as a “human enterprise.”<sup>3</sup> Allen says emphatically that failure to recognize the journey in life this way is to “fail to be human” and will result in “great deprivation.”<sup>4</sup> The faith journey is always mysterious as no one knows fully what the journey is going to reveal and where it is going to end up. The uniqueness of everyone’s journey makes it very difficult to compare one person’s journey to the next.

The uniqueness of the faith journey in the follower of Christ makes this project very difficult. Charting a course and plotting a pathway to travel is not easy. Believers at GCC are looking for a guide and a group of people to join with on that journey. They desire a packaged plan, a new program, a resource they can buy into in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Hagberg and Guelich. *The Critical Journey*, xix.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

experience God more fully. But these packages are few and far between and they are only sufficient to a certain point because in the end, each person must be responsible for traveling his or her own journey to God, down his or her own unique road. Clyde Reid, as noted in the Introduction, refers to the inability of the Church to help push people on to their own journeys as enabling the “evading” of God.<sup>5</sup> Reid suggested that too often “we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience.”<sup>6</sup> All too often the well-intentioned efforts fail to push the desiring follower of Christ out of the nest to venture on their personal quests for God. Often, this is due to the fact that most in the Church are stuck on their journeys for lack of real role models to direct them. What is more, even if the leadership of the Church knew they were to help others, they would have no idea what direction to point people in, nor would they know exactly what they are sending them out to discover about themselves and God. This chapter will provide greater clarity regarding giving this direction and some benchmarks of spiritual maturity will be revealed to help the traveler on the spiritual journey.

### **Spiritual Formation, Maturity and Experiencing God Understood**

Fortunately, just as all fingerprints may be different, they also look very similar and thus it is important to this ministry focus paper to better understand the similarities in the journey to start. While Hagberg and Guelich recognize the uniqueness of a person’s faith journey, they also suggest that “all journeys of faith are similar because we are

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<sup>5</sup> Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 41, quoted in Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

people who do fairly predictable things.”<sup>7</sup> So in fact the early stages of the journey are similar because the Church orders and structures one’s initial spiritual life. The Church becomes, for many, that narrow gate each person traditionally must venture through to find God. Yet, as noted earlier, the Church, if it is not careful, can also become a roadblock to one progressing along the journey. Understanding that caution, it is crucial that the Church better appreciate and understand the predictable and most common stages of faith so as not to become an obstacle to anyone’s spiritual growth.

Hagberg and Guelich have suggested that the fingerprint of the spiritual journey is characterized by six stages that occur on the journey of faith. These stages include: “1) the recognition of God, 2) the life of discipleship, 3) the productive life, 4) the journey inward, 5) the journey outward, and 6) the life of love.”<sup>8</sup> Hagberg and Guelich believe that these stages or similar expressions of these stages are evident in the thoughts and writings of many Christian theologians and influential spiritual role models through the ages. They include in their list: Augustine; Julian of Norwich; Francis of Assisi; Ignatius of Loyola; Soren Kierkegaard; and most recently, Scott Peck.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Julian of Norwich, inspired by passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18, reflects in her writing on the processes of her own revelation of God. In one way she discusses her pilgrimage through five images of the bleeding of Jesus in the Passion, and in a second way through three stages of exposure to God: 1) beginning, 2) inward understanding, and 3) revelation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, xix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Colledge Julian and James Walsh, *Showings*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 218, 269.

Also, Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola's most famous theological composition, the *Spiritual Exercises*, is a well-ordered manual of meditations, rules, and practices culled from his own experiences. Ignatius of Loyola considered this a guide for the Christian's journey from purgation to enlightenment to union with Christ. It has been suggested that the *Spiritual Exercises* were ideal for the "person who sincerely desires to discover how he or she can please and serve God best."<sup>11</sup> A recent study done by the Willow Creek Association is affirming this again for today's generation; they identify four primary stages which include: 1) exploring Christ, 2) growing in Christ, 3) close to Christ, and then 4) Christ centered.<sup>12</sup> The Willow Creek Association agrees also that spiritual practices are important at all the stages although they suggest that "they become most important for those who are more spiritually mature."<sup>13</sup>

In essence, this journey through the stages of faith best describes the word "spirituality." Spirituality is that process by which one draws closer to God. It was noted previously that spirituality, according to Hagberg and Guelich, is "the way in which we live out our response to God."<sup>14</sup> Allen adds to this notion that spirituality is in particular a "focus on the Holy Spirit who brings to fullness in our lives and in the Christian community the work of God achieved in Christ."<sup>15</sup> What all this means is that spirituality is an intersecting of one's efforts to experience and respond to God along with God's

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<sup>11</sup> Ignatius and George E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 51.

<sup>12</sup> Hawkins, Greg L. and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 18-19.

effort, through the Holy Spirit, to reveal himself and his particular purposes to the follower of Christ. This makes spirituality dynamic because it is two dimensional, a shared process involving the individual's efforts to open his or her heart to receiving God and the Holy Spirit's ability to interpret God in a way that God can fill the heart that is opening wider to receive him. Webber puts it more simply by saying Christian spirituality is "God's passionate embrace of us," and "our passionate embrace of God."<sup>16</sup>

Spiritual formation is similar in every Christ-follower in the transformational effect that takes place as a result of personal effort and the activity of the Holy Spirit. All along the journey there is dynamic interaction between what efforts the individual is making and what efforts of the Holy Spirit are being received into the heart of the individual. Spiritual formation is a shared work between the individual and God as they formulate their relationship. Webber says this is like "two sides of a single coin" because on one hand, "*God makes us spiritual,*" and on the other, "*we live the spiritual life.*"<sup>17</sup> Along this journey, there is assistance from various sources, the most obvious being the Church and its affirming community of followers and disciples. Others that assist in this journey are immediate family, peers, and spiritual guides that come in various forms including books, counselors, mentors and even institutions. These tools help the individual, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to formulate a dynamic relationship with God. All this then helps the Christ-follower manage the experiences of life from a perspective of being a spiritual person.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Spiritual formation is also a maturing process as the person of faith travels the journey through the stages of spirituality. Hagberg and Guelich suggest there are stages characterized by maturing processes including “recognition” of God, “learning” from others, and “belonging” to the community.<sup>18</sup> But if spiritual formation is a maturing process, is there a point in which one can declare himself or herself spiritually mature? Maturity is characterized by ripeness, a state of wisdom or even an advanced level of experience. For the Christian community to identify any one person as spiritually mature, what criterion might be considered? Four general themes best summarize the benchmarks of spiritual maturity. These benchmarks are the characteristics and state of awareness common to those who have become fully developed in their faith and share a deeper understanding of God.

The first benchmark is: Christ’s life is the perfect model for all. For those advancing in faith and spiritual awareness, a benchmark occurs when it becomes apparent to the Christian that Christ is not only one’s savior but also the perfect model of how to live one’s life. A person reaches a level of maturity when modeling the life of Christ becomes the person’s all-encompassing endeavor. Hagberg and Guelich suggest that at this stage “Christ’s life represents not just an example but a model for our lives.”<sup>19</sup> This means one is willing to replicate Christ’s life, or as Hagberg and Guelich suggest, “We willingly are obedient to God’s call, even, if necessary, unto death.”<sup>20</sup> The Apostle Paul recognizes this value in Philippians 2:5 when he emphatically suggests, “Your attitude

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<sup>18</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 33, 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Paul emphasizes that one’s mind and heart must be focused on practicing life as Jesus did, sharing in Christ’s behavior. Jac Muller points out in his exegesis that Paul’s point is to drive home the necessity to “contemplate this in yourselves,”<sup>21</sup> that is, to contemplate how to fashion one’s own character to be the same as that of Christ. George Arthur Buttrick, in his commentary titled *The Interpreter’s Bible*, suggests that this is a pinnacle of Paul’s writings because Paul lays out the “first definition of the test for a Christian” which is “a disposition of mind.” Buttrick points out that this disposition of mind is more important as a test of spiritual identity in Christ than “creeds, sacraments, rites, or correct morals.”<sup>22</sup> The first benchmark of spiritual maturity, therefore, is an attitude changing to be more like that of Christ.

The second benchmark is love, compassion and laying down one’s life. Building on this emphasis of a passionate desire to model Christ’s character is a fuller expression of what it means to love. Jesus’ love for humanity was perfect (1 John 4:17-19). Through Christ’s ministry, unconditional love became the symbol of the Christian life. The spiritually mature believer is characterized by simply living love by being filled with compassion and concern for others. Hagberg and Guelich point out that when one is “in constant dialogue with God, our lives are permeated with unconditional love.”<sup>23</sup> Henri Nouwen also emphasizes this love and compassion as the tallest virtue of ministry, a

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<sup>21</sup> Jac J. Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 77.

<sup>22</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), Volume XI, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

value not reserved for the clergy but for everyone of faith. Nouwen says the fullest expression of love and of Christian ministry is “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>24</sup> This is the loving expression the savior gave his people when he died on the cross, and it is the most loving action believers can give when they are driven to sacrifice their interests in order to give new life to another.

This powerful love is reflected in Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians in Philippians 2:5-8. Paul writes:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

In his explanation of what it means to share in the attitude of Christ, Paul emphasizes the servant nature of Christ and his grand humility. These were evidence of Christ’s ability to put others before himself. This behavior of Christ is the best expression of love. Paul points out that Christ willingly died on the cross for the sake of every human being. Christ was overwhelmed by love for God’s people and so the person who shares this value has realized an important benchmark to spirituality. In fact, this benchmark of love is nowhere better explained by Paul than in Philippians 2. Gordon Fee notes that in this passage the truth about God is revealed “that God is love and that his love expresses itself in self-sacrifice for the sake of those he loves.”<sup>25</sup> Spiritual maturity is marked by a movement towards this self-sacrificing love and this is another important benchmark.

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<sup>24</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 114.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 97.

Another clear manifestation of spiritual maturity is recognition of the Holy Spirit's presence, and this is the third benchmark. This may be the clearest expression of what it means to experience God. The Holy Spirit allows one to see God working in the world and in one's life. Hagberg and Guelich suggest that when one is filled with the Spirit, "So pervasive is the presence of the Spirit in our lives that we may not even be particularly conscious of doing something of the Spirit."<sup>26</sup> The Spirit's presence becomes synonymous with an individual's instinctive character. Believers have a clearer understanding of their spiritual gifts that are given them to glorify God. Furthermore, the fruits of the Spirit are ripening all over their lives and in their interactions with those around them.

Throughout Paul's letters there is emphasis on the Holy Spirit's presence in spiritual maturity. There is emphasis on the necessity of "fellowship with the Spirit" in Paul's definitive summary in Philippians 2:1. He declares boldly that if there is "fellowship with the spirit" there is shared character with Christ and the spirit governs and motivates one's particular actions of spiritual character. The "fellowship with the spirit" is an indication of the level of trust embraced by the follower and an indication that the person of faith has received the "power bestowed by Christ."<sup>27</sup> This brings to clarity what Paul writes in Romans 8:9, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you." The life of the spiritually mature is empowered by the Holy Spirit that has taken up residence in one's soul because of the increased trust in God. Thus this third benchmark of spiritual maturity is an

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<sup>26</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 43.

expression of the embracing relationship that occurs between the emerging disciple and God who is manifested in the Holy Spirit.

The fourth and final benchmark of spiritual maturity is selfless living and living for eternity. This benchmark might be best illustrated by the life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. When one gets to this point, one's personal needs, wants, and passions move from the back seat to literally being discarded along the road. These believers deliberately give up their lives materially, physically, mentally, and emotionally for service to others and they have no sense of loss in letting it all go. Allen calls this reaching "*apatheia*" which he best describes as being able to model Christ's love and live by the spirit without any "undue distraction."<sup>28</sup> In essence, the follower of Christ has freely abandoned any reward this life might bring to focus solely on the life of eternity that lies ahead. This is what Paul means when he says early to the Philippians, "for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This is ultimately the new life one seeks in their rebirth of faith; it is the culmination of the search for true meaning. Gordon Fee explains that this is more than imitating God; it is actually having "the mind of Christ, developed in us, so that we too can bear God's image in our attitudes and relationships within the Christian community – and beyond."<sup>29</sup> Spiritual maturity is ultimately benchmarked by one's fully embracing Christ as Lord and this is most evident when followers eagerly go to their knees and confess Christ as Lord of their lives and the world. For such people there is a passionate embrace of God and an eagerness to share eternity with him. Bowing the knee according to Fee is "a common idiom for doing

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<sup>28</sup> Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 102.

homage, sometimes in prayer, but always in recognition of the authority of the god or person before whom one is kneeling.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is an acknowledgment that Jesus is “supreme.”<sup>31</sup> Spiritually mature people reach this benchmark when they join with the society of saints, both in heaven and on earth, who truly confess the supremacy of Christ over all things and over all other gods, and that there is none like him.<sup>32</sup>

These four benchmarks summarize the attitudes and values that increasingly become pervasive in the maturing Christian. While the character of a mature Christian is similar, it remains true that all who walk the journey arrive through a unique pathway with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore these transformational benchmarks of spiritual maturity are the values toward which the Church can point individuals as they grow and mature in faith. What is more, as this ministry focus paper will demonstrate, it is spiritual disciplines of various sorts that best help followers of Christ position themselves to make the journey towards spiritual maturity and the greater experience of God. In the next section the process of moving towards spiritual maturity will be more clearly drafted. Emphasis will be given on how spiritual disciplines, practices, and rituals of family and church influence people along their spiritual journeys.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>31</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Buttrick's reference says: “The enduring supremacy of Christ's revelation will not depend on the support of theologians or the vote of the churches. It will rest on the simple fact that to the end of time no one can show us any power other than the love that stooped to earth in him, which can win over our human spirits from enslavement to self. This power unto salvation contradicted all the expectations of authorities, religious and secular, in Jesus' own day. And it will forever contradict every way of imposing on the human will from outside which tries to supplant this inside persuasion and constraint. Nothing else can save man from himself and at the same time leave him his freedom.” Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 51-52.

### **Spiritual Growth Happens through Spiritual Disciplines**

Rick Warren, in his popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, points out that “everyone is driven by something.”<sup>33</sup> No matter who one has become or what stage in life one is in, everyone is driven by something. Everybody is being guided, controlled, or directed in a certain direction from the first moment of birth. Children are driven by their parents who set them on the best possible growth plan and eventually the children mature enough to take the reins of their own growth and development. Similarly, spiritual life takes on this same pattern. From the time individuals begin to recognize their religious culture, they explore spirituality by the very nature of the spiritual experiences offered to them by their parents. Parents may bring their children to church, put them in Sunday school, invite them to pray before their meals, or read Bible stories to them while they drift off to sleep each night. Spiritual formation begins for most in this environment where people are exposed to the spirituality of their families. At this early stage and for most of their young lives the most influential people in children’s spiritual lives are the parents. Ben Freudenburg agrees that “parents are the primary Christian Educators in the church and the family is the God-ordained institution for faith building in children and youth and for the passing of faith from one generation to the next.”<sup>34</sup> The familiarity with spiritual practices and disciplines starts very early, and it starts in the home and rarely in the church.

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<sup>33</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Vital Ministry, 1998), 21.

Similarly the exposure to spirituality in the family is the beginning of participation in spiritual disciplines. A beginning experience, for example, includes the rituals of prayer, attendance at church, and so on where one begins to formulate, at its simplest level, spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise that affects personal spiritual formation. Through these activities, the children or young people are offered and invited to make for themselves a “spiritual life” which Willard refers to as any range of activity in which people “cooperatively interact with God.”<sup>35</sup> In this regard, any activity of greater or lesser degree which allows the person to cooperatively interact with God becomes a simple spiritual discipline when it is repeatedly participated in either willingly or as routine of one’s family life. Donald Whitney points out additionally that this activity is spiritual discipline in so far as that personal or corporate spiritual activity to some degree is able to “promote spiritual growth.”<sup>36</sup> His point is that some practices or spiritual activities that lose their ability to promote spiritual growth eventually are no longer formative disciplines but rather meaningless activities. So it is important to recognize that spiritual discipline, at its simplest level, is any spiritual activity that drives the spiritual formation of individuals forward in their faith journeys.

### Unintentional Maturity

As we explore how spiritual disciplines expose people to a deeper understanding and experience of God, it is important then to recognize that there are some spiritual

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<sup>35</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 67.

<sup>36</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 17.

disciplines that unintentionally impact personal spiritual growth. This spiritual maturity comes about by virtue of one's participation in spiritual experiences that are less intentional and more common to a way of life. During young childhood, as noted above, spirituality is out of the individual's control. Spirituality begins to emerge early in childhood as each child is born into a unique family where a particular culture is lived out and conversely influences spiritual development. All families have a spiritual life background and all cultures are influenced by a spiritual element. In the primarily Judeo-Christian culture in America, there are elements of spirituality that are deeply rooted. While these spiritual roots are constantly being challenged by the changing culture, the roots go very deep. Nearly every family has a heritage that is generally framed by some religious affiliation. Even those who grow up in a non-religion-practicing household in America are to some degree influenced by these Judeo-Christian values. Therefore, the religious background into which children are born significantly impacts their spiritual formation in childhood and in many cases into adulthood. Some basic spiritual disciplines are likely to be implanted in a child's character because of these influences.

For the most part, these basic spiritual practices are unintentional influences; they are practiced and participated in as a family, culture, and church. Robert Fulghum has organized an exploration into the rituals of American culture and the value these rituals play in life and in spiritual formation. He suggests that life's rituals of birth, baptism, marriage, parenthood, death and the funeral are participated in as experiences and practices that influence one's spiritual formation. He says "nobody lives without rituals" and "rituals create sacred time," time to dwell in the "eternal," and they "soften the

phases of life when we are reminded how hard it is to be human.”<sup>37</sup> The strength of his text is in his awareness of how powerful and influential rituals are to the formation of the spiritual life. Participation in these rituals is remembered with such vivid clarity that they carry significance in one’s formation as a human and a person of God. All the various rituals, and particularly those that are tied to sacred traditions in the Church, are at the foundation of spiritual formation. All the religious rituals of family life and one’s particular culture are unintentional practices of spirituality. In an exploration of the spiritual disciplines, it is necessary to include in the study an acknowledgement of these valued cultural practices and to recognize the value they play in spiritual development and the significance they have in the heart’s preparation for personal and intentional spiritual discipline.

Furthermore, looking more closely at the influence of one’s church background, it is again important to point out that ritual or routine participation in church, at whatever age, is an unintentional participation in spiritual discipline. Attending worship routinely is a practiced spiritual discipline. Participation in a study group or a small group is a spiritual discipline. Volunteering oneself to serve in the church or in some form of Christian outreach of service is a practice of spiritual discipline. Regularly giving time to personal or corporate prayer is a spiritual discipline. We call these spiritual activities unintentional in that they are often participated in by virtue of one’s family and cultural values referenced above, and by virtue of one’s choice to associate with a particular religious community, in this case the church. They are unintentional in that the practice is so common to the Christian community that they are experienced less as an exercise of

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 20, 113.

spiritual growth and more as a responsibility or expectation of one's participation. For many in the church, participation in these rituals happens without there ever being much consideration as to why one is driven to do it. Many only practice these simple disciplines because they know they should, from watching others and modeling their family traditions. No doubt there is spiritual growth and spiritual formation in these practices how ever simple it may be.

