

PART TWO: FOUNDATIONS

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CHAPTER 5
THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL MATURATION

This chapter describes a biblical and theological foundation for cultivating spiritual maturity foundational to the thesis of this paper that biblically and theologically sound strategies can be developed that mature, mobilize, and equip FLC congregants for apostolic discipleship. This chapter defines the gospel and spiritual formations, which are critical and central for cultivating mature disciples sent out in mission. A narrative depiction of a transformed life in Christ is presented that exemplifies the outcomes of an equipping ministry. The church's role and the use of spiritual disciplines and small groups will link theology to equipping ministry.

Theology comes from a Greek word that means study of God.¹ Biologically, maturation is a process of becoming fully developed or ripe “such as the ripening of a seed or the attainment of full functional capacity by a cell, a tissue, or an organ.”² The word *καταρτίζω* means maturation, being “fit, sound, complete, to restore or be made whole.”³ In Ephesians 4:13, *τελειωσ* refers to being “made complete, mature, or more perfect.”⁴ As disciples of Jesus, Christians seek maturity in character transformation and

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, s.v. “theology.”

² Ibid.. s.v. “maturation.”

³ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, s.v. “*καταρτίζω*.”

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*, s.v. “*τελειωσ*.”

behavior that emulates Jesus in practical ways. Willard writes: Practical theology's overall task is, in effect, to develop for practical implementation the methods by which women and men interact with God to fulfill the divine intent for human existence. That intent for the church is twofold: the effective proclamation of the Christian gospel to all humanity, making "disciples" from every nation or ethnic group, and the development of those disciples' character into the character of Christ himself "teaching them to do all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).⁵

Willard suggests the purpose of theology is reflection, study, and proclamation of the gospel that ultimately provides practical application for life. Willard defines the role of leaders and teachers in the church by quoting Ephesians 4:12, "For the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The church's task is to fulfill this calling and teach the saints discipleship basics while simultaneously equipping them for the priesthood of believers who are sent into the world for service.

Eims summarizes three essentials for persons who equip others as stalwart, loyal, productive disciples in the ministry of Jesus Christ:⁶

He [*sic*] must have clearly in mind what he wants them to know and understand of the things of God; he must know what are the basic ingredients in a life of discipleship. He must have a clear picture of what he wants these disciples to become. He must know what bedrock elements

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 15.

⁶ Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciplemaking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 36.

of Christian character must be theirs and what kind of people they should be. He must have a vivid vision of what he wants them to learn to do and a workable plan to help them accomplish it.⁷

Based on Eims' comments two questions guide this chapter's content: "What are the things of God that people ought to know?" and, "What does a mature follower of Jesus Christ look like?"

An equipping model for discipleship and evangelism is built upon a solid biblical and theological foundation and the Christian church is built upon the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. From the seeds of faith planted by the Holy Spirit extends a lifetime of faith incubation, in which the seeds are watered, fertilized, sprout, mature, bear fruit, and are pruned. This chapter begins with the seeds of faith of the gospel.

The Gospel Defined

First Lutheran's first core value is a commitment to be deeply rooted in the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible:

We treasure the Biblical message of God's grace, his amazing love for undeserving people through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, and his death on the cross for us. (John 3:16) In fact, the Bible is central to, and the basis for, every aspect of our congregation's ministry for the sole purpose that Jesus Christ might be exalted as Savior and Lord. For us, the Bible is the primary source of truth. (II Timothy 3:16-17)⁸

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ Daniel Kolander, "First Lutheran Church Core Values" (Cedar Rapids, IA: First Lutheran Church, 2002).

FLC's primary source of the gospel or good news is rooted in Jesus' way of being and living described in scripture. The good news of Jesus Christ radically transforms lives and is foundational for the salvation experience at FLC in Cedar Rapids.