For the most part, these primary practices of the church were the foundation of the spiritual disciplines identified in the *My Faith Journey* guidebook, a booklet written by and for GCC that formulates a "Faith Journey Roadmap" for the congregation. In 2004, when the booklet was written, the church identified seven practices common to participation at GCC and labeled them as "spiritual disciplines." These seven disciplines include worship, prayer, Bible study, community, service, evangelism, and generosity (or stewardship).<sup>38</sup> While GCC made a point to categorize these practices as spiritual disciplines, they may be misconstrued as such. As outlined in the guidebook they are described as the simple activities that are most common to church life. Depending on how one understands these seven activities they may or may not be understood fully as spiritual disciplines in the truest sense of the meaning. Participating in these activities may give rise to spiritual formation but they may better be understood as the common practices in most Christian churches today. Some might wish to conclude that these are the spiritual disciplines most necessary for spiritual formation and many in the church might be satisfied with this designation. However, most do not practice them as intentional spiritual disciplines but rather participate in these activities out of cultural

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<sup>38</sup> Stuart R. Merkel, ed., *My Faith Journey: A Guide to Growing Closer to Christ*, booklet, printed by Gurnee Community Church in Gurnee, Illinois, 2004, 6.

tradition and ritual. For the purposes of this ministry focus paper, they will be considered basic spiritual practices of the Christian life or activities common to Christian culture.

### Intentional Maturity

Turning the tables now, intentional maturity occurs when the spiritual discipline or activity that the individual participates in is sought after intentionally for the purpose of putting one in a place to experience spiritual growth. This level of spiritual discipline is characterized by a personal drive to point one's heart towards a deeper understanding and experience of God. Willard points out that "the spiritual life is a life of interaction with a personal God, and it is pure delusion to suppose that it can be carried on sloppily." Going on, he points out that "the will to do his will can only be carried into reality as we *take measures* to be ready and able to meet and draw upon him in our actions."<sup>39</sup> Willard, Reid and the latest Willow Creek research, all mentioned above, suggest that for far too long the Church has promoted sloppy and often ineffective efforts to experience God. Intentional spiritual maturity is a value with which the Church should be re-acquainted. Jesus explained to his disciples that they should "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29). The yoke is heavy and it is binding. It is used to keep the working animal focused and controlled. But Jesus' yoke is light because he carries most of the burden. The hope for believers (according to Jesus) is in their ability to learn from Jesus, and, like a yoke, this learning effort is focused and intentional. According to Buttrick, this common rabbinical image to accept the yoke "is to put off the yoke of

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<sup>39</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 153.

earthly monarchies and worldly care.”<sup>40</sup> The imploring of Christ to “take” the yoke suggests that the bondage of Christ’s yoke is a “beneficent bondage” focused on reverence to God.<sup>41</sup> Maturity and growth come when one intentionally puts on a yoke which guides his or her direction. This, in essence, is the function of spiritual disciplines, and may very well be the yoke to which Jesus refers.

Intentional maturity happens, as Willard states in the quote above, when the followers of Christ “take matters” into their own hands to venture towards discovering God on their own effort. In most cases, this effort is hard to do corporately, due to people’s particular spiritual “fingerprints.” However, because the spiritual journey is similar at times, there are appropriate times to make this a corporate venture, but doing it with two or three is much easier than with ten to twelve or more. Regardless, even if done corporately, the venture of the soul’s inward journey to God is personal to each individual. It may be spurred on by corporate activity but it is a personal and sacred experience of the individual. St Augustine remarked in the first paragraph of *The Confessions* that God created people for relationship with him and that “our hearts are restless until it rests” in God.<sup>42</sup> Intentional maturity, then, is a focused personal effort enhanced by corporate activity for the sake of personal spiritual growth.

This focused personal effort is generally characterized by some common characteristics. The first characteristic is that people will choose an activity or spiritual discipline that focuses on a particular spiritual weakness. When people exercise to build

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<sup>40</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 390.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1st ed., trans. by John Kenneth Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 43.

strength, they focus on the muscles that are weakest. When people exercise to build their spiritual lives, they should also focus on the spiritual muscles that are the weakest. Each spiritual discipline, when practiced generally, focuses attention on areas of spiritual weakness that the individual might like to strengthen. Jeremy Taylor, in the dedicatory preface to his classic on holy living (1650), points out the necessity to choose wisely disciplines that will make a difference. He writes, “If you intendest heartily to serve god, and avoid sin in any one instance, refuse not the hardest and most severe advice that is prescribed in order to it, though possibly is be a stranger to thee; for whatsoever it be, custom will make it easy.”<sup>43</sup> Taylor also notes that if presented with several options or disciplines, one should “observe which of them fits thy person or the circumstances of thy need, and use it rather than the other, that by this means thou mayest be engaged to watch and use spiritual arts and observations about thy soul.”<sup>44</sup> Truly, spiritual disciplines are tried and true forms of spiritual activity that have proven through time to bring transformation and provide strength and a deeper understanding and experience of God to the eager follower of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of the spiritual disciplines that “such customs have only one purpose – to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done.”<sup>45</sup> When selected carefully to address a particular need, life transformation happens with great impact and the purposes of God are more often fulfilled.

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<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Taylor and Thomas K. Carroll, *Selected Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 441.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 169.

A second characteristic common to intentional maturity is a commitment of significant time to spiritual practices. By practicing a spiritual discipline over time, maturity occurs because a spiritual value has been exercised routinely enough to go deep into the soul and cause permanent or long-term transformation. This is why real maturity rarely happens when a spiritual discipline is engaged in for a brief period of time, such as during a retreat. American culture is unfortunately built on this value of instant gratification, but this value is not available to the practice of spiritual disciplines. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. points out that “instant fulfillment of needs and desires allows no time for the long and rigorous path of disciplines.” “Yet,” he writes, “it is the path that brings true and lasting fulfillment, not the brief and fleeting appearances of fulfillment that disappears in the next moment”<sup>46</sup> The use of the term “discipline” suggests that there is or will be time engaged in an exercise for the purpose of spiritual maturity.

A third characteristic often recognizable of intentional maturity is that the spiritual activity has had visible impact on one’s daily routine in life. Richard Foster emphasizes this point at the beginning of his landmark text on spiritual disciplines. He says of spiritual discipline that “the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life,” in relationships from home to beyond one’s neighborhood.<sup>47</sup> Thus participating in a spiritual discipline ought to have a visible impact on how one’s life is lived in private and in public. Michael Wilkins, in his book, *In His Image*, refers to this as an “inside-out mentality” and suggests that when one focuses attention on “growing in

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<sup>46</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 102-103.

<sup>47</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1.

spiritual intimacy with Jesus,” God prompts change outwardly.<sup>48</sup> He goes on to say that “as we develop His trusting, obedient nature, inward changes in our attitude toward God and others will result in changes in our outer behavior, changes that can be seen in the actions of our body.”<sup>49</sup> Wilkins also discusses how the biblical Pharisees missed this important value when they spent greater time trying to make their appearance look clean while neglecting the inner life values. Inner life transformation is absolutely necessary for life transformation of one’s outward behavior and character.

Intentional maturity happens when people bring the abundance of God into their lives in a fresh way. A challenge of this ministry focus paper will be to stress the necessity for individual choice and initiative in selecting spiritual disciplines that are rarely prescribed and more often discovered along the journey. There is no general prescription for what list of activities or disciplines one should partake in to see this kind of spiritual maturity. Rather, intentional maturity is the process of discovering which spiritual discipline or disciplines will cause the greatest growth in the individual at a particular time and place in his or her life. It is certain that these three characteristics – focusing on a particular weakness, committing a significant amount of time, and effecting change in one’s life as a result – will be common in whatever avenue is chosen. The necessity of being intentional is what makes spiritual growth dynamic. An understanding and experience of God expands while individuals travel further along the journey towards spiritual maturity.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 56.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

### **Identifying Disciplines that Stretch the Heart and Offer a Direct Encounter with God**

Thirty years ago, Richard Foster suggested in his classic book on spiritual disciplines that “today there is an abysmal ignorance of the most simple and practical aspects of nearly all the classic Spiritual Disciplines.”<sup>50</sup> Despite drawing awareness to these forgotten or neglected practices, the spiritual disciplines have had very little impact in the Church. In fact, Webber has noted that the landscape of spirituality has changed in the last five decades and as a result there is a “new spirituality.”<sup>51</sup> This new spirituality is influenced by the new age movement and has resulted in a “simplified Christian commitment to the very basic emphasis of an experience of Christ.”<sup>52</sup> Webber is hopeful that there can be a “return to an ancient spirituality” in which spirituality is centered in “God’s story as a comprehensive vision of the world, its history, and the meaning of human existence.”<sup>53</sup> Fortunately, there has been a resurgence of dialogue in these areas and more and more resources are becoming available to help followers of Christ choose to practice spiritual disciplines. Foster also noted that for the first-century Christian, the disciplines of fasting, meditation, worship, celebration and so on were “common knowledge,” and very little instruction was given or needed in order to practice these and other similar disciplines.<sup>54</sup> But today, practicing spiritual disciplines is foreign to most in

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<sup>50</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3.

a church like GCC. At GCC most are simply unfamiliar with various spiritual practices and disciplines, so it is difficult for these followers of Christ to know where to begin.

Again, it is important to remember that spiritual maturity best happens when one makes an effort to strengthen the weaker aspects of his or her spiritual life. That being the case, Mulholland suggests that disciplines are “the guardrails that keep the vehicle of our being on the road that leads through the stages of the pilgrimage toward wholeness in the image of Christ.”<sup>55</sup> If believers will consider that the spiritual disciplines may function as “guardrails” then they might desire to examine their spiritual lives to find out where they are often going off the road. Where does the follower of Christ commonly get sidetracked and thrown off the journey? Making an effort to choose spiritual disciplines that will help keep oneself on the road to spiritual maturity will do just that if believers are able to give themselves completely to the particular practices. As noted above, Paul’s letter to the Philippians is crucial to understanding spiritual maturity. Therefore, Paul’s instruction to his friends in Philippi affirms the necessity to choose wisely and practice hard the disciplines of spirituality. Paul writes, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13). Paul notes in this passage how important it is to “work out” or give attention to one’s spiritual life and that it will require challenge and emotion that is intensive. Muller outlines this by noting that “the believer is called to self activity, to the active pursuit of the will of God, to the promotion of the spiritual life in himself, to the realization of the virtues of the Christian life, and to a

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<sup>55</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 76.

personal application of salvation.”<sup>56</sup> Paul also notes at the end of this passage that while someone is working it out, God is good and faithful and assists them by also working in them for his purposes. Muller explains this by contending that the disciple “must *work out* what God in His grace has *worked in*.”<sup>57</sup> The Holy Spirit embraces the eager follower of Christ. Choosing to establish the right “guardrails” will be difficult when people want to go their own ways, but the value is that God is given a chance to work out his salvation in them through the process.

There are many examples of purposeful selection of disciplines. For people who struggle to discover how to let the Holy Spirit guide them, choosing the practice of prayer can serve to create greater ability to hear God and let him lead. Likewise, people who struggle to be obedient to God’s will might choose to practice the discipline of service. Practicing the spiritual discipline of service offers the opportunity to relinquish pride and selfishness when required to place others first before oneself. This discipline can also serve to help people struggling with humility or a lack of gratitude. For people struggling with giving time to God, choosing to practice fasting can directly address the inability in their busy lives to give time to God. Fasting from food or some routine important practice can be beneficial when one replaces that activity with a spiritual activity or with prayer. Another example can be found in the spiritual discipline of silence. This discipline can serve to focus on being increasingly attentive to God by shutting out the noise and chatter of the world. Each of these disciplines, as well as others not discussed, is important in that willingness to practice any one of them can be freeing and allow more

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<sup>56</sup> Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

time, energy, or heart to be exposed to God's marvelous presence and work in one's life.

All in all, the spiritually disciplined person is more likely to better serve God and his purposes and better experience God in all his fullness.

## CHAPTER 4

### SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ARE THE PATHWAY TO EXPERIENCING GOD

#### **The Definition of a Spiritual Discipline**

Willard is convinced that “many serious and thoughtful Christians are looking for ways into an intelligent and powerful Christ-likeness that can inform their entire existence and not just produce special religious moments.”<sup>1</sup> He points to the fact that “practices and concepts that have had a long life in the Christian past are being experienced and explored anew.”<sup>2</sup> Foster refers to these practices as the “classical disciplines of the spiritual life” and he suggests that these spiritual disciplines “call us to move beyond surface living into the depths.”<sup>3</sup> This affirms what was stated in Chapter 3, that the disciplines are forms of spiritual activity that have proven through time to bring transformation and provide strength and a deeper experience of God to the eager follower of Christ. It was also noted above that Mulholland suggests that the disciplines are “the guardrails that keep the vehicle of our being on the road that leads through the stages of the pilgrimage toward wholeness in the image of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Thus it has been established that the spiritual disciplines are credible means of spiritual transformation and they promote a deeper understanding of God and a more fulfilling experience of God. In addition, the spiritual disciplines guide the disciple to have greater clarity of and greater participation in the purposes of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Willard, *The Great Omission*, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 76.

Spiritual disciplines, when practiced with intention and purpose, affect the transformation of the maturing disciple. They guide the individual to better share in the attitude and character of Christ. For Whitney, spiritual discipline, at its simplest level, is any spiritual activity that “promotes spiritual growth.”<sup>5</sup> However, if the definition is diluted too much, then nearly every activity of the spiritual life becomes a spiritual discipline. As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is better to recognize that the more simple rituals and basic churchgoing practices are the unintentional disciplines that are stepping stones to the classical disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines are practices that promote a deeper understanding and experience of God. They include any disciplined activity that moves the follower of Christ forward toward embracing the benchmarks of spiritual maturity revealed in Paul’s writing in the second chapter of the Philippians. Mulholland suggests that “our only pure motive for our spiritual disciplines is the motive of loving obedience to God.”<sup>6</sup> Christ’s obedience to God was profound as Paul notes in Philippians 2: he was “obedient to death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Mulholland further points out that spiritual disciplines “are acts of loving obedience that we offer to God steadily and consistently, to be used for whatever work God purposes to do in and through our lives.”<sup>7</sup> They are, simply put, activities or practices that focus the mind and heart’s attention on God. They stretch and strengthen the mind and heart just as physical exercise stretches and strengthens physical muscles. Therefore, the disciplines guide the person of faith to a

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<sup>5</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

greater capacity for witnessing to the presence of the Holy Spirit and to a clearer understanding of the ways of God. Willard writes, “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.”<sup>8</sup> Willard means that one can live in a power that is beyond oneself when one is fully given to a disciplined spiritual practice. The practitioner opens himself or herself to a deeper realm of the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual disciplines also draw one closer to knowing and doing the true will of God because they are a means to breaking down the powerful influence of the personal will. Mulholland explains, “Without the classical disciplines, personal disciplines can quickly become privatized and even pathological – privatized in the sense of keeping our relationship with God firmly under our control and permitting us to adjust the call to discipleship to fit our agenda.”<sup>9</sup> The practice of any spiritual discipline is a venture into greater obedience to God and less personal control. They are intended to be “offered to God with no strings attached.”<sup>10</sup>

The spiritual disciplines are also practices and activities of spiritual devotion that turn attention away from one’s own purpose to a desire for the purposes of God. Through the ages of Christianity, the practice of various spiritual disciplines has often led people to forsake their own lives for the sake of the purposes of God. Practicing the disciplines often is so freeing from the bonds of the world that many Christ-followers have followed Christ’s self-sacrificing lifestyle. Jesus’ unparalleled sacrifice was for the

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<sup>8</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

world of people God created and, as it will be described later in this chapter, many men and women since Jesus' time have been moved to self-sacrificing acts. One example of this would include the forefathers of Congregationalism, the Mayflower Pilgrims, who sacrificed much when they left the comforts of Europe to plant a colony for God. Their decided separation from the state church of England was initiated out of a growing spiritual practice of raising "the Bible as supreme authority" for life and the Church.<sup>11</sup> Because of this value many of these Mayflower Pilgrims gave their lives, dying along the way, in pursuit of a glorious hope "of planting the seeds of the true church into a new land"<sup>12</sup>. The Mayflower Pilgrims remain examples of spiritually disciplined people willing to sacrifice much for the sake of others. The spiritual disciplines are practices that point one to the self-sacrificing nature of Christ.

Finally, spiritual disciplines promote the pursuit of being fully human. Likely the most difficult challenge Christ faced was the pursuit of being fully human when he knew he was divine. The struggles of Christ depicted in the temptation stories are examples of the difficult challenge Christ encountered in disciplining his human tendencies to perform in godly ways. Paul helped the Philippians recognize this too when he wrote: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" and "being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself" (Philippians 2:6,8). If spiritual disciplines are practices that lead one to a deeper understanding and experience of God, then being more fully human is a relevant endeavor. Unlike Christ, no one must battle with the temptation to be overly divine, but spiritual disciplines offer avenues to

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<sup>11</sup> John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

greater wholeness and greater appreciation for being more fully the humans that God designed his people to be. Willard states, “The aim of disciplines in the spiritual life – and specifically, in the following of Christ – is the transformation of the total state of the soul.”<sup>13</sup> He continues, “It is the renewal of the whole person from the inside, involving differences in thought, feeling, and character.”<sup>14</sup> Paul wrote to the Colossian church about this transformation when he said, “You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:9-10).<sup>15</sup> Spiritual disciplines are a venture into the human condition, the creator’s perfect design for his people, which was something Christ spent his earthly lifetime pursuing. The spiritual disciplines are practices that promote one to be more fully human, more fully capable of coming face to face with God just as Christ did while walking the face of the earth.

Christ’s view of practicing the spiritual life is best observed in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in which he references many of the disciplines. Willard suggests that Jesus in this sermon is creating a “picture of moral fulfillment and beauty in the kingdom of the heavens” and is starting a “historical movement” among his everyday followers.<sup>16</sup> The Sermon on the Mount should not be confused with theory; it is a practical explanation for living the spiritual life and thus it addresses various spiritual practices most common among the people. Jesus addresses the practice of simplicity with “do not worry”

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<sup>13</sup> Willard, *The Great Omission*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

<sup>15</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X1, 215-216. See commentary notes on Colossians 3:9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 130.

(Matthew 6:25). He addresses the regular practice of prayer and gives a formula to follow (Matthew 6:5-15). He gives wisdom on the purposes of fasting and the most effective means of conducting it (Matthew 6:16-18). He addresses service and generosity as a secret practice not to be flaunted or touted (Matthew 6:2-4). The spiritual life according to Jesus in the sermon is a practical experience best lived through various disciplines that engage the Father in heaven.

Not surprisingly, from the very first days of the Church, the disciplined life emerges. In Acts 2:42-47 the people met daily “to learn, to care, to fellowship and to worship.”<sup>17</sup> Luke suggests that these spiritual practices, helped them witness “wonders and miraculous signs” (Acts 2:43) and many “being saved” each day (Acts 2:47). As the Church grew through the centuries, a movement emerged out of the recognition of valuing the spiritually disciplined life. Monasticism, symbolized by its primary value of being separated or withdrawn from the world, first appeared with hermits of the second century who lived in caves near local churches and spent their days in prayer and meditation. This movement has grown to include many monastic orders of men and women that have changed the course of the world through their spiritually devoted lives. The Benedictines and the Jesuits are just a couple of examples.

The spiritually disciplined movement that most influenced the tradition of congregational churches like GCC would be the Puritan movement. The congregational separatists held to the Puritan values and strict patterns of proper worship and their lives became an attempt to purge themselves of the ungodly. Nathaniel Philbrick states, “They shared an intense fellowship of righteousness that touched every facet of every

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<sup>17</sup> William J. Larkin, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon W. Robinson, *Acts*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 61.

communicant's life."<sup>18</sup> They were highly engaged in the practices of spiritual disciplines daily. As a result, this disciplined practice gave them a deeper understanding of Christ as the head of the Church which in turn drove their spiritual lives and influenced the direction they pointed the Congregational Church.

Therefore, the spiritual disciplines are practices that empower followers of Christ to a deeper understanding and experience of God, and create openness within disciples to knowing the purposes of God for their lives. They are practices that take time and effort to pursue and they lead to sharing the attitude of Christ, to greater love and self-sacrificing behavior, to greater obedience to God, to witnessing the Holy Spirit, and to becoming more fully human. Ultimately, these disciplines give the follower of Christ the avenue to more fully experience God in all the aspects of one's life. Foster contends that the disciplines "are intended for our good and meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives."<sup>19</sup> He also states that these disciplines "give us the means to receive God's grace."<sup>20</sup> The next part of this chapter will reveal what some of these particular practices are as well as how people of faith have received grace by practicing spiritual disciplines in pursuit of God.

### **Organizing the Spiritual Disciplines for Practical Purposes**

Spiritual disciplines have emerged as tried and true practices through the ages. These spiritual disciplines, because of their witnessed impact and the resulting awakening

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<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking, 2006), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

experience of the Holy Spirit, can be organized into two categories. The first and primary category includes the “classical spiritual disciplines” of Bible reading, prayer, and worship/liturgy.<sup>21</sup> These disciplines are primary because they are the first order disciplines. They are spiritual practices that are essential to the revelation of God through the Holy Spirit. They are the foundational practices of the Church and as such are the most common of practices at GCC. Practice of these disciplines leads disciples of Christ down the necessary pathway to encountering the foundational attitude and character of Christ.

Mulholland suggests that the classical spiritual disciplines “form the scaffolding, the structure, the support network” within which one then can exercise more personalized disciplines for their particular journeys.<sup>22</sup> These more personalized disciplines form a deeper, more critical category of disciplines which are much more focused in their impact and, when selected, are more purposeful or focused in “the transforming of our being into the wholeness of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> These deeper, more critical disciplines include numerous practices including fasting, study, solitude, silence, serving, submission, frugality/simplicity, confession journaling, chastity, sacrifice, retreat, celebration, evangelism, guidance, secrecy, and community or fellowship. These deeper, more critical disciplines fulfill essential purposes for helping the Christ follower find the guardrails that keep them on their God-designed faith journeys. They are the disciplines that powerfully open doors to a deeper understand and experience of God and they more

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<sup>21</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 105.

fully engage followers of Christ in participating in the purposes of God. They functionally address weaknesses that need strengthening but they open new doors to the realms of God, the Holy Spirit, and the fullness of humanity.

There have been other categories of the disciplines offered for clarifying purposes that are worth noting here. Willard promotes two groupings of the spiritual disciplines: “disciplines of abstinence,” including solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice, and “disciplines of engagement,” including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession and submission.<sup>24</sup> This way of categorizing is helpful in seeing that some disciplines require a withdrawal from typical activities, desires, or sinful tendencies. Disciplines of engagement are practices that require a person to replace an unhealthy activity with something that is more fulfilling of God’s hope for his people. In addition, Foster organizes the disciplines into three categories: the “inward disciplines” focus on the individual’s inward journey of faith and includes meditation, prayer, fasting, and study; second are the “outward disciplines,” including simplicity, solitude, submission and service which all focus upon one’s way of life in the world; and lastly, the “corporate disciplines” are engaged in with the worshipping community and include confession, worship, guidance and celebration.<sup>25</sup> These categories are helpful in better understanding the intention of each practice. Individuals deciding on giving themselves to a discipline would be wise to consider these categorizations. However, spiritual disciplines are not bound to only impact the inward

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<sup>24</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 158.

<sup>25</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

journey or to purely be an abstinence practice. Each discipline practiced impacts the whole of life to a greater or lesser degree.

Upon reviewing the ancient practices of spiritual disciplines it is clear that practice of the disciplines was more broadly considered. Both St. Benedict and St. Ignatius establish a guide book of rules and practices. Nowhere in their works are the disciplines categorized, rather they are simply presented as practices expected to be participated in by those who have withdrawn to explore spiritual life to the fullest. Benedict writes generally to the monks in his society while Ignatius prepares the exercises for a broader group. Ignatius intended the exercises to be useful to “many classes of people” and, as Robert W. Gleason points out, in particular he intended them for “the more generous souls from whom greater service and love of God might be hoped.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, for the practical purposes of this project, it is important to give some categorization of the disciplines so that the person of faith can approach the disciplines at his or her own pace. Ignatius’ vision of spiritual disciplines relevant to all classes is a valuable goal for GCC. Yet it is impractical for most in today’s culture to consider a radical departure from the world for any amount of time in order to solely practice the disciplines. The spiritual disciplines organized below into classical and deeper, more critical disciplines are valuable for anyone who desires greater spiritual awakening, and they are practical enough to be practiced in the confines of one’s daily routine (assuming at least minimal or minor adjustment). In addition, it also seems practical under Ignatius’ vision to choose to enter into the practice of one deeper, more

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<sup>26</sup> Ignatius and Mottola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 21.

critical discipline at a time so as to be more fully able to embrace its impact and not to be distracted by similar activities.

### The Classical Foundational Disciplines

The classical disciplines are Bible reading, prayer, and worship/liturgy. These disciplines are primary because the foundation of all the other spiritual disciplines falls on the practice of these disciplines in one way or another. They are the disciplines most commonly practiced, most often reflected upon, and most valuable to preparing one for a deeper understanding and experience of God. They are more common to church life and valuable in strengthening one for the more critical faith journey. At a minimum they are the spiritual disciplines that should be promoted routinely by the Church.

#### **Bible Reading**

The practice of Bible reading is for most people the first practical spiritual discipline. It is a routine activity that is essential to spiritual growth and development. Reading Scripture is an important first practice because it trains the mind to regularly have the opportunity to hear God. Those who desire to be open to the purposes of God must first train themselves to hear the Word. The most practical way to hear the Word of God is to simply read it. In practice, Bible reading is nothing more than listening to God. It is establishing a routine of hearing God speak. Whitney suggests, “If we don’t discipline ourselves to hear God’s Word regularly, we may only hear it accidentally, just when we feel like it, or we may never hear it at all.”<sup>27</sup> Joshua, who brought the Hebrew

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<sup>27</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 29.

people across the Jordan River into the land of Canaan, recognized the value of reading God's Word, and he was the first to decree it as a spiritual discipline (Joshua 1:8). Jesus himself valued the reading of the Word (Luke 4:16-17); the early Church made a practice of telling the stories of Jesus (Acts 2:42); and eventually, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the material that would become the Gospels of the New Testament (John 20:31).

The practice of reading and listening to the Word has historically been a valued spiritual practice of the Church. The Puritans had as their central core value the focus on the Bible "as supreme authority."<sup>28</sup> Daily reading of Scripture by the head of house to his family was a valued practice. Bible reading simply allows the person of faith the opportunity to allow God to speak solely and directly to the reader or listener. Bible reading should not be fraught with preconceived notions or explanations, but it should allow followers of Christ to hear the Word directly as if they were the first to read what God had inspired the author to write through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the message travels from God, through the Holy Spirit, to the author, and directly to the reader's ears as God first intended. This discipline is best practiced at a minimum of fifteen minutes daily but could be practiced longer or more often through the day as desired. It is not so important how much time one spends, but rather that one simply does read the Word. Readings should include selections from the Old and New Testament and include a routine Psalm or two. There are various resources and patterns for daily reading available, including reading through the Bible in a year, the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, or simply venturing to read the same text routinely for a period of time.

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<sup>28</sup> John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 3.

## Prayer

If Bible reading is the first practical spiritual discipline, then the discipline of prayer is the first God-engaging spiritual discipline. It is in fact the first and primary practice for communicating with God. If Bible reading allows one to listen to God, prayer allows one to communicate with God about the impact his Word has on one's life. Foster sees prayer as "the central avenue God uses to transform us."<sup>29</sup> Foster's contention is that people of faith engage God because they have a genuine interest in change in their lives. In most cases, it is a passion to conform more fully to the ways of Christ. Prayer has a way of soothing the past with all its disappointments and loss and of offering hope for and even impacting the future.

Jesus' practice of prayer is recorded often in the Gospels. Jesus' retreats "early in the morning to a solitary place" (Mark 1:35), to "mountainsides" (Matthew 14:23), and to various other "quiet" (Mark 6:35), "lonely" (Luke 5:16), or "deserted" (Luke 4:42 NRSV) places, all for the purpose of prayer and meditation. Prayer takes the person of God from being an observer on the sideline of spirituality to being a co-laborer with God. Foster defines prayer as "interactive conversation with God about what we and God are thinking and doing together."<sup>30</sup> Willard affirms this prayer relationship when he writes that, as a discipline, prayer is "co-laboring with God to accomplish good things and advance his Kingdom purposes."<sup>31</sup> Paul writes the church in Thessalonica with this co-

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<sup>29</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Richard J. Foster, *The Spiritual Formation Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Deuterocanonical Books*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 2302.

<sup>31</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 184.

laboring spirit in mind.<sup>32</sup> He encourages the church six times regarding prayer including to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The practice of praying continually is a reflection of his own prayer life because Paul “prays without ceasing, at every moment, at all times, night and day.”<sup>33</sup> Paul desires the Thessalonians to value this discipline in their personal lives and the life of their church.<sup>34</sup>

Prayer engages the person spiritually and offers an avenue into participation in the broader purposes of God. Madame Jeanne Guyon, a seventeenth-century reformer, suggests that “prayer is the outpouring of the heart in the presence of God . . . [it] elevates the soul and causes it to ascend unto God.”<sup>35</sup> Guyon wrote to elevate individual daily practice of prayer and hoped to help individuals discover the union with God that prayer can bring, something the Church in her day was discouraging. The practice of prayer brings about the greatest growth in the individual when it becomes more fully relational between the person and God through the Holy Spirit. Prayer in its purest form joins the individual as a participant in the Kingdom, not a client of the Kingdom. Prayer on a consistent basis is the act of stepping towards living for eternity. Nouwen confirms this

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<sup>32</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X1, 311. See commentary notes on 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a.

<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Taylor, *A Companion to Paul: Readings in Pauline Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1975), 184.

<sup>34</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X1, 315. See commentary notes on 1 Thessalonians 5:25.

<sup>35</sup> Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon and Harold J. Chadwick, *Madame Jeanne Guyon : Experiencing Union with God through Inner Prayer & the Way and Results of Union with God*, Pure Gold Classic (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2001). 110.

as he writes, “Prayer is the act by which we divest ourselves of all false belongings and become free to belong to God and God alone.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Worship/Liturgy**

Worship is a classical spiritual discipline because it is the primary way for believers to bring their attention, both corporately and individually, on God. In the American church culture today, worship is often seen as the primary act of the gathered church. But the meaning and significance of this practice is more profound and is important to understand. As noted above, reading the Bible helps one listen to God and prayer engages one in a relationship of communication with God. The discipline of worship engages one’s life behavior and is any routine act that focuses one’s life activity on God. It is the way believers honor God and consider him worthy of devoting their lives to. David, who is considered or assumed to have authored most of the Psalms, wrote the Psalms in this way so the reader would witness and participate in his personal worship and search for the experience of the living God.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, Mulholland suggests this discipline is better defined as “liturgy,” which he defines as “the work of the people.”<sup>38</sup> He explains, “Liturgy is the diverse structure of behaviors that serve to nurture us in that new order of being [in Christ].”<sup>39</sup> In this description, worship includes weekly church gatherings where there is a planned celebration of God, but it also includes any time there is a corporate, individual, or spontaneous celebration of God. Jesus’ invitation

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<sup>36</sup> Henri Nouwen, “Letting Go of All Things,” *Sojourners* (May 1979): 6.

<sup>37</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IV, 3, 6, 10. See introduction notes on Psalms.

<sup>38</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

to Peter, James and John to witness his transfiguration is an invitation to one of these spontaneous celebrations of God (Matthew 17:1-3). Buttrick suggests the transfiguration serves to validate the significance of “high hours” when worship is filled with revelation of God and when his truth is revealed.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the spiritual discipline of worship is daily and often spontaneous at daily devotion time, rituals, grace before meals, nightly prayers, and so on. Worship as a spiritual discipline is one’s responding behavior towards God: to his love and to his presence through the Holy Spirit. This discipline, which is learned in practice corporately with the gathered congregation, can be manifested by the individual in private as the necessary element of celebration of God is practiced. The act of celebration impacts believers in that it motivates them to be more preoccupied with God and to live with greater obedience to God and his ways. Foster notes, “If worship does not propel us into greater obedience, it has not been worship.”<sup>41</sup> The Puritans in particular had a significant obedience to the practice of Sunday worship service. The Puritans, by their passion alone, in effect gave birth to what is known today as “Christian Sunday.”<sup>42</sup> The concept of observing the first day of the week entirely for worship, so much so that it is necessary to close all businesses and refrain from other organized recreation, had its start because of the Puritan discipline to worship. The spiritual discipline of worship is foundational because it builds one’s appreciation for greater and greater obedience to God. In effect, worship assures corporately and individually that one’s life intentionally gives glory to God.

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<sup>40</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 775.

<sup>41</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 148.

<sup>42</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, 1st U.S. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 235

These three primary spiritual disciplines are foundational to anyone focused on a deeper understanding and experience of God. At GCC they are the first avenues for spiritual maturity. They are the keys to knowing better the purposes of God for one's life. Practicing these disciplines is critical for believers who desire to intentionally take their lives to greater spiritual maturity. These disciplines together form a scaffolding and any practice of one is surely to include the engagement of one or more of the others. For instance, Whitney writes of the discipline of meditation, not addressed in this study, that it is "the missing link between Bible intake and prayer."<sup>43</sup> This could be said of each of the classical spiritual disciplines in similar fashion.

Some at GCC might debate over identifying these three as the foundational and primary spiritual disciplines that lead to spiritual maturity. To these first three, other spiritual disciplines could be added such as fellowship/community, Bible study, or the practice of stewardship. In GCC's *My Faith Journey: A Guide to Growing Closer to Christ*, there are seven basic disciplines identified. Worship and prayer are included, but so are Bible study, community, service, evangelism, and stewardship. These are clearly first-order disciplines because they are promoted and commonly practiced in the church. However, they may not have in and of themselves the significant impact of the three mentioned earlier. In fact, Bible study, service, and evangelism are more important to spiritual maturity when understood as personalized, deeper disciplines to be practiced for deeper devotion and concentration. The value of each discipline for each individual is unique to the particular spiritual fingerprint of each person.

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<sup>43</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 71.

### The Deeper, More Critical Disciplines

The classical spiritual disciplines are the foundation of spiritual maturity and the doorway to a deeper understanding and experience of God. However, the deeper, more critical disciplines are not secondary spiritual disciplines. They do not represent a less significant level of discipline. Rather, they are disciplines that build on the foundation set by the other classical practices. They are “personalized spiritual disciplines” which dig more deeply into the ways of God and the character of Christ.<sup>44</sup> They are the critical disciplines necessary to build spiritual maturity. Throughout church history, as will be demonstrated below, these disciplines have shown themselves to be tried and true pathways to the fuller experience of God. They are difficult endeavors to undertake but they are the shortest pathway to spiritual maturity and greater expressions of discipleship. Many in the Church, and at GCC in particular, never reach spiritual fulfillment because they are never introduced to the following disciplines or guided to practice these more personalized spiritual disciplines by which they can dig more deeply and more critically along their spiritual journeys.

#### **Fasting**

The first of the deeper disciplines is fasting, a spiritual discipline of abstinence. Throughout the Bible there are references to this practice, often at significant times or around critical events in the life of the people of God. Moses appears to have fasted while on the mountain receiving the stone tablets of the covenant (Deuteronomy 9:9). Jesus fasted after his baptism while forty days in the wilderness. The Gospel references

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<sup>44</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 104.

to this occurrence focus on the temptations but it is clear that Jesus was “led by the spirit” (Matthew 4:1) and he “fasted” (Matthew 4:2) for the full length of the time. This period of fasting for Jesus is a time where he is tested to determine his commitment to the purposes God has called him to.<sup>45</sup> Even Paul, after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road, while blinded and awaiting Christ’s instructions, fasted while he waited (Acts 9:9). Fasting is “the voluntary abstention from an otherwise normal function – most often eating – for the sake of intense spiritual activity.”<sup>46</sup> The spiritual activity that goes on during fasting is a purposeful attention to God. Believers fast from something they want in order to help them do what God wants. People can fast for many reasons, to strengthen prayer, express grief, seek deliverance, express repentance, resist temptation, or minister to others. All these activities focus one’s attention on the purposes of God. Willard contends, “Fasting teaches temperance or self control” as well as “moderation and restraint” from one’s fundamental drives.<sup>47</sup> Mulholland adds to this that whenever there is “a destructive bondage of dependence” on something other than God, it is from this dependence that “a discipline of fasting is needed.”<sup>48</sup> This spiritual discipline is critical to spiritual maturity because it opens up one’s life to greater dependence on God for sustenance in life. It should be practiced with frequency so that dependence on God increases and God’s purposes can be revealed and heard. A prime example of this occurred leading up to the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s and the Second

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<sup>45</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 89-90. See commentary notes on Matthew 4:1-11.

<sup>46</sup> Foster, *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, 2298.

<sup>47</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 167.

<sup>48</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 119.

Great Awakening of the 1790s. In his book, *Congregationalism in America*, Manfred Kohl notes that as the American colony grew through the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century, “occasionally a congregation began to experience a new life as its members began to set aside days of fasting and prayer.”<sup>49</sup> Fasting transforms the heart by directing one’s full attention on God, making one more submissive to his guidance and trusting in him for direction.