The agape unconditional love of Jesus transforms lives and is defined in terms of reconciled relationships, rest, relief, release, and redirection (refocus). In a world of chaotic change, people look for something dependable that provides hope, healing, and refreshment for mind, body, and soul now and long-term.⁹

Gospel as Relationship

Religion as a system of belief is incomplete without a personal relationship with God incarnated in Jesus (Rev 3:20). A relationship with God and relationships with other people are essential for the abundant life. Humanity was created with a "connection requirement"¹⁰ for human touch, conversation, and care for one another. The incarnation of God in Jesus, demonstrates a God who moves toward His people and connects with them through relationship. A biblical example of reconciled relationships, rest, relief, release, and redirection is found in the story of the woman caught in adultery from John 8:1-11. The good news incarnate in Jesus is revealed as Jesus interacts with her and the Jewish temple leaders who were ready to condemn her to death. Her desire for relationships became distorted and expressed through sexual intimacy in adulterous relationships. But Jesus said: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to

⁹ Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 153.

¹⁰ Frazee, *Making Room for Life*, 27.

throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). The woman’s suffering became sudden rest, relief, and release based on Jesus’ intervention and interaction.

The release and relational connection took place when Jesus straightened her up and asked: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (John 8:10). She realized she was not condemned, had been set free, and Jesus confirmed, “Then neither do I condemn you” (John 8:11). Jesus then redirected her life when He said: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). The good news is heard in a holy connection with God incarnate in Jesus: rest for her mind, body and spirit; relief from suffering; release from sin’s captivity; and a new, redirected life. Her reaction to the good news is temporary if she continues in her old life patterns of sin, but if she leaves her old way of life and connects with the community of believers, she is set free by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The five Rs of the gospel relate to the twenty-first century context because the gospel of Jesus Christ transforms relationships with God and humanity living in a culture of isolation and disconnect. Frazee examined urban and suburban American life and noted that people may have a multitude of relationships, but few are deep and lasting. He calls this social illness “crowded loneliness.”¹¹ Frazee argues that American Christians can condense their circle of connections and experience relationships through concentrated, multiple interactions throughout the week. Frazee writes:

If we hope to be successful in truly making room for life, we’re going to have to rebuild our current lifestyles on a new foundation. We cannot simply pour more money and energy into the paradigm of crowded

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

loneliness. Managing an endless number of disconnected linear relationships is exhausting. But more than just making us tired, this way of life is toxic. We were created with a connection requirement, and if this requirement is not satisfied, we will eventually die. If we ever became convinced of this, it would make our pursuit of a connecting life a higher priority.¹²

The yearning for God and a loving community willing to relate deeply is vital for the many isolated and disconnected.

Much of twenty-first century American culture moves at a frantic pace and Frazee states: “Simply put, many of us have squeezed living out of life. We don’t have the time to soak in life and deep friendships. We’re always running around trying to get to the next event.”¹³ Frazee describes the gospel in restful terms as a Sabbath rhythm in Christ that restructures time and priorities. He calls this the “Hebrew Day Planner.”¹⁴

There are essentially three major activities in each day that should be governed by night and day: productivity, relationships, and sleep...Between 9:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. everyone would settle down to get a good night’s sleep. The basic structure of a normal day for the Hebrews went like this: twelve hours available for productivity and work (6:00 A.M.-6:00 P.M.); four hours available for relationships (6:00 P.M. – 10 P.M.).¹⁵

In the Christian community this biblically-based vision of a balanced life is good news. Just as Jesus offers rest to the weary, FLC can offer the good news that chaotic lifestyles can change and burdens can be lightened.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

Humans often suffer, but Jesus offers relief and a lighter burden (Matt 11:28-30). Jesus ministry sought to comfort the afflicted, which is compassion (to suffer with).¹⁶ “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36 NIV). Americans and others suffer, and significant in the American context are prevalent issues such as depression, loneliness, eating disorders, addictions, divorce, and cancer. The good news is that Jesus heals physical, social, mental, and spiritual pain as people yearn for holistic healing in their lives (Matt. 9:35).

Every person is captive to sin (Rom 3:23), which may manifest in habitual behaviors including addiction to substances, behaviors, and thoughts. May writes:

We are all addicts in every sense of the word. Moreover, our addictions are our own worst enemies. They enslave us with chains that are of our own making and yet that, paradoxically, are virtually beyond our control. Addiction also makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another. Addiction breeds willfulness within us, yet, again paradoxically, it erodes our free will and eats away at our dignity. Addiction then is at once an inherent part of our nature and an antagonist of our nature. It is the absolute enemy of human freedom, the antipathy of love. Yet, in still another paradox, our addictions can lead us to a deep appreciation of grace. They can bring us to our knees.¹⁷

Jesus sets individuals free from the bondage of that sin (Rom 8:2), and the gospel helps believers deal with their addictions in the context of a biblical community of supporting relationships.

¹⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 4.

¹⁷ Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 4.

The gospel transforms lives (Rom 12:2). Paul states in 2 Corinthians, “Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun” (2 Cor 5:17, NLT). Individuals may experience a conversion event or be baptized; however, some disconnect from the life-long journey of a re-directed life connected with Christ and Christian community. McLaren writes, “We’ve got to help people look at following Christ as a life-long journey. It’s great to cross the starting line on that journey, but salvation is about a whole life.”¹⁸ Like the woman caught in adultery, the support of biblical community provided through the grace of Christ, is essential to live a new life directed by Jesus.

A Depiction of a Mature Follower of Jesus Christ

FLC has defined the life of a fully devoted follower of Christ using six words: Christ, center, connect, cultivate, contribute, and communicate (figure 1). When believers encounter the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ, First Lutheran Church members help them mature and live out the five dimensions of apostolic discipleship. Kolander proclaimed,

Transformation into Christ-likeness is what God intends for every believer. Being a follower of Christ means that you keep learning, and keep growing, and keep changing your whole life long. It’s a journey that will be complete only when you die or when Christ returns. Until that time, we’re all works in progress. As Paul wrote, even of himself: “I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies

¹⁸ Lynne Marian, “Brian McLaren on Outreach,” *Outreach Magazine* (July/August 2005): 122.

ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.” (Philippians 3:12-14, NLT)¹⁹

Christ

In figure 8, a star is placed in the center that represents Jesus Christ as the light, shining brightly. This light is like the star of Bethlehem that leads individuals to Jesus. FLC congregants intend to be Christ-centered and biblically-based. As Christians, they are to reflect the light of Christ, and are called to bring this light to the world. “Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

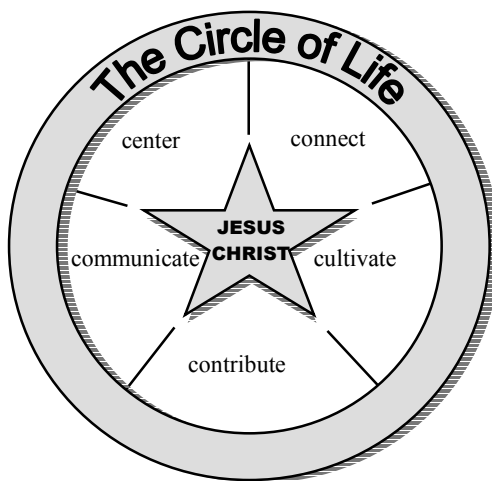


Figure 8

Center

Authentic worship takes place as worshippers center lives on God. Borg writes:

¹⁹ Daniel Kolander, “Transformation: The Change Is on the Inside” (Cedar Rapids, IA: First Lutheran Church, September 4, 2005).

Faith is faithfulness to our relationship with God. It means what faithfulness does in a committed human relationship: we are faithful (or not) to our spouses or partners. Faith as fidelity means loyalty, allegiance, the commitment of the self at its deepest level, the commitment of the “heart.”... Fidelitas refers to a radical centering in God.²⁰

Faith and worship go hand in hand; therefore, worship done in an attitude of praise honors and pleases God as a daily dying to self (Rom 6:6). Humanism honors or centers on self. Christianity is based on the loss of self so that God and others are honored and served.

FLC’s core value defines it as a commitment to stay centered on God through daily worship and prayer. Worship is thus a personal and corporate encounter with the living God (Psa 84:1-4, 10-12; Eph 1:3-14). Centering on God occurs in solitude or community, and the spiritual disciplines facilitate it through worship, daily devotions, and prayer. These disciplines are exercised corporately and personally, which ultimately enhance each believer’s focus on God.