## **Study**

The next of the deeper disciplines is the discipline of study. Where fasting is a discipline of abstinence, this is a discipline of engagement, that is, an activity taken on rather than refrained from. Study as an activity is common to the church, but it is not always at the level of spiritual discipline. Bible and book studies are prolific in church activity and some in the church are passionately addicted to this regular activity. Most people study for increased biblical knowledge and familiarity, for inspiration, and some just go along to study for fellowship purposes. Sadly, people in the Church, including those at GCC, often attend studies for years with little or no significant spiritual maturity. Study becomes a spiritual discipline when one becomes an intentional learner rather than an accidental learner. Whitney asserts, “Those who are not trying to learn will only get spiritual and biblical knowledge by accident or convenience.”<sup>50</sup>

The spiritual discipline of study is the practice of engaging the mind in the Word of God in order that the mind takes on greater God-honoring conformity. Study as a

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<sup>49</sup> Manfred Waldemar Kohl, *Congregationalism in America* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1977), 26.

<sup>50</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 229.

discipline focuses one's mind in certain directions or ways for spiritual maturity to occur. The purpose, as Foster sees it, is to replace "old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits."<sup>51</sup> He references Romans 12:2 as Paul's affirmation of this necessity: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

One movement that caught this vision with fervor was the Congregational movement in New England. The Congregational Church very early valued study as a discipline for spiritual growth. They saw education as the sure and certain way "to ensure direct access for all to the Bible" for the purpose of defeating "that old deluder Satan"; they also saw education as contributing to "good citizenship."<sup>52</sup> Thus, study was a significant value of the early Congregational movement and the Church very quickly went about establishing schools and universities all over the colony. Samuel Willard, at the turn of the eighteenth century, summarized rather wittily the sentiments of most on the subject of study when he said that ministerial gifts are not ordinarily "acquired in a shoemaker's shop!"<sup>53</sup> Study is an intentional discipline for the purpose of taking believers to heights of spirituality where they will have solid knowledge to stand on. The discipline of study is the primary vehicle to discovering truth about God, the Spirit, the world, salvation, and one's place and purpose in his creation.

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<sup>51</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 171.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Willard, quoted in Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 172.

Study as a spiritual discipline is achieved in many intentional ways, including meditating on the Bible, sitting under gifted teachers, engaging in a degree program, reading about the lives of disciples throughout Christian history, and the like. Everyone who desires spiritual maturity is wise to enter into a discipline of study for a period of time to broaden the mind for deeper understanding of God and to better know how to offer oneself to his purposes. Study then is a primary way believers offer themselves towards the experience of God.

### **Solitude and Silence**

Throughout the Gospels Jesus is frequently referenced as going away to a “lonely place” (Matthew 14:13, Mark 1:35, 6:31) or retreating to the “wilderness” (Luke 5:16). Solitude was a discipline treasured by Jesus throughout his ministry, from the forty days in the desert to the Garden of Gethsemane. Solitude is time alone, away from the noise, activity, sounds, and distractions of today’s busy culture. It is a safe place with God. Foster says solitude is not “a place but a state of mind and heart.”<sup>54</sup> It can happen for a few minutes or a few days. For Jesus, his time of solitude was devoted to reflection, prayer, and meditation.

Silence is a twin to solitude. In silence the person of faith is quiet and refrains from much talking in order to be a listener. As a listener the person seeks to be directed to hear the voice of God through his Word or simply to listen to God speaking through others. Practicing the discipline of silence is not always a complete retreat from words but can rather be a practice of speaking less and saying what needs to be said when it

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<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 84.

needs to be said. For instance, Jesus is nearly silent before Pilate when words were expected (Matthew 27:12, Mark 15:4-5). Jesus was aware of the path he was commissioned to go and was disciplined not to let any word of his own derail God's will for him.<sup>55</sup> Words can get in the way of God's work, so silence is a practice in patience, humility, and self-discipline when one is alone and with others. A significant portion of the letter of James is given to the need to "tame the tongue" (James 3:1-13). James' point is that a tamed tongue fosters humility and self-control, and that it resists the temptation to let one's life be blemished by assisting in the spread of evil.<sup>56</sup> This discipline affirms that listening to God is much more profitable than listening to oneself.

Together the disciplines of solitude and silence promote time for God to guide and be in control of one's life and offer time to hear God's purposes. David began his life in silence and solitude as a shepherd boy (1 Samuel 17:12-15). His resulting deeper understanding and experience of God gave him profound wisdom for life that can be witnessed before Goliath (1 Samuel 17:34-37), and variously throughout the Psalms. Solitude and silence have long been practices of the monastic movement. Monks have spent their days in solitude, in silence, or in service to one another. In today's culture the best practices of solitude and silence will be devotion of time away from the world. Silence can be practiced during these times away as well as at intervals during the year for reflection and goal setting. If practiced this way, the disciplines of solitude and

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<sup>55</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 889-890. See commentary notes on Mark 14:60-61a.

<sup>56</sup> George M. Stulac, *James*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 120-130. See commentary notes on James 3:1-12.

silence are avenues to better hear God, better worship him, better express faith in him, gain spiritual perspective, seek his will, and find restoration for the soul.<sup>57</sup>

## Service

The spiritual discipline of service is very important to the Church and to understanding the purposes of God. Willard explains service as the practice in which “we engage our goods and strength in the active motion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world.”<sup>58</sup> The practice of the discipline of service builds humility by offering the participant the pathway away from self-righteous individual glorification to a focus upon glorifying God. Doing service becomes a spiritual discipline by making a regular practice of it. One can choose an activity that best fulfills a need of others or the Church. In this way it is also very closely linked to the purposeful use of one’s God-given spiritual gifts. The various gifts are implanted in every believer by the Holy Spirit and are intended by God to be used for the frequent good of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 4:12).<sup>59</sup> The discipline of service then is an intentional effort to regularly use one’s spiritual gifts for these purposes. Jesus emphasized this practice himself when he explained to his disciples that in fact he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).<sup>60</sup> When service is practiced as a discipline, there is transformation because disciples offer themselves to

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<sup>57</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 186-191.

<sup>58</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 183.

<sup>59</sup> See more on the benefits of the spiritual gifts in C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, 15th anniversary ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 41-43.

<sup>60</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 497. See commentary notes on Matthew 20:28.

God for his purposes, not their own. Those who volunteer to serve at GCC would do well to recognize that service offers them the opportunity to use their gifts as a means to strengthen their relationships with God and better understand God's purposes for their lives. In this way service becomes a priority, not a pastime, as Whitney contends, "God doesn't want servants who will give him the leftovers of their life's commitments."<sup>61</sup>

Service as a discipline should be a priority and a routine and it should be done to the best of one's ability, using the best of the spiritual gifts of service that God has given each individual.

The spiritual discipline of service is another value that was manifested out of the monastic lifestyle. Many who retreated for spiritual growth emerged from the monastic life and gave their lives to service for God. The Jesuits, who grasped the mind and heart of Ignatian spirituality, understood the discipline of "distinguished service of Christ."<sup>62</sup> As a result Jesuits went all over the world to serve others as a lifelong spiritual discipline. Similarly, the earliest congregational settlers in New England who came for the purpose of their religious freedom came also with servant hearts to bring the Word of God to the Indians already settled there. According to Philbrick, "The colony's seal, created even before their arrival in the New World, depicted a Native American saying 'Come over and help us.'"<sup>63</sup> Serving is an integral part of church life and, taken as a spiritual discipline, one is rewarded with great understanding of God and his particular purposes.

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<sup>61</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Ignatius and Mottola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Philbrick, *Mayflower*, 191.

### **Frugality and Simplicity**

The spiritual discipline of frugality, meaning to live by acquiring only what is necessary, and the discipline of simplicity, meaning to live modestly and unpretentiously, are close sisters to one another and will be considered here as one avenue of spiritual discipline. The discipline of voluntary poverty is an extreme form of the same. These spiritual disciplines are practiced to help believers to manage, avoid, and/or reject today's cultural hunger for status, glamour, and luxury. They help believers to refrain from valuing money and goods that gratify their desires. Instead, these spiritual disciplines help them to find the greater value of trusting God for provision and life's necessities. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raised this value up against anxiety and worry when he said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).<sup>64</sup> The practice of one of these spiritual disciplines gives the emerging disciple an avenue to live as Jesus envisioned. The clear difficulty of these disciplines is that they challenge the affluent lifestyle, a reality for most of GCC. Foster states that the discipline of simplicity "is an *inward* reality that results in an *outward* lifestyle"<sup>65</sup> In this way the practice of frugality and simplicity require a balance of valuing the Kingdom of God over the kingdom of society's indulgences. Thankfully, for those who practice this discipline as a lifestyle, they are raised to a more divine appreciation of the creator God's vision for the provisions of life in his Kingdom.

The monks are again a good example as they were required to give up all earthly possessions to join a monastery, thus practicing the discipline of simplicity. Orders like

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<sup>64</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 154-155. See commentary notes on Matthew 6:25-34.

<sup>65</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 69, 74.

the Franciscans, launched by Francis of Assisi in the twelfth century, and the Dominicans, named for their founder, Dominic di Guzman of Spain, in the thirteenth century, centered on the simple life, taking vows of poverty. This was extreme simplicity. A more practical approach for the general church member is to look at the simple lives of the Quaker communities, cousins of Congregationalism. Frugality and simplicity are values of Quaker spirituality and are tools used to free oneself to pursue good in the world, to have more time to listen for the voice of God, and to better worship God with one's whole self. One Quaker, Robert Lawrence Smith, writes of simplicity: "I have come to understand that making life simple does for the mind what getting in shape does for our bodies. It makes us feel more in control, more centered, more effective. And as with getting in shape, you have to want it sincerely, and you have to work at it consciously every day."<sup>66</sup> The spiritual discipline of simplicity is an historically valued spiritual practice of people of faith and it is effective in opening up the follower of Christ for experiencing God and discovering his purposes.

### **Community**

Community, or as it is sometimes called, fellowship, is a vital spiritual discipline of the Church, one in fact that was practiced by the early Church as it was forming in the temple courts each day (Acts 2:46). Community is spiritual discipline when followers of Christ meet regularly in concert with one another to share and grow spiritually, often while practicing various other disciplines together. The fellowship of meeting together and practicing classical disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and worship is a valuable

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Lawrence Smith, *A Quaker Book of Wisdom: Life Lessons in Simplicity, Service, & Common Sense*, 1st ed., A Living Planet Book (New York: Eagle Brook, 1998), 61.

and supportive endeavor that promotes the lifestyle of faith and encourages the development of one's individual and unique relationship with God. D. Michael Henderson, in his book, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, notes that John Wesley recognized the value of community when he determined "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."<sup>67</sup> Henderson writes:

He [Wesley] made sure that those who were serious about leading a new life were channeled into small groups for growth in discipleship. These little meetings were later called "classes" and formed the backbone of the Methodist reformation for the next century. The "class meeting" turned out to be the primary means of bringing millions of England's most desperate people into the liberating discipline of Christian faith.<sup>68</sup>

In the small groups or class meetings, the participants followed a strict set of published norms. The routine practice and the consistent and regular environment fostered personal spiritual growth. It is likely a coincidence that "Community" is the middle name of GCC but it is profoundly relevant since the life together experiences are a value that has brought continued growth and spiritual development among the fellowship. Community is a spiritual discipline that has the same impact fresh wood has on a smoldering fire; it builds the flame in the individual's heart and exponentially warms everyone within its reach.

### Conclusion

This list is not fully exhaustive and still other deeper disciplines could be added. All of the disciplines in one way or another are individually or variously practiced for the

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<sup>67</sup> D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

deeper understanding and experience of God. They are equally useful for maturing Christians to gain revelation of the purposes of God for their lives. God is found and experienced when focused spiritual effort is given in daily forms. It has been revealed that this effort is not reserved solely for those who seclude themselves but has included whole societies like Puritan England and Congregational New England. Moreover, these disciplines have not only opened up many people to the knowledge of God but, in addition, many have been inspired to see a vision of God's purposes for them and their communities. Therefore, the next chapter will provide a practical strategy for guiding the Christians of GCC to spiritual maturity through intentional spiritual discipline. The chapter will concentrate on the focused atmosphere necessary to raise the importance of spiritual disciplines. It will center on developing pathways for individuals and groups to directly experience God through the activities of spiritual disciplines.

PART THREE  
STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 5

### THE STRATEGY FOR RAISING THE VALUE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

#### **Creating an Environment Centered on Spiritual Disciplines that Anticipates Direct Experiences of God**

This chapter will concentrate on the focused atmosphere necessary to raise the importance of spiritual disciplines. It will focus on developing pathways for individuals and groups to directly experience God through the activities of spiritual disciplines. The impact of a spiritual life transformed by the practice of various spiritual disciplines has been presented above. It is also been asserted that the church has often been unsuccessful in moving people to a place spiritually where they are capable or have the tools necessary to practice spiritual disciplines on their own. The introduction noted that the church often keeps people from personal spiritual growth as a result of the “law of religious evasion.”<sup>1</sup> Well-intentioned efforts tend to fail in the end to push the common believer out of the nest to venture on his or her personal quest for God. The strategy for how the ineffective efforts of the church are reconsidered to create a transforming environment where spiritual disciplines and individual and group spiritual practices are encouraged and available to everyone at GCC will be the focus of this chapter. The environment that the church must provide and the tools, resources, and time that must be given to this effort will be discussed.

To begin, it is worth noting what drove other movements in Christian history to turn toward promoting spiritual practices. First, the driving force behind John Wesley’s efforts is worth noting. Wesley’s success in bringing people together for spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 41, quoted in Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 201.

practices was driven by the success of his friend John Whitefield who became a prolific and inspiring public preacher. Whitefield's revivals were highly successful but gave the people nothing to carry them to greater spiritual depths once the revivals were over. Wesley witnessed this and gave his efforts to creating "class meetings" where people would gather in small clusters to examine their lives and be directed by one another into greater spiritual depths. Whitefield himself said, "My brother Wesley acted wisely – the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand."<sup>2</sup> D. Michael Henderson reflected that "the Wesleyan revolution is an illustration that long-lasting spiritual transformation is not the product of dynamic preaching or of correct doctrine." Rather, he asserts, "The class meeting which Wesley developed was the instrument by which preaching and doctrine were harnessed into spiritual renewal . . . [which] carried the revolution."<sup>3</sup>

Another important movement to consider is the Monastic movement. The driving goal of this movement was union with God. Church Father Origen of Alexandria had a desire to "express the Christian experience as an orderly, rational pattern of perfection" and he saw this as a personal endeavor that had to be taken by the person of faith themselves.<sup>4</sup> Those who followed Origen's line of thinking were often driven to the monastic lifestyle. Two hundred years later, as the Monastic movement expanded, Benedict of Nursia developed his *Rule* for the monastic life because he saw this lifestyle

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<sup>2</sup> Holland N. McTyeire, *History of Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1904), 204, quoted in Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> St. Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 1st ed., trans. by Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. Del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975), 13.

necessary as the “most perfect instrument of salvation and sanctification” for its participants.<sup>5</sup> He also saw that the mutual support the fellow monks gave one another as necessary for those who were beginning along the journey towards perfect union with God. Throughout Christian history these kinds of efforts to give the person of faith guidelines, tools, and gatherings of like-minded people are movements that saw great spiritual growth and led to a deeper understanding and experience of God.

In recent years the efforts of individuals, for example, Richard Foster, using his method called *Renovaré*,<sup>6</sup> and the *Reveal* study of Willow Creek Community Church<sup>7</sup> have demonstrated that there is a renewed passion for promoting personal spiritual practices from within the context of the Church. These efforts are attempts to help local churches point followers of Christ toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. The success of these new ministries and the historical movements of the past are strongly influenced by the environment that was created in the Church for this kind of growth and experience to happen. The environment that typically was established included concern about the physical atmosphere; resources, tools, and methods available to the individual. It also concerned the mentors available to disciple others, the fellowship with others on the same journey, and the witness of those whose lives have been transformed as a result of personal spiritual discipline. These essential elements are necessary to create an environment centered on spiritual disciplines at GCC. The more the church is able to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>6</sup> Renovare, <http://www.renovare.org> (accessed October 13, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* Willow Creek Resources, (Barrington, Illinois, 2007).

create a favorable environment, the more likely the people of the church will find a deeper understanding and experience of God.

### Developing a Spiritual Formation Resource Center

Crucial to the development of an environment where people are personally seeking spiritual discipline practices is the physical atmosphere at the church. Foster writes, “Every action, every piece of furniture, every ritual makes the connection between heaven and earth and draws the People of God more deeply into the disciplines of spiritual formation.”<sup>8</sup> Typically in every church there is space designated for various purposes. All churches have a worship center where worship and sacraments are conducted weekly. Most have educational facilities and classrooms set aside for children, youth, and adults to be instructed in the ways of God. Space is also given to administration with private studies for pastoral staff. Finally there is gathering space set aside for fellowship and community building. These are valuable spaces necessary to run a typical church like GCC. However, to promote an environment for spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines, similar space must be designated and set aside.

In order to promote spiritual disciplines and a deeper understanding and experience of God it will be necessary for GCC to develop a Spiritual Formation Resource Center. Ideally, the center would be in a location within the church and be a space set aside where people desiring greater growth could go anytime for resource and assistance in this effort. It should not be confused with a library of spiritual books for the taking. Rather the center must include several elements that make it a dynamic center of

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<sup>8</sup> Foster, *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, 90.

spiritual growth functional enough to meet the many and varied needs of the congregation. The center should be designed with the individual and the occasional small group in mind. The center would need to be large enough for a group of people to gather yet intimate enough for an individual to find meaning there alone. The room would be equipped with a lending library of relevant and updated spiritual texts as well as a compilation of books, videos, and audios available for purchase. Another corner of the room would feature a prayer center where individuals could come to kneel or sit in a comfortable chair for prayer and meditation. This corner would feature plants or symbols such as a cross that would serve as visual focal points for contemplation. In another corner of the room would be a gathering place for small groups and a refreshment center where coffee and other warm and refreshing drinks would daily be available. The center of the room the floor would be outlined with a labyrinth or prayer-path where people could take a spiritual journey in prayer to contemplate the deeper areas of life. The labyrinth is a twelfth-century ritual which features an inward journey and an outward journey that is walked slowly to aid in contemplative prayer and reflection as a form of spiritual pilgrimage. Another corner of the room would include a private area for spiritual direction, counseling, and confessional prayer. All of these features would be captured in a comfortable setting with symbols of faith and expressions of life and hope throughout its walls.

Colonial Church of Edina, Minnesota has designed such a center with the following purposes in mind:

The purpose of the Center is to help people grow in their faith and calling in the world through deepening their inner life with God.

Colonial Church is called to a vision of spiritual formation in all its ministries and activities. We understand spiritual formation as the process of a community being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of the world. Growing in Christ involves both the inner life of faith and the outward life of service to others.