Connect

Mature disciples connect with other believers regularly and experience Christian community because discipleship includes belonging, not just believing (Matt 18:19-20). FLC’s core value identifies connection as a commitment to live out Christian faith in authentic biblical community. FLC states that loving relationships are vital to the spiritual growth of the congregation and are best actualized in small groups. In the small group’s

²⁰ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 32-33.

intimate context, concern for one another, specific prayer, and holding each other accountable are facilitated and realized.²¹

Cultivate

FLC emphasizes how Christians grow in passionate spirituality through the cultivation of spiritual maturity and godly character in discipleship. FLC expresses this core value as a commitment to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ and the cultivation of an ongoing personal relationship with Christ (John 15:1-17). The more believers know Christ, the more they become like Christ through a growth process from spiritual infancy to maturity (Phil 3:3-14, Eph 4:12-14). The corporate and personal spiritual disciplines of study, Sabbath observance, and service strengthen the relationship with Christ.

Contribute

Mature disciples contribute through their gifts and talents in ministry. Two FLC core values describe these contributions. First, FLC has a commitment to multiply ministers for God's work in the world, and the pastors and staff's primary role is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). A second way of contribution is FLC's commitment to generously share the resources God has given the congregants.

²¹ Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1983), 35-40)

Communicate

The fifth dimension of spiritual maturity is the communication of God's love and good news to others, which is mission. God is at work in the world and Christians join God in the task. As followers of Christ, Christians continue Jesus' mission on earth through personal testimony of how Christ changed their lives. Their mindset shifts from self-centered thinking to other-centered thinking, from a narrow local view to a wider global view (Rom 6:6, Matt 28:19-20).

FLC exists to help develop mature followers of Christ who seek: (1) to center their lives on God, not on self; (2) to connect deeper with other believers in Christian community; (3) to cultivate spiritual maturity and godly character; (4) to contribute something back to God by using their gifts and talents in ministry; and (5) to communicate God's love to others by developing a heart for the world.

Small Groups as Primary Incubator for Faith Maturation

Because the gospel is defined in part as connected relationships, FLC cultivates mature disciples in small group incubators, which is identified as FLC's greatest perceived NCD strength. This focus is stated as a FLC core value as "a commitment to live out our faith in relevant Biblical community."²²

Research demonstrates that people respond best to the gospel when it is presented within the context of loving relationships. Therefore, we believe that building relationships is vital to the spiritual growth of our congregation. We further believe that those relationships are best realized in small groups, places where we get to know one another, develop caring

²² Kolander, "First Lutheran Church Core Values," 1.

concern for each other, hold each other accountable, and offer newcomers a safe place to belong (Acts 2:42-47).²³

In a world where neighbors and those sitting nearby in the church pew are often unknown, small groups provide a relationship network of people who can experience the grace of God together. Close relationships are essential because “at the heart of discipling is a relationship in which one or more believers assist or invest in each other in order to grow to maturity in Christ.”²⁴ FLC uses three primary models of small group dynamics: Talmidim, Lateral Mentoring, and Acts 2 Community.

Talmidim

Jesus called people from the crowds and focused on a few (Matt 10:2, Mark 3:14). Eims writes, “Disciples cannot be mass produced. We cannot drop people into a program and see disciples emerge at the end of the production line. It takes time to make disciples. It takes individual personal attention.”²⁵ Jesus based His discipleship plan on the Hebrew education or Talmidim approach of the first century.²⁶ People with an intense desire to emulate a rabbi or teacher, spent time with the rabbi and imitated him. Those who are spiritual infants need milk (1 Cor 3:1-2, 1 Pet 2:2). As these spiritually young mature as

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 129.

²⁵ Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, 45.

²⁶ “Rabbi and Talmidim,” <http://www.community.gospel.net/Brx?pageID=2753> (accessed October 1, 2005).

faithful followers and reflect the character of Christ, they become teachers whom the young emulate.

Teachers or small group leaders must develop mature, strong disciples who can also train strong disciples. Since a teacher or leader can disciple effectively only a few at a time and at a slow pace, it is essential that a vision of discipleship multiplication is established. When prepared, these students are commissioned to shepherd their own group. In contemporary terms, this is called a “turbo group” approach.²⁷ FLC small group ministry uses this concept.