The Center's purpose is to help integrate this ministry of formation into the life of the church by offering opportunities for spiritual growth, prayer, study and reflection.

We also wish to reach out to anyone in the community who desires a deeper relationship with God and the opportunity to learn about or experience silence, solitude, the classic Christian spiritual disciplines, or the ministry of spiritual direction.<sup>9</sup>

Designed by Janet Hagberg and directed by Rev. Gary W. Klingsporn, the center serves the church by offering individuals space to meet God. There are weekly gatherings to practice *Lectio Divina* and Centering Prayer, two ancient Christian prayer forms built on listening to God. There is also time that can be reserved for personal spiritual retreat and individuals can sign up to receive spiritual direction from one of the volunteer counselors available.

Should space not be available at GCC for the Spiritual Formations Resource Center, consideration could be given to renting or purchasing space off site. Acquiring a more well traveled location like a storefront might promote the center's visibility and availability to a broader community other than the GCC church population. The center could be a resource to Christian individuals from many local churches. It also may serve as a safe entry point to the church for people who desire spiritual growth but who have preconceived notions of the church and have personal resistance to entering a place of worship. It is interesting to note that there is plenty of historical precedence for separating the space for spiritual practices from the church. The desert fathers retreated

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<sup>9</sup> Colonial Church of Edina, "Center for Spiritual Formation," [http://www.colonialchurch.org/spiritual\\_formation/adults/centering\\_prayer.htm](http://www.colonialchurch.org/spiritual_formation/adults/centering_prayer.htm) (accessed July 22, 2008).

to caves in the desert, the monks retreated to monasteries, and even Wesley's bands met in various locations throughout the community wherever there was gathering space. Finding space apart from the church facilities may actually be more conducive to spiritual growth. Wherever the location, the center would be safe, friendly, welcoming, and helpful to all who entered seeking deeper understanding and experiences of God.

#### Use of Visual Stimuli and the Language of Spiritual Disciplines

Another very important necessity of creating an environment centered on spiritual disciplines at GCC is creating a church-wide atmosphere that promotes and directs people's attention towards spiritual discipline practices. A similar effort took place in 2002 when the church adopted the seven spiritual disciplines as the primary ways they express their faith at GCC. At the time, the primary means of communicating this value of spiritual disciplines was through written materials and the preaching of a few sermon series on the topic. Since then many in leadership appreciate this emphasis and acknowledge spiritual disciplines as a value of the church. All new members of the church are introduced to the spiritual disciplines through the "My Faith Journey Guide Book." These efforts have had some surface-level impact on affirming the values the church functions under, however it has not promoted spiritual discipline practices of the magnitude and depth hoped for in this study. In fact, as noted earlier, it may have had the opposite effect by mis-communicating what spiritual disciplines actually are and how to practice them. To counter this mis-communication and to build on the foundations the seven spiritual disciplines have laid at the church, it is necessary to re-infuse the

atmosphere of the church with increased visual stimuli and appropriate language on the subject of spiritual disciplines.

Visual stimuli are important in the church and the worshiping atmosphere. If it is the desire to direct individuals to strive for deeper understanding and a greater experience of God it will be important to regularly communicate that throughout the church. The Church has marvelously used its atmosphere through the centuries to convey values and convictions. For example, Roman Catholic churches have emphasized visual images of the Virgin Mary, which began around the time of Gregory the Great (ca 540-604), Bishop of Rome, and originally began as a way “to educate the ignorant” and to be a “spiritual path.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the choice of the New England Puritans to build meetinghouses, not sanctuaries, and their fixation with rejecting all objects and icons from within the church walls was an intentional effort to draw attention to the Word and worship of God. Von Rohr writes that the New England meetinghouse was “necessarily primitive in construction” and “was simple and bare of intent.”<sup>11</sup> The most notable objects in the meetinghouse were the high central pulpit for the minister’s sermon and the communion table for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Not even a cross was allowed in the meetinghouse as this would recall the liturgical setting from which the Congregationalists had fled. Everything in the atmosphere of worship was intentionally thought through. In other church settings, stained glass windows and religious symbols have been placed in the worship atmosphere.

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<sup>10</sup> George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 102.

GCC will need to consider objects and visual images that draw attention to the value of spiritual disciplines. An example of this would be to install an aesthetically pleasing wood-paneled design for the front of the sanctuary. Matching the church décor the artwork could feature a winding road with various symbols that point to the stops along the way. Other ideas might include banners or wall décor that feature symbols of spiritual practice that could be placed throughout the building, effectively drawing attention to the church's value of spiritual disciplines. A creative design team would best be hired to envision and design such work for the church. Electronic images could also be used with the video projection units in the sanctuary each Sunday and during other meetings of the church.

As important as the visual images are to creating an atmosphere, there is also the need to create common language and verbal communication that express the church's passion for spiritual disciplines. An intentional effort by church staff and key leaders of the church should be conducted to formulate the language the church uses to promote spiritual disciplines. This language could be imbedded in the visual stimuli discussed above. Whenever the leaders of the church are communicating, it is worth the extra effort to draw attention to the spiritual discipline values the church affirms. This type of priority is not dissimilar from the ritual practices of Church where routine recitation of the *Apostles Creed*, the *Lord's Prayer* or the *Gloria Patria* are used to sustain values of church faith among the congregation. The spiritual discipline language should promote corporate practices as well as individual spiritual discipline practices. The language should be used weekly so that it becomes common to all. The church must communicate the message that spiritual growth happens most directly through individual spiritual

practices. Phrases that promote spiritual practices among individuals of the congregation might include: “Spiritual disciplines lead to deeper understanding of God”; “Spiritual practices are the pathway to a greater experience of God”; and “The purposes of God for one’s life are best discovered as one ventures forward on his or her individual faith journey.” This, in addition to the regular invitation to begin to practice spiritual disciplines, will raise awareness and serve as an invitation to go deeper. Therefore, common language and stimulating visual images for the common endeavor of the church congregation will serve to stimulate the value of spiritual disciplines in the individual.

#### Testimonies to the Power of Spiritual Disciplines to Reveal God

Spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines will be promoted through the voices of those who have gone deeper and have experienced God through spiritual practices. Thomas Merton, in his introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert*, writes of his desire for writing down the stories of the earliest of the desert fathers. He states, “Let it suffice for me to say that we need to learn from these men of the fourth century how to ignore prejudice, defy compulsion and strike out fearlessly into the unknown.”<sup>12</sup> Merton’s collection of testimonies and stories of spiritual enlightenment are a necessary read for anyone desiring a deeper understanding and experience of God. They tell of the depth of spiritual growth and maturity that occurred through the spiritual practices and they inspire the reader to seek the same for their own lives. Others like James Lawson have collected

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 24.

similar stories that tell of the deeper experiences of Christians.<sup>13</sup> These stories inspire, focus, and direct people to greater individual spiritual endeavors.

At GCC, the congregation must routinely tell of the spiritual experiences of people through spiritual practices. The pastors and leaders of the church must tell the ancient stories and they must allow the modern story to be told amidst the congregation. People of faith need desperately to hear that greater experience of God awaits them beyond conversion. They will find assurance that the journey of faith they are on is one that can expose them to the presence of God and lead them to greater purpose in their lives. Lawson affirms this when he writes, “When Christians of so many different centuries and countries relate their deeper Christian experiences in their own manner and languages, and yet all agree as to the essential facts, it is overwhelming evidence that such a deep Christian experience may really be attained.”<sup>14</sup> Opportunity for the testimonies of spiritual experiences through spiritual disciplines must therefore be routinely given on Sunday mornings and throughout the weekly life of the church through various forms of communication.

### **Offering Individuals Time for Spiritual Direction**

As an atmosphere promoting spiritual disciplines is created, the people will soon consider going deeper spiritually. The question then is: Where will they turn? There must be a leadership team in place to handle this movement of spiritual growth. A key value that must be promoted is the value that spiritual maturity comes by learning from

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<sup>13</sup> J. Gilchrist Lawson, *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

and listening to those who have journeyed ahead. Juan Carlos Ortiz discovered that in his ministry as an evangelist he failed initially to see that he and his church promoted the “eternal childhood of the believer.”<sup>15</sup> They failed to carry believers on to maturity, simply keeping them like orphans in the church. He recognized that it was the responsibility of the church to transform the infant believer to a maturing, self-sustaining follower of Christ. In order for the church to accomplish this task it requires that there must be guides to help those wishing to explore deeper spirituality. There need to be practitioners willing to help those desiring to mature. This is precisely the place in which the practice of spiritual disciplines bridges disciple-like qualities. Ogden writes of discipleship: “Every believer or inquirer must be given the opportunity to be invited into a relationship of intimate trust that provides the opportunity to explore and apply God’s Word.”<sup>16</sup> Spiritual maturity will rarely happen without the invitation of a trusted leader and the assistance of a guide or a mentor to give direction, encouragement, and time to the growth of another. A community of spiritual directors is necessary for the developing growth of more individuals in the church.

Gilbert Bilezikian, in his book, *Community 101*, observes in the Church that the more seasoned followers of Christ have great value in helping those less informed. He notes how important “lay believers” are to the less spiritually mature and how they are likely “the best qualified” because they are familiar with the general needs of new

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<sup>15</sup> Juan Carlos Ortiz and Jamie Buckingham, *Call to Discipleship* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 172.

explorers and they speak the same language.<sup>17</sup> Thus the best qualified to help direct new believers are those in the church who are simply farther down the path of their own journeys.

Therefore it is necessary for GCC to identify those who are practicing various disciplines and to implore them to assist those who desire assistance in getting started. They are best described as spiritual directors and they are absolutely crucial to creating a community that is collectively maturing. The pastors of the church will have to take a long, hard look at those in the church who are qualified to serve in this role. Possibly the church elders should be considered first. Thus, along with the atmosphere of spiritual disciplines must be a corporate value among the church lay leadership of promoting the mentoring of others.

With spiritual mentors and spiritual directors committed to nurturing others in their spiritual practices, there will be a growth mentality that will prevail throughout the life of the church. The spiritual directors will need to nurture individuals, pairs, or small groups of three or four by motivating them through regular counsel. The discipleship mentality needed for this effort will be genuine love and respect for the individual, a commitment to making the learner feel secure in the spiritual director's hands, and regular recognition and encouragement. To practice spiritual disciplines takes time and trial as the learner is stretched and challenged. Good discipleship will give people greater self-worth as they are trying on spiritual disciplines and will help them keep a healthy perspective of where they are on the journey. This kind of spiritual direction, like discipleship, gives hope and lifts others to higher levels of spiritual maturity. It cannot be

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<sup>17</sup> Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, MI, Barrington, IL: Zondervan, Willow Creek Resources, 1997), 146.

denied that there will be a resistance by evil forces, pain, apprehension, and failures just as there have been for anyone who has tried to become stronger spiritually, for example, Jesus' own temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). The good news is, as Maxwell and Dornan write, "When a person feels encouraged, he can face the impossible and overcome incredible adversity."<sup>18</sup> Couple this with the power and strength that comes from God through the Holy Spirit and spiritual maturity will certainly occur. Thus, those experienced in spiritual disciplines will have to be well trained to be the spiritual directors of the next generation of spiritually mature individuals in the church.

#### Interview Goals, Assessment, Tools, Practice, Evaluation

In giving time to those needing and desiring spiritual direction, various tools will be necessary. The first priority will be to set up an interview formula for working with individuals. Since lay people will be working with lay people it is important to keep these tools simple for both the spiritual director and the person being interviewed. The goal of working with a spiritual director is to find direction for one's practice of spiritual disciplines. Helping someone find the right pathway towards deeper understanding and experience of God and helping them discover God's purpose for their lives is most important. To accomplish this goal there are several steps: assessment, observation, practice, and evaluation.

The first responsibility of the spiritual director is to help the individual make a genuine, well considered, assessment of his or her spiritual life at present. There are several tools available to assist in this process. These assessment tools can be used

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<sup>18</sup> John C. Maxwell and Jim Dornan, *Becoming a Person of Influence: How to Positively Impact the Lives of Others* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997).

privately by the individual or with the guidance of a spiritual director. However, the value of having a spiritual director significantly increases the effectiveness of using such a tool. Some of the assessment tools include *The Christian Life Profile* created by Randy Frazee, the *Threefold Art of Experiencing God* by Christian A Schwarz of Natural Church Development, and a soon-to-be-available online resource called *Individual Health Assessment Tool* by Steven Macchia of Leadership Transformations. At present, the best resource for the efforts of GCC will be *The Christian Life Profile*. This comprehensive tool enables individuals to assess their Christian beliefs, practices, and virtues for the purpose of helping people strengthen their relationships with Christ and helping them live in such a way that Christ is seen in them. This tool is helpful to the process of identifying spiritual disciplines to practice because, as it purports, “it is designed to help you discover the areas where you are the strongest, as well the areas you need to grow in your Christian life.”<sup>19</sup> The tool also allows the individual to obtain additional assessment from trusted friends.

After the person completes the assessment tool, the spiritual director can consult with the individual, make observations, and help identify areas where spiritual growth is most necessary. A cursory review of the spiritual disciplines can then be done to identify various spiritual disciplines that can help the individual achieve spiritual growth in the areas that most need to be tended to by the individual. Once a spiritual discipline practice is identified, the individual can take the appropriate time to practice his or her identified discipline over an agreed upon time. Then the individual meets again with the spiritual director to assess progress and discuss further individual efforts. After a year or two it is

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<sup>19</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool: Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

best to retake the assessment tool to chart personal progress. This can be done with the spiritual director at an evaluation meeting.

### **Creating Pathways that Expose Groups to Disciplined Activity**

Once there is an atmosphere promoting spiritual disciplines and individual time being given to personal assessment, the next step is to make available pathways for individuals to practice spiritual disciplines. The individual assessment promotes personal initiative on the part of the follower who desires a deeper understanding and experience of God. At GCC it will be necessary to provide assistance to people wanting to practice spiritual disciplines in their daily lives. The most effective tool that has been used at GCC through the years has been small groups. Small groups provide accountability and encouragement for participants who desire personal growth. Just as Wesley discovered the need for using bands to bring believers together for intense spiritual growth, GCC has a well established small group environment to functionally support spiritual discipline exploration. In order to use small groups for this effort, the groups will have to be structured. In addition, each group will have to practice the same spiritual discipline together.

#### **Discipline Initiative Groups**

Discipline Initiative Groups (DIGs) will be created to provide opportunities for people to walk the spiritual disciplines journey together. Each quarter of the year, members of the congregation will be given the opportunity to join a DIG for approximately twelve weeks. The DIGs will meet for the purpose of encouraging one

another in spiritual discipline practices. Each group will be organized around one particular spiritual discipline that the group will agree to practice daily for the agreed upon time. The group will meet weekly to provide support and encouragement and to discuss their individual progress. During the week the members of the group will be instructed to practice their spiritual discipline in various or routine ways, and supplementary reading will accompany the week's activities. During the same time each person in the group will be encouraged to practice reading the Word and prayer in addition to the particular discipline that their group is focusing on.

#### DIGs for the Classical Disciplines

In Chapter 4 the classical spiritual disciplines were outlined as foundational to anyone focused on a deeper understanding and experience of God. It was noted that at GCC they are the first avenues for spiritual maturity. They are the keys to knowing better the purposes of God for one's life. Practicing these disciplines is critical for believers who desire to intentionally take their lives to greater spiritual maturity. It was noted that these disciplines form scaffolding for the development of any of the other deeper, more critical disciplines. At GCC it is essential to offer as a first level of spiritual discipline DIGs that help individuals strengthen their practice of the classical spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and worship.

#### **DIG for Bible Reading**

The DIG for Bible Reading will focus on the daily reading of Scripture. Not to be confused with Bible study, this group will have the primary task to read the Word without

a lot of in-depth study. Some surface-level study is appropriate but for the most part the goal is that the Bible is being read daily. The group will have a selected amount of Scripture to read and a goal to accomplish a certain section of Scripture over the twelve-week period. For instance, a first-level group would be instructed to read through the Gospels over the twelve-week period. Other groups might read Paul's letters, the writings of John, or an Old Testament section of Scripture. Each individual will have the same weekly readings to accomplish which they will read daily at a time that is most convenient for them to practice the discipline. The goal is that they make a daily discipline of reading Scripture for the twelve-week period. In addition, they will be asked to include a time of prayer and the reading of an additional text such as Gordon Fee's *How to Read The Bible For All It's Worth*<sup>20</sup> or *Playing with Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* by Walt Russell<sup>21</sup> (see Appendix D).

### **DIG for Prayer**

The DIG for Prayer would function in a similar manner with the primary goal being that the individuals are finding a significant time daily for the practice of prayer. One thing this group would do is to explore different methods of prayer to help each individual find a prayer routine that best promotes engagement with God. Methods of prayer might include conversational prayer, centering prayer, and prayer walking. It was noted above that Foster defines prayer as “interactive conversation with God about what

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Walt Russell, *Playing with Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000).

we and God are thinking and doing together.”<sup>22</sup> The disciplined prayer time should allow for this type of prayer to occur. In addition, just as prayer was important to the DIG for Bible Reading so is Bible reading important to the DIG for Prayer. While making time for individual prayer there will be Scripture reading to accomplish over the same time such as reading one or two Psalms each day. An additional text or two would be recommended to be read during the same period such as Madame Jeanne Guyon’s *Experiencing Union with God Through Inner Prayer*.<sup>23</sup> When the group has its weekly meetings together the participants will practice prayer, discuss how they are experiencing God, discuss the text, and try out various different forms of prayer such as using a prayer labyrinth or the significance of using Roman Catholic rosary beads (see Appendix E).

### **DIG for Worship**

The DIG for Worship would function in a similar manner with the primary goal being that the individuals are finding a significant time each day to give themselves to the practice of worship on a daily basis. This group would discover that worship of God is broader than a weekly service of worship held at the church for the congregation. Just as with the DIG for Prayer, individuals will give themselves daily to the practice of personal worship for a period of fifteen to thirty minutes. Reading of Scripture will be expected as

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<sup>22</sup> Foster, *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, 2302.

<sup>23</sup> Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon and Harold J. Chadwick, *Madame Jeanne Guyon: Experiencing Union with God through Inner Prayer & the Way and Results of Union with God*, Pure Gold Classic (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2001).

would the reading of an additional text on worship such as *Worship Is a Verb* by Robert Webber<sup>24</sup> or *Worship His Majesty* by Jack Hayford.<sup>25</sup>

#### DIGs for the Deeper, More Critical Disciplines

If participants are satisfied that they have made these classical disciplines a practical part of their daily routines and they desire to practice more critical spiritual disciplines, similar opportunities for DIGs would be available. The deeper, more critical disciplines build on the foundation set by the other classical practices above. These disciplines were described above as “personalized spiritual disciplines” which dig deeper into the ways of God and the character of Christ.<sup>26</sup> It was said they are the critical disciplines necessary to build towards spiritual maturity and they are tried and true pathways to the fuller experience of God. These groups would meet weekly for support and encouragement and to share stories of how individuals are experiencing God through the particular discipline. In addition, participants would read a supplemental text on the subject of the discipline. Just as with the practice of the classical spiritual disciplines, practice of Bible reading and prayer are essential elements that would supplement the focus of the selected deeper, more critical disciplines.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles Transforming Worship*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Jack W. Hayford, *Worship His Majesty: How Praising the King of Kings Will Change Your Life*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 104.

### **DIG for Fasting**

The goal of the DIG for Fasting is to seek greater spiritual maturity by opening up one's life to greater dependence on God for sustenance in life. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by choosing something to fast from, such as eating food on a particular day of the week, the media, or a daily valued activity. The goal would be to replace these activities with attention on God. Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required as would the reading of a supplementary text such as *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* by Elmer Towns<sup>27</sup> or *Tony Evans Speaks Out on Fasting* by Tony Evans.<sup>28</sup>

### **DIG for Study**

The goal of the DIG for Study is engaging the mind in the Word of God in order that the mind takes on greater God-honoring conformity. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by choosing a particular path of study such as an independent study of a biblical passage or book or an exploration of a particular value or character of Christ. The goal would be to give time to this study daily. Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required as would the reading of a supplementary text such as *Playing with Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* by Walt Russell.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Evans, *Tony Evans Speaks Out on Fasting* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Russell, *Playing with Fire*.

### **DIG for Solitude or Silence**

The goal of the DIG for Solitude or Silence is the establishment of time for God to guide and be in control of one's life and/or time to hear God's purposes. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by choosing a place and time that is fully free from any distraction. For instance they might choose to visit a local church sanctuary or prayer garden every day on the way to or from work; they might have a private place at home away from interruptions, sounds, or distractions; or they may choose a time each day to remain completely silent, refraining from words for a period of an hour or so. Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required and the reading of a supplementary text such as *The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen<sup>30</sup> or *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* by Ruth Haley Barton.<sup>31</sup>

### **DIG for Service**

The goal of the DIG for Service is building humility by avoiding self-righteous individual glorification and focusing instead upon glorifying God through the giving of oneself to others. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by choosing a place to serve others or the church regularly for the twelve-week period. This discipline requires intentionality in finding a genuine place or way to serve. One way would be to volunteer weekly with a service organization or to agree to do a service for the church or a family. This group would do well to start off by taking individual spiritual gifts

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<sup>30</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> R. Ruth Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

assessments to better determine God's implanted spiritual gifts for each. Knowing one's spiritual gifts will help determine the choice a person makes regarding serving. Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required and the reading of a supplementary text such as *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne,<sup>32</sup> *Full Service: Moving from Self-Serve Christianity to Total Servanthood* by Siang-Yang Tan,<sup>33</sup> or *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* by C. Peter Wagner.<sup>34</sup>

### **DIG Simplicity or Frugality**

The goal of the DIG for Simplicity or Frugality is to help believers to manage, avoid, and/or reject today's cultural hunger for status, glamour, and luxury in order to help them find the greater value of trusting God for provision and life's necessities. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by making a concerted effort daily to choose simple lifestyle over extravagant behavior. This discipline would require the people in the group to take a hard look at their habits and consider altering one or more of them. Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required and the reading of a supplementary text such as *Freedom of Simplicity* by Richard J. Foster<sup>35</sup> or *Another Fine*

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<sup>32</sup> Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, 4th rev. ed. (Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Siang-Yang Tan, *Full Service: Moving from Self-Serve Christianity to Total Servanthood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, 15th anniversary ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity : Finding Harmony in a Complex World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

*Mess, Lord! Finding Simplicity, Order, and Insight in a Complicated World* by Karon Phillips Goodman.<sup>36</sup>

### **DIG Community**

The goal of the DIG for Community is to make the regular meeting with others for prayer, Bible reading, worship and study a valuable and supportive endeavor that promotes the lifestyle of faith and encourages the development of one's individual and unique relationship with God. This group would make a spiritual discipline of being a group and would work together to experience the community shared by the early Church meeting in the temple courts (Acts 2:42-47) or Wesley's band meetings. Individuals would practice the spiritual discipline by meeting often together. If possible, they would meet daily or every other day for a short amount of time for prayer, Bible reading or study, and worship. Neil Cole's Life Transformation Group (LTG) format would work well with this group. An LTG is a group of two or three people who meet together weekly "for three essential disciplines for personal spiritual growth – a steady diet of Scripture, confession of sin and prayer for others who need Christ."<sup>37</sup> Daily Bible reading and prayer would be required and the reading of a supplementary text such as

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<sup>36</sup> Karon Phillips Goodman, *Another Fine Mess Lord!: Finding Simplicity, Order & Insight in a Complicated World* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Pub., 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God* ( St. Charles, IL, Church Smart Resources 1999), 63.

*Search and Rescue: Becoming a Disciple Who Makes a Difference* by Neil Cole<sup>38</sup> or *Community 101* by Gilbert Bilezikian.<sup>39</sup>

### **Planning Retreats**

In June 2006, I had the pleasure of spending two weeks with Dallas Willard and Keith Matthews in the Doctor of Ministry course, “Spirituality and Ministry.” At the conclusion of this two-week journey into the spiritual disciplines, Willard gave an empowering call to the students: “Take this experience back to your congregations.”<sup>40</sup> In developing this plan for promoting spiritual disciplines at GCC it has remained my hope that I could fulfill this desire for the church. One part of fulfilling that hope is the offering of retreats that focus on spiritual disciplines. Mulholland writes, “Retreat is the discipline of setting apart time, individually or corporately, to step aside from the normal flow of life and give God our full and undivided attention.”<sup>41</sup> These retreats would be held off site, over a weekend, at a retreat center conducive to spiritual contemplation.

The focus of these retreats would not be to simply get away to practice spiritual discipline. While practicing spiritual disciplines would be a significant part of the retreat experience, the primary focus would be on reevaluating the focus of one’s life in Christ. On retreat individuals would be given opportunity to re-assess how Christ is being seen in

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<sup>38</sup> Neil Cole, *Search & Rescue: Becoming a Disciple Who Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Bilezikian, *Community 101*.

<sup>40</sup> Dallas Willard, course lecture, “GM 720, Spirituality and Ministry,” Fuller Theological Seminary, 5-16 June 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 119.

them. The retreat would also help identify new spiritual disciplines that might address areas of needed growth in one's Christian life.

The retreat could also reinforce the fact that the disciplined life is not one of believers using the disciplines to transform their own lives into the image of Christ. Rather, the retreat would offer time to reflect and assess what God is doing and to seek clarity on what one ought to be doing. Mulholland suggests, "We need to take time to stand aside and allow God to show us what we are doing and what we ought to be doing"<sup>42</sup> A glimpse of this is also witnessed in the Gethsemane account as Jesus retreats there with the disciples. Jesus' prayer in the garden, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" is a reflection of his desire to do God's will and not his own (Matthew 26:39).<sup>43</sup> Individuals who retreat for this reflection would be given help to discover how to be sure to follow the path that God has for their lives in Christ. Therefore retreat is important because it allows individuals to step away from their busy lives and to step away from themselves to see what God is doing through them. It also affords time to discover what God desires for them and how they can give more realistic time to allowing transformation to occur once they return from the retreat to "real life."

At GCC retreats like Walk to Emmaus and the ALPHA weekend have been life transformational. It is likely, then, that the DIG Retreat would have the same impact for many who participate. The retreat would be focused on a particular passage of Scripture such as Mathew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, Romans 12, or some other passage. Reading of the particular passage would take place several times throughout the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 580. See commentary notes on Matthew 26:39.

weekend. In addition time would be given to personal prayer, journaling, and reflection and there would be shared group worship. A spiritual guide would be employed to give inspiration and direction to participants. The purpose of the guide would be to help individuals reflect on the Word of God chosen for the retreat and to be a voice of God bringing wisdom from above. An important part of the retreat would be the re-assessment and setting of personal goals to focus on once the retreat was over. For those individuals who have done the Christian Life Profile, going back over their “Personal Plan for Spiritual Growth” to discover goals that were being met and also goals that were being neglected in the growth plan would be one avenue of reassessment.

### **Conclusion**

To share the drive of John Wesley or the ancient monastics in their efforts towards spiritual disciplines the elements outlined above will be necessary in order for GCC to see spiritual disciplines begin to transform the lives of the people of the church. The more the church is able to create this favorable environment, the more likely the people of the church will find a deeper understanding and experience of God. The development of a Spiritual Formation Resource Center where people can go to find spiritual support, direction, and personal time is necessary. Complimentary language and visual stimuli will also raise up the value of spiritual disciplines in the church. Yet all of this will only suffice to stimulate interest and desire. It is even more imperative to develop spiritual leadership who will offer individuals direction using the tools discussed. It is equally imperative that everyone desiring this spiritual growth be led to join a DIG group that will help them make spiritual disciplines a more regular routine of practice in

their life. These elements are necessary in the church so that people will find deeper understanding of God and have experiences of God that are transforming. GCC must develop these pathways if it desires to do for people what they can not do yet on their own. It must provide these resources so that the people of God in this church will desire spiritual maturity and will have the tools necessary to practice spiritual disciplines.

The next chapter will focus on rethinking leadership structures and traditional models to foster spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines. A time line for implementation will also help avoid short term distraction. Lastly a vision for how spiritual discipline activity becomes a way of life at GCC and experiencing God becomes the distinguishing character of the church.

## CHAPTER 6

### RETHINKING STRUCTURES AND GOALS IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH AN ENVIRONMENT THAT EXPERIENCES GOD THROUGH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The final chapter will now be concerned with the emerging philosophy of church ministry at GCC. There is a need to rethink leadership structures to foster spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines. There is also a need to rethink small group structures. This chapter will also offer an implementation timeline in order to avoid the distractions that short-term trends can have on a church. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a long-range vision in which spiritual discipline activity is a way of life and experiencing God is the distinguishing character of the church.

#### **Rethinking Church Leadership to Foster Spiritual Discipline**

To foster spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines in the life of GCC there is an absolute necessity to consider a new focus for the philosophy of church leadership and ministry. Reid's observation that "we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience." must now be addressed.<sup>1</sup> Mark Batterson daringly calls church members "caged Christians" because the Church has unintentionally removed risk, danger and struggle from their spiritual lives.<sup>2</sup> In order to mature spiritually, believers must be pushed out of their comfortable and safe environments. Therefore, it is important to consider how to best promote an

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<sup>1</sup> Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 41, quoted in Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 201.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2008), 6.

atmosphere where people can be set free to have a deeper understanding and experience of God.

This ideal atmosphere is captured by a new motto that GCC is “A Family Growing in Faith.”<sup>3</sup> This motto was coined by the senior pastor, Chris Stephens, who observed the desire of many to have a church that has the feel of a family. As an affirmation, Wilkins suggests, “People in families grow closer to each other and develop into the individuals they were meant to be when they learn to rely on each other, to help, challenge, and be loyal to each other.”<sup>4</sup> His observation is accurate and, if applied to the philosophy of ministry at GCC, new values can be better emphasized to help the church towards individual participation in spiritual discipline.

One way to promote the church being a family is to emphasize that everyone is in need of others to become spiritually mature. A new message the church can convey is that “I can’t do it without my church family.” All too often at GCC, and presumably other church institutions, the philosophy is “You can do it.” In other words, the church promotes a mentality that assumes everyone has what it takes to do what ever God wants him or her to do. It suggests that all can experience God individually and discover his purposes for their lives without much help from others. In one sense this can seem encouraging and accurate for it promotes an independent spirit. However, if one cannot do it because of fear, insecurity, inexperience, or insufficient knowledge, he or she is less likely to seek help. Many are too embarrassed to say, “I can’t do it.” Many people in the church spend a great deal of time, even years, waiting and hoping that someone might

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<sup>3</sup> Gurnee Community Church, “Gurnee Community Church home page,” <http://www.gcchome.org/> (accessed 30 August 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Wilkins, *In His Image*, 127.

show them the way to a deeper understanding and experience of God. Many have no way of assessing the purposes God has for them. Many simply give up and leave the church feeling unfulfilled.

A different approach would be to live as a participant in the church as one lives in a family. The idea is that individual spiritual maturity is only attained through a community that shares an enthusiasm for the spiritual life venture. Throughout history the Church has always thrived when people were dependent on one another for their spiritual hope and even for their lives. The early Church gathered in the temple courts daily (Acts 2:44-46) and the Church thrived. The people of Israel had to live depending daily on God and each other in the desert wilderness with Moses (Exodus 18:17-23). In the young colony of New England, the Congregational Church thrived during a time when everyone needed each other to survive and flourish.

The philosophy of ministry necessary at GCC to sustain its becoming a church founded on spiritual maturity through spiritual disciplines is one that promotes this family mentality. Families exist together for mutual edification. They are bounded by love and uplifted by a common drive for greater personal and shared fulfillment. In a family, everyone wants the best for the others because everyone benefits and matures. When one grows, all grow. When one suffers, all suffer. Family is never completely an individual venture. At times there is individual effort but even then there is shared hope and mutual support and encouragement. A family is driven by movement and maturity and together they face life's circumstances and share in the maturing venture together. As family, there is a shared understanding of one another and there is a shared hope and desire to help one another reach one's God-given potential and purposes.

The present model at GCC is more corporately minded and competitively organized. It is like that of a corporation trying to run a business. GCC is organized around corporate goals for the institution and it is structured around various teams that do the work of the church. In this model, the ministry of the church is the greatest emphasis and there are various ministry teams in place to make the church successful. The failure of this model is that it promotes the institution over the individual. With it come high expectations for productivity and the expectation of direct individual responsibility without the guarantee of mutual support. In many cases the ministry teams are not teams at all but individuals responsible for certain jobs. When that job is not done the sole responsibility falls on the one who failed to complete the task. GCC is located in one of the greatest sports cities in the world, Chicago, Illinois. Despite this, it is one of the most difficult cities in which to be a player because of the high expectations. In this city, the people love their teams and raise the flag for their teams with passionate enthusiasm. However, if a “player” on the “team” is struggling or not meeting everyone’s expectations, he or she is reviewed critically and sent packing as soon as possible. This team philosophy infiltrates the life of the Church. At GCC there is passionate love for the institution, but this often comes at the expense of having less compassion and more critique of the individual.

In a family there is pride and passion, but there is an added passion which is an eternal commitment to one another. Everyone in a family recognizes the shared responsibility for the health, goodwill, and success of the whole. In a healthy family, there is mutual acceptance and support because there is no other way. Wilkins powerfully observes of Christians that “the challenges we face in life are formidable;

without community they become impossible.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to contend, “We need each other in the process of becoming like Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> This is why building a church to live together as a family is much more conducive to promoting spiritual maturity for all. In a family there is lifelong commitment to one another and mutual support for success and growth. Jesus’ profound response to his disciples on hearing that his mother and brother had come calling is a profound statement of how Jesus expected the Christian community to live together. “Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers’” (Matthew 12:49).<sup>7</sup> Jesus saw the Church as his family. Buttrick summarizes this well: “Is church membership a family, and Christian discipleship a home? It should be so. Within the church the lowly should find understanding, security, mutual love, and the challenge of the kingdom. For the followers of Christ are a family ‘around the feet of God.’”<sup>8</sup>

For this reason, it is essential for GCC to rethink church structures to be less team-oriented and more family-oriented. Every bit of the structured organization of the church should be reconsidered. Ministry teams and boards presently place a high value on expectations, responsibilities, self-motivation, and ego-driven recognition. To raise the value of the individual over the institution, ministry teams should be replaced by family groups where the values of mentoring, modeling, empathy, mutuality and trust are promoted as the highest values. If this occurs then it becomes easier to see all church

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 405-407. See commentary notes on Matthew 12:46-50,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 406-407.

activity as beneficial for individual spiritual maturity. Participation in the church and its ministry is solely for the purpose of everyone's deeper understanding and experience of God; with this in mind, the processes and disciplines will be more affirming of shared hope for greater spiritual maturity. Truly healthy families always want the best for everyone in the family, and maturity and spiritual growth are a shared hope for one another. The family atmosphere promotes the spiritual maturity of each individual over the success of the institution. It is only by making this sort of transition that more in the church will be eager to practice and participate in spiritual discipline activities. If the spiritual maturity of the individual is to be heightened, everything that the church does as an institution must be practiced as promoting growth in the individual. In this way spiritual disciplines are more necessary. What is more, participating on a leadership group or serving the church is more likely to be practiced as a spiritual discipline rather than as a duty.

### **Letting Go of Old Models of Small Groups**

A significant portion of Chapter 5 was given to the conception of new spiritual growth through participation in small groups. The DIG model emphasized encouragement, support, daily practice, and accountability for people desiring deeper understanding and greater experience of God. This new model of small group life is very different from the types of small groups promoted by GCC over the last ten years. During that time significant emphasis was placed on a vision of becoming a “church of small groups.”<sup>9</sup> These groups had as a purpose the hope of being small communities that

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<sup>9</sup> Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 12.

would grow together through regular gatherings where easy-to-use studies were discussed. Significant values of the group life were authentic relationships, prayer for one another, and mutual concerns. These groups became, and continue to be, a popular experience for many at GCC. Many groups have been meeting together for years because the value of the fellowship is so bonding. Even some have remained in these groups while moving on to other churches or even while having simply stopped attending regular worship altogether. It is not hard to observe that these groups have become an important source of spiritual nurture in many different ways. The deficiency, however, is that these groups have fallen prey to the same evasive activities of much of the church. There are at times short spurts of spiritual activity which is observed as growth, but it is rarely the type of spiritual maturity hoped for by Christ. Everyone remains contented by virtue of the routine, but few are encouraged to grow beyond their present spiritual states to reach their fullest potential.

To illustrate, small groups at GCC are like groups made up of people who like playing golf with their friends. The group might really enjoy playing golf with their friends and they may show signs of getting better at playing golf simply by regularly going out to the course together. However, in that scenario they probably will not show any real sustaining improvement to the level of their capabilities. If, however, they wanted to become intentional about improving their play, they could in fact try harder to play golf much better. If they did that, each one might take a lesson, go to the driving range alone, study literature on the swing or putt, and go out to play with more intensity. In the same manner, the DIGs are for the community of people who desire to intentionally mature. These groups are for those who want to embrace the Holy Spirit to

affect and witness greater spiritual growth in Christ. They are for those sensing God's call to become more like Christ.