Lateral Mentoring

A significant emerging small group approach is based on the lateral mentoring of Barnabas and Paul. This nonhierarchical model views discipling as a mutual process of peer mentoring, and the relationships of group members are developed side by side rather than one person having authority or position over another.²⁸ The peers serve “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). Ogden’s *Discipleship Triads* and Cole’s *Life Transformation Groups* are used in the FLC context.²⁹

Acts 2 Community

This third approach to small group development reflects a multi-generational vision for biblical community. Acts 2:42-47 demonstrates this vision of people who live

²⁷ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 196.

²⁸ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

in close proximity, which provides opportunity for frequent interaction. Due to twenty-first century American mobility and short commutes locally, FLC is not limited by immediate proximity. Although several FLC small groups are based on affinity and life stage, a movement towards a group mixture of singles, couples, and families of various life stages have developed.

DNA of FLC Small Groups

The essential DNA of any group includes three elements: divine truth, nurturing relationships, and apostolic mission.³⁰

Seeking divine truth involves study of the Word, both in the person of Jesus and in the scriptures. In Jesus and scripture, God intersects with humanity and sheds light on human identity and reality in the spiritual and material worlds.³¹ Christians immerse themselves in scripture to know and be with Jesus (2 Tim 2:15, 2 Tim 3:16). Jesus is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6) and transforms Christians in faith and action. The Word challenges Christians to “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2).

The process of nurturing relationships requires time and energy to share with one another. Authentic biblical community extends beyond regular meeting times as relationships intersect throughout the week through e-mail, phone calls, and face-to-face

³⁰ Cole, *Church Multiplication Movements*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

connections. FLC builds nurturing relationships grounded in Divine truth, and sends believers out on a mission to reach more people for Christ.

Christ's apostolic mission instruction is: "Go, make disciples" (Matt 28:19) The questions based upon this instruction include: "Who needs the Lord?" "Who could be a part of this community?" "Who could be a part of this team?" Apostolic mission is more than an invitation; it is about strong disciples making strong disciples who make strong disciples who expand the effort in concentric circles to others.³² FLC members are "sent out" (Acts 13:4) to make and multiply disciples, leaders, ministers, groups, and movements.

Schwarz's NCD work expands on the DNA theme and describes the elements that make a small group "holistic": the small group meets the real questions and needs of its members in a complete way; small group leaders are trained; apprentice leaders are raised up and trained; group participants and groups are multiplied; resources are provided for the content development of groups; different kinds of groups are created; and some groups are allowed to die.³³ The church has been effective historically because it has touched one life at a time while spreading and multiplying globally.³⁴ These small group techniques and principles provide multiple strategies that make, mature, and multiply apostolic disciples for mission.

³² Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God*, 29.

³³ Christian A. Schwarz, *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 96-102.

³⁴ Cole, *Church Multiplication Movements*, 18.

The Role of Spiritual Disciplines

The spiritual disciplines increase the practitioner's positive focus on God and neighbors.³⁵ The apostle Paul declared, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Rom 12:11-12). NCD's description of passionate spirituality describes the means to make Christian faith a holistic experience and a personal encounter with Christ.³⁶

Monastic societies provided a variety of Christian, spiritual disciplines through the centuries but few mainline protestant denominations explored this treasure until recently.³⁷ In the last few decades Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, and others have emphasized these fruitful faith practices for maturity. Many mainline protestant churches, however, interpreted the disciplines as good works designed to attain salvation, and many protestants have hesitated to practice them. In addition, the disciplines appear contrary to the thinking of current society. Willard describes the battle as modern society's goals often contrast with the discipline's goals.

Contemporary Westerners are nurtured on the faith that everyone has a *right* to do what they want when they want, to pursue happiness in all ways possible, to feel good, and to lead a "productive and successful life," understood largely in terms of self-contentment and material well-being. This vision of life has come, in the popular mind, to be identified with "the good life," and even with civilized existence.³⁸

³⁵ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 26.

³⁶ Schwarz, *Implementation Guide*, 63.

³⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 146.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

Through the NCD process, FLC members identified their interest in spiritual exercise through the disciplines. The group identified obstacles to living out a passionate spirituality, which included: FLC's conservative Lutheranism is not demonstrative and are sometimes uncomfortable with congregant expressed, verbal prayer, or reading the Bible. Some respondents indicated that the importance of faith practices was not systematized or emphasized. A lack of church focus on discipleship training was also a prominent theme. Others shared that such practices have not been part of the family "faith upbringing" of people, and basic spiritual practices were minimal or non-existent in the home. The pursuit of the good life has probably taken priority over faith development.

FLC's greatest growth area is "Passionate Spirituality," as defined by NCD, and is measured by a person's practice of personal spiritual disciplines, corporate spiritual disciplines, and contagious faith. A high value and practice of a regular prayer life and personal use of the Bible are basic indicators of spiritual passion, and an effective ministry flows out of a passionate spirituality. Since 2001, FLC has explored a variety of avenues that foster passionate spirituality through the practice of corporate and personal spiritual disciplines that create a genuine, deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Three Categories of Spiritual Disciplines

In the context of FLC's Circle of Life Discipleship Journey, three primary categories of spiritual disciplines were identified: study, Sabbath, and service.

Study

Foster identifies study as an important spiritual discipline:

The purpose of the Spiritual disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it.³⁹

The gospel narrative is relevant for the present times, but many people remain in bondage to fears and anxieties, and could be released as they practice the study discipline.⁴⁰ Foster says “Study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction.”⁴¹ Study, therefore, involves a concentrated, intensive experience that develops a habit and trains the mind to think and live a different way.

Foster identifies four steps that enhance the study discipline: repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection. Like a disciplined athlete, repetition helps master an action or mindset and makes it more natural or habitual. The adoption of alternative, effective options and practicing them repeatedly provides transformation. Centering the mind through concentration focuses one’s attention with a singleness of purpose. The repeated focus of the mind in a particular direction, centering one’s attention on the subject at hand, and understanding what is being studied, moves a person to new level of comprehension.⁴² This is what Jesus refers to as knowledge of the truth

³⁹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴² Ibid., 65.

that sets persons free (John 8:32), and is similar to the moment someone reads something repeatedly and suddenly understands it. Finally, through the step of reflection individuals understand things from God's perspective and understand themselves more completely.⁴³

Under the study category, FLC will concentrate on spiritual formation and contemplative living, growth, and discipleship.

Spiritual Formation and Contemplative Living

When the gospel seed that produces transformation is planted, it requires good soil and fertilizer to reach its fullest potential. The spiritual growth process is defined as spiritual formation. According to Mulholland, "Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others."⁴⁴ Contemplation is a major nurturing ingredient in the FLC context, and contemplation is defined as the "focused attention of the soul toward the Divine. Contemplation is about the interior life of prayer that yearns to see and know God as God is, to experience a pure union with God, and to be absorbed by God's all-consuming infinite love."⁴⁵ Whether in solitude or community, Jesus and his disciples exemplified this life of prayer that leads to service.

Contemplative living is a means by which members and friends of First Lutheran Church seek spiritual growth and maturity in order to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Because prayer is foundational to wisdom, group participants learn to be still,

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁴ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 13.

⁴⁵ Keith Beasley-Topliffe, *Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2003), 67.

focus their attention on the Beloved, and listen for God’s voice.⁴⁶ The expression of mutual concerns and desires results from this conversation. Through teaching, modeling, and accountability, participants use the spiritual disciplines as a way of life that produces a rich interior life of contemplation and meditation. This experience propels people outward in service for the church, community, and world. People’s love and desire for God results in healthy understandings of who God is and is not. A deeper self-knowledge teaches people that difficulties and struggles are not roadblocks, but clarify one’s walk with Jesus. As people grow in this self-knowledge and knowledge of God, they become authentic and candid before God. In their union with God, people are freed and remain their unique selves with distinct gifts, passions, and wounds. Their unique service capabilities emerge in their freedom from their old ways of self-protection and self-focus. The measure of spiritual depth is the work they do, or as Chittister writes, “Work is the contemplative’s response to contemplative insight.”⁴⁷ Living contemplatively leads people outward.⁴⁸

One of the tools FLC uses for assistance toward spiritual maturation is the Renovaré resource for spiritual renewal, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* by James Bryan Smith.⁴⁹ The sessions explore: the life of Christ, the contemplative tradition, the

⁴⁶ Marcie Watson, “Contemplative Living” (Cedar Rapids, IA: First Lutheran Church, 5 August 2005).