The DIG model of small groups at GCC must have a new emphasis on which to focus. The values of the present groups that must continue to be strong are the values of authentic relationships, sharing spiritual life together, praying for one another, and meeting regularly enough to have continuity between meetings. In addition to these values, the new generation of small groups at GCC must be made up of people who have shared interest in personal spiritual maturity and lifelong learning. They must want to advance themselves along the journey of faith. If possible, they would best be a group of people like Jim Collins speaks of in his book, *Good to Great*, who are "willing to go to extreme lengths" to fulfill the goals God has given them for their lives.<sup>10</sup> Once there is greater intention and a common shared goal of greater spiritual growth, it is an easy turn that leads perfectly into spiritual disciplines. Growth is more intensified when it is concentrated in a particular action or practice. Thus it is essential to have groups share a particular goal to practice a particular spiritual discipline. If one wants to play golf better, he or she best not plan to regularly work out with someone wanting to play tennis better. It is the same with spiritual disciplines. Bible readers must go with Bible readers, and fasters must go with fasters. Essentially these small groups become what Norma Cook Everist, in her book, *The Church as Learning Community*, calls "learning communities."<sup>11</sup> She reveals that the learning process in the church community can

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<sup>10</sup> James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 124.

<sup>11</sup> Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

fulfill its real call “when its purpose is helping people find meaning rather than applying faith to life.”<sup>12</sup> The DIGs at GCC have the purpose to practice spiritual disciplines for the goal of finding that greater meaning in life which is a deeper understanding and experience of God. The present generation of small groups at GCC fails to do this because the goal of these groups falls short of intentional spiritual maturity. A new generation of small groups must now be launched.

### **The Timeline for Implementation**

A timeline for implementing each of the components necessary for embracing the spiritual disciplines movement at GCC may be seen in Appendix F. The DIGs and the spiritual direction and assessment components are the key primary spiritual discipline activities. The DIG retreats are also a critical activity of the spiritual disciplines movement. The broader efforts that guide the church to fully embrace spiritual disciplines by reconsidering church structures, language, and facilities are included and this text is shaded in blue. An exciting coincidence of this effort is the church’s celebration of its sesquicentennial and the formation of four groups who will: 1) address the physical atmosphere of existing building; 2) construct the Spiritual Formations Center; 3) develop a new organizational structure into family groups; and 4) consider a new mission statement to better reflect the language of spiritual disciplines.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

### **Spiritual Disciplines as the Way of Life for the Church**

In 1658 in London, a group of ministers and church delegates of local independent Congregational churches were invited to assemble for the purpose of developing a document which included their confession of faith and the way of Congregational life. Congregational church life had been developing throughout England and in the new colony of New England since the earliest part of the century. The assembly gathered at the Savoy Palace in London on September 29 and together established the “Savoy Declaration of Faith.”<sup>13</sup> John Owen, who is presumed to have written the preface to the Savoy Declaration, concluded the preface by saying the prayer of the assembly was that “we all may walk by the same rule.”<sup>14</sup> That assembly established what Congregationalists for centuries have referred to as the “Congregational Way.”<sup>15</sup> The Savoy Declaration of faith established among Congregationalists a commitment to a shared way of church life. Those established principles defined Congregational churches, gave unity to all the assemblies of faith, and motivated churches’ shared efforts. In that same spirit, the spiritual disciplines movement at GCC has the potential to define the patterns and pathways this Illinois church lives by faith. It equally has the potential to give unity to the church and motivate to collectively participate in an advancing spiritual maturity.

For this to happen, the practice of spiritual disciplines must become for the community of faith the foundation of the way church members live their spirituality.

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur A. Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> Robert E. Davis, ed., *Historic Documents of Congregationalism* (Miller Falls, MA: Puritan Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life*, 22.

Willard says spirituality refers to “a way of conducting religious life.”<sup>16</sup> That being so, each member of GCC who embraces the spiritually disciplined lifestyle will share in this movement of spirituality at the church. This movement will be associated with the way people gain deeper understanding and have greater experiences of God. It will also be the way people in the church are guided to discover God’s purposes for their life. This spiritual formation effort, using spiritual disciplines as its primary tool for spiritual growth, will over time become the new language of the faithful at GCC. It will be the new faith journey that will give many people new pathways to venture on towards fuller devotion to God. All this is contingent upon the church, both staff and congregation, fully embracing spiritual disciplines and the broader transformations needed in the present structures and facilities.

While this project has emphasized the practices and plans the church and individuals must necessarily adopt, the key element of this transformation is the Holy Spirit. In fact, for every great movement of Christian faith through the centuries, the key element that empowered the people of faith to go deeper, try harder, and sacrifice more was the sustaining and ever present impact of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said it would be so: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8).<sup>17</sup> The essential resource for spirituality and movements of spiritual growth is the Holy Spirit who comes on Christ’s followers “just as he did on Mary at the incarnation.”<sup>18</sup> In *The Congregational Way of Life*, Arthur A. Rouner explains that this was the empowering

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<sup>16</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John Xxiii and Mother Teresa*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 18ff, quoted in Willard, *The Great Omission*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Larkin, Briscoe, and Robinson, *Acts*, 41. See commentary notes on Acts 1:8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

force of the Congregational forefathers: “They saw how the Lord Christ’s Spirit moved in that fellowship, binding them close. They saw how each man counted and was loved because he was one of the brethren. All these things our forefathers saw, and knew that the life they wanted to live must also be bound to this Christ in the same kind of covenant community.”<sup>19</sup> Rouner also points out that for everyone, not just Congregationalists, “Christianity means living in the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

The impact the spiritual disciplines movement has at GCC has everything to do with how individuals embrace the power of the Holy Spirit and give him the freedom to work and move in them individually, among them collectively, and around them as a community. The Holy Spirit is the seal on one’s transformation through spiritual practices. The Spirit makes one’s unique fingerprinted spiritual journey cohesive with all the other journeys of all the other faithful throughout the church. When the followers of Christ embrace spiritual disciplines and open their hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit’s power will be unifying, uplifting, and will jettison the people of GCC to God-honoring heights of spiritual maturity. The lifestyle of spiritual maturity through spiritual disciplines will be an exciting venture in a new and wonderful way of life for the people of GCC.

### **Experiencing God Becomes the Distinguishing Character of the Church Fellowship**

Girolamo Savonarola, who is often referred to as the precursor to the Protestant Reformation because he had a great influence upon Martin Luther, practiced a disciplined

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<sup>19</sup> Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life*, 171-172.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

spiritual life from an early age. At age twenty-three, he ran away and joined the Dominican convent and desired only to be a drudge doing the most menial tasks at the convent. But while he was there, he fasted and prayed and led a silent life. Later in his life, his continued prayer and meditation opened him up to experience direct revelations from God, and as a result his influence on the direction of the Church is unparalleled in the modern Church. It was Savonarola's disciplined life that inspired one writer to say that he "seemed to be swept onward by a power not his own."<sup>21</sup> Some followers of Christ at GCC will say that they have experienced God in some way once or twice in their lives. Very few will confidently say they experience God on a regular basis. Allen points out that there is common agreement in the Christian world that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is "the vision of God."<sup>22</sup> Allen asserts that this "union with God" and "participation in God's life and being" is never fully realized in this life, but is in the next.<sup>23</sup> However, he affirms that this life and the life to come are "integrally connected: one leads to the other."<sup>24</sup> This connection is the driving force behind the practice of spiritual disciplines at GCC. As individuals practice spiritual disciplines they will gain the deeper understanding of God they have yearned for. This deeper understanding draws them closer to the realm of experiencing God in earthly ways and prepares people to be overwhelmed by the experience of God in the next life.

Hagberg and Guelich explain that in the most advanced stage of Christian spirituality, the experience of God through the filling of the Holy Spirit, is so manifested

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<sup>21</sup> Lawson, *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 21-23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

that “we are oblivious to the Spirit because we are accustomed to God moving very naturally through our lives, unexpectedly and surely.”<sup>25</sup> This is spiritual maturity at its fullest and it is the experience of God that the people of faith at GCC can know and appreciate as participants in the life of this church. This type of experience of God brought on through the practice of spiritual disciplines is sought after by the person intentional about spiritual maturity, and it is more lasting and sustaining than any other endeavor of spirituality that one could consider. Through the disciplines, individual hearts will be overwhelmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit and will become a testimony of the experience of God in this life. The experience of God is not simply a feeling, something warm and soothing to the soul. Rather, the experience of God is inward, deep in the soul, and it is manifested outward in the character of Christ that prevails over the life of the individual of faith. The people of Christ are driven by their sustaining experiences of God through the power of the Holy Spirit brought on by practice of the spiritual disciplines to live life as those whose “attitudes” are “the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).<sup>26</sup>

Once the movement of the spiritual disciplines takes root in the life of the people of GCC, this type of sustaining experience of God will be an expanding character of GCC. It will be seen in the attitudes, passions, new directions, and service the church shares as a community and people will know that GCC is the place to go to experience God. People from within and without the church will yearn to join the journey towards

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<sup>25</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153-154.

<sup>26</sup> Fee, *Philippians*, 91-92. See commentary notes of Philippians 2:5.

fuller devotion to God knowing that the experience of God in the next life begins with a dynamic venture to experience God in this one.

### **Evaluation and Review**

All this is possible at GCC if there is a driving passion to pray for and work hard to transform the heart of this church. It will not come about by chance. It will not come about by the work of one individual. It will only come about by the collective energies of the spiritual leaders of the church who embrace the Holy Spirit and go deep into the practices of spiritual disciplines for their own life-sustaining transformation. Therefore it is important to identify what tools will be used to evaluate and review the impact of the spiritual disciplines ministry plan on the life of GCC.

Evaluation must be a serious review and it must be personal and realistic if it is to have a positive impact. The most important thing to remember about this ministry plan is that this movement at GCC has been a God-ordained calling for the church. It is of high importance to him and requires that the church give its best effort so that he is glorified and uplifted throughout. As a result the evaluation team will have to spend time covering the whole effort in prayer and, as a spiritual discipline, consider doing the evaluation through a time of fasting. The team must listen for God to give affirmation, set new directions, and give stern warning. They will have to review their efforts through reading and re-reading God's Word and may choose to study more for greater wisdom.

The evaluation of the ministry plan will be conducted annually. Each year the pastoral staff and key leaders in the spiritual disciplines movement at GCC will take it upon themselves to set aside time for critical evaluation. The assessment will be

thorough and will consider strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing ministry. In addition, evaluation of the effort in comparison to its original vision will be conducted and any adjustment considered to the process or the vision itself. In his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, Warren Bennis states, “Until you truly know yourself, strengths and weaknesses, know what you want to do and why you want to do it, you can not succeed in any but the most superficial sense of the word.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, at the outset of this ministry plan, these items – strengths, weaknesses, changes ahead, and vision – will be the standard questions that will be considered at each annual ministry plan review.

The first element of evaluation of the ministry plan will focus on its strengths. The evaluation team will write down as many of the strengths of the ministry as possible. The team must be able to identify at least five and then they will prioritize the list from the greatest strength to the least important strength of the ministry plan. The group will also look at where it is possible that a strength could also be a weakness or could lead to a negative impact on the ministry effort. With that in mind, the team will look to identify if there are any strengths the church would like to manage better.

The second observation will be to identify obvious weaknesses. A list of three or more of the most significant weaknesses should be made. Some specific time will be taken to consider which of the weaknesses have been observed by others in the church. The team should take into account any negative comments that have been made regarding the ministry. The team should particularly focus on any weaknesses that could

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<sup>27</sup> Warren G. Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1989), 80, quoted in Morgan W. McCall, *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), 205.

potentially be a constant stumbling block. In addition, the group will assess if there are any weaknesses that once were strengths or could potentially be strengths in the future.

After looking at strengths and weaknesses, the team of evaluators should consider what changes in direction should occur that would help direct the ministry plan. The group can also consider what changes are coming at the church that might cause the movement of spiritual disciplines to be sidetracked or stalled.

Lastly, the evaluation team must look specifically at the vision of the spiritual disciplines movement at GCC. The journey of spiritual disciplines at GCC was set in motion for the purpose of seeing greater spiritual maturity among the congregation, to break down the evasive enabling practices that keep people from venturing to greater individual spiritual growth, and ultimately to point people to a deeper understanding and experience of God and to help them discover how they can participate in the purposes of God throughout their lives. The evaluation team must determine if the church continues to be going in this direction. They will also want to consider what the church needs to do in the future to be able to see this ministry plan succeed to greater heights. Once this is completed, the group will make a plan to review the process again in one year.

At the five-year junction and presumably at ten years, fifteen, and so on, the church should look back and celebrate life transformation and make a broader assessment and reaffirmation of the ministry plan. Spiritual transformation is often a slow process and the impacts are often hard to observe in short spurts. Each five years there should be ample people for whom participation in the spiritual disciplines movement at GCC can be observed as showing spiritual maturity and growth. The church should take time to witness and celebrate how individuals who made the choice to live more spiritually

disciplined lives allowed the power of the Holy Spirit to truly make a difference in their spiritual lives. A five-year spiritual disciplines testimonial banquet would give everyone a chance to appreciate the way God has worked in the lives of many people. It would also motivate others to consider how they can consider joining in the practice of spiritual disciplines themselves.

## CONCLUSION

The English Puritans endeavored to allow spiritual disciplines to invade all aspects of their lives. Packer writes, “[The Puritans] exercised intense discipline with themselves, seeking to bring their every thought and action into accord with God’s word.”<sup>1</sup> While Sunday was reserved for worship, the typical Puritan would spend the whole of Saturday in prayer, fasting, and self-examination in preparation for worship and the taking of the Lord’s Supper. And the discipline was not reserved for individuals but for the whole household. There were days of household fasting and days in which individuals took private fasts. The families, including the servants and any guests, would meet daily in the morning and again in the evening for family worship. The head of the family conducted these meetings by opening in prayer, reading the Bible, and giving carefully prepared and brief comments, followed by the singing of a Psalm. Throughout the day Puritans performed their own private spiritual disciplines at work or at home (by the women and servants), and in so doing they tried to keep “their hearts in a spiritual frame.”<sup>2</sup> All activity at the end of the day concluded with yet another vital Puritan discipline of self-examination, and many kept diaries of their intimate soul-searching practices. What came of all this Puritan discipline were “instances of men and women being given extraordinary spiritual experiences” and “deep experimental knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

the love of God in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> The Puritans proved, as this ministry focus paper has also attempted to do, that true godliness emerges most assuredly from spiritual self-discipline.

The Introduction stated that the purpose of this ministry focus paper was to present a strategy for helping the collective body of GCC to have a growing faith in Jesus Christ through personal and corporate integration of spiritual disciplines. The exploration into the various disciplines, their historical impact, and the creation of a strategic ministry (DIG) to get the momentum of spiritual growth going has demonstrated that it is possible to accomplish this goal. GCC is poised to move people from satisfaction with spiritual activity toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. The Puritans gave God permission to invade all aspects of their lives when they took up more disciplined spiritual lives. GCC can do the same and give God permission to transform people, one by one, group by group, into a people driven by their spiritual discipline to understand and experience God.

Willard has made two significant observations that this ministry focus paper has attempted to address by offering a practical solution for this particular church. First, he contends that Christians today have made discipleship “optional” by not stressing the value and necessity of the spiritually disciplined life.<sup>4</sup> He also confirms Reid’s “law of religious evasion” that “we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience.”<sup>5</sup> These two allegations are not insurmountable. They are even preventable at GCC through the spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> Willard, *The Great Omission*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 201.

discipline effort. By creating an emphasis on spiritual disciplines, putting into motion the development of spiritual leaders, and hastening the corporate restructuring, GCC will be poised for great spiritual transformation. Discipleship no longer has to be reserved for spiritual extremists but is reachable for all who desire lives transformed by God.

Moreover, DIG opens up the doorway to genuine religious experience to many more than are being afforded that opportunity at present. No longer does the church have to keep busy to look spiritual; the life-transforming effort of spiritual disciplines will brighten the whole church through the various witnesses of genuine experiences of God among the people of GCC.

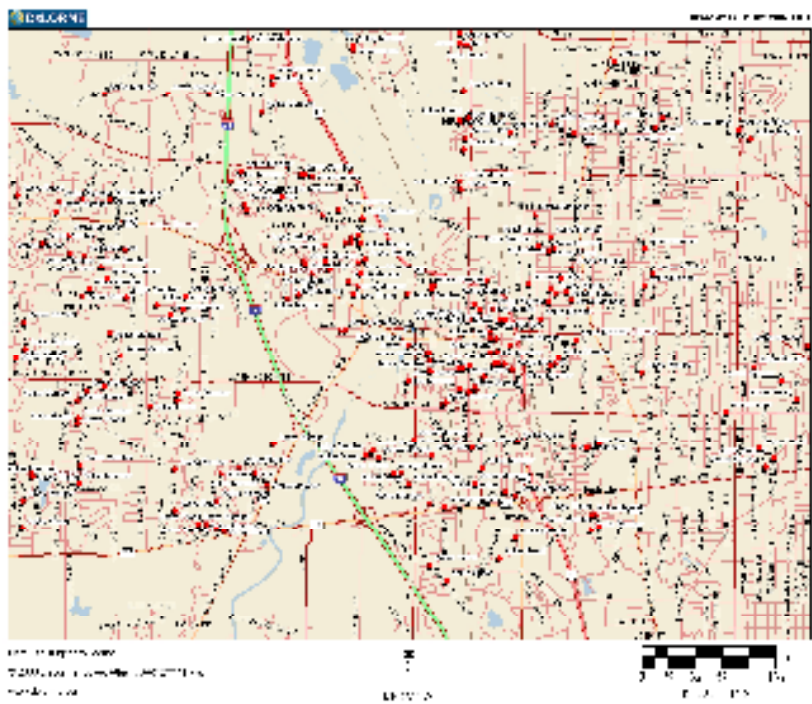
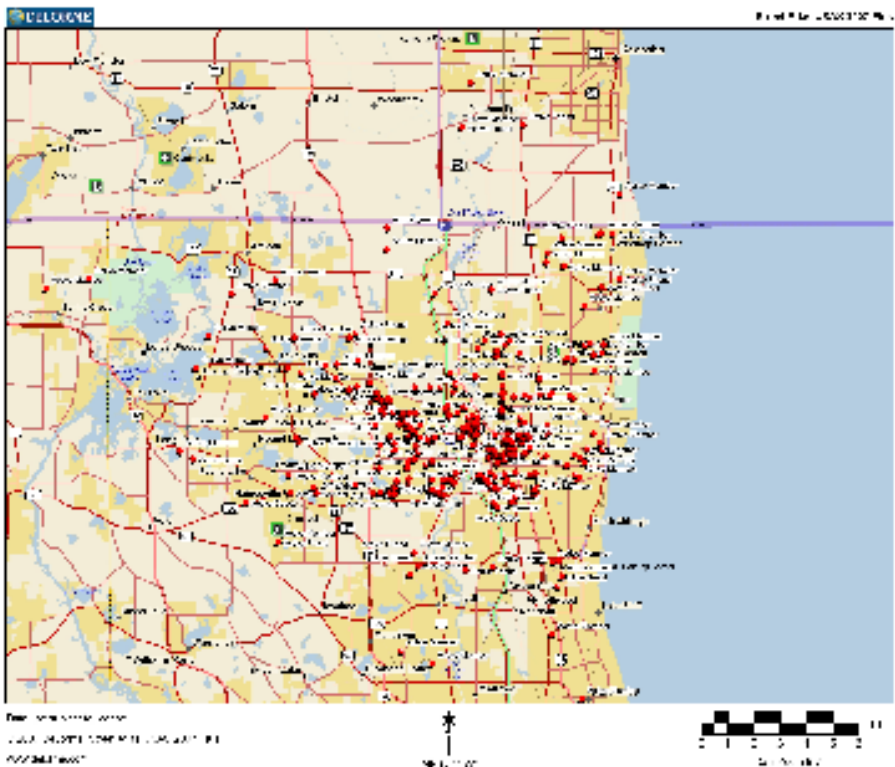
It was noted also in the Introduction that the apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). This ministry focus paper has also demonstrated clearly that the practice of spiritual discipline not only impacts and transforms one's own life but it is influential in guiding the individual to discover God's purpose for his or her life. A mind transformed through spiritual practice is a heart refocused towards a desire to do God's will. Great things for the sake of the kingdom will emerge from this effort and life transformation will revitalize GCC for the long term. God's will, vision, purposes, and goals for GCC will be reached and many more yet to be revealed will emerge through a community busy with spiritual discipline activity.