⁴⁷ Joan Chittister, *Illuminated Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 122.

⁴⁸ Watson, “Contemplative Living.”

⁴⁹ James Bryan Smith, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 9-10.

holiness tradition, the charismatic tradition, the social justice tradition, the evangelical tradition, and the incarnational tradition. More than 130 FLC members and friends have participated in a Renovaré Spiritual Formation Small Group during the past three years. The groups use the Renovaré system, study together, commit to a spiritual discipline that is practiced during the week, and meet together, and share what new personal insights about God and self were experienced through spiritual practice. Foster highlights some of the benefits he experienced in the Renovaré group:

First, I like the sense of community. None of us is supposed to live the Christian life alone. We gain strength and help from others. Second, I like the nurturing character. The rule for our weekly gatherings is a good one: give encouragement as often as possible; advice, once in a great while; reproof, only when absolutely necessary; and judgment, *never*. Third, I like the intentionality. Our purpose is to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. Everything is oriented around this single goal. Fourth, I like the loving accountability. I need others to ask hard questions about my prayer experiences, temptations and struggles, and plans for spiritual growth. Fifth, I like the balanced vision. To be baptized into the great streams of Christian faith and practice helps free me from my many provincialisms. Sixth, I like the practical strategy. I want and need realistic handles that actually move me forward into Christ-likeness. Seventh, I like the freedom and the fun. These groups encourage discipline without rigidity, accountability without manipulation.⁵⁰

In a world of chaotic lifestyles and constant noise, contemplative living has brought a refreshing approach to spiritual formation at FLC.

Spiritual direction is another tool provided First Lutheran Church's congregants and friends through a full-time, trained staff Spiritual Director. Based on the spiritual formation through contemplative living, the spiritual direction program stimulates increased change among participants. It does not force people into new life, but it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

encourages people to pay close attention to God, be available to God, and be changed by God. The director and the Spiritual Director work together and clear away some obstacles to God, re-examine concepts of God, identify effective spiritual disciplines, learn new and relevant ways to pray, and seek God's guidance.

Growth

At FLC, growth opportunities are offered through particular courses that provide deep study through repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection.⁵¹ A teacher or ministry team member leads the course and concentrates on a particular discipleship dimension. This includes an entry course on the basics of Christianity known as Alpha. Other equipping classes include: *Contagious Christian* for those who seek skills in witnessing, the *Good Sense* course on managing household finances for the sake of increased generosity, and a variety of adult education offerings on Sunday mornings.

Discipleship

The third dimension to study is called *Discipleship* and includes many purchased or in-house resources and books for study in small group or personal study. These resources are readily available and catalogued in our FLC adult and children's libraries. Like college courses, resources range from simple levels of 101 and 201 and get more in-depth with material and preparation commitment for study, like a 301 or 401 level. An abundance of Bible studies and books on life stage themes, spiritual disciplines, books of

⁵¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 62.

the Bible, and previous sermon series studies are circulated by individuals and small groups.

Sabbath

The American society is known in other cultures as “stressed out,” overly competitive, and extremely busy, and yet, Americans yearn for rest and recuperation.⁵² Sabbath comes originally from the Hebrew verb *Shabbat*, which means primarily “to cease or desist.”⁵³ To be still, to stop doing and simply be, is difficult in a materialistic society that constantly wants more. The tension between the desire for rest and the reality of work and pressure remains, and the Circle of Life Journey at FLC provides leisure and time for reflection.