I began this project by proclaiming that the symbol of my adult life has been my passion for Christ and the desire for others to experience God more fully. I noted that this passion was complimented by GCC's own desire to help people be “more fully

devoted” followers of Christ. I cannot be satisfied to witness committed Christians being oblivious to the wonderful, exciting, attainable embrace of God. Therefore this ministry focus paper asserts that the faith journey where spiritual disciplines are regularly practiced is a journey that leads one directly into the presence of God. I am eager to grasp the hands of my fellow followers of Christ at GCC and have us run with renewed energy towards a way of life proven through history to be a direct avenue to fully experiencing God.

APPENDIX A

Gurnee Community Church Membership Chart, Spring 2007



## APPENDIX B

### Gurnee Community Church Shared Statements Revised and Adopted April 1998

#### **Mission Statement**

It is the mission of this church to lead people to a growing faith in Jesus Christ, through love, service, and encouragement, as we journey toward full devotion to God.

#### **Faith Statement**

We are a congregation of believers united on a spiritual journey which is guided by a belief in God as revealed in our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus, and empowered through the Holy Spirit, as presented to us in the teachings of the Bible.

We believe that God's grace has been extended to us through our faith in Christ Jesus and we have accepted His call to a life of love for God and God's people. We are sustained in this endeavor through prayer, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, our relationships with one another and with the God-given gifts that we bring to these relationships. We recognize the uniqueness of our members regarding their individual beliefs and experiences and join them as Christian brothers and sisters on their faith journey.

#### **Vision Statement**

As people of God, under the leadership of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is the vision of the Gurnee Community Church to:

1. Be known in the community as a leading family-based, seeker-friendly Christian church;
2. Provide meaningful weekly worship services for members and friends of all ages and Christian faith backgrounds through pastoral and lay staff utilizing their gifts to integrate teaching, preaching, music, and other performing arts into those services;
3. Be a church of service, through focused youth and member involvement and financial support of missions and outreach programs dedicated to helping the physical needs of, and providing spiritual nourishment for, the uninformed and less fortunate;
4. Develop solid, ongoing Bible-based, Christian education for youth and adults of all ages through a Christian preschool, youth and adult Sunday programs, and pertinent small-group ministries made available to all and attended by the majority of our church family; and
5. Provide opportunities for relationship building in a Christian community for members and seekers alike to come to know one another through both spiritual as well as social interactions, thus strengthening the ties that bind us as brothers and sisters on a journey in Christian faith.

**G.C.C. Covenant Statement**

We covenant with God and each other at Gurnee Community Church to live habits necessary for spiritual growth; seeking to discover our spiritual gifts in order to serve God through the body of Christ; accepting our calling to share the gospel with others.

## APPENDIX C

## Seven Step Process for Faith Journey Road Map

## Step One: NEED

Assess our current situation. Identify our need.

Examine the symptoms of our present state, and identify the principle causes of these symptoms.

## Step Two: MISSION

Review our mission statement.

- Reacquaint ourselves with each word of our mission.
- Consider any variations.
- Own it as our own.
- Decide who else needs to own it too.

## Step Three: VISION

What does our future look like?

Picture the future of GCC - What is God's intent for the ministry of GCC?

Example: In 5 years Gurnee Community Church will be recognized as a church of vital faith that is community based, and has an on going Christian heritage, just as an eagle soars over its territory with honor, glory and majesty.

## Step 4 CORE MINISTRY VALUES

What is important to our ministry?

- Spiritual Disciplines
- Evangelism
- Spiritual Gifts
- Community through Small Groups
- Stewardship
- Is there anything else?

## Step 5 PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

What will be our philosophy of ministry?

By what means or ways will we accomplish our goal of *making fully devoted followers of Christ*?

## Step 6 STRATEGY PLANS

What is the process that will accomplish the mission of GCC?

## Step 7 STRUCTURES

What structures need to be in place in order to facilitate our strategy?

What will be the key building blocks that help people flow towards *full devotion*?

## APPENDIX D

**DIG - Discipline Initiative Group****Bible Reading**  
2008 SUMMER SCHEDULE

The group meets **THURSDAY – 7:00 PM in GCC Chapel**

**Spiritual Practice Schedule:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Bible Reading</b>	<b>Additional Reading</b>
<b>June 5</b>	Introduction Night	<i>How To Read the Bible for All It's Worth</i>
<b>June 12</b>	Mark 1-8	Chapter 1
<b>June 19</b>	Mark 9-16	Chapter 2
<b>June 26</b>	Matthew 1-9	Chapter 3
<b>July 3</b>	Matthew 10-20	Chapter 4
<b>July 10</b>	Matthew 21- 28	Chapter 5
<b>July 17</b>	Luke 1-8	Chapter 6
<b>July 24</b>	Luke 9-16	Chapter 7
<b>July 31</b>	Luke 17-24	Chapter 8
<b>August 7</b>	John 1-6	Chapter 9
<b>August 14</b>	John 7-12	Chapter 10
<b>August 21</b>	John 13-21	Chapter 11

(Finish Chapters 12-13 on your own)

**Daily Practice:** The most important thing you do in DIG is exercise the spiritual discipline each day. You will need to plan a time you can carve out each day of the week for your Bible reading and prayer time. Make that time sacred. If you must take one day as a Sabbath from the practice that is OK (Pastor Merkel often skips his reading on Sunday). If you miss a day, just make it up the next day, but do not miss several days in a row or you will never get caught up. If for some reason you can not help that you missed several days then just pick up where the rest of the group is and start over. Do not try to do all the reading the night before the meeting. If this becomes your practice then you should drop out of DIG until you have more time. The primary goal of DIG is to practice a spiritual discipline daily!

**Prayer:** A critical practice with any spiritual discipline is prayer. You should spend at least a few minutes to 15 minutes in prayer at the end of your Bible Reading time. Ask God to use the text to speak to your heart and to the activities of your day. Pray for other personal needs and concerns as necessary

**Additional Reading:** The group will read *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon Fee. You can do the additional reading at your own pace. However you may want to read a few pages a day to make that time consistent. You could choose to do the reading of the text at another time of the day.

**Experience God:** A critical part of practicing the spiritual discipline is your time to experience God. As you practice this discipline daily God will begin to speak to you. Be patient and let him be heard. Listen to him speak to you in the passages you read and the prayers you say. Make time for silence and listening just for God. Let the Holy Spirit open your mind to receive God. You may want to position your hands in an open fashion as if you were receiving a gift. Look for God to also speak to His purposes for you. Don't expect to recognize God right away. You may not fully realize what God is doing until you reach the end of the 12 weeks.

**Daily Reading Options:** There are several ways you can do your daily reading of the Bible Text.

- 1) Read one or two chapters a day spreading the week's reading over the whole week.
- 2) Read 3 to 4 chapters a day so that you actually have time to read the text more than once during the week (Pastor Stu's Method).
- 3) Read the entire text each day allowing you to read the same Bible reading 7 times during the week.

As you read through these sections throughout the week, find a thought or a few thoughts that stick out to you and spend some time reflecting on it. It may be helpful to have a pen and paper nearby to jot some things down. A good way to do this is to look at the following:

**One Time-** What was happening to the original audience?

**All Time-** What is the universal principle found in the passage?

**My Time-** What does the passage say to you? How should you respond to the truth found?

## APPENDIX E

**DIG - Discipline Initiative Group****PRAYER**

## 2008 SUMMER SCHEDULE

The group will meet **TUESDAY 7:00 PM** in the GCC Chapel

**Spiritual Practice Schedule:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Prayer Time</b>	<b>Bible Reading</b>	<b>Additional Reading</b>
<b>June 3</b>	(Introduction Night)		<i>Madame Jeanne Guyon</i>
<b>June 10</b>	10 minutes	Psalm 1-14	Chapter 1-2
<b>June 17</b>	10 minutes	Psalm 15-28	Chapter 3-4
<b>June 24</b>	10 minutes	Psalm 29-42	Chapter 5-6
<b>July 1</b>	15 minutes	Psalm 43-56	Chapter 7-8
<b>July 8</b>	15 minutes	Psalm 57-70	Chapter 9-10
<b>July 15</b>	15 minutes	Psalm 71-84	Chapter 11-12
<b>July 22</b>	20 minutes	Psalm 85-98	Chapter 13-14
<b>July 29</b>	20 minutes	Psalm 99-112	Chapter 15-16
<b>August 5</b>	20 minutes	Psalm 113-119	Chapter 17-18
<b>August 12</b>	30 minutes	Psalm 120-134	Chapter 19-20
<b>August 19</b>	30 minutes	Psalm 135-150	Chapter 21-22

(Finish Chapters 23-24 on your own)

**Daily Practice:** The most important thing you do in DIG is exercise the spiritual discipline each day. Plan a time you can carve out each day of the week for your prayer and Bible reading time. Make that time sacred. If you must take one day as a Sabbath from the practice that is OK (Pastor Merkel often skips his reading on Sunday). If you miss a day, just make it up the next day, but do not miss several days in a row or you will never get caught up. If for some reason you can not help that you missed several days then just pick up where the rest of the group is and start over. Do not try to do all the reading the night before the meeting. If this becomes your practice then you should drop out of DIG until you have more time. The primary goal of DIG is to practice a spiritual discipline daily!

**Prayer:** A critical practice with any spiritual discipline is prayer. This particular discipline is focused on the practice of prayer. The primary effort of this program is for you to pray daily. The chart above lists how much time you should spend in prayer each day. Typically you should spend at least a few minutes to 15 minutes in prayer at the end of your Bible reading time. Ask God to use the text to speak to your heart and to the activities of your day. Pray for other personal needs and concerns as necessary.

Important to the practice of prayer are several elements. Things to consider every time you pray as your spiritual discipline:

- **Location:** Choose the same place to pray each time you pray. Make sure it is quiet and you won't be interrupted.
- **Posture:** Choose a typical posture each time you pray, on your knees, sitting, lying down (adding a pillow to this one can be dangerous), even standing.
- **Hands:** Find a comfortable way to place your hands. Try opening them up like you are receiving a gift (maybe the Holy Spirit will place something there for you to receive!)
- **Time:** Find a regular time to pray. If you want to accelerate your experience find more than one time a day to pray.
- **What to Pray:** A formula like the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) prayer always works great.

**Additional Reading:** The group will read Madame Jeanne Guyon's book, *Experiencing Union with God through Inner Prayer*. You can do this additional reading at your own pace. However you may want to read a few pages a day to make that time consistent. You could choose to do the reading of the text at another time of the day.

**Experience God:** A critical part of practicing the spiritual discipline is your time to experience God. As you practice this discipline daily God will begin to speak to you. Be patient and let him be heard. Listen to him speak to you in the passages you read and the prayers you say. Make time for silence and listening just for God. Let the Holy Spirit open your mind to receive God. You may want to position your hands in an open fashion as if you were receiving a gift. Look for God to also speak to His purposes for you. Don't expect to recognize God right away. You may not fully realize what God is doing until you reach the end of the 12 weeks.

**Daily Reading Method:** There are several ways you can do your daily reading of the Bible Text.

- 1) Read one or two chapters a day spreading the week's reading over the whole week (best plan for Prayer Group).
- 2) Read 3 to 4 chapters a day so that you actually have time to read the text more than once during the week (Pastor Stu's Method).
- 3) Read the entire text each day allowing you to read the same Bible reading 7 times during the week.

## APPENDIX F

## The Timeline for Embracing Spiritual Disciplines

2008

- ⇐ Summer **DIG Test Group A.**  
Dig Bible Reading, DIG Prayer, DIG Service.  
These groups met for twelve weeks - Completed
- ⇐ Fall Spiritual direction first attempts at assessment by Pastor Merkel (two people).

2009

- ⇐ Winter **DIG Test Group B.**  
Dig Worship, DIG Fasting, groups meet for twelve weeks
- ⇐ March [Spiritual Disciplines movement presented to Church Council and Elder Board](#)
- ⇐ Spring Spiritual directions second attempts at assessment by Pastor Merkel. Invite two people who have the potential to be spiritual directors.
- ⇐ **DIG RETREAT:** One or two weekends after Easter
- ⇐ April [Spiritual Disciplines movement study period by Elder Board](#)
- ⇐ Summer **DIG Test Group C.** Meet for twelve weeks
- ⇐ Fall **Spiritual Assessments: Phase One.** (four people)  
Invite four people to receive assessment by Pastor Merkel of which two have the potential to be spiritual directors.
- ⇐ [September Spiritual Disciplines movement study period by Staff](#)

2010

- ⇐ Winter **DIG Launch Groups.**  
Dig Bible Reading, DIG Prayer, others as necessary
- ⇐ January [First annual evaluation conducted by pastoral staff and key spiritual disciplines movement leaders.](#)
- ⇐ Training continues of spiritual directors by Pastor Merkel
- ⇐

- ⇐ **February Church celebrates 150 years**
    - ⇐
    - ⇐ **March** Spiritual Disciplines movement is proposed to Congregation for approval. Four teams are formed to 1) address the physical atmosphere of the existing building, 2) construct the Spiritual Formations Center, 3) develop a new organizational structure into family groups, and 4) consider a new mission statement to better reflect the language of spiritual disciplines.
    - ⇐
    - ⇐ Pastoral staff and support staff begin to use language consistent with spiritual disciplines philosophy.
    - ⇐ **Spring** **Spiritual Assessments: Phase Two.** Trained spiritual directors provide first assessments for interested members, one or two each.
    - ⇐
    - ⇐ **DIG RETREAT** One or two weekends after Easter
    - ⇐ **Summer** **DIG Groups.** Meet for twelve weeks
    - ⇐ **August** Church Council proposes to congregation revitalization of existing building and construction of Spiritual Formations Center. New Missions Statement adopted.
    - ⇐ **Fall** **Spiritual Assessments: Phase Two** continued. Trained spiritual directors provide second round of assessments for interested members, one or two each.
    - ⇐
    - ⇐ **DIG RETREAT** Nearest to October 1.
    - ⇐ **Winter** **DIG Groups.** Dig Bible Reading, DIG Prayer, Begin to offer more critical disciplines as necessary Training of additional spiritual directors by Pastor Merkel
    - ⇐ **January** Second annual evaluation conducted by pastoral staff and key spiritual disciplines movement leaders.
    - ⇐ **February** New organizational structure is developed and proposed to congregation
    - ⇐ **Spring** **Spiritual Assessments: Phase Two** continued. Trained spiritual directors provide assessments for interested members.
- 2011

⇐ **DIG RETREAT**

⇐ **May** Organizational leadership retreat held for new and continuing members of former boards and ministry teams and new family groups.

⇐ **Summer** **DIG Groups:** New groups available and existing groups offered choice to continue for longer than twelve weeks.

⇐ **July** New organizational structure is implemented with new leadership groups,

⇐ **Fall** **DIG Groups.** At this point DIG groups are now very much a part of the spiritual life framework of the church. Everyone sees the value of DIG groups.

⇐ **September** Spiritual Formations Center and revitalization completed and dedicated.

⇐ **Spiritual Assessments: Phase Three.** At this point there are enough spiritual directors to provide assessments during the Fall and Spring assessment periods.

⇐ **DIG RETREAT**

2012

⇐ **Winter** **DIG Groups.** At this point Dig Groups regularly form each Winter and Summer, Existing groups have re-enroll period at the beginning of Winter and Summer. People can join an existing group or a new group.

⇐ **January** Third annual evaluation conducted by pastoral staff and key spiritual disciplines movement leaders.

⇐ Training of additional spiritual directors by Pastor Merkel

⇐ **Spring** **Spiritual Assessments Period.**

⇐ **DIG RETREAT**

⇐ **Summer** **DIG Groups** formed and/or re-enroll

⇐ **Fall** **Spiritual Assessments Period.**

⇐ **DIG RETREAT**

2013

- ⇐ Winter **DIG Groups** formed and/or re-enroll.
- ⇐ January [Fourth annual evaluation conducted by pastoral staff and key spiritual disciplines movement leaders.](#)
- ⇐ Training of additional spiritual directors by Pastor Merkel
- ⇐ Spring **Spiritual Assessments Period.**
- ⇐ **DIG RETREAT**
- ⇐ April [Five Year Spiritual Disciplines Testimonial Banquet and Reaffirmation](#)
- ⇐ Summer **DIG Groups** formed and/or re-enroll
- ⇐ Fall **Spiritual Assessments Period.**

2014

- ⇐ **DIG RETREAT**
- ⇐ Winter **DIG Groups** formed and/or re-enroll.
- ⇐ January [Annual evaluation conducted by pastoral staff and key spiritual disciplines movement leaders.](#)
- ⇐ Training of additional spiritual directors by Pastor Merkel
- ⇐ Spring **Spiritual Assessments Period.**
- ⇐ **DIG RETREAT**
- ⇐ Summer **DIG Groups** formed and/or re-enroll
- ⇐ Fall **Spiritual Assessments Period.**
- ⇐ **DIG RETREAT**

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Vita of  
**Stuart R. Merkel**

Present Position:

Pastor of Educational Ministries, Gurnee Community Church  
Gurnee, IL

Personal Data:

Birthdate: June 12, 1961  
Birthplace: Pomona, California  
Marital Status: Married to Lynn Pountain  
2 children: Peter and Greg  
Home Address: 1090 Hawthorne Street  
Gurnee, IL 60031  
Phones: Office: (847) 336-2392  
Cell: (847) 989-5972  
Home: (847) 244-7216  
Denomination: National Association of Congregational  
Christian Churches  
Ordained: June 20, 1987

Education:

BA Point Loma College  
San Diego, CA, 1983  
MDiv Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California, 1987  
DMin (candidate) Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California, 2008

Professional Experience:

3/00 to 12/08 Pastor of Educational Ministries,  
Gurnee Community Church  
Gurnee, IL  
10/87 – 12/98 Associate Pastor of Youth and Children,  
South Congregational Church  
Hartford, Connecticut