Marva Dawn describes how God blesses those who learn the essence of Sabbath as: cease work, rest, embrace, and feast.⁵⁴ Dawn names particular, almost compulsive distractions that keep American Christians from centering on God:

We will consider many aspects of Sabbath ceasing—to cease not only from work itself, but also from the need to accomplish and be productive, from the worry and tension that accompany our modern criterion of efficiency, from our efforts to be in control of our lives as if we were God, from our possessiveness and our enculturation, and, finally, from the humdrum and meaninglessness that result when life is pursued without the Lord at the center of it all. In all these dimensions we will recognize the great healing that can take place in our lives when we get into the rhythm of setting aside every seventh day all of our efforts to provide for ourselves and make our way in the world. A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us—not by becoming

⁵² Frazee, *Making Room For Life*, 12.

⁵³ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives.⁵⁵

In a busy work or school-based calendar year, Christians can create personal or group moments of Sabbath.

A second meaning of the Hebrew verb *Shabbat* is “to rest.”⁵⁶ Genesis 2:2 reads, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing, so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.” Dawn quotes Martin Luther’s reflections on this passage, “The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment [to keep the Sabbath holy] is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more—that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we do nothing of our own.”⁵⁷ The result of *Shabbat* is rest from thinking and doing, so that the mind, body, and spirit can be replenished.

The third dimension of Sabbath is the adoption of values and a lifestyle God advocates: “The important point in all our imitation [of God] is its deliberate intentionality. We don’t just think God’s values are good. We embrace them wholly [and] to embrace is to accept with gusto, to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity.”⁵⁸ This embrace is the passionate spirituality Schwarz describes.⁵⁹ Integrity

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 52.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁹ Schwarz, *Implementation Guide*, 63.

results when one embraces God's values, lives them out wholly, and bears witness to non-believers about God's work.

Whether identified as a particular day of the week or periods of time during the year, the Sabbath was made for play through feasting.

Observing the Sabbath includes not only the freedom from, and repentance for, work and worry (ceasing), the renewing of our whole being in grace-based faith (resting), and the intentionality of our choosing and valuing (embracing), but also the fun and festivity of a weekly eschatological party.⁶⁰

Feasting on God's grace is a celebration of life that includes music, food, beauty, and affection. Frazee's concept of the Hebrew Day Planner with the convivium meal time from 6:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M., followed by a relationship time, describes Sabbath feasting on a daily basis.⁶¹

Implications of this practical theology of Sabbath for FLC suggests individuals and the church community create periods of time in the calendar year for Sabbath moments of ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting. These are natural community times for exercising the spiritual disciplines of study, service, and Sabbath.

Service

Service is a major discipleship emphasis for FLC congregants, as Nelson writes:

Most believe taking part in worship is not enough. They see the importance of the congregation's taking part in small groups for study (didache); they stress the importance of socialization (koinonia); and they find it important to have the congregation use their gifts in service

⁶⁰ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 151.

⁶¹ Frazee, *Making Room For Life*, 127-142.

(diakonia). Both the new-paradigm churches and the mainline churches interested in new life and rebirth see these facets as key to the renewal and the reinventing of the church for the next century.⁶²

Service grows from contemplative living. As FLC members go deeper through small groups, solitude, and are immersed in scriptural truth, they live like Jesus and use their entire selves for service. FLC specifies three dimensions of service or missional ministry: service in the church, service in the community, and service in the world.⁶³

Thriving, contemporary churches are high commitment churches and expect their members to serve in ministry within and beyond their church.⁶⁴ The traditional trend in mainline denominations is one of low congregant expectations.⁶⁵ An emphasis on service energizes church members, draws prospective members, and produces growth.

Conclusion

Aligned with the thesis, this chapter provided a theology of spiritual maturation based on the gospel, an image of a mature Christian follower, the use of small groups and the spiritual disciplines of study, Sabbath, and service. FLC has crafted a holistic plan that integrates these elements for our context. Small groups are essential in spurring disciples towards maturity through the spiritual disciplines of study, Sabbath, and service. The next chapter uses these elements as a basis for need-oriented evangelism.

⁶² Gustav Nelson, *Service is the Point: Members as Ministers to the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 14.

⁶³ Dan Kolander, “The Circle of Life” (Cedar Rapids, IA: First Lutheran Church, 14 January 2005).

⁶⁴ Nelson, *Service is the Point*, 15.

⁶⁵ Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 53